

Apostasy & Perseverance

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I. Introduction

1. Thematic Significance

Apostasy is a major theme in Scripture, beginning with the archetypal apostasy of Adam and Lucifer.¹ And these are interrelated inasmuch as the fall of Lucifer is a precipitating event in the fall of Adam.

Moreover, the apostasy of these archetypal agents created the initial conditions for other agents to commit apostasy. Lucifer was apparently the leader of revolt in heaven.

Furthermore, Adam's fall was not a discrete event. Rather, all of Adam's posterity also fell in him. In that sense, human beings are natural-born apostates. Apostasy is their in-born condition.²

Finally, fallen angels sometimes contribute to the apostasy of certain nominal Christians. For example, dabbling in the occult can lead to apostasy.

In addition, there's a sense in which the whole of redemptive history is a response to apostasy. Apostasy, in the sense of fallen humanity, is a presupposition of God's redemptive purposes.

But in a teleological sense, God foreordained the fall as a means to manifest his mercy and judgment (e.g. Rom 11:32).³

2. Definition

i) There's an element of circularity to defining apostasy. On the one hand, definitions of concrete phenomena usually involve a general description which is abstracted from a sampling of representative examples.

On the other hand, unless we already had a preconception of what phenomena we were trying to define, we wouldn't have any idea of what examples qualify. So where do we begin?

In one sense, we can't begin without a definition to identify representative examples. In another sense, we can't begin without representative examples feeding into our definition.

¹ In this thesis, I'll be using "Lucifer" as a conventional designation for Satan before he fell. My usage doesn't prejudge or depend on one's interpretation of Isa 14:12. I simply use it for convenience and clarity. Since the name "Satan" (or the "Devil") connotes a fallen angel, it avoids unnecessary confusion if we also have a different name to designate his prelapsarian identity.

² An exception would be prenatal regeneration.

³ "This their sin, God was pleased, according to His wise and holy counsel, to permit, having purposed to order it to His own glory" (WCF 6:1).

However, not all circles are vicious. If we were looking for an absolute definition, then the process would be viciously circular. But a relative definition will suffice.

We can begin with the type of phenomena that interests us. The sort of thing we want to study and classify. The scope of our definition will then be commensurate with the scope of our concern. That's still circular, but a virtuous circle.

ii) Let's begin with a Catholic definition, not because I agree with it, but because it's a useful foil:

Apostasy a fide, or perfidiæ: Perfidia is the complete and voluntary abandonment of the Christian religion, whether the apostate embraces another religion such as Paganism, Judaism, Mohammedanism, etc., or merely makes profession of Naturalism, Rationalism, etc. The heretic differs from the apostate in that he only denies one or more of the doctrines of revealed religion, whereas the apostate denies the religion itself, a sin which has always been looked upon as one of the most grievous.⁴

For purposes of my thesis, this definition is too crude and superficial to be useful. For instance, we have liberal theologians who still profess the Christian faith, as they define it. However, they redefine it in a way that's unrecognizable in relation to the Bible. But in so doing, they have defected from the faith just as surely as someone who formally renounced the Christian faith.

Moreover, it's possible to be a closet apostate. To lead a double-life. Keep up appearances while you keep your infidelity to yourself.

Furthermore, this definition accentuates a loss of faith. Yet in Scripture, apostasy can be practical rather than intellectual—or both. An apostate doesn't necessarily turn his back on the faith because he ceases to believe. Rather, his apostasy may be the result of moral failure. For whatever reason, he lacks the inner resolve to frame his life according to the truth.

Finally, this definition accentuates the dynamic and individualistic side of apostasy. A dramatic change in the status quo of the individual.

But in Scripture, with its dual emphasis on both the individual and corporate aspects of human identity, apostasy can also have an ascribed status as well as an achieved aspect. If you depart from the true faith of your parents, then you're an apostate. On this definition, there needn't be a spiritual transition in the life of the individual, as if he went from a state of piety to impiety. For he may have been religiously indifferent or defiant his whole life. He is still an apostate to the true faith whether or not, at some prior time, he personally appropriated his hereditary faith.

⁴ <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01624b.htm>

We might label this distinction by distinguishing between a “personal apostate” and a “corporate apostate.” A corporate apostate is a man who breaks with his corporate religious identity. As a matter of ascribed status, he was a member of the covenant community, with the attendant rights and responsibilities, but he has defected from his hereditary faith. And, for purposes of this thesis, I’m restricting the definition to the true faith (i.e. Christianity, Biblical Judaism).

iii) We also need to distinguish between apostasy and backsliding. In Calvinism, this involves a categorical distinction. The regenerate can backslide, but they can’t become apostates.

In Arminianism, by contrast, this is a difference of degree rather than kind. For the regenerate can both backslide and commit apostasy. Both groups had the same basic religious experience.

Up to a point, the phenomenology of the apostate and backslider may be indistinguishable. From a Reformed standpoint, there are no borderline cases between the elect and the reprobate. But due to sin and common grace, the elect are more or less worse than their profession whereas the reprobate are often better than their profession.

iv) Strictly speaking, apostasy can occur within every religion, cult, or ideology. However, there’s a fundamental difference between defecting from the true faith and defecting from a false faith. A false faith is, itself, an apostate faith. To apostatize from an apostate faith is quite different than apostasy from the true faith. Apostasy from an apostate faith can either represent a shift from one falsehood to another, or a shift from falsehood to truth.

This, in turn, generates certain borderline cases. Suppose an individual is a devout Catholic. He already belongs to gravely compromised theological tradition. Suppose he becomes an Evangelical. That defection represents a step-up. A dramatic improvement in his spiritual condition. Suppose he becomes a Marxist. The defection represents a step down. Going from bad to worse. Whether we classify him as an apostate might depend on whether he leaves his Catholic faith for something better or something worse. Conversely, suppose a Mormon becomes a Marxist. That’s a wash since Marxism and Mormonism are equally damnable.

Since I’m not a religious pluralist, I’ll confine my thesis to cases of apostasy from the Judeo-Christian faith.⁵

⁵ By “Judeo” I mean OT Jews, Second Temple Jews, and Messianic Jews. By “Christian” I mean theological traditions which are sufficiently orthodox to represent a credible profession of faith.

3. Apostasy and Perseverance

Apostasy raises the question of whether a “true” believer can lose his salvation. This thesis will be written from the Reformed perspective. It’s beyond the scope of my thesis to present a positive defense of Reformed perseverance.⁶ However, in this course of this thesis I will take the occasion to show how apostasy is consistent with Reformed perseverance.

4. Pastoral Theology

Beyond its importance to exegetical and systematic theology, apostasy and backsliding are also important to pastoral theology. Apostasy is a common phenomenon in church history. What prior conditions trigger apostasy, or predispose a nominal believer to defect from the faith? Are there any discernible patterns? Can we take any preventative measures to lessen one’s susceptibility to apostasy? How should we counsel a backslider?

⁶ For an overview, cf. G. Borchert, *Assurance and Warning* (B&H 1987); D. A. Carson, “Reflections on Assurance,” T. Schreiner & B. Ware, eds. *Still Sovereign* (Baker 2000), 247-76; W. Grudem, “Perseverance of the Saints,” *ibid.* 133-82; A. Hoekema, *Saved By Grace* (Eerdmans 1989), chapter 13; R. Peterson, *Preservation and Apostasy* (P&R 2009). C. N. Sellers, *Election and Perseverance* (SPC 1987); T. Schreiner, *Run to Win the Race* (Crossway 2010); J. Gundry-Volf, *Paul and Perseverance* (WJK 1991). For a historical overview of the doctrine, cf. J. Davis, “The Perseverance of the Saints: A History of the Doctrine,” *JETS*, 34/2 (June 1991) p. 213-228”; <http://www.bringyou.to/apologetics/a133.htm>

II. Exegetical Theology

A. Major Motif

In Scripture, apostasy is applied at a corporate as well as national level. Certain local NT churches are on the verge of apostasy, viz. in Galatians, Hebrews, some of the seven churches of Asia Minor.

Likewise, the national apostasy of Israel is a running theme in both Testaments. And it complements the corresponding motif of the remnant.⁷ To take a few examples:

The diary of Israel's journey tells mostly of a people bent on noncompliance and on wrongdoing. They are dissatisfied and complain about God's provisions (incident of the quails, [Num] 11:1-34); they lack trust and disobey; they refuse to enter the land (13:1-14; 14:45); they are impatient (21:5-9) and insubordinate (Korah 16:1-40); and they flagrantly disregard the commandments (e.g., they enter into illicit sexual relations with the Midianites, 25:1-5). Moses himself as leader fails to comply by striking the rock instead of speaking to it (20:1-13).⁸

Toward the end of Deuteronomy, there is a chapter cataloging the blessings that would attend Israel's life if she kept covenant with God (28:1-14) and the curses that would come as a consequence of disobedience (Deut 28:15-68). It appears that the writer of the Deuteronomic History deliberately sought to demonstrate the historical realization of these curses in the life of the nation: disease (28:21-22; 2 Sam 24); drought (28:23-24; 1 Kings 17-18); cannibalism (28:53-57; 2 Kings 6:24-30); and perhaps most important, exile and defeat (28:36-37, 49-52; 2 Kings 17:24-32; 25:18-24).⁹

Any reader who has even a cursory acquaintance with the book of Judges is familiar with the series of stories that made up the core of the book... This recurring sequence of sin-oppression-deliverance is often called "cyclical." But this designation is somewhat misleading if it is understood to imply that each "cycle" is more or less aimless or equal to all the others. A better way to describe it would be as a "downward spiral": it is not that each cycle is more or less a repeat of the earlier

⁷ Cf. G. Hasel, *The Remnant: The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea from Genesis to Isaiah* (Andrews University 1972).

⁸ "Numbers: Theology of," W. VanGemeren, ed. *NIDOTTE* (Zondervan 1997), 4:987; cf. "Numbers, Book of," T. D. Alexander, & D. Baker, eds. *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (IVP 2003), 614-16.

⁹ T. Longman & R. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Zondervan 2006), 186.

ones; rather, there is a deterioration in the quality of the judges and the effect of their leadership.¹⁰

Throughout his history, the Chronicler used the concept of abandonment to describe Israel's disowning, deserting and leaving God behind. No less than nine times Israel's abandonment is stated in personal terms... Israel abandoned God in two main ways. They flagrantly violated the Law of Moses in general terms... Moreover, the nation also neglected divine regulations specifically governing worship... On fourteen occasions the Chronicler noted that the people of God had been "unfaithful."¹¹

The redemptive-historical problem confronted by Habakkuk anticipates the theological challenge faced by the apostle Paul and expressed in the book of Romans. Has God cast off his people? Because in their unbelief they rejected their messiah, have they now been rejected by the Lord altogether (Rom 11:1)? Habakkuk had asked the question centuries earlier. By delivering his people into the hands of the ruthless Babylonians, had God abandoned them altogether? No, for "the justified-by-faith shall live" (Hab 2:4). Those who trusted him will survive. The apostle Paul faced essentially the same threat to the continuance of God's ancient people. The nation of Israel had rejected the Christ of God that had been sent to them. Had God in response rejected his people? Had he this time cast them off altogether? No, for once more: "The justified-by-faith shall live" (Rom 11:1-2; 1:17). Paul himself is a living testimony to the fact that there remains a remnant according to the election of grace. This remnant shall survive by faith. They shall emerge with devisors of new life in Christ as they continue to rely on him by faith alone.¹²

The book of Revelation is supremely concerned with the difference between true and false worship... When dealing with other religions, this book is extremely relevant regarding the nature and proper object of worship as well as regarding the meaning of martyrdom and the believer's future hope. According to the author of Revelation, ultimately Satan himself stands behind the forces conspiring against Christians. Worship resides at the center of the battle between believers and Satan as it is played out in the arena of the imperial cult versus fidelity to Christ... John envisioned a time when the imperial cult escalates to the point of mandatory participation of all inhabitants on earth. Christians refusing to bow down in worship to the beast incur his wrath and are summarily executed (13:15); they are also exhorted to remain faithful and true to Christ even if it results in death (2:10,13; 13:10; 14:12; 17:14). God will vindicate them by judging all those who worshipped the beast (14:9,11; 16:2). The book of Revelation strongly promotes abstinence from all forms of idolatry because God is the only one worthy of worship (4:11; 5:2,4,9,12). Exclusive worship of God constitutes the major theological

¹⁰ Ibid. 139-40; cf. D. Block, *Judges, Ruth* (Broadman 1999), 57-59; K. L. Younger, *Judges and Ruth* (Zondervan 2002), 34-43.

¹¹ R. Pratt, *1 and 2 Chronicles* (Mentor 1998), 42-44.

¹² O. P. Robertson, *The Christ of the Prophets* (P&R 2004), 262-63.

imperatives for Christians as well as all humanity (9:20; 14:7; 15:4; 19:10; 22:9).¹³

In this representative sampling we see a pervasive theme of corporate apostasy alongside a counter-theme of corporate perseverance in the case of the remnant. There is no essential tension or paradox in this respect, for we're dealing with two different groups, and what is true for the one isn't applicable to the other.

¹³ A. Köstenberger et al. *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown* (B&H 2009), 868-69.

B. Locus Classicus

Heb 6:4-6

For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.

Heb 10:26-31

For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Heb 6:4-6 (cf. 10:26-31) is the locus classicus for the possibility (or actuality) of Christian apostasy. The text raises a number of exegetical, theological, and pastoral questions regarding the nature of apostasy and the spiritual experience of the apostate. Are the "apostates"¹⁴ regenerate Christians? Can a true believer lose his salvation? If someone commits apostasy, is spiritual restoration possible? Are the apostates the same as the addressees? Are the passages directed at true believers, nominal believers, or both? Is the author addressing a mixed audience?

I'll spend more time on this verse because (i) it's the locus classicus; (ii) it's a central front in the Calvinist/Arminian debate, (iii), how we answer certain questions in relation to Heb 6 are applicable to how we deal with similar verses or issues. In general, I'll be defending the typological interpretation of Heb 6 & 10—favored by scholars like O'Brien, Emmrich, Guthrie, Weeks, Gleason, and Mathewson.¹⁵

¹⁴ I put "apostates" in scare quotes because I don't wish to prejudge their actual status. In the case of their OT counterparts, we're dealing with a past event. Hence, these were actual apostates. However, in relation to Heb 6 & 10, the author is writing about a fluid situation in the present. From the standpoint of the author and his target audience, the future outcome remains to be seen. Indeed, he's writing to forestall a dire outcome.

¹⁵ This doesn't mean I necessarily agree with their overall interpretation. Rather, I agree with them that terminology in Heb 6:4-6 was selected to trigger associations with the Exodus generation.

One thing I should say at the outset: because Calvinists devote so much time to refuting the Arminian misinterpretation of Heb 6 and 10, we need to keep in mind that God has a word for us as well. This passage is speaking to us. It has something to tell the Calvinist.¹⁶

1. Harmonization

i) When it comes to passages like Heb 6, Arminians typically accuse Calvinists of forcing these passages into a preconceived grid. Because Calvinists think that other NT writings teach perseverance, we don't allow Heb 6 to say otherwise.

However, this is not a simple question. For one thing, Arminians do the same thing in reverse. As one scholar observes:

This position [loss of salvation] conflicts with otherwise clear statements within the book of Hebrews itself that affirm the eternal security of believers (see 2:14-18; 7:25; 8:12; 9:14-15; 10:14,17-18). Arminians respond to this charge by making all the promises of the eternal security of believers in Scripture conditional upon perseverance, even where it seems evident that no such conditions are present. Thus, the warnings in Hebrews pose no problem if viewed as threatening the security of believers, since passages that affirm the security of believers must be read in light of warnings in Scripture. But not only does the present view tend to import conditions into otherwise unconditional promises about eternal security, it also misunderstands important conditional statements¹⁷

¹⁶ According to one writer, "At this point I wish to emphasize that our findings so far to not at all impinge upon the doctrine of 'irresistible grace' or 'sovereign election.' The Epistle to the Hebrews—unlike other documents or portions of the NT—does not assume a divine perspective regarding the believers' status quo. While some texts afford windows into the very mind and eternal purposes of God for the believer (cf. Phil 1:6; Rom 8:29-30; etc.), our letter is content with assuming a human or rather pastoral perspective. Accordingly, the author does not pretend to be able to know the hearts of his addressees so as to distinguish their ultimate spiritual condition. He does know, however, that some of them are ready to throw in the towel and disown Christ," M. Emmrich, "Hebrews 6:4-6 -- again! (a pneumatological inquiry)," *WTJ* 65/2 (Fall 2003), 89.

This statement is true as far as it goes. As a rule, Bible writers aren't privy to the spiritual condition or eternal fate of individuals. However, this distinction doesn't resolve the issue. For the author of Hebrews is describing a type of experience or class of individuals. So the twofold question remains whether that description singles out the distinctive experience of the regenerate and, if so, whether individuals belonging to that category can depart from the faith. In other words, the question at issue is not the author's specific knowledge of particular individuals, but the "job description" of the apostate.

¹⁷ C. Thomas, *A Case for Mixed-Audience with Reference to the Warning Passages in Hebrews* (Peter Lang 2008), 87.

ii) So this confronts the interpreter with one of three options: He can leave the various passages in a state of tension, or else he can attempt a unified interpretation. If the latter, then he can try to harmonize the passages in either of two opposing directions: consistent with the loss of salvation or consistent with the perseverance of a true believer.

One problem with leaving various passages in a state of tension is that if you interpret each passage in isolation, then you end up with a rather compartmentalized faith. If you think one writer teaches one thing while another writer teaches the contrary, then it's impossible to cultivate a consistent spiritual outlook. You can't practice what you believe because you don't know what to believe. You think and feel conflicted.

So it's preferable to harmonize various passages if we can do so while respecting the terms of each passage. Otherwise, we don't know how to position ourselves in relation to God.

2. Perseverance of the Saints

In addition, it's not simply a question of how we harmonize Hebrew 6 and 10 with other NT passages. For there is considerable evidence within Hebrews itself for the perseverance of the saints.

i) In Hebrews, the nature of faith implies the perseverance of the saints. As one scholar explains:

While it must be admitted that the consummation of the believers' rest lies in the future, it is a mistake to overlook the fact that the thrust of the warning is against entering the rest (4:1,3), which entrance for the author takes place in the present, now, by faith. In fact, the author provides assurance that "we who have believed [do already] enter that rest" (4:3).¹⁸

The concept of faith in Hebrews is absolutely critical for understanding the author's statement that God's rest is a present reality. For the author, faith "is not merely a waiting for the fulfillment of the promise; it means through the promise a present grasp upon invisible truth" (Barrett, "Eschatology," (381). That is, faith itself is eschatological in orientation, for it is the divinely ordained means which brings the future into the present. Thus, according to 11:1, "faith makes real in the present that which is future, unseen, or heavenly:" and it is for this reason "that those who have believed can be said to enter the rest already" (Lincoln, "Sabbath," 211).¹⁹

In the eschatological framework of Hebrews, the actual blessing of the final and full inheritance that may be denied some lies in the future, but it may yet be received now in the form of promise (cf. Abraham, who did not receive "the things

¹⁸ Ibid., 220n148.

¹⁹ Ibid. 221n149.

promised” [11:13) but received “the promise” as pledged [11:17]; see note in NET Bible). In the immediate passage, the ultimate blessing that lies ahead is the final vision of God (the beatific vision (12:14b). But that future blessing must be entered into now by the pursuit of peace and holiness within the community of saints.²⁰

They were “all” commended for their faith although they died without receiving what was promised (11:39). This means that where this kind of faith is presence there can be no aborting of the goal to which it looks.²¹

ii) Likewise, the author accentuates the sufficiency and superiority of Christian redemption—in contrast to the Mosaic cultus. As one scholar explains:

The first theme is the superiority and completeness of the salvation now provided in Jesus Christ as compared to the provisional and imperfect nature of the Mosaic order. Because of who the Son is and his sacrifice of himself by God’s gracious will, a full cleansing for sin has been accomplished once for all. He has become the guarantee of a new and superior covenant enacted on superior promises and providing a superior hope through which its beneficiaries draw near to God (Heb 1:1-4; 5:9-10; 7:19,22; 8:6; 10:10).²²

Second, as the writer of Hebrews develops the superiority of this new covenant salvation, he emphasizes the eternal character of its benefits (8:12; 10:12,17-18)...In Hebrews 7:25 the writer gives the consequence of Jesus’ character as eternal High Priest...Nothing is said about limits to his ability to save them. No qualifications are introduced about past versus future dimensions of this salvation; in fact, the point of the context is his ability to intercede and deliver for all time. No intimations are given that Christ’s ability to save may be thwarted or his willingness to save may be ended by the objects themselves deciding to cease “coming to God through him.”²³

In Hebrews 10:14 the writer explains the significance of Christ’s posture of sitting at God’s right hand (in contrast to the standing priests of the old order whose sacrifices could never take away sins)...This is followed in 10:17 by the reiteration of God’s emphatic new covenant declaration...Again this assertion of the lasting effect of Christ’s saving work is not qualified in any way. The quality of his new covenant sacrifice is such that it accomplishes perfection, holiness, and forgiveness for all time for those who come under its benefits. There is no indication that those whom “he has perfected for all time” may become “unperfected” or that those whom he is making holy may become “unholy,” or that the Lord may at

²⁰ Ibid. 228-29n182.

²¹ Ibid. 257.

²² B. Fanning, “Classical Reformed Response,” *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, H. Bateman, ed. (Kregel 2007), 310.

²³ Ibid. 310-11.

some future time call their sins to mind once again. There is no hint that the eternal effects become eternal only after a probationary period.²⁴

Hebrews explicitly connects these two ideas in 9:13-15. Here the writer contrasts the outward, ritual cleansing of the Mosaic sacrifices with the inward cleansing and enablement Christ has provided. . . . The new covenant provides cleansing of the conscience from the guilt of sin, as well as inward strengthening and renewal of the heart to serve God. This new life of service includes heartfelt worship as well as moral transformation and obedience to God (10:22; 13:9,15-16). And so Christ's new covenant priestly work ensures not just the initiation of a process of perfecting and making holy but also its continuation and ultimate accomplishment.²⁵

But if Christians can lose their salvation, then how is membership in the new covenant any great improvement over membership in the old covenant? It exchanges one defectible status for another defectible status. On the Arminian view, you could lose your salvation under the old covenant, and you can still lose your salvation under the new covenant. So how does that begin to do justice to the invidious contrast which our author repeatedly draws between the old and new covenants?

On the Arminian view, Christ is unable to save those he redeemed. He can try to save them, but they may successfully spurn his best efforts on their behalf.

As such, if we interpret the apostasy passages in light of perseverance, that isn't a case of intruding extraneous factors into the document under review. Rather, that's a case of trying to integrate the author's statements regarding apostasy into the overall flow of his theological argument and the totality of his theological outlook.

iii) Arminians treat Heb 6:4-6 as an explicit and unmistakable description of authentic Christian experience. Yet something fundamental is missing from this description. As one scholar explains:

In fact, when the author of Hebrews himself wants to speak of those who possess salvation his choice of language is predominantly that of faith. He describes Christians as "those who have heard the message in faith" (4:2), as "those who have believed" (4:3), as those "who through faith and perseverance inherit the promise" (6:12), as "being among those who believe resulting in the preservation of the soul [in contrast to some who draw back resulting in destruction (10:39b)]. Moreover, the true Christian is described as "my righteous one who lives by faith" (10:38). When we include the numerous exhortations throughout the epistle to persevere in faith (e.g. 6:12; 10:22,28-38) and to imitate good examples of faith (e.g. 6:12; ch. 11; 13:7), we are left with the clear impression that for the author the distinctive mark of true conversion is faith, particularly the kind of faith that perseveres. It would be strange, therefore, if there is no more powerful portrayal

²⁴ Ibid. 312.

²⁵ Ibid. 313.

of genuine conversion than 6:4-5) (as some aver), that the author omits the language of faith.²⁶

3. Background

Most scholars identify the recipients of Hebrews as Messianic Jews. Their immediate incentive to defect from the Christian faith is probably fear of persecution, although they may also be harboring wistful regrets and nagging second thoughts about the loss of patronage and prestige which their Christian conversion precipitated.²⁷ After the initial enthusiasm of their conversion wore off, the tradeoff seemed less appealing. Buyer's remorse set in.²⁸

For three reasons they view reversion Judaism as a tempting fallback position: (i) You didn't have to be a Christian to be saved, since Jews could be saved under the Mosaic covenant. (ii) Judaism was a legally sanctioned religion in the Roman Empire. So they could avoid persecution from the Roman authorities. (iii) They could also avoid persecution from the Jewish authorities. Moreover, reversion to Judaism would renew their membership and restore their social privileges in the Jewish community, from which they'd been cut off as a consequence of Christian conversion.

Therefore, from their viewpoint, they had nothing to lose by reverting to Judaism—and quite a lot to gain.

That motivation had special reference to Christian and/or NT apostates. But beyond the recipients of the letter, the letter also describes Jewish and/or OT apostates. Obviously, their motive wasn't specifically Christian. Rather, it involved an underlying predisposition, which can manifest itself in different ways under different circumstances.

4. Semantic fallacies

For many Arminians, it's "obvious" that Heb 6 (along with Heb 10) is talking about true believers. And on that assumption, it's equally "obvious" to them that a true believer can lose his salvation.

However, what makes this reading so obvious is not the text itself, but the filter which

²⁶ Thomas, 263.

²⁷ Cf. D. deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle "to the Hebrews"* (Eerdmans 2000), 7-20; A. Lincoln, *Hebrews: A Guide* (T&T Clark 2006), 54-60; P. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (Eerdmans 2010), §2; Thomas, *A Case for Mixed-Audience with Reference to the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, chap. 3. Although deSilva doesn't believe the audience has to be specifically or predominantly Judaic, I think the way in which our author frames the problems and solutions renders the traditional identification highly probable. Cf. Thomas, *ibid.*, 106n27.

²⁸ P. Ellingworth, *Commentary on Hebrews* (Eerdmans 1993), 78f. Thomas, *ibid.*, chap. 3.

Arminians bring to the text. Arminians are apt to commit one or two related semantic fallacies. On the one hand, they tend to filter the author's usage through the terminology or soteric categories of other Bible writers, like Paul and John. On the other hand, they also tend to filter the author's usage through the terminology or soteric categories of systematic theology or dogmatic theology.

To the extent that Arminians bring this filter to the text, they commit several related word-study fallacies. As one scholar explains:

Semantic anachronism. This fallacy occurs when a late use of a word is read back into earlier literature.²⁹

Verbal parallelomania...the listing of verbal parallels in some body of literature as if those bare phenomena demonstrate conceptual links or even dependency.³⁰

False assumptions about technical meaning. In this fallacy, an interpreter falsely assumes that a word always or nearly always has a certain technical meaning—a meaning usually derived either from a subset of the evidence or from the interpreter's personal systematic theology.³¹

Unwarranted adoption of an expanded semantic field. The fallacy in this instance lies in the supposition that the meaning of a word in a specific context is much broader than the context itself allows and may bring with it the word's entire semantic range.³²

Unwarranted neglect of distinguishing peculiarities of a corpus...many scholars have applied this [Pauline] meaning to the term when it is used by other writers.³³

When Arminian writers come to Hebrews, they are apt to filter the author's usage through a Pauline or Johannine lens—or the lens of systematic theology or dogmatic theology.

For example, if we ask whether the apostates in Heb 6 were “regenerate” Christians, we're already casting the question in terms extrinsic to the author's own usage. “Regeneration” is a primarily Johannine category—although other Bible writers use equivalent metaphors.

This doesn't mean it's wrong to ask the question. It's possible that the author uses equivalent terms or concepts. And it's possible that his statements imply their regenerate status. But we need to carefully distinguish the concepts we use in framing the question

²⁹ D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Baker, 2nd ed., 2004), 33.

³⁰ Ibid. 43.

³¹ Ibid. 45.

³² Ibid. 60.

³³ Ibid. 62.

from the concepts which may be operative in the author's own universe of discourse.

Likewise, if the author uses a word like "sanctify," this doesn't mean that he's using the word in the technical sense it has acquired in systematic theology, or the way in which a writer like Paul might typically use that word.

5. Authorial usage

To properly construe the author's usage in Heb 6 (and 10), we need to be sensitive to his own idiolect, conceptual apparatus, and literary allusions.

i) In general, the author of Hebrews uses cultic categories of ritual purity and impurity. Cultic holiness or defilement. This has its background in the Mosaic cultus. As one scholar explains:

Israel in particular should somehow reflect God's holiness in its relationship to the nations by being a holy people ("You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy"—Lev 19:2)...Leviticus, on which Hebrews draws extensively, focuses especially on worship as the heart of God's relationship with Israel and as the sphere in which an order which will affect the whole of life is to be established. The place in which God's presence was held to be especially manifested and available—the tabernacle and its holy of holies—has therefore to be kept free from the threat of disorder. Access to the presence of the holy God has to be properly managed, human impurity has to be dealt with, and in the process appropriate distinctions between what is holy and profane, what is clean and unclean, have to be made.

To this end, various types of sacrifice are brought by the people. Two particular forms of gifts and sacrifices are established in Leviticus 4-5. The "sin offering" enables purification by dealing with the stain that particular acts can bring on a person, while the "guilt offering" enables restitution by dealing with the guilt and indebtedness caused by which would render the transgressor liable to punishment (cf. Lev 5:17). Blood and death play an important role in this system of holiness. On the other hand, contact with death in a variety of forms, and especially with corpses, pollutes; and blood, when lost in violent death or in menstruation, defiles. On the other hand, sacrifices are the means of the restoration of holiness and these sacrifices paradoxically involve blood and death.³⁴

As another scholar explains:

J. Milgrom has convincingly demonstrated that the primary purpose of the guilt offering was to make atonement for desecration of "sancta," the mishandling of holy (sacred) things, as opposed to the sin offering, which made atonement for contamination of sancta...Consecration changes the status of someone or some-

³⁴ Lincoln, *ibid.*, 82-83.

thing by shifting them from the realm of the common to the realm of the holy (Lev 10:10a). Purification changes their condition from unclean to clean (Lev 10:10b). The main focus of the sin offering was to make atonement for the defilement of sancta. So it purified sancta, but it could also consecrate (i.e., make holy) sacred objects (but not people) in connection with this purification (see, e.g., Lev 8:15; 16:19). The main focus of the guilt offering was to make atonement for desecration of sancta. So it (re-)consecrated sancta, including people (see, e.g., Lev 14:12-18; Num 6:9-12), but it also included making reparations for the sancta that had been violated where that was possible (see, e.g., Lev 5:16; 6:5 [MT 5:24]).³⁵

On the one hand, the distinction between holy and common has to do with “consecration” (i.e., “to make holy [sacred]”). To treat something or someone that is holy (sacred) as if he, she or it were “common” would be to “desecrate” them. On the other hand, the distinction between clean and unclean has to do with “purification” (i.e., “to cleanse, purify”). If something or someone is clean (pure), to make it or them unclean (impure) is to commit an act of “defilement” (i.e., “to make unclean, impure”).³⁶

This cultic orientation is, of course, consistent with the author’s target audience. His letter is directed at Messianic Jews who thought in terms of the Mosaic cultus. And that backdrop frames the way in which our author construes the nature of atonement and apostasy:

Johnsson has rightly insisted that this understanding of defilement and purgation is crucial to the argument in Heb 9-10... The reference to blood (*haima*), which occurs for the first time in a cultic sense in v7, prepares for the repeated introduction of this term in a cultic context in the ensuing sections.³⁷

The writer regards sin as defilement (see Comment on 9:7). Sin that is committed *ekousios* clearly implies a rejection of the cultus itself (and of God who provided for it). People who reject the cultus can have no hope of removing the defilement of sin because their rejection expresses open, intentional and voluntary apostasy.³⁸

The apostate “has treated the blood of the covenant, by which we was consecrated [to the service of God], as defiled.” The formulation reflects the cultic argument in 9:11-10:18, where the death of Christ is related to enactment of the new covenant and the discussion insists on the significance of blood (cf. 9:13-22). The words “the blood of the covenant” are taken from Exod 24:8 LXX, cited in 9:20. Here they clearly refer to Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross viewed from the perspective of covenant inauguration. The blood of Christ seals and activates the

³⁵ T. D. Alexander & D. Baker, eds. *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (IVP 2003), 720.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 726.

³⁷ W. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13* (Word 1991), 222.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 292.

new, eternal covenant (cf. 13:20). The phrase *en ho hegiasthe*, “by means of which he was consecrated,” resumes 10:10,14, where the subjective blessing secured by Christ’s sufficient sacrifice is defined as consecration to God (cf. 13:12).³⁹

This redemptive scheme doesn’t concern what the offender or beneficiary is like in and of himself. It’s not about his actual virtue or vice, or his subjective condition (e.g. regeneration). Rather, this is a case of ascribed status instead of an achieved status. An objective status. Extrinsic properties rather than intrinsic properties.

Put another way, this involves a relation between one party and another. That can also be a unilateral relation. Not what we are or do, but what God does to us, for us, or against us.

To take a comparison, consider a birthright. If you’re the legitimate, firstborn son, then you inherit a certain position by virtue of your parentage and primogeniture. And that, in turn, varies with the social standing of your father or mother or clan. Same thing with an adopted child. And, not coincidentally, the author of Hebrews uses hereditary categories as well as ceremonial categories.

ii) In particular, when describing NT apostates, the author uses words and images which derive from OT precedents and the Mosaic cultus. As one scholar observes,

Koinon [common] contrasts with *hegiasthe* [consecrated]...the apostate treats as profane...that which is in fact not only holy in itself, but the source of cleansing holiness for the believer. The language is cultic, not ethical.⁴⁰

So the author of Hebrews is using categories of ritual purity and impurity to describe the apostate. Sacred v. profane. The apostate was “holy” in the sense of cultic holiness—like the consecration of Israel. In this scheme, apostasy is sacrilege. Just as the new covenant was consecrated by the blood of Christ,⁴¹ the apostate profanes the covenant.

Yet a ritually pure person could be unregenerate. Remember those OT admonitions about circumcision of the heart? You could be a member in good standing of the OT covenant community, and still be a nominal believer. And you could be excommunicated from the covenant community through a sacrilegious act.

³⁹ Ibid. 294. Ironically, Lane fails to fully appreciate the significance of that cultic framework as it bears on the prior condition of the apostate.

⁴⁰ P. Ellingworth, *ibid.*, 540; cf. “The word for ‘common’ (*koinos*)...is a cultic word meaning ‘unclean’ or unholy,” D. Hagner, *Hebrews* (Hendrickson 1995), 172; “In the context of Levitical purity laws, the adjective ‘common, defiled’ referred to what was unfit or ceremonially impure (note Mk 7:2,5; Acts 10:28),” O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 378n189.

⁴¹ “This phrase [‘blood of the covenant’] alludes to Exod 24:8, quoted in Heb 9:20 (cf. v18), and reapplies it by implication to the covenant established by the sacrifice of Christ,” Ellingworth, *ibid.*, 540.

Cultic holiness or unholiness is not about an individual's actual state of holiness or unholiness, but about his legal standing before God. The high priest was sacrosanct because of his office, not his character. What he was, not who he was.

This doesn't mean that our author can never use language which characterizes the subjective condition of an individual. But we shouldn't automatically assume that that's what he intends. We need to make allowance for different types of discourse. And we need to identify which type of discourse he's using in any particular description. Is it cultic jargon or generic usage?

6. Literary allusions

The author's terminology in Heb 6:4-6 takes its cue from OT paradigms. As one scholar explains:

A recent approach to interpreting key expressions in Hebrews 6:4-6 claims that the author's terminology is colored by Old Testament accounts of the wilderness generation. The descriptive phrases, "those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift," and the like, are believed to evoke the context of Israel's wilderness journeys, with the rebellion at Kadesh-Barnea (Num 13-14; Ps 95) providing the typology for this warning. Further, the language of this admonition corresponds with the two previous warning passages (2:1-4; 3:7-4:13), which also make use of "the pilgrimage trajectory for depicting the author's addressees as the wandering people of God"...Most of the parallels, which are "by means of allusion and echo apart from direct citation," can be discovered in Exodus and Numbers with their descriptions of the people as they traveled through the wilderness on their way to Canaan, as well as in Nehemiah 9 (esp. vv13-15,19-21) and in related Psalms, where the history of God's dealing with Israel is rehearsed in somewhat extended fashion.⁴²

An important antecedent to "those who have once been enlightened" is "the light that God provided for the wilderness generation in the desert" in accordance with Exodus 13:21, recalled in Nehemiah 9:12, which has several important linguistic and conceptual parallels. With the wilderness generation" in mind, this aspect of the Exodus narrative has provided a primary impetus for the author's conception here. So the author's reference to "enlightenment" here probably corresponds to 10:26: "we have received knowledge of the truth" (note v32).⁴³

The typological interpretation of Hebrews based on Israel's wilderness wanderings sees the connection with God's raining down manna "from heaven" for the Israelites (Exod 16:4), described as a divine "gift" [Neh 9:15; Pss 105(104):40; 78(77):24].⁴⁴

⁴² O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 217-18.

⁴³ Ibid. 221.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 222.

The fourth description, in which the author continues with an emphatic repetition of his tasting imagery (v4), contains two expressions and is meant to indicate that word and works of power went hand in hand in the experience of the members... In particular, our author's phraseology may be derived from two statements in the book of Joshua that make reference to the divine promise of the land of Canaan [21:45; 23:15].⁴⁵

The close connection between word and sign has suggested to some that the listeners' experience can be seen as "a replica of Israel's formative period" at the exodus and in the wilderness. Exodus 4:28-30 is taken as paradigmatic of almost the entire record of the exodus, in which word and sign form a unity that is similar to the roles of Moses and Aaron. Word and sign confront Pharaoh (Exod 3:18-20), and throughout the desert wanderings the presence of the divine word that is accompanied by miracles characterizes Israel's experience.⁴⁶

As another scholar explains:

More importantly, the above analysis sheds some valuable light on the vexing question of the status of those envisioned in Heb 6:4-6. After analyzing the statements in vv. 4-6, McKnight confidently concludes that "[i]f the author is accurate in his description of the readers' experience, then we can only say that they are believers—true believers."⁴⁹ However, the preceding analysis leads us in a different direction. It appears that in analogy to the old covenant community the people depicted in 6:4-6 are not genuine believers or true members of the new covenant community. Like their OT counterparts, they have experienced all these blessings (vv. 4-5), but like the wilderness generation they are hardhearted, rebellious (3:8) and possess an "evil heart of unbelief" (3:12, 19).⁵⁰ More clearly, 4:2 poignantly states that both groups (the wilderness generation and the new covenant community) have had the gospel preached to them, but the wilderness generation to which the readers of Hebrews are compared failed to believe, and therefore the message was of no value to them. Thus, the conclusion of Lane that "[t]ogether, the clauses describe vividly the reality of the experience of personal salvation enjoyed by the Christians addressed" is premature.⁵¹ Wayne A. Grudem has recently proposed a similar understanding to the one presented in this section.⁵² According to him, the descriptive phrases themselves in vv. 4-6 are inconclusive as to whether the subjects are genuine believers or not. Here in Hebrews 6 they describe "people who were not yet Christians but who had simply heard the gospel and had experienced several of the blessings of the Holy Spirit's work in the Christian community."⁵³ The falling away (v. 6) is not a falling from salvation, but a failure to exercise saving faith in light of the blessings to which the readers have been exposed through association with the Christian community.⁵⁴ The preceding analysis of the OT background to 6:4-6 confirms Grudem's conclu-

⁴⁵ Ibid. 223.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 223.

sions. Thus in analogy to the old covenant community, those envisioned in vv. 4-6 have experienced the blessings of the new covenant ("being enlightened," "tasting the heavenly gift," etc.), experiences common to all by virtue of belonging to the new covenant community, but have recapitulated the error of their old covenant predecessors by failing to believe and rejecting what they have experienced. In doing so they come under the covenantal curse.⁴⁷

i) Given both the synoptic character of the various warning passages in Hebrews, as well as the allusions to the paradigmatic experience of the OT apostates, there needs to be a basic level of continuity between the spiritual experience of OT apostates and their NT counterparts. It would undermine the author's argument from analogy if NT apostates were regenerate believers who lost their salvation whereas OT apostates were unregenerate believers who had no salvation to lose. Either both groups had a comparable experience or else the parallel breaks down at the crucial point of comparison.

Of course, this doesn't mean they have to enjoy the identical experience. But to interpose a fundamental dichotomy between the spiritual experience of OT apostates and NT apostates, where one group lost its salvation while the other group was never saved in the first place, turns the argument from analogy into an argument from disanalogy.

ii) The question then, is if we begin where the author begins, with the spiritual experience of the OT apostates as his template, then does he describe their experience in terms which suggest inner transformation? Or does it suggest individuals who, no matter their level of exposure remain unchanged by their encounter with God?

Isn't that the impression we get from reading the wilderness narratives? No matter what they witness, it never pierces their hard-hearted distrust. They may relent in the face of divine judgment, but as soon as the immediate crisis has passed, they revert to their faithless, thankless predisposition.

iii) Not only is that the cyclical pattern we find in the wilderness narratives, but the author of Hebrews (Heb 3:7-4:13) uses terminology which highlights their incorrigible obtuseness.

⁴⁷ D. Mathewson, "Reading Hebrews in Light of the Old Testament," *WTJ* 61 (1999), 209-25; http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted_hildebrandt/OTeSources/04-Numbers/Text/Articles/Mathewson-Heb6OT-WTJ.pdf; cf. M. Emmrich, "Hebrews 6:4-6—again! (a pneumatological inquiry)," *WTJ* 65/2 (Fall 2003): 83-95 (esp. 83-87); R. Gleason, "The Old Testament Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4-8," *BSac* 155 (1998): 62-91; N. Weeks, "Admonition and error in Hebrews," *WTJ* 39/1 (Fall 1976): 72-80 (esp. 77-79).

7. Contextual clues

Heb 6:4-6 attracts so much interest and attention that these verses are frequently interpreted in isolation to the preceding verses which introduce this unit. And yet as one scholar points out:

There is a rough sort of equivalence between this set of experiences [6:4-6] and the “basic instruction about the Messiah” that is enumerated in 6:1-2, but no more than that. It is, indeed, by no means clear that this list actually refers to separate realities. It may provide alternative ways of speaking of the same reality.⁴⁸

However, vv1-2 describe rudimentary instruction in the Christian faith, certain rites and ceremonies, as well as faith and repentance. That, of itself, suggests a fairly superficial level of spiritual exposure and spiritual response.

8. Apostasy & ecclesiology

On the face of it, there is, in Hebrews, a tension between the superiority of the new covenant and the possibility of NT apostates. If Christ made atonement for the NT apostate, then in what sense does the new covenant mark a signal improvement over the liabilities of the old covenant? Aren't NT apostates simply the counterpart to OT apostates?

Even if we say the apostates were redeemed rather than regenerated, doesn't that simply relocate the Arminian objection? And if they were not redeemed, then in what sense were they consecrated? In what sense were they guilty of profaning the covenant?

Before we answer that question directly, we need to be aware of how the author's ecclesiology will contribute to the answer. As one scholar notes,

In Hebrews the people of God are considered to be children of one Father (Heb 2:10-11). Jesus is enthroned as Lord (Heb 1:3), but he is also the brother of all believers, so that they form one assembly or congregation (Heb 2:11-12). All believers are gathered together to give praise to God for his saving goodness (Heb 2:12). This sacrifice that pleases God is one of praise (Heb 13:15). The church is also conceived as a house (Heb 3:6), and Jesus as the faithful Son (Heb 3:1-6). The term “house” (oikos) indicates that the church is the new people of God, the true dwelling place of God. The church of Jesus Christ is conceived of as “the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven” (Heb 12:23). The people of God are, so to speak, a heavenly people, just as the true city of God is in heaven rather than on earth; it is “the heavenly Jerusalem” rather than the earthly Jerusalem (Heb 12:22). The church as a community faced persecution in Hebrews (Heb 10:32-34) and thus it was tempting to neglect regular meeting with other believers (Heb 10:25).⁴⁹

⁴⁸ L. Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary* (WJK 2006), 162.

⁴⁹ T. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology* (Baker 2008), 740.

Let's also remember that Hebrews was written to and for a local church. Probably a house-church in Rome. And their local church is an earthly instance of the new Jerusalem. Scholars often focus on the parallel between the earthly, OT tabernacle and its heavenly counterpart. But implicit in the same letter is a parallel between the earthly, NT church and its heavenly counterpart. It participates in the new world order.

We need to introduce one more dynamic to relieve the apparent tension. And that concerns the “contagious” nature of ritual purity or impurity:

Everything that is not holy is common. Common things divided into two groups, the clean and the unclean. Clean things become holy, when they are sanctified. But unclean objects cannot be sanctified. Clean things can be made unclean, if they are polluted. Finally, holy items may be defiled and become common, even polluted, and therefore unclean...Uncleanness may be transmitted from some unclean things by contact (e.g., [Lev] 11:39-40; 14:36; 15:4ff., &c.). Similarly some holy objects make everything that touches them holy (Exod 29:37; 30:29; Lev 6:11 [Eng. 18], 20 [27])....Unlike cleanness, though, uncleanness is contagious and incompatible with holiness...Different degrees of uncleanness require different cleansing rituals.⁵⁰

i) Because ritual purity and impurity are “contagious,” they can either be contracted directly or indirectly. Mediated by a second party. Degrees of association. First- and second-order association.

That's analogous to the OT concept of sacred space. Concentric sacred space:

The Israelites also learned that holiness was defined in spatial degrees from God” regions closer to God are holier than those remote from God...Within these spheres there are also degrees of holiness.⁵¹

ii) The point is not to posit a specific correspondence between OT ritual purity or impurity and NT purity or impurity. In the NT, this is simplified and consolidated in the person of Christ, as well as Christians, who are temples of the Holy Spirit. But there is continuity at the level of the underlying principle.

And that, in turn, brings us to the final dynamic. As one scholar observes:

This raises the question of what exactly is the sin against which the author warns his readers in such severe terms. The immediate context suggests that it involves separation from the Christian community (Heb 10:24). Thus offending against Christ as the Son of God (6:6), against his sacrifice, and against the Holy Spirit (v29), and failing to become one with Christ's obedience to the will of God (v.36;

⁵⁰ G. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (Eerdmans 1988), 19-21.

⁵¹ B. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Zondervan 2007), 468.

cf. 2:4 and especially 10:5-10). The sin appears to involve a voluntary or willful failure, both in worship (nomos, v28) and in practical acts which express loving solidarity with other members of the believing community (vv32-34).⁵²

So Ellingworth defines NT apostasy in this letter as absenting oneself from the new covenant community. A form of self-excommunication. That's the sense in which the apostate sins against the Son of God and the Spirit of God. And the converse of this, as he himself explains, would be participation in the life and worship of the new covenant community.

The apostate needn't be been redeemed by Christ to be consecrated by the covenant, and subsequently profane the covenant. For cultic holiness is contagious. The apostate could be ritually purified or consecrated by direct contact with the saints, or some other holy thing.

Needless to say, you don't have to be elect or regenerate or redeemed to participate in the public worship of the new covenant community or express your solidarity through various activities. And, in that respect, you don't have to be elect or regenerate or redeemed to profane the Lord or be guilty of profanation.

Infractions of ritual purity were culpable under the old covenant, and such infractions are aggravated under the new covenant. If the person of OT high priest was sacrosanct, then how much more in the case of his antitype? And if the apostate was purified or consecrated by his extensive and intensive contact with Christians, then his apostasy is an act of sacrilege.

In Scripture, it's possible to "contract" ritual purity through certain associations. And this isn't limited to the Mosaic cultus. 1 Cor 7:14 is a case in point. The heathen spouse was purified by his marriage to a Christian spouse. And the children were purified by belonging to a Christian parent.

Conversely, as Paul also points out, it is possible to contract ritual impurity through certain associations. A member of the new covenant community desecrates his body by uniting his body to a prostitute.

Paul normally refers to sanctification as a subjective condition, reflecting the role of the Holy Spirit in spiritual renewal. But his usage is topical. In 1 Cor 7, he's dealing with a different situation.

iii) In the specific case of Hebrews, the apostate is probably "sanctified" by the "blood of the covenant" in the sense of sharing in the eucharist. As two scholars explain:

The communion cup, from which we drank in remembrance of the Redeemer, is the new covenant in his blood (1 Cor 11:25). Week after week the apostate has

⁵² Ellingworth, *ibid.*, 530.

partaken of the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ, thereby professing to look to Christ for the washing away of sin. But his faith has been simulated, not genuine, and his secession from the community of believers reveals that, far from thankfully trusting in the blood of Jesus for forgiveness, he has profaned it, or, literally, counted it as common. The blood which made it possible for him to enter into the sphere of God's holiness he has treated as a thing unholy, thus completely contradicting the profession he had formerly made.⁵³

Our interpretation of Matthew's version of the last supper as a parallel to Moses' sprinkling of blood at the Sinai covenant has a striking parallel in Heb 9:15-22. Here the surpassing self-sacrifice of Jesus is compared with the sprinkling in Exod 24:6-8. Moreover, Heb 9:20 uses the phrase "This is the blood of the covenant which...". There is no "this is" in Exod 24:8. The words rather come from the tradition of the Lord's Supper. So the writer of Hebrews was put in mind of this last when likening Jesus' mediation of the new covenant in blood to the inauguration of the old covenant through Moses' sprinkling of blood. This is what we find also in the First Gospel.⁵⁴

iv) On a related note, the first and foremost object of the blood is the covenant rather than the sinner. The blood ratifies the covenant. Put another way, the blood applies directly to the covenant, and indirectly to the sinner insofar as the sinner participates in the covenant via the covenant sign.

Of course, this doesn't preclude the possibility that Jesus shed his blood for sinners—in a more direct sense (e.g. died for the elect). But in Heb 10:29, the "blood of the covenant" is an idiomatic shorthand expression for the shed blood which ratifies a covenant. It applies indirectly to sinners insofar as they receive the covenant sign (i.e. take communion).⁵⁵

9. Apostasy & restoration

Traditionally, Heb 6 & 10 are thought to teach the irreclaimable fate of the apostate. This is something of a crux for just about every theological tradition. Craig Koester has a helpful overview and review of the various interpretive options on this issue.⁵⁶

It isn't necessary to resolve this crux. However, it's useful to try, for our interpretation

⁵³ P. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Eerdmans 1987), 423; cf. "S. Lehne, New Covenant, 86, observes: 'The motif of covenant-blood, which appears in both our present versions of the Last Supper accounts, is central to the concern of the author of Hebrews (9:19; 10:29; 13:20),' " P. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 378n188.

⁵⁴ W. Davies & D. Allison, *Matthew 19-28: a Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (T&T Clark 1997), 475.

⁵⁵ In Exod 24:8, Moses literally sprinkles the people with sacrificial blood. But, of course, that direct action is not in view in Hebrews.

⁵⁶ C. Koester, *Hebrews* (Doubleday 2001), 312-13, 318-21.

will affect our understanding of what apostasy amounts to.

- i) This is a problem for freewill theism, where the apostate ought to retain the libertarian freedom to repent and be restored.
- ii) It's less of a problem for Calvinism, where we might treat this as an instance of divine hardening. At the same time, Calvinism distinguishes apostates from backsliders.
- iii) Perhaps the most satisfactory explanation is that Heb 6:4-12 reflects the dialectical tension between admonitions and exhortations. On the one hand, the speaker wishes to forewarn his audience against the dire consequences of apostasy. And the threatened consequences are genuine. This is not an idle threat. If you revert to Judaism and die outside of Christ, then damnation is your lot.

On the other hand, the speaker doesn't wish rob them of all hope. Indeed, that would be counterproductive, for his purpose is to deter them from apostasy and encourage them to persevere.

Therefore, he has to walk a fine line between presumption and despair. Not give them false hope, but also not to leave them bereft of hope. Hence, the dire warning in 6:4-6 is tempered by the encouragement in vv9-11.⁵⁷

In that respect, we should probably make allowance for the practical nature of pastoral discourse. For the rhetorical effect of one's words on the audience.⁵⁸

As Scripture itself records, God sometimes restores the wandering sheep. Yet that is not a pretext to be a spiritual daredevil—for not all who go astray return to the fold.

So there may be a hyperbolic element to Heb 6:4-6. The writer might be depicting the apostate as if he instantly crossed a line of no-return—to accentuate and anticipate the ultimate consequences of dying apart from Christ. In that sense, he's bringing the futuristic language of eschatological judgment into the present.

- iv) On a related note—in a public letter addressed to a mixed audience, the writer has a little something to say for everyone. Some members of the congregation may be overly confident while others may be overly anxious. He has a word for both the cocky and the despondent. As one scholar puts it:

⁵⁷ “The warning in 6:4-8 was designed to awaken fear of divine judgment, but in order to prevent fear from debilitating the listeners, the author now expresses his confidence in their salvation,” *ibid.*, 324.

⁵⁸ “Others, too, understood that texts concerning penalties incurred by those who abandoned God were to be read ‘as warning rather than as intending their perdition,’ so that people would seek God rather than forsake him (Philo, Rewards 163). Hebrews’ warnings can best be read in this way,” *ibid.* 320.

There are Christians who are plagued by doubt and fear and who find it hard to relax in the confidence that God is in ultimate control, that “underneath are the everlasting arms” (Dt 33:27). For them the assurance of John 10:27-29 and Romans 8:28-39 is the most important teaching that could be given. It is support for the fainthearted. But there are others whose danger is not doubt but complacency. The “sluggishness” the author has perceived in his readers suggests a lack of serious spiritual concern. People who are drifting into such an attitude need to be pulled up sharp, and Hebrews 6:4-8 is such a pastoral warning. It is a shot across the bow of the careless.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ R. T. France, “Hebrews,” *NEBC 13* (Zondervan 2006), 13:84-85. For an alternative proposal, cf. C. Davis, “Hebrews 6:4-6 From an Oral Critical Perspective,” *JETS* (December 2008); http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3817/is_200812/ai_n31171934/

C. Paradigm Passages

1. Rom 1:18-25

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

This passage represents a summary of the running indictment of pagan idolatry in OT theology. And idolatry is a paradigmatic case of apostasy. In Rom 5:12-21, Paul will trace this back to Adam's fall.

As two commentators note:

Paul argues that God's wrath is righteously revealed because people suppress the truth about the one true God and turn to idolatry (18-23). Then in verse 24-32 he specifies the consequences of idolatry in terms of the moral disintegration of human society...The thematic unity of verses 24-32 is strengthened when we observe that the content of the section focuses on the moral disintegration of human society that is a consequence of rejecting god. The link linking verses 23-23, therefore, shows that the moral chaos that has entered human society is rooted in human idolatry.⁶⁰

The expression "the truth of God" picks up the theme of v18 and makes unequivocally clear that it is not truth in general or some limited truth that humans wish to suppress but the truth of God's being as the Ultimate One disclosed by the creation. The choice of the term to pseudos ("the lie") as the antithesis to the truth of God emphasizes the intentionality of humans to distort and suppress the truth. Conzelmann points out, "Lying cannot be viewed merely as the opposite of truth," because it contains an element of deception that differentiates it from mere falsehood. This is not simply "a lie" but "the lie," which involves the fundamental

⁶⁰ T. Schreiner, *Romans* (Baker 1998), 83.

thrust of humans to replace God with themselves..."⁶¹

Unbelievers deploy a suppress-and-supplant strategy. They don't merely deny the truth. Rather, they try to efface the truth by replacing the truth with an overlay of falsehood. Spray-painting their lie over the underlying truth. The big lie is the big cover-up.

Unbelief is more than ignorance. Rather, it's a defiant repudiation of unwelcome truths. The unbeliever is a rebel.

2. Mt 13:1-23

Mt 13:1-23 (par. Mk 4:1-20; Lk 8:4-15)

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear."

Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says:

*"You will indeed hear but never understand,
and you will indeed see but never perceive.
For this people's heart has grown dull,
and with their ears they can barely hear,
and their eyes they have closed,
lest they should see with their eyes
and hear with their ears
and understand with their heart
and turn, and I would heal them."*

But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and

⁶¹ R. Jewett, *Romans* (Fortress 2007), 170.

did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

"Hear then the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

This parable presents a number of exegetical complexities:

- i) There's the interrelationship between the parable proper, the linking material (on the general purpose of parables), and the exposition of the parable.
- ii) There are synoptic variants in the three different versions of this parable.
- iii) There's the question of how the seeds correspond to the soils—due to the fluid nature of the figurative imagery—with shifting imagery for the same referents.

For purposes of this thesis, it isn't necessary to discuss everything—just the elements germane to the nature of apostasy.

Key points:

- i) The parable answers the question, "Why is the message of the Kingdom of God meeting with such a mixed reception?"⁶²
- ii) The fate of the respective seeds charts a progressive continuum:

non-germination>mere germination>abortive growth>fruition⁶³

Hence, apostates can fall away at different stages. Some go deeper into the faith than others before they fall away. Or, at least, they remain nominal believers for a longer duration.

- iii) There are basically two types of seeds: fruitful and fruitless.

⁶² R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (Eerdmans 2002), 189.

⁶³ R. T. France, *ibid.*, 191; J. Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans 2005), 527; R. Stein, *Mark* (Baker 2008), 199.

iv) However, fruitlessness has more than one potential cause—even if the outcome is the same.

v) The fruitful seeds also chart a progressive continuum:

thirtyfold>sixtyfold>hundredfold

vi) The predisposition of the listener is a necessary factor in the outcome, for better or worse.

vii) The devil also has a role to play in the downfall of some unfruitful seeds (13:19).

viii) The ultimate reason for the outcome is the sovereign will of God (cf. Mk 4:12; Mt 13:11; 11:25-27).⁶⁴ As such, apostasy is not incompatible with predestination. To the contrary, apostates fall away because God predestined their apostasy. Apostasy is the historical expression of eternal reprobation.⁶⁵

ix) Dropping the agricultural metaphor, motivations for apostasy involve:

a) Incomprehension and spiritual warfare (v19)

b) Rootless enthusiasm which is easily uprooted in the face of persecution (vv20-22)

Feelings are fickle. A snap decision to convert queues one up for a snap decision to de-convert.⁶⁶ In each case the seed is simply reacting to its immediate surroundings. There is no inner direction.⁶⁷

This need not have reference to official persecution. Converts could be shunned by family, friends, employers, &c.

⁶⁴ Cf. C. A. Evans, *To See and Not Perceive: Isaiah 6:9-10 in Early Jewish and Christian Interpretation* (Sheffield 1989).

⁶⁵ Stein apparently tries to blunt the predestinarian force of Mk 4:12 by saying, “some of Jesus’s parables were meant to be understood by those outside (Lk 15:1-2) and that some were in fact understood very well (Mk 12:12),” Mark, 211. However, the fact that some apostates understand the message, or even know it to be true, is entirely compatible with reprobation. That’s an aggravated form of disbelief. And, indeed, the parable takes for granted that some “seeds” understand the message. Stein’s comment also suffers from a level-confusion. We need to draw a distinction between the fictitious audience within the parabolic narrative, and the real audience which hears the parabolic narrative. Jesus is using the fictitious audience to describe the varied reactions of the real audience (for his preaching and teaching).

⁶⁶ “The immediacy of response to the word is matched by the immediacy of collapse under persecution for the word,” J. Nolland, *ibid.* 541.

⁶⁷ “Their enthusiasm is based on external stimulus, not on inner conviction, and so it will not last when the external is no longer there,” France, *ibid.*, 520.

c) Worry, wealth, self-indulgence (Lk 8:14)

“Worry” is symptomatic of deep-seated distrust in God’s providence (cf. Mt 6:19-34; 10:19). Like the murmuring Israelites in the wilderness.

Wealth, per se, is not the problem, but undue attachment to a lavish lifestyle (cf. Lk 7:25; 12:19; 16:19). Where is your treasure (cf. Mt 6:19)?

3. 1 Cor 10:13

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

One of the issues raised by this passage is whether the “temptation” has reference to sinful temptations in general, or temptations to commit apostasy in particular. Scholars have argued that, in context, Paul is referring to sins like idolatry, which would be a paradigm-case of apostasy:

He [Paul] emphasizes God’s categorical intolerance of Israel’s idolatry and Israel’s worst sin in making the golden calf and offering sacrifice to the idol...He has in mind a metaphorical harlotry (Num 25:1-9; Rev 2:14,21)...He alludes to Num 25:1-9, which recounts the people having sexual relations with the women of Moab and then being invited to sacrifice to their gods.⁶⁸

The litany of Israel’s sins in Ps 105LXX (106 MT and Eng.) provides the best backdrop for understanding the reference to the grumbling...“grumbling” (Ps 105:25/1 Cor 10:10), ‘committing fornication,’ as a figurative reference to idolatry (Ps 105:39/1 Cor 10:7)...The psalm also lists idolatry (Ps 105:19,28,36-39/1 Cor 10:7,14) and eating idol food (Ps 105:28) in its condemnation of Israel’s apostasy.⁶⁹

In Rom 11:11-12, however, “stumbling” and “falling” refer to the loss of salvation, not just occasional slips.”⁷⁰

Avoiding all overt associations with idolatry would invite hostility, especially when one was a guest at the home of a religiously minded host who offered food that had been sanctified by an idol...The social problems created for Christians who abandoned idolatry are described in 1 Pet 4:3-4...Withdrawing from all idolatrous functions would scuttle any ambitions for social advancement, impair pa-

⁶⁸ D. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (Baker 2003), 460-62.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 464.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 466.

tron/client relations, fuel ostracism, and damage economic partnerships.⁷¹

Paul warns the Corinthians about the danger of idol worship...Paul now alludes to Exod 32:1-6...Aaron consented and took their gold rings to fashion them into a molten calf...This was the classic incident in the Exodus from Egypt when the grumbling Israelites became idolaters. Their grumbling and craving had led even to such idolatry. To emphasize the seriousness of such craving Paul quotes the OT verse about idolatry, which is the only explicit OT quotation in this passage.⁷²” J. Fitzmyer, *1 Corinthians*, 385.

The idolatrous worship of the Israelites took the form not only of a banquet, in which Israel ate (probably quail and manna) and drank water (from the rock), but also of a sport or dance in which they reveled before the golden calf that they were worshipping.⁷³

He [Paul] alludes to another OT incident of idolatry, that at Shittim, where Israelites are said to have played the harlot with daughters of Moab, who invited them to the sacrifices of their gods.⁷⁴

The right which some Corinthian Christians exercise was to recline at a dinner in a pagan temple (8:10)...This right related to the special privilege open to a limited number of the inhabitants to dine during the Games at nearby Isthmia on a number of occasions and came under the jurisdiction of Corinth. These were the Roman citizens of Corinth...Just as there were perils in reclining at a private banquet (6:12-20), so too there were not dissimilar dangers open to those Christians who accepted the invitation to recline at the civic banquets associated with the games. “Some ate, drank and rose up to play” (10:7), which was the way that the LXX describes the banquet associated with idolatry and the “after-dinner” behaviour in Exodus 32:6...The nexus between reclining in the temple and idolatry becomes clearer as Paul commanded Christians to flee from it, i.e., the sinners because, as he explains later, it was not possible for them to sit at “the table of daemons” and drink of “the cup of daemons” and to sit also at the table of the Lord and drink his cup (10:14,21).⁷⁵

i) Given this background, the divine promise applies to divine protection against apostasy—for those to whom the promise extends. As such, this verse is quite consistent with Reformed perseverance.

ii) But on the Arminian interpretation, God broke his promise. For if a true believer did

⁷¹ Ibid. 468.

⁷² J. Fitzmyer, *1 Corinthians* (Yale 2008), 385.

⁷³ Ibid. 385-86.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 386; cf. G. Beale & D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 725-27.

⁷⁵ B. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth* (Eerdmans 2001), 93-94.

succumb to apostasy, then God allowed him to be tested beyond his limits. The believer was unable to resist the fatal temptation.

On that view, God makes promises which he is either unable or unwilling to keep. For he let the true believer be tempted beyond his powers of resistance.

iii) The Corinthians are a mixed multitude. We can't very well talk about the spiritual status of the Corinthians in general. That varies from one individual to the next. Likewise, not as if OT Jews were all of a kind.

iv) Apropos (iii), remember that 1 Corinthians is a public letter, addressed to the whole congregation—which is, itself, a somewhat fluid body, having a certain amount of turnover from one time to another. In the nature of the case, what Paul says is applicable to some, but not to others.

4. The Unforgivable Sin

Mt 12:31-32

Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

What is the unforgivable sin? And how, if at all, is it applicable to our own situation?

The unforgivable sin comes to us in two different versions:

- i) In the Marcan/Matthean version (Mt 12:31-32; Mk 3:28-29), it has reference to attributing dominical exorcisms to sorcery.
- ii) In the Lucan version (Lk 12:10), it has reference to apostasy under threat of persecution.

We presumably have two different versions because Jesus spoke to the issue on at least two different occasions.

This should warn us against equating the unforgivable sin with the specific circumstances in which it is described, for—as the Synoptics illustrate—the circumstances vary.

So what do these two descriptions have in common?

- i) In both cases, the sinner is in a position to know better.
- ii) Another possible point of contact is that, in both cases, we're dealing with public testimony. The Jewish opponents publicly denounce the ministry of Christ. The persecuted

believer publicly renounces the faith.

What makes the sin unforgivable? It is possible that (i) is a sufficient condition.

But it may also be that (ii) furnishes a necessary, aggravating circumstance.

On that view, what makes it unforgivable is not simply that the sinner is in a position to know better, but that he is dissuading others from believing in Christ.

In the case of the Jewish opponents, the sinner is bearing public witness against the work of Christ.

In the case of the apostate, his recantation is a public witness against the mission of Christ.

And even if his recantation is an act of cowardice rather than conviction, the effect of his example is dissuasive.

Or it may be that (ii) is a sufficient condition in its own right.

Remember that, in Scripture, the presumption is that, all other things being equal, sinners are lost. It's not that you have to do something extra-special to be on the road to perdition.

You don't need to take a wrong turn, for, absent the grace of God, you are already headed in the wrong direction.

How do we account for the distinction between blasphemy against Jesus, which is forgivable, and blasphemy against the Spirit, which is unforgivable?

i) To begin with, the work of the Spirit, in context, has immediate reference to exorcism, although it would presumably include miracles more generally, of which exorcism is a subset.

This thaumaturgical work is not to be confused with the internal witness of the Spirit.

ii) The distinction likely differentiates between corroborated and uncorroborated testimony. Christ bears witness to himself, but his self-testimony is seconded by the prophets as well as the work of the Father and the Spirit as they empower him to perform miraculous deeds. The Resurrection would be the capstone.

iii) If (ii) is correct, then the point is not that blasphemy against the Spirit is intrinsically more heinous than blasphemy against the Son. The distinction is not between the Spirit, *per se*, and the Son, *per se*—but between the testimony of Christ, alone, and the corroborative work of the Spirit.

How does this apply to our own situation?

We need to avoid two extremes:

- i) For the above-stated reasons, it's a mistake to limit the unforgivable sin to the specific circumstances in which it is described. These circumstances occasion the teaching, but the sin cannot be tied down to the illustrative exigencies.
- ii) If (i) is overly narrow, the opposite error is an overly broad application in which the unforgivable sin is simply equivalent to persistent unbelief. That application is so generic that it fails to explain why this particular sin is singled out, in contrast to other sins, as unforgivable. So it needs to meet stricter criteria.
- iii) On a minimalist interpretation, the unforgivable sin would satisfy two conditions:
 - (a) The sinner is in a position to know better, and:
 - (b) He goes public with his disbelief to dissuade others.

Both (a) and (b) would be necessary conditions, but insufficient in isolation.

- iv) On a maximalist interpretation, the unforgivable sin would satisfy only one condition:
 - (a) or possibly (b).

On that view (a) would be a sufficient condition.

It's possible that (b) would also be a sufficient condition.

- v) In Scripture, there is also a distinction between apostates and backsliders. A professing believer can suffer a lapse of faith, but be restored to the faith.

He may have been a true believer who suffered a crisis of faith or loss of nerve, or else he may have been a nominal believer who, as a result of his temporary defection and restoration, becomes a true believer.

So who can commit the unforgivable sin? Depending on our interpretation, an apostate, a public enemy of the faith, and/or someone who never made profession of faith, but is in a position to know better.

It isn't necessary for us to draw the exact boundaries, for the larger lesson is that no one should go anywhere near the point of no return.

It isn't a question of knowing where the invisible line is drawn, and then doing everything just up to the trip-wire without stepping on the spiritual land-mine. For that attitude is already a damnable attitude.

5. 1 Jn 2:19

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.

i) In 1 Jn 2:19, John draws a distinction between true and nominal believers. As one scholar put it:

With this, John turns to the immediate purpose at hand, the exposure and denunciation of the false teachers who had recently departed from the congregation's midst and the reassurance of the believers who remained (2:18-27)...As John makes clear, while these individuals were at one time in the congregation, by their eventual departure they proved that they were never really part of the company of the saved to begin with, or else they would have remained (2:19; cf. 2 Pet 2:22).⁷⁶

As Köstenberger goes on to explain, the distinction between nominal believers and true believers is fundamental to John's doctrine of assurance:

Construing 1 John in terms of "tests" fails to understand the primary nature of the letter as reassuring believers that they were genuinely saved after the congregation had recently been shaken by the defection of individuals who, it turns out, had never truly been part of the community (1 John 2:19). Thus it is preferable to read 1 John in terms of reassurance rather than "tests." Thus John writes to his audience, "But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it, and because no lie comes from the truth" (2:20-21). In fact, John's very purpose for writing is bound up with providing assurance for his readers: "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life" (5:13).⁷⁷

By contrast, Arminian theology erases the categorical distinction between true believers and nominal believers since the regenerate can lose their salvation. Both persevering believers and apostates had the very same religious experience.

ii) In addition, as another scholar explains,

John may be reflecting a conviction articulated by other NT writers and even by Jesus himself, a conviction that in turn has OT roots as well: God is continually at work showing forth his glory, and for his people this means their ongoing sifting and purifying (cf. Akin 201: 117), who speaks of both purifying and educating. When ostensible members of the people of God turn away from the beliefs and practices authorized by God and subsequently depart the community, God is glo-

⁷⁶ A. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters* (Zondervan 2009), 266.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 480-81.

rified in that the truth of who are his and who are not is revealed.⁷⁸

This goes beyond the human motives for apostasy to God's ulterior motive in decreeing that outcome. Who stands and who falls is ultimately up to God. And some fall away to underscore the truth that God's preservation is the differential factor.

6. 1 Jn 5:16-17

If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that. 17 All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to death.

i) John's language may be enigmatic because his audience already knew what he was alluding to, or because the "sin" in question was not entirely clear-cut. He may also be a bit ambiguous because, in situations like this, there is no one right answer in every case. Indeed, these are not mutually exclusive explanations.

ii) One preliminary question is whether this "mortal" sin denotes physical or spiritual death.

In favor of the literal interpretation, there is some evidence, albeit slight, that God occasionally uses terminal illness as either remedial punishment or retributive punishment in dealing with errant church-members (Acts 5:1-11; 1 Cor 5:3-5; 11:30).

There are, however, some problems with that identification.

a) In 1 John, life and death are consistently used as metaphors to signify a spiritual condition rather than a physical condition.

b) Apropos (a), it's best, where possible, to interpret a writer's usage on his own terms rather than in reference to extraneous material. We have no way of knowing that he had that extraneous material in mind. So stick with his own linguistic habits.

c) If it refers to physical death, then how would John's audience be in a position to know who committed this mortal sin? Short of death, how could they tell if someone was dying? And the issue would be moot after they died.

d) In the ancient world, before the advent of modern medical science, death was common—even for those in the prime of life. Surely John wouldn't suggest that we refrain from praying for someone who's deathly ill. If someone is apparently on his deathbed, it could certainly be for reasons other than sinning unto death. And, of course, prayers for healing sometimes make a difference.

⁷⁸ R. Yarbrough, *1-3 John* (Baker 2008), 147-48.

e) It seems more likely, then, that John is using “death” in a figurative sense to denote a spiritual condition (i.e. damnation).

iii) So what is this mortal sin, and what are its symptoms? I think the best way to approach the answer is to consider the historical context of 1 John.

He was writing to members of his church or churches (in Asia Minor). They had gone through a traumatic schism after some false teachers and their followers seceded from John’s church.

So the immediate referent for the “sin unto death” would single out the kind of sin which John’s opponents exemplified.

To judge by what we can reconstruct from the letter, they were guilty of the following misdeeds:

- a) Their views on the person and work of Christ were grossly deficient.
- b) They subscribed to a form of perfectionism, which was probably interchangeable with antinomianism. After all, if you think you’re sinless, then you can act with impunity.
- c) In their opposition to John, they defied apostolic authority.
- d) By shunning or disfellowshipping the members of John’s congregation, as well as trying to undermine their faith, they displayed their hatred for the brethren.
- e) They may have also had pretensions to superior spiritual enlightenment.

Assuming that this is the right way to go about defining the “sin unto death,” then it’s not a discrete, self-contained, one-time event.

Rather, it involves a persistent pattern of thought and deed with certain specific, roughly identifiable features.

iv) John doesn’t prohibit his audience for praying for individuals who commit this sin. Rather, he indicates that they’re under no obligation to do so. He apparently leaves that up to the discretion of the Christian.

v) We might ask why that’s the case? Two possibilities come to mind:

- a) If someone is sufficiently hardened in a state of spiritual rebellion, then this may indicate that God has hardened him. Prayer is futile if it goes against the will of God (e.g. Jer 7:16; 11:14; 14:11).
- b) It may also have something to do with spiritual priorities. After all, when you are pray-

ing for one person, you're not praying for another. Although you can pray for a number of different people over time, you can only pray for one at a time—and there are more people in need of prayer than you have hours in the day. So you have to make choices.

Once again, this isn't a prohibition. John isn't forbidding his audience to intercede for the individual who commits this sin. Rather, he treats it as something discretionary.

Whether or not they do so might depend on their relationship with the individual or individuals in question. Our social obligations vary.

vi) This passage is sometimes cited to challenge the perseverance of the saints. However, the Johannine corpus distinguishes between true believers and nominal believers (e.g. Jn 6:66ff.; 1 Jn 2:19f.). So this phenomenon is consistent with God's preservation of his own.

vii) Finally, it's important to keep this in perspective. When John talks about the assurance of salvation, he's not saying that Christians should ordinarily doubt their salvation. Radical self-doubt is not their default position. That is not a presumption which they must overcome.

Rather, he talks about the assurance of salvation in the context of false teachers and their schismatic followers. They were actively undermining the faith of the faithful.

That's why John administers a spiritual exam. To restore the shattered confidence of the faithful.

C. Secondary Passages

1. Mt 24:10-12,24

And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold...For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.

As one scholar explains:

This saying is one of those where it seems to have its most serious sense, of a fall which is not just a temporary setback but involves the abandonment of God's way and the loss of salvation (as in 5:29-30; 13:21; 18:6-9), since a disciple who betrays fellow disciples has turned decisively away from the community of faith. The mutual love and concern which should be the distinguishing mark of true disciples (as the discourse of ch 18 has made clear) has turned into hatred and repudiation...Here, as in 7:15, the focus appears to be on imposters within the disciple community rather than the messianic claimants predicted in vv4-5. The result of their reaching is described here (as with the false Messiahs of v5) as deceit or leading people astray...The "cooling" of love marks the end of effective discipleship. A love which is cold is like a fire which has gone out; cf. the devastating effects of the loss of the first love in Rev 2:4-5.⁷⁹

Whether we characterize this event as a "loss of salvation" is, of course, a matter of definition, as well as one's overall theology. Indeed, in this very context, v24 imposes a limit on that eventuality:

The implication of the *ei dunaton*, "if possible," is that the *ekletoi*, "elect" or "chosen" (elsewhere in Mt 22:14; 24:22,31), are in the care of their Father (cf. 10:29-31) and it is therefore not within the power of these enemies to accomplish their purpose. The warnings in this passage against false prophets find an OT background in Deut 13:2-4.⁸⁰

So, in this pericope, we have a striking balance between apostasy and perseverance, admonition and assurance. Some will fall away, and turn against their former associates. Yet God preserves the elect from fatal delusion. On the one hand, apostasy is a live possibility (for some). And this is a prediction, not a hypothetical. On the other hand, it's not in the cards where the elect are concerned. Jesus is speaking, both to forewarn and to encourage.

⁷⁹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans 2007), 906-907.

⁸⁰ D. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28* (Nelson 1995), 706.

This also raises a question about the evidentiary value of signs and wonders. If their function is to attest a true prophet, but if they can be counterfeited, then how do we tell the difference? One scholar proposes a contextual solution:

This is no secretive coming in the wilderness, which false prophets could easily fabricate, but a revelation in glory that the whole world must see (24:29-31; cf. 2 Bar. 29:1). Although the Gospel writers have not revised Jesus' prediction to fit the later situation, his warning may have been helpful in confronting those who already at an earlier date felt that Jesus had returned in some nonphysical way (cf. 2 Thes 2:2-3; Best 1977: 278).⁸¹

While that may not suffice as a complete explanation, it's adequate for this pericope.

2. Jn 15:1-6

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

This passage raises the question of whether a true believer can lose his salvation. Yet as one scholar explains:

But the latter view, that these dead branches are apostate Christians, must confront the strong evidence within John that true disciples are preserved to the end (e.g. notes on 6:37-40; 10:28). It is more satisfactory to recognize that asking the "in me" language to settle such disputes is to push the vine imagery too far. The transparent purpose of the verse is to insist that there are no true Christians without some measure of fruit. Fruitfulness is an infallible mark of true Christianity; the alternative is dead wood, and the exigencies of the vine metaphor make it necessary that such wood be connected to the vine... These have no life in them; they have never borne fruit, or else they would have been pruned, not cut off. Because Jesus is the true vine, in contradistinction to the vine of Israel that bore either no fruit or rotten fruit, it is impossible to think that any ranch that bears no fruit can long be considered part of him: his own credentials as the true vine would be called in question as fundamentally as the credentials of Israel.⁸²

⁸¹ C. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans 1999), 583.

⁸² D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (IVP 1991), 515.

3. Rom 14:15

For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.

i) One preliminary question is whether this has reference to eschatological judgment. You needn't to be a Calvinist to reject the eschatological interpretation. As one leading commentator, by no means a Calvinist, observes:

Paul uses the powerful verb *apollumi* in the present imperative, which implies an ongoing process rather than once and for all 'being lost before God.' ...Horst Baltz is therefore closer to the nuances required by this context in suggesting the translation of *lupeo* in this verse as 'injured/deeply troubled,' which implies an ongoing state...That 'that' person is 'being destroyed' is clearly a 'metaphorical' use of the word, but it does not imply the temptation to apostasy except in a secondary sense...References in the commentaries to 'eschatological ruin' or 'spiritual ruin' not only overlook the tense of the verb but also provide scant explanation of the effects of conscience violation.⁸³

Likewise, Thiselton apparently agrees with Gundry-Volf that the reference in 1 Cor 8:11 is existential rather than eschatological.⁸⁴

ii) Even if we accept the eschatological interpretation, a warning merely states the ultimate consequences of an action; it says nothing about the probability that such a warning will be violated. Indeed, a basic function of a warning is to serve as a disincentive to all such actions.

4. Galatians 5:4

You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.

Arminians sometimes cite this verse to show that Christians can lose their salvation. But as one scholar notes, in the broader context:

Paul doesn't say that the Galatians are trusting in their works. He warns them not to trust in their works. These verses are not a declaration, but a warning.⁸⁵

5. 1 Tim 4:1-5

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the in-

⁸³ R. Jewett, *Romans* (Fortress 2006), 861-62.

⁸⁴ A. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Eerdmans 2000), 653f.

⁸⁵ T. Schreiner, *Run to Win the Prize* (Crossway 2010), 118.

sincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

i) V1 raises the question of the timeframe. When is this prophecy being fulfilled? Should we go with a preterist interpretation? Was it fulfilled in Paul's lifetime? Should we go with a futurist interpretation? Does it await a great apostasy at the end of the church age (e.g. premillennialism)? Should we favor an idealist interpretation?

Scholars have often argued that the "latter days" (and equivalent phrases) is synonymous with the church age. The "former days" represent the period of promise. The old covenant. The latter days represent the period of fulfillment. The new covenant.

On that view, this type of prophecy isn't fulfilled at any one time. Rather, it's progressively fulfilled. Throughout the duration of the church age, this phenomenon will crop up. A case of inaugurated eschatology. While it was already coming to pass in Paul's time, it's a cyclical phenomenon, recurring at different times during the church age as a whole. Every Christian generation is living in the "latter days."

At the same time, the fact that church history repeats itself, with infinite variations, does not preclude and ultimate linearity to church history. The church age will come to an end with the return of Christ. And that has yet to be.

ii) V1 also sounds the note of spiritual warfare (cf. Eph 6). This doesn't necessarily mean the apostates are possessed—although that might be the case in some instances. But they are "dupes of Satan."⁸⁶ Apostasy and heresy have their ultimate origins in the dark side—as part of Satan's attack on the church. Satan can't attack God directly. So he fights proxy wars with satellite states.

And since the Devil is the prototypal and archetypal deceiver, there's a genealogical correlation between the heresies of false teachers and the diabolical strategist who is directing this campaign behind the scenes.

iii) There is also the question of how to interpret the metaphor of a seared conscience. There are two exegetical options:

a) This could be a way of branding the apostate, as a token of Satanic ownership, like the mark of the Beast (Rev 13:16).

b) This would be equivalent to the Biblical notion of judicial hardening, whereby God hardens the heart or deadens the conscience of the reprobate—like cauterizing a wound, which leaves the scar tissue insensible.

⁸⁶ G. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence* (Hendrickson 1994), 768.

c) Which interpretation is correct may also turn on how we construe the notion of a “hypocritical liar.” According to one scholar,

If a person’s conscience has been seared, he or she cannot know the difference between truth and error, but the term hupokrise, “hypocrisy,” implies that the opponents did know the difference.⁸⁷

The problem with this interpretation is that you can’t deduce the mental state of a hypocrite from the meaning of a word. Philology isn’t psychology. Our understanding of what makes a hypocrite tick isn’t based on linguistic analysis, but paradigm-cases, as well as a general knowledge of human behavior.

Hypocrisy can range along a continuum of deception and self-deception. Even charlatans feel the need to justify their duplicity to themselves. So deception and self-deception often intertwine. It’s quite possible for someone to first turn his back on the truth, as a result of which he will silence his conscience.⁸⁸

In addition, there are stages of deception and self-deception, as the “hypocritical liar” finds it necessary to weave a web of deception. He has to tell one lie to cover up another lie. Over time, he’s caught in his own web of deception.

So it’s best not to overinterpret Paul’s statement. It’s sufficient to say of the apostate false teachers that,

They were not who they said they were, and their teaching was not what they claimed it to be.⁸⁹

The complexities of their psychological make up is something above and beyond what we can infer from a mere use of the word “hypocrite.” And it undoubtedly varies from case to case.

6. 2 Pet 2:1 (cf. 20-21)

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.

This is often cited as a stock, Arminian proof-text against perseverance and limited atonement alike. However, several comments are in order:

i) Before we consider 2:1 in particular, we should identify Peter’s opponents. As one

⁸⁷ W. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (Nelson 2000), 237.

⁸⁸ I.H. Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles* (T&T Clark 1999), 540.

⁸⁹ P. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (Eerdmans 2006), 292.

scholar notes:

...The false teachers are trying to draw members of the congregations into their error. They are apostates and are bringing others to the same end.⁹⁰

ii) Regarding 2:1 in particular, this is the language of metaphor, not systematic theology. To read his wording as if he were using technical jargon to describe the nature and scope of the atonement (e.g. penal substitution) commits a number of semantic fallacies.⁹¹

iii) For that matter, Arminian theology is not committed to penal substitution. Some Arminians accept it while others reject it.⁹²

iv) Apropos (ii), Peter has chosen this language to draw a word-picture. It's part of a consistent picturesque metaphor about someone who had been enslaved, then manumitted, only to sell himself back into slavery. As one scholar explains:

The slave-market metaphor appears in 2:1: "They will deny the Master who bought them." It reappears in 2:19...Central to the apostates' rhetorical strategy is the "promise of liberation" (2:19). Yet they themselves are "slaves" to moral "corruption."...The apostates "deny the Master who bought them (cf. Acts 20:28). These persons emphasize and use the catchword "freedom" (2:19), with all its seductive attraction...The freedom which apostates boast of themselves is in reality no freedom at all; instead, it is a return to slavery (2:29). This slavery, however, is not merely the standard variety. It is a more degrading form of bondage, since they have willingly forsaken the redeeming power they have known. In the end, they reach a state worse than the original (2:20).⁹³

So Peter's choice of language was intended to create an ironic play on words. He turns the rhetoric of the false teachers back on themselves. In their nominal Christian experience they achieved a short-lived deliverance from the bondage of pagan depravity. But they have now reverted to their former condition, which is made all the worse by their squandered liberation.

It's like an inmate who is jailed, released from jail when a benefactor bails him out, then reoffends while he is out on bail—as a result of which he's reincarcerated. He's worse off for having had a fleeting taste of freedom.

v) Dropping the metaphor, what, in Petrine terms, did the religious experience of the apostates amount to? As one scholar explains:

⁹⁰ G. Green, *Jude & 2 Peter* (Baker 2008), 151.

⁹¹ D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, chapter 1.

⁹² For a prominent modern Arminian who rejects penal substitution, cf. J. Grider, *A Wesleyan-Holiness Theology* (Beacon Hill 1994).

⁹³ E. Waltner & J. Charles, *1-2 Peter, Jude* (Herald Press 1999), 231,39,43.

In 2:20 a term for cultic impurity is used (although it can have a moral and even sexual sense). Used only here in the NT, this term for cultic impurity is rare in the Greek OT, but more common in both Philo and Josephus... The point is that the choice of the new term here not only connects with teaching back to the defilement in the world but also lays the emphasis on the behavior of the world as separating it from God (i.e., cultic defilement)...⁹⁴

The temporary association of the false teachers with the Christian faith consecrated them, in the sense of ritual purity or cultic holiness. By the same token, their subsequent defecation has the effect of contracting ritual defilement.

So this has nothing to do with subjective transformation (e.g. regeneration). At the same time, their apostasy aggravates their guilt. They are culpable for ritual defilement, which would not be the case had they never been closely associated with the Christian faith in the first place.

It would be analogous to OT offenders who were guilty of highhanded violations of the ceremonial law.

vi) Another problem with the Arminian interpretation is how, on that interpretation, we'd harmonize Peter and Jude. As one scholar explains:

Jude never considers those he opposes part of the Christian community. They are interlopers in his eyes, although they may have passed themselves off as Christians. 2 Pet views the false teachers as indeed part of the community, but a part that has left the true faith.⁹⁵

If, a la Calvinism, we regard the false teachers as nominal Christians, then we can harmonize the two viewpoints without difficulty. For a nominal Christian is both an insider and outsider. Inasmuch as he participates in the life of the church, he's an insider. Inasmuch as his participation is merely external, he remains an outsider.

But if, a la Arminianism, the false teachers were born-again Christians who lost their salvation, then there is no principled distinction between their insider and outsider status.⁹⁶

vii) 2:20 is,

Virtually a verbatim quotation of the words of Jesus in Matt 12:45/Luke 11:26 (changing only the singular reference of Jesus to a plural pronoun to fit the context here).⁹⁷

⁹⁴ P. Davids, *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*, 249.

⁹⁵ Davids, *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*, 219.

⁹⁶ A possible way around this is to argue that Peter's opponents and Jude's opponents have nothing in common, which seems artificial.

⁹⁷ Ibid. 250; cf. Green, *ibid.*, 302; D. Moo, *2 Peter, Jude* (Zondervan 1996), 146.

The dominical saying as reference to a demoniac who was exorcized, only to fall back into a state of sevenfold possession. This raises the question of whether Peter is merely using this allusion to stress the aggravated condition of the apostate, or if Peter also meant to carry over the demonic factor. This raises the possibility that, for Peter, apostasy, at least in some cases, has a demonic component. However, it's hard to tell if he confined himself to the material he quoted, or meant to implicitly include the attendant background material.

7. Rev 3:5

The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.

Arminians take Rev 3:5 to imply that someone whose name was written in the book of life may have his name erased. But there are several problems with this interpretation:

i) Since their names were written down before the foundation of the world (13:8; 13:8), subsequent erasure would implicate God in a shortsighted error. On that view, God is like a man who does a crossword puzzle with a pencil rather than a pen so that he can erase his mistakes until he gets it right. Nothing is written in indelible ink since he doesn't know in advance if he's chose the right word. It might have too many letters, or two few. Or it might have the right number of letters, but conflict with a vertical or horizontal word.

By contrast, the very notion that names were written down before the foundation of the world presumes that those whose names are missing were never written down in the first place. Apostasy and perseverance reveal in time what was concealed in eternity. History is the way in which we read eternity. We discover the content of the book by the way in which the plot plays out.

ii) V3: 5 employs a rhetorical device by expression positive concept through a negative construction. As one scholar explains:

It is imperative to see that both the positive and the negative terms [2:7,11,17,26-28; 3:5,12,21] serve the same purpose—to assure those who conquer of final salvation...In Revelation 3:5, Jesus does not speak of names being erased from the book of life; rather by employing the figure of speech call litotes he emphasizes his promise. Litotes is 'the negation of an anytonym or contrary expression' to make an emphatic positive statement.⁹⁸

iii) Throughout Scripture, God employs a combination of conditional promises, unconditional promises, and threats to motivate his people to persevere. This is self-fulfilling

⁹⁸ R. Peterson, *Our Secure Salvation*, 189-90.

psychology. The overcomer overcomes, in part, due to exhortations like 3:5. Incentives to persevere alongside disincentives to fall away. These are complimentary. The classic carrot-and-stick approach.

Indeed, that's the basic function of 3:5—to encourage the faithful to be faithful.

Some readers might object that I'm assuming a view of theism in which the future is either foreordained or, at the very least, foreknown. And there are theists like Boyd, Hasker, Basinger, Kushner, Sanders, and Pinnock who reject that assumption.

If, for the sake of argument, we play along with their view, then God writes down as many names as he can think of, then names are randomly erased over time in a war of attrition. In this picture, the names in the final draft are far fewer than the names in the rough draft, and history is the editor. The historical process edits out the names of all who fall by the wayside.

This resembles the kill-curve of mass extinction, à la Raup. A field of bullets, like a sheet of meteorites—striking down whatever hapless inhabitants find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time.⁹⁹

But for those who find reprobation too ruthless to stomach, it's hard to see how this libertarian actuary is any great improvement.

8. Rev 22:19

And if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

The language of apportionment (*meros*) is an allusion to OT land-promises and the allotment of land to the respective tribes of Israel. That supplies the background for John's figurative usage.

So this involves an analogy between OT Israel and the NT church. How then do we unpack the metaphor?

Members of the OT covenant community were apportioned certain parcels of the promised land according to their clan. But the land-promises were conditional (i.e., the curse sanctions). A Jewish apostate could lose his inheritance.

Likewise, a member of the visible church (=NT covenant community) can lose his conditional share in the new Eden or the New Jerusalem. Although election is unconditional, the offer of the gospel is conditional (repentance and faith).

⁹⁹ S. Gould, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory* (Belknap 2002), 1324.

Yet that's not the same thing as losing one's salvation. It says nothing about one's prior state of grace. An OT Jew could inherit land even though he wasn't a true believer. And he could also be cut off from the community of faith if he became a public and impenitent covenant-breaker.

By the same token, one can be a member of the visible church and then be excommunicated. You may have been a member merely because you were the child of a member, or the spouse of a member. You went through the motions.

i) John is alluding to the OT laws and promises of inheritance. In the OT, those were originally literal (although, even in the OT, the concept of inherence could be used in a typological or spiritual sense).

In reapplying this concept to the NT church, John is shifting from a literal to a metaphorical application. So we then need to unpack the meaning of the metaphor. And, by the same token, we must make allowance for the limitations of any metaphor.

ii) His allusion also involves a comparison between OT Jews and NT Christians. And, under *both* Testaments, there was a difference between spiritual election and membership in the covenant community. You didn't have to be regenerate to belong to the covenant community. Circumcision of the heart was always an ideal. But participation in the life of Israel could move on two different planes.

D. Paradigm Cases

1. Lucifer

The Bible has no explicit passage on the primordial fall of Lucifer.¹⁰⁰ There are, however, a number of passages which may or may not allude to the fall of Lucifer.

i) Gen 3:1-5

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made.

He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

Modern readers often poke fun at the specter of a talking snake. However, other issues aside, we need to approach this text from the viewpoint of what the “serpent” would connote to the original audience, and not to modern readers who may be wholly ignorant of its narrative associations.

This text raises some basic exegetical questions. Why is the Tempter depicted as a serpent?¹⁰¹ What’s the intertextual connection between the serpent and the devil?

a) One obvious reason to depict the Tempter in ophidian terms is due to the fact that serpents were ritually unclean animals (cf. Lev 11; Deut 14). The audience of Gen 3 is the same audience as the audience for the ceremonial laws. So they’d associate a snake with an unclean animal.

b) On a related note, as a number of scholars have shown, Eden is sacred space. A bucol-

¹⁰⁰ Duane Garrett, in *Angels and the New Spirituality* (Broadman 1995), presents a deflationary explanation for four of the passages I discuss. His treatment is a sensible and salutary corrective to pop demonology and new age angelology. However, I think his analysis is too atomistic. He treats them in isolation rather than tracing out their intertextual connections as well as the development of a standardized cosmic warfare motif. In addition, I think he fails to take sufficiently into account the way in which Bible writers treat some past events as paradigmatic for future events. But, in that case, the logic is reversible.

¹⁰¹ James Barr asks, “Why, after all, a snake?” *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* (Fortress 1993), 65. Yet there are several plausible reasons for a serpentine tempter, viz. the wisdom motif, the unclean animal motif, the polemic against ophiolatry and ophiomancy.

ic temple. By the same token, that makes Adam a “priest” in the sense that one of his duties is to act as a gatekeeper to prevent the garden from being defiled by ritually impure intruders.¹⁰²

The mere presence of an unclean animal like a serpent ritually desecrates the garden. This depiction alerts the reader that fact that this speaker is an unwelcome guest. He doesn’t belong there. Something is already amiss.

As a practical matter, it doesn’t seem realistic to suppose that Adam and Eve could prevent a snake from entering the garden. How would two human beings be in able to patrol every square inch of the perimeter to keep the garden a snake-free zone? Even if Eden were walled garden, snakes can climb over walls.

And, of course, an ancient Jewish reader could ask himself the same question. That’s a narrative clue to the true identity of the “serpent.”

c) In the ANE, snakes were associated with wisdom. And Gen 3 exploits that association:

The serpent of Gen 3, the most “subtle” animals of creation, represents also supernatural wisdom. Although the first man is forbidden to eat from the tree of the garden before the serpent is created (Gen 2:16-20), the reptile knows of the prohibition before accosting the woman (3:1). It pretends to know as much about the tree “to make one wise” as God does (Gen 3:4-5)...The serpent convinces the woman that it is wiser than she, knowing even the secret intents of the mind of God so that in its supernatural wisdom it understands that mind better than can the woman in her believing obedience. It invites her to stand in that wisdom...The serpent as a figure of wisdom is encountered frequently in the ancient Near East.¹⁰³

d) In addition, the name of the tempter may well be a metonymic pun or double entendre, from homonymic or paronomastic folk etymology.¹⁰⁴ That’s a common convention in the Pentateuch. As one scholar explains, in this particular case:

A more directly sinister nuance may be seen in Heb. *nahas* if it is to be connected with the verb *nahas*, ‘to practice divination, observe signs’ (Gen 30:27; 44:5,16; Lev 19:26; Deut 18:10)...The related noun *nahas* means “divination” (Num 23:23; 24:1). Near Eastern divination formulae frequently include procedures in-

¹⁰² Cf. T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem* (IVP 2008); G. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission* (IVP 2004).

¹⁰³ Joines, K. “The Serpent in Gen 3,” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*. 87/1 (1975), 4.

¹⁰⁴ On the general convention of metonymic names in Biblical literature, cf. T. Stordalen, T. Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden: Genesis 2-3 and Symbolic of the Eden Garden in Biblical Hebrew Literature* (Peters 2000), 55.

volving a serpent.¹⁰⁵

Such a play on words would trade on the ophiomantic connotations of name in ANE culture, and thereby clue the audience to the malevolent and preternatural identity of the Tempter.

e) Apropos (d), there is a polemical thrust to the serpentine trappings of the Tempter. As one scholar points out,

In Egypt, the people had seen the serpent venerated as either a force of life or of death, for the tombs were painted with snakes, and the king even wore a stylized serpent on his headdress. The Israelites would have regarded the serpent as an evil force because it was often a symbol of death, and its status as a symbol of life would have been rejected since only the Lord can produce life. Thus, in addition to its importance as the account of how evil entered the human race, this narrative also has a polemical force, showing the connection of the serpent with rebellion against God, which is death. In other words, divinity cannot be achieved (as promised in 3:5) by following the pagan beliefs and symbols, for they only bring death.¹⁰⁶

f) Apropos (e), this is reinforced by two Pentateuchal comparisons:

α) The serpentine staff of Moses (Exod 4:2-4). And that, in turn, involves a premeditated confrontation with Egyptian ophiomancy and ophiolatry (7:8-12). As one scholar explains:

Some snakes were to be worshipped, others were to be considered incarnations of evil... Probably the most important serpent worship was the cult of Uraeus centered in the city of Per-Wadjet in the delta. There a temple was built in the early dynastic period in honor of the Uraeus-goddess Wadjet. She personified the cobra and was the tutelary goddess of Lower Egypt... The two goddesses and the sovereignty they imparted to Pharaoh were physically represented on the front of the king's crown in the form of an enraged female cobra.¹⁰⁷

This identifies the goddess as Wadjet, the serpent-goddess of Lower Egypt. Wadjet was frequently portrayed as a snake that spit forth flames as her poison.¹⁰⁸

Aaron's casting of his staff before Pharaoh and its transformation into a snake was an incident of judicial irony, an extensive polemic against Egyptian thought and practice... finally, the scene is ironic in that the Hebrew leaders cast before Pharaoh his very emblem. The two tutelary goddesses of Egypt and Horus were

¹⁰⁵ V. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* (Eerdmans 1991), 187.

¹⁰⁶ A. Ross, *Genesis* (Tyndale House 2008), 50.

¹⁰⁷ J. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Baker 1997), 88-89.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 91n42.

represented in the cobra of the crown.¹⁰⁹

Since the Pentateuch forms a literary unit, the implied reader of Genesis would be cognizant of this ophidian symbolism when he read Gen 3. And this is reinforced by the fact that the implied reader for the Pentateuch is a member of the Exodus generation—with fresh memories of life in Egypt.

β) The iconic serpent in Num 21:8-9. As Currid explains:

Reacting to the last grumbling incident before the Hebrews reached the Promised Land, God sent *hannehasim hasseraḥim* (“fiery serpents”) upon them because of their unfaithfulness. The *nehasim* bit many of the Hebrews and some died. Yahweh then ordered Moses to fashion a *seraph* and set it on a standard or pole in the middle of the Israelite camp. So Moses crafted a *nehas nehoseṭ* (“bronze serpent”), and whoever had been bitten needed only to look at the image to be healed.¹¹⁰

Isaiah 6 represents the attendants of Yahweh as *seraphim* with six wings, and elsewhere the prophet speaks of *seraph meopep* (“a fiery flying one” [Isa 14:29; 30:6]). By definition, “a *seraph* is a serpent, and for Isaiah it may have wings, as in the case of the *seraphim* of Isaiah 6.”¹¹¹

It is clear that the *uraeus* was a fiery snake which the Egyptians believed would protect the Pharaoh by spitting forth fire on his enemies.¹¹²

This episode is an example of sympathetic magic, that is, “controlling an adversary through manipulation of a replication.”...Sympathetic magic was especially common in dealing with snake bites—the Egyptians believed they could be healed by an image of a snake.¹¹³

Episodes such as the divining of the Red Sea and the serpent confrontation were ironic critiques of similar accounts in Egyptian literature...Moreover, the biblical writer often used a parallel idiom as a polemic against Egypt...Likewise, Numbers 21 is a scene of polemical taunting against Egypt.¹¹⁴

a) So a spitting cobra was a cultic and occultic emblem. It represents the tutelary “gods” of Egypt.

b) If Exod 4, 7 and Deut 21 make polemical use of ophidian symbolism, then it’s natural

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 92-93.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 146.

¹¹¹ Ibid. 146.

¹¹² Ibid. 147.

¹¹³ Ibid. 148.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. 154-55. Cf. R. Hess, *Israelite Religions* (Baker 2007), 202-07.

to assume that Gen 3 is another case in point.

c) It's also striking that Isaiah can employ ophidian imagery to depict angelic figures. That, of course, falls outside the Pentateuch. But it's probably an allusion to the Pentateuch. It suggests a natural association.

d) One also wonders if the "stones of fire" in Ezk 28:14, 16 (in conjunction with the cherub) are meant to trigger a free association with blinding venom of the spitting cobra, in its emblematic status as a numinous being with fiery venom. Likewise, the incendiary image of king's fiery demise (v18).

ii) Isa 14:12-14

How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High."

Traditionally, Isa 14:12-14 is the locus classicus. However, as modern commentators point out, the historical referent is the king of Babylon.

At the same time, the identification is a bit more complex. For Isaiah uses mythopoetic imagery to depict the downfall of the Babylonian king. Hence, there's a story behind the story. Using one story to tell another story.

Isaiah is apparently tapping into literary or folkloric genre involving a revolt in heaven—with winners and losers.¹¹⁵ And this, in turn, becomes a theological motif in Scripture. Among other things, the canon of Scripture reflects a cumulative exegetical tradition. A series of intertextual links in which a later writer builds on an earlier writer. Progressive revelation involves internal development as well as new revelation.

While Isa 14:12-14 doesn't specifically denote the fall of Lucifer, it does contribute to a theological motif regarding fallen angels.

It also assigns a motive: self-idolatry. In Scripture, this is the paradigmatic sin. The aspiration to godhood.

iii) Ezk 28:11-19

Son of man, raise a lamentation over the king of Tyre, and say to him, Thus says the Lord God:

¹¹⁵ Cf. B. Childs, *Isaiah* (WJK 2001), 126; J. Goldingay, *Isaiah* (Hendrickson 2001), 103, 105; D. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (IVP 1993), 144-45; G. Smith, *Isaiah 1-39* (Broadman 2007), 314-16.

*"You were the signet of perfection,
full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.
You were in Eden, the garden of God;
every precious stone was your covering,
sardius, topaz, and diamond,
beryl, onyx, and jasper,
sapphire, emerald, and carbuncle;
and crafted in gold were your settings
and your engravings.
On the day that you were created
they were prepared.
You were an anointed guardian cherub.
I placed you; you were on the holy mountain of God;
in the midst of the stones of fire you walked.
You were blameless in your ways
from the day you were created,
till unrighteousness was found in you."*

In the same vein, but even more complex, is Ezk 28:11-19. Ezekiel, like Isaiah, is using one story to tell another story. Using Gen 1-3 to portray the downfall of the Tyrian king. As such, Ezekiel is drawing an implicit parallel between the two events. As one scholar outlines this passage:

The lament God inspires Ezekiel to sing over the king of Tyre contains a series of metaphorical references to the story of the Garden of Eden and to the Mountain of God. The king is compared to a guardian angel at the mountain and, in a way, to Adam himself in the garden. The comparisons are not exact, but imagistic—overtones and general allusions rather than straight-one-for-one correspondences to the garden story. The allusions to the mountain of God (e.g. vv14,16) reflect a poetic theme in the Old Testament in which the mountain represents God's abode.¹¹⁶

For a more detailed analysis, let's turn to James Barr:

My interest lies in the two oracles against the king of Tyre, Ezk 28:1-10 and 28:11-19, especially the latter. For my purposes, the first of these is fairly clear: it depicts the king of Tyre as a human who has come to think he is a god. He has wisdom like Daniel and enormous wealth. But God will bring "strangers" upon him who will defile his splendor, and he will be cast down into the Pit. The second oracle is set in "Eden, the garden of God" (v13) or on "the mountain of God" (v16), a place adorned with gold and precious stones. Here again a person is

¹¹⁶ D. Stuart, *Ezekiel* (Word 1989), 273.

to be castigated and expelled...And so, this person came to a dreadful end.¹¹⁷

But who was this person? Was it the first human, Adam, as he is called in Genesis? Or was it a superhuman being, one of the divinely appointed agents who guarded the garden? The question, as we will see, is important for understanding Genesis, the history of prophecy, and aspects of religion in the Second Temple period.¹¹⁸

If this [syntactical analysis] is convincing, then...it has a decisive effect on the understanding of the chapter...for it means that the person addressed in the second oracle, the one who is full of wisdom and perfect in beauty, who walked among the precious stones until final iniquity was found in him, was a semi-divine being or a divinely placed agent, not the first man. Adam. This does indeed relate to the story of Genesis 2-3, where cherubs guarded the garden after Adam and Eve were expelled, but here it is a cherub—doubtless a different one!—who is in disgrace. This being was perfect...It walked among the precious stones. It was one of the cherubs but it forsook its work of guardianship, fell into sin and evil, and was expelled...In other words, the story does not so much parallel Adam's disobedience, but the "angelic" fall, of "Lucifer, son of the morning" in Isa 14:12...who is "fallen from heaven." He had aspired to ascend to heaven, to set his throne on high, but now he was cast down to Sheol.. Ezekiel stresses the "wisdom" of this being, a feature which makes him rather more similar to the snake of Gen 3, and less like the humans of that story, who conspicuously lacked that quality.¹¹⁹

One possible objection may be mentioned: the double reference (vv13,15) to the "creation" of the addressee of the oracle. Creation would, of course, fit very well for Adam. Although there is little direct material on the subject in the Hebrew Bible, it is not impossible for superhuman beings. Even of the gods it was possible to speak of their "being fashioned" (Isa 43:10 [elohim])—especially when one was peaking polemically of a deity in process of being demoted, demolished, or denied.¹²⁰

Although I have distinguished between the two oracles against the king of Tyre in Ezekiel 28, it is likely that the two were lumped together in their general theological impact. If so, the setting of the second oracle in Eden, the garden of God (not mentioned in the first oracles where the setting is "in the seat of the gods, in the heart of the seas") was nevertheless taken to apply to the first oracle. Thus since Ezekiel, interpreters have often applied the essential idea, that a person who was a

¹¹⁷ J. Barr, "'Thou art the Cherub': *Ezekiel 28:14 and the Post-Ezekiel Understanding of Genesis 2-3*," E. Ulrich et al. eds. *Priests, Prophets and Scribes* (Sheffield Academic Press 1992), 213.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 213-24.

¹¹⁹ Ibid. 220-21.

¹²⁰ Ibid. 221.

man wanted to be counted as a god, to Adam and Eve...¹²¹

A few comments:

- a) Barr supports his interpretation with some meticulous syntactical and text-critical analysis, which I didn't bother to quote.
- b) Barr was, of course, a liberal. Indeed, an apostate. However, he was also a premier Hebraist. His interpretation is based on syntactical analysis. It doesn't depend on his source-critical assumptions or his classification of the material as mythological.
- c) Assuming this analysis is correct, then Ezk 28 is both an intertextual interpretation of Gen 1-3 as well as a supplement to Gen 1-3. It complements the account in Gen 3 by bringing the fall of Adam into conjunction with the fall of Lucifer.¹²²

If we treat Gen 3 and Ezk 28 as two pieces of a puzzle, then the logical way they'd fit together is that Lucifer was given the role of a security guard, to protect Adam, Eve, and the garden from intruders. However, Lucifer, in a role reversal, used his position to desecrate the garden and turn our first parents against their Creator. An inside job by a double agent.

This would be equivalent to a fall from heaven since, in Biblical cosmography, mountains, like the Edenic mountain in Ezekiel 28 (or Mount Zion) can signify the meeting-point between heaven and earth.¹²³

Moreover, there's a logical linkage between the fall of each agent. If a guardian cherub is the agent of temptation, then Adam and the tempter would both be expelled from the garden.

Furthermore, if the king of Tyre was a human being, the angelic fall dovetails nicely with the Adamic fall. For even in Ezekiel, the story of the fallen cherub is applicable to the

¹²¹ Ibid. 221.

¹²² For a different interpretation, which favors the LXX rendering (pace Barr) over against the MT rendering, cf. T. Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden*, 341-45. A potential objection is that Stordalen has to postulate a conjectural emendation in the MT, along with hypothetical stages in its recensional history. While that's possible, it's preferable not to multiply unverifiable assumptions. Nested postulates generate dwindling probabilities since the probability of a succeeding postulate is contingent on the probability of the preceding postulate. Barr's reading has the advantage that it can take the text as is, without recourse to extraneous assumptions. As one scholar notes, "In some instances it appears that LXX was based on a different Hebrew Vorlage than our Hebrew text. However, some of the deviations in LXX may derive from a misunderstanding of the Hebrew text before the translators D. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1-24* (Eerdmans 1997), 41-42.

¹²³ Cf. H. Wallace, *The Eden Narrative* (Scholars Press 1985), 84-86.

downfall of a human monarch. Hence, these are harmonious notions.¹²⁴

This wouldn't be a fall from heaven, exactly. Rather, it would be a fall from the Edenic mountain. However, the mountainous imagery is suggestive of heaven. The meeting point of heaven and earth. That's another stock feature of Biblical cosmography (e.g. the Mount Zion motif).

And it still represents the generic image of a downward motion—with all of the conventional connotations. As in Isaiah 14:12-14, self-idolatry is the motive—with an added element of perfidy.

Of course, Ezekiel's depiction shouldn't be confused with historical narration. This isn't a straightforward report of what went down. Rather, it's a layered comparison. It's possible that we shouldn't try to tie up the loose ends. However, if we did so, I think that's about how they would go together.

At the same time, it also gives us an example of intertextual exegesis. To some extent, this is how Ezekiel understood Gen 1-3, although we need to distinguish his understanding of the primeval account from his "contemporary" application to the king of Tyre.

This is accurate as far as it goes. But it also conceals some key ambiguities:

- a) The comparison is metaphorical in reference to the Tyrian king. But this, of itself, doesn't mean it's metaphorical in reference to the backstory. The application is metaphorical.
- b) There is also a question of how Ezekiel's version or gloss correlations with Gen 1-3. As one commentator says:

Basically it makes use of a version of the garden of Eden story that appears in Gen 2-3... Yet this version knows nothing of the serpent or the first woman; It credits the first man with wisdom and adorns him in bejeweled clothing and apparently leaves him dead. However, it does speak of the garden of Eden and expulsion from it, of moral perfection before a fall and of one cherub who is the agent of expulsion.¹²⁵

But this is overstated:

- a) We'd expect Ezekiel to be selective. He highlights those elements which are most analogous to the situation of the Tyrian king.

¹²⁴ On the other hand, Waltke thinks the royal title ("king of Tyre") "may refer to Melkart, the patron deity of Tyre, who was known as the 'king of the city' (v12)," B. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 274n36. In that case, the downfall of the earthly monarch implicates the downfall of the patron god.

¹²⁵ L. Allen, *Ezekiel 20-48* (Word 1990), 94.

b) In addition, we shouldn't assume that Ezekiel is limited to the information supplied by Gen 1-3. Progressive revelation is supplementary as well as elucidatory. It adds to the record. Not simply infers. As a seer, Ezekiel is in a position to bring new revelation to bear on preexisting revelation.

c) Allen is assuming that the cherub and the serpent are two different characters. But that prejudices the identity of the serpent.

d) The bejeweled clothing is, in the first instance, an allusion to the vestments of the high priest. And that, in turn, goes back to some Edenic motifs involving the Edenic gemstones as well as Adam's sacerdotal duty to preserve the sacred space of Eden from defilement.

e) His death probably has reference, not to the Edenic characters, but to the King of Tyre. Of course, mortality is also a leading theme in Gen 2-3.

f) Is wisdom a property of Adam, or a property of the cherub? Actually, the sapiential motif goes back to Gen 3 (i.e. the "shrewd serpent," the tree of knowledge).

But if the king of Tyre is the immediate referent, who supplies the analogue? Does Ezk 28 11-19 describe the fall of Adam, or the fall of Lucifer?

That question may be too precise. Given the comparative imagery, his imagery is inherently fluid. If he can transfer imagery from Gen 1-3 to the king of Tyre, then he can also transfer imagery from Adam to an angel, or vice versa.

Although we need to be very circumspect in our handling of this material, it would be a mistake to simply ignore it. Ezekiel makes an important potential contribution to Biblical demonology.

iv) Lk 10:18-20

And he said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

In all likelihood, v18 is an allusion to Isa 14:12. As two commentators explain:

The image of being "lifted up" and "thrown down" [v10: 15] is probably an allusion to Isa 14:13,15, part of a prophetic oracle pronounced against the city of Babylon (Isa 14:4). The suggestion is confirmed when it is noted that Satan's "fall like lightning from heaven" (v18) is certainly an allusion to Isa 14:12, passage sometimes understood as describing Lucifer's (Satan's) fall from heaven (see Rev

12:7-10,13).¹²⁶

Jesus had just used Isaianic imagery to describe the descent of Capernaum (v15; Isa 14:1-27); the same is now used with reference to Satan, whose claim to glory and allegiance (cf. 4:5-7; cf. Isa 14:13) is antecedent to, even mandates, his fall. The deployment of the Isaianic imagery is important for Luke, who thus correlates the positions of Capernaum and of Satan over against God. In v16b, Jesus had observed that rejecting his emissaries was tantamount to rejecting God; in light of the parallel drawn by the usual use of Isaiah 14, a further equation can be drawn by way of interpolation: To reject God is to align oneself with Satan, and to align oneself with Satan is to place oneself in the position of being cast down in judgment.¹²⁷

The image of a “fall” is ambiguous in two respects. We need to clarify that ambiguity, both in reference to Lk 10:18 as well as Rev 12:7-9.

a) The image of “falling” is a spatial metaphor.¹²⁸ It can stand for more than one thing.

α) A loss of power. Indeed, we use “fall from power” as an idiom for loss of power or authority.

β) A moral declension. Moral corruption.

Once again, we use “moral decline” or moral “freefall” the same way.

γ) On a related note, “falling away” is a synonym for apostasy.

δ) More generally, it can be used in the “tragic” sense of a transition from good fortune to ill-fortune.

And these can involve related concepts. Lucifer’s primordial fall was a moral declension. But, in one respect, it also represents a fall from power. He lost his position in heaven.

On the other hand, the fall of Lucifer empowered him in another respect, for he gained a measure of power over other fallen creatures.

¹²⁶ C. A. Evans, *Luke* (Hendrickson 1990), 173.

¹²⁷ J. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Eerdmans 1997), 418. A number of other scholars and commentators also see an allusion to Isa 14:12 in this verse. Cf. G. Beale & D. A. Carson eds. *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Baker 2007), 318a; C. F. Evans, *Saint Luke* (TPI 1990), 454; D. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53* (Baker 1998), 1006-07; I. H. Marshall, *Commentary on Luke* (Eerdmans 1989), 428-29; R. Stein, *Luke* (Broadman 1992), 309. Fitzmyer and Nolland demur. However, the arguments by some of the aforesaid scholars strike me as quite convincing.

¹²⁸ Cf. L. Ryken, et al. eds. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (IVP 1998).

This, in turn, sets him up for an eschatological fall (as well as a primordial fall). A further loss of power.

b) By the same token, “heaven” is another spiritual metaphor.

α) It can represent a seat of power

β) It can represent the dwelling place of God, the saints, and the angels.

An agent can fall from (b), but retain (a). For (b) represents a moral and spiritual state. “Heaven,” in the symbolic sense of (a), continues to represent Satan’s base of operations (cf. Job 1-2; Zech 3:1-2).

When did Lucifer fall in Lk 11:18? For the time being, let’s bracket a primordial fall as the primary referent. I’ll revisit that question shortly (see below).

Does it then refer to a present event (i.e. the thaumaturgic ministry of Christ and his disciples), or a future event (i.e. the Day of Judgment)? That’s something of a false dichotomy. It would be more accurate to construe this statement in terms of inaugurated eschatology. The healings, exorcisms, and other miracles of Jesus and his disciples inaugurate the first stage in Satan’s eventual and inexorable defeat.¹²⁹

At the same time, we need to distinguish between the viewpoint of Jesus, the viewpoint of Luke, and the viewpoint of the modern audience. The narration doesn’t consciously distinguish between what is happening now and some future fulfillment. That represents the retrospective viewpoint of the modern reader. With 2000 years of history behind us, we see, in hindsight, that what the ministry of Christ set in motion has yet to run its course. This doesn’t mean that Jesus or Luke equate the two events; rather, they don’t distinguish the two events. The narrative doesn’t speak to that issue one way or the other.

So while it’s historically accurate to draw that distinction, it’s not, strictly speaking, an exegetical distinction. Rather, it’s something that only time can disambiguate.¹³⁰

However, an eschatological referent does not rule out a protological allusion. Indeed, the past and future answer to each other. At one level, Lucifer’s protological fall represented a fall from power (as well as a moral and spiritual defection). At another level, that empowered him as the “god” or “ruler” of this world. His eschatological fall will represent a definitive loss of power. Thus, the eschatological fall will complete the protological fall—representing the nth stage of his downward spiral.

¹²⁹ G. Twelftree, *In the Name of Jesus* (Baker 2007), 138-40.

¹³⁰ This goes to the element of historical contingency which is a presupposition of Biblical promise and fulfillment. Cf. R. Pratt, “Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions.” http://www.thirdmill.org/files/english/theology/81968~5_24_99_9-21-50_PM~Pratt.Historical_Contingencies.pdf

Beyond v18 itself is the relation, if any, between v18 and vv19-20.¹³¹ Even if, with Nolland,¹³² we treat v19 as a “detached saying,” the further fact, if it is a fact, that Luke has collated some isolated sayings into a continuous pericope means that Luke intended for the reader to treat this material as a literary unit. Therefore, we should also construe v18 in light of vv19-20, since their combination reflects the narrative viewpoint. Put another way, it reflects his editorial interpretation of these dominical sayings.

In view of that, what some commentators say about v19 is pertinent to v18 as well, as part of an overall interpretation of this pericope:

“Serpents and scorpions”: Behind this is probably Ps 90:13 LXX, “you will tread on the asp and basilisk (a fabulous monster).”...for this combination threatening the Israelites in the wilderness, cf. Deut 8:15; in a commentary on Deuteronomy they are combined with evil spirits. They could thus be meant as particular manifestations or symbols of “the power of the enemy” (cf. 2 Thes 2:9).¹³³

The serpent and the scorpion were not only well-known sources of physical evil in Palestinian life, but were OT symbols of all kinds of evil. The seductive serpent of Gen 3:1-14, used to explain the “origin” of evil in human life, appears in the LXX as *ho ophis*.¹³⁴

These [snakes and scorpions] were both well-known symbols for evil. The snake is a symbol for Satan in Gen 3:1-5; 2 Cor 11:3; Rev 12:9,14-15; 20:2. For a parallel to Luke’s statement, cf. Ps 91:13; T. Levi 18:12—“Beliar shall be bound by him [the Messiah], and he shall give power to his children to tread upon evil spirits” (cf. also T. Simeon 6:6; T. Zebulon 9:8).¹³⁵

In terms of intertextual and subtextual connections, Lk 10:18-20 combines literary and theological motifs involving the fall of Satan in the Messianic age, the downfall of “Venus” in Isa 14:12-14, as well as the serpentine temper in Gen 3.

¹³¹ Cf. Marshall, *ibid.* 427ff.

¹³² “This verse [19] will also have been transmitted as a detached saying (not the opening ‘behold,’ which suggests a fresh beginning rather than a development from v18),” J. Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34* (Word 1993), 564. It seems to me that this fails to properly distinguish between the original saying and Luke’s edition of the original saying. Even if these were separate sayings when Jesus delivered them, at different times, this doesn’t mean that v19 can’t be a development of v18 in Luke’s editorial compilation. Redaction is an interpretive process. The meaning of the Lukan pericope is determined by the final form of the text, and not by hypothetical source criticism which attempts to deconstruct an editorial construct. The narrative viewpoint controls the meaning of the narrative components.

¹³³ C. F. Evans, *ibid.* 455.

¹³⁴ Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV* (Doubleday 1985), 863.

¹³⁵ Stein, *ibid.* 310; cf. C. A. Evans, *ibid.*, 174.

Let's return to the question of when Lucifer fell in Lk 10:18. At least in principle, we need to distinguish between the visionary chronology and the narrative chronology.¹³⁶ Since Jesus saw Lucifer fall in a vision, we need to distinguish between the internal timetable of the vision, and the external timetable of the event to which the narrative applies the vision. As one commentator puts it:

As the 70 were going about their urgent mission, Jesus in prayer had seen a vision, echoing the prophetic visions of the downfall of the ancient enemy (Isaiah 14:4-23; Ezekiel 28:1-19). Jesus had seen, in mystical sight, the heavenly reality which corresponded to the earthly victories won by the 70.¹³⁷

This raises a potential, twofold distinction or relation: (a) the relation between OT typological visions and their NT counterpart of antitype; (b) the relation between Jesus' vision and the historical referent(s).

a) Is there something like a type/antitype or promise/fulfillment relation between the OT visions and Jesus' vision?

b) Is there a distinction between the timing of the diabolical fall in Jesus' vision, and the application of that (prior?) event to the ministry of Christ and his disciples?

c) Apropos (a-b), Jesus could have "seen" a vision of a primordial fall. And that prior event could, in turn, prefigure Satan's loss of power with the advent of Christ. So the internal sequence of the vision need not be synchronous with the sequence of the narrative—any more than a type is synchronous with its antitype.

Put another way, we could be dealing with more than one referent. There could be a primordial event, denoted in the vision. And there could also be a subsequent event (or series of events), denoted in the narrative. Parallel events in which the former foreshadows the latter.

I'm not claiming that this is, in fact, the case. It's possible to overinterpret this passage in either direction. My immediate point is that commentators tend to collapse this distinction, as if the external setting dictates the referent. But when dealing with visionary revelation, that's simplistic. We have several things going on: (a) the mental event of Jesus' vision; (b) the imaginative event which he saw in his vision, and (c) the historical events recorded in the narrative, which are, in some way, correlated with the (b). That, however,

¹³⁶ For an overview of this distinction, cf. G. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Eerdmans 1999), 52ff.; J. Michaels, *Revelation* (IVP 1997), 22ff.; 219ff.; V. Poythress, "Genre and Hermeneutics in Rev 20:1-6," *JETS* 36 (1993), 41-54; http://www.frame-poythress.org/poythress_articles/1993Genre.htm

Although these discussions have special reference to the interpretation of the Apocalypse, they are also germane to visionary revelation in general, of which both Lk 10:18 and the Apocalypse constitute a special case.

¹³⁷ T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (WJK 2004), 125.

could either be a (d) one-to-one correspondence or else a (e) one-to-many correspondence.

If (d), then Jesus saw Satan fall when the 70 began to cast out demons. If (e), then Jesus saw him fall at some prior date, which however typifies his loss of power when the 70 began to cast out demons. The time at which he fell in the vision may or may not be synchronous with the time at which he fell in relation to the contemporaneous events.

This also goes back to the ambiguous imagery of a downward motion (see above). That's a polyvalent symbol which can stand for more than kind of incident. And progressive revelation, in its later stages, has more allusive layers than at its inception, when a literary or theological motif is initially introduced.

v) 2 Pet 2:4 & Jude 6

2 Pet 2:4

For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment.

Jude 6

And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day.

This would seem to be an explicit reference to the fallen angels. Indeed, to their primordial fall. Of course, even if that were the case, it's not a specific reference to the fall of Satan. But, by implication, he would be included. There are, however, certain complications to this appeal:

a) Many commentators think this is an allusion to Gen 6:1-4—via haggadic tradition.¹³⁸ If so, then this has reference to a prediluvial event rather than a primordial event.

On the other hand, the fact, if it is a fact, that fallen angels interbred with women before the Flood doesn't mean the angels fell at that time. Indeed, it's more likely that this illicit liaison is a sinful manifestation of angels who have already turned to evil.

b) Of course, the question of the correct interpretation of Gen 6:1-4 is quite controversial. But that's a side issue inasmuch as the salient question concerns the way in which Peter and Jude apply this material to their own situation.

¹³⁸ E.g. P. Davids, *The Letters of Second Peter and Jude* (Eerdmans 2006), 48ff.; 225ff.; G. Green, *Jude & 2 Peter* (Baker 2008), 62ff; 248ff.; T. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude* (Broadman 2003), 335ff.; 447ff. For an opposing view, cf. J. Walton, *Genesis* (Zondervan 2001), 297.

c) Apropos (b), even if it were an allusion to a primordial fall, that doesn't, of itself, settle the factual question. Did Peter and Jude regard this haggadic gloss as historically accurate? Or is their allusion to this material a case of audience adaptation? A rhetorical strategy in which they respond to the false teachers on their own terms, for the sake of argument?¹³⁹

d) However, even after we register all the necessary caveats, the fact remains that Peter and Jude contribute to a consistent Biblical motif involving a cosmic war with outcast, downcast losers.

vi) Rev 8:10 & 9:1

Rev 8:10

The third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water.

Rev 9:1

And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit.

Gregory Beale has offered a detailed exposition of these two passages. Among other things, he says:

We have observed elsewhere that stars represent angelic beings in Revelation, the OT, and post-biblical Judaism (see on 1:19)...Here the judgment of Babylon's angel is in view, since v8 concerns the judgment of Babylon the Great. The identification of the star as Babylon's representative angel becomes more convincing if v10 is understood as alluding to Isa 14:12-15. There the judgment of the king of Babylon and his nation is said to occur because its guardian angel, 'the star of the morning,' has 'fallen from heaven...thrust down to Sheol...to the recesses of the pit.' That the judgment of the Babylonian world system is in mind is consistency with the imagery in Sib Or. 5:158-60: "a great start will come from heaven into the divine sea and will burn up the deep sea and Babylon itself and the land of Italy."¹⁴⁰

The main debate is whether this is a good or evil being. The star [9:1] should rather be interpreted in the same way as the star in 8:10 because of the parallel wording ("a star fell from heaven")...The portrayal of a heavenly being "falling like a star

¹³⁹ Cf. R. Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus* (T&T Clark 1990), 225-33; J. Charles, *The Literary Strategy in the Epistle of Jude* (USP 1993); E. Waltner & J. Charles, *1-2 Peter, Jude* (Herald Press 1999), 302-308; 330-333; T. Wilder et al. *Faithful to the End: An Introduction to Hebrews Through Revelation* (Broadman 2007), 231-41.

¹⁴⁰ G. Beale, *Revelation*, 478-79.

from heaven” elsewhere also represents judgment of either Satan or his angels. In 1 En. 88:1-3 an evil angel (perhaps Satan, cf. 1 En. 10:4) is referred to as a “star that had fallen from heaven...into an abyss...narrow...and dark” (so also 86:1-2; cf. 1 En 18:11-16; 86:3; 90:23-26, where disobedient angels are “stars” that have been cast into the “abyss”). Jesus uses virtually the identical expression to describe Satan’s judgment in Luke 10:18: “I was seeing Satan as a star falling from heaven.” In Luke 10:17-20 Jesus identifies Satan as head over the demons and, with them, in the process of being subjected to him and his disciples. The expression in 9:1 may be another way of saying that “Satan...was cast to earth, and his angels with him were cast” (12:9; cf. 12:13). Testament of Solomon 20:14-17 says that good angels do not fall like stars from heaven because they “have their foundations laid in the firmament”; but “demons” appear as “stars...falling from heaven...dropped like flashes of lightning to the earth” because they have no such foundations.¹⁴¹

Similarly, Sib. Or. 5:72 speaks of a heavenly being representing Egypt whose judgment is described as “fallen from the stars” (“wandering stars, for whom black darkness is reserved forever” in Jude 13 is also comparable). Greek Apocalypse of Ezra 4:29ff. and Apoc. Elijah 4:11ff. also apply Isa 14:12ff. to the Antichrist, who leads people astray...In addition to resemblances with falling star depictions elsewhere (mentioned above), the conclusion that this is not a good angel but a fallen angel is also suggested by v11...for the satanic nature of this angel see on v11)...Therefore, the angel in v1 is either Satan or one of his minions...¹⁴²

It isn’t necessary to my thesis that either verse singles out Lucifer as the angelic star. It’s sufficient for my purposes that passages like this continue the stock motif of angels as fallen heavenly beings. By implication, that makes Satan a fallen angel.

The timing (in 8:10ff.; 9:1ff.) is eschatological rather than protological. However, it’s equally clear that these angelic beings were already evil at the time of this denouement. Hence, such passages take for granted a prior lapse.

vii) Rev 12:7-9

Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

This is the climactic passage on the cosmic warfare theme, to which earlier verses in Revelation, as well as OT antecedents, has been building. It represents the culmination of

¹⁴¹ Ibid. 491-92.

¹⁴² Ibid. 492.

progressive canonical tradition. The fall of Satan in at this point in redemptive history recapitulates his primordial fall at the outset of history:

Just as Satan and his hosts fell at the beginning of the first creation (so Isa 14:11-16; Ezk 28:12-19 [?]; 2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6; 1 En. 9-10; 86; 2 En. 7; 18; 29:4-5; Life of Adam and Eve [Vita] 12:1; 16:1; Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer 13), so he had to fall at the start of the second new creation (see above on 1:5 and 3:14; cf. 2 Cor 5:14-17; Gal 6:15).¹⁴³

Although the fall of Satan in Rev 12:7-10 is coordinated with the Messianic age, there's a certain symmetry between the past and the present:

In Isaiah and Ezekiel, language from the cosmic rebellion aspect of the combat myth was used metaphorically to describe Israel's historical enemies (Isa 14:b-15; Ezk 28:1-9; cf. Day, *Conflict*, 88-140; Eliade, *Sacred*, 47-50)...The application of language drawn from the primordial cosmic rebellion myths to the historical enemies of Israel is based on the perception of the paradigmatic character of the original conflict...In some proto-apocalyptic texts such as Isa 27:1, God is expected to repeat in the future his primordial victories in the past...Such text show the way in which eschatological combat myths were developed out of protological combat myths.¹⁴⁴

Because it's possible to retroengineer certain passages, we can rightly infer Lucifer's primeval apostasy from some passages dealing with historical or eschatological cosmic warfare. For in the course of God's unfolding revelation, subsequent Bible writers jump into a continuous narrative, and take it to the next step. Their audience already knows the back-story of this ongoing story.

Yet it does so because that's understood. An unspoken assumption which doesn't need to be stated since it represents a cultural preunderstanding which the author shares in common with his audience. In this case, an exegetical tradition. Much like popular idioms, where speaker and listener alike already know the back-story.

Rev 12 & 20 allude to the Tempter in Gen 3, mediated by Isaiah 27:1, where Leviathan is described both in terms of a snake (LXX: ophis) as well as a dragon (LXX: drakon).

¹⁴³ Beale, *Revelation*, 658.

¹⁴⁴ D. Aune, *Revelation 6-16* (Nelson 1998), 668. Two caveats: (i) As Beale has documented, John's source material has its roots in OT texts, not pagan mythology; (ii) There's a difference between the polemical use of mythopoetic imagery and the adoption of a mythological outlook. Because liberal scholars like Aune don't believe in the historicity of various Biblical narratives, they classify some of these narratives as mythological. That, however, reflects the viewpoint of the scholar, not the viewpoint of the narrator.

2. Adam & Eve

Gen 2:15-17

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

Gen 3:1-8

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made.

He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

The Biblical account of the temptation and fall of man is tantalizingly brief for so momentous an event.

a) As a number of scholars have pointed out, the garden is more than just a park-like enclosure. It also represents sacred space.¹⁴⁵ It stands in contrast to the wilderness outside the garden. The relationship is analogous to degrees of sacred space, or sacred and profane, in Israel:

Canaan>holy land>temple>inner sanctum

The relationship is concentric. Eden is a microcosm of the cosmic temple, which symbolizes the divine abode.

To "tend and keep" (KJV) the garden is a double-entendre. While it suggests the duties of a farmer or gardener, it also suggests the duties of a priest who safeguards the sanctity of

¹⁴⁵ Cf. T. Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden*.

the temple. Eden also had angelic sentinels to patrol the perimeter (Gen 3:24; Ezk 28:14,16).

Genesis is part of the Pentateuch. It introduces various motifs which foreshadow later events and institutions in the Pentateuch. The audience is the same for all five books. They were meant to be read (or heard) as a unit. Eden is the archetypal temple on earth.

By contrast, the “serpent” represents an unclean creature.¹⁴⁶ It’s the sort of creature which Adam and Eve were duty-bound to bar access to the Edenic precincts—or expel if it did trespass the boundaries. Its very presence is sacrilegious.

The first misstep which Adam and Eve made was to give it a hearing or audience. It should have been escorted right out of the Garden.

At the same time, its identity is ambiguous. The narrator and the reader know a bit more than Adam and Eve. And, of course, the “serpent” knows more about the real situation than Adam and Eve.

That situation generates dramatic irony. The narrator and his audience know about unclean animals. They also know about ancient Near Eastern ophiolatry and ophiomancy. To the informed reader, the “serpent” is a more sinister being than it would appear to Adam and Eve—who don’t come to this encounter with all that background information at their fingertips.

b) This brings us to the question of what Adam and Eve already knew, and the nature of the temptation. What does the “knowledge of good and evil” stand for?¹⁴⁷

But the precise identity of this knowledge is probably less important than the way in which the temptation is stated: “you will become like God (or gods).”

The way in which they become god-like is secondary. The knowledge of good and evil is not, itself, tempting. What is tempting, rather, is what it represents—especially in terms of how the “serpent” spins the value of such knowledge. Knowing “good and evil” is “god-like.” It will make you godlike to possess such knowledge. That’s the primary consideration. How they become godlike is merely a means to an end. The temptation lies in the goal, not the process. The goal is the bait.

Self-transcendence. To surpass their finitude. Rise above their creaturely limitations. To become more than they were meant to be. Apotheosis, no less.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ G. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Word 1987), 73.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. V. Hamilton, *Genesis 1-17*, 172-74.

¹⁴⁸ James Barr says, “The story gives no evidence for the idea that they longed to be as gods... There is nothing here of a rebellion against God, nothing of a titanic will to take over the status of the divine... Even the knowing of good and evil, which the serpent has actually mentioned as the expected result of eating the fruit, is not included as an attrac-

c) On a related note, the dramatic irony is analogous to Job, where the narrator and reader know something that Job does not, since they overheard the “wager” between God and Satan in the prologue (1-2).

Likewise, the omniscient narrator of Genesis knows more about the “serpent,” and the consequences of succumbing temptation, than they do. As does the reader, whom the narrator allows into his confidence.

Yet it wouldn’t be correct to say they were in a state of childish innocence or naïveté. They knew their duty. Their situation typifies the dialectical relationship between faith and sight. They knew enough to see their duty and do it. And they are obligated to trust in God for what they don’t know.

But in a classic trade-down, they end up with less than what they had before. They bet the house and lose. They gamble everything away to get something even better—as they perceive it. By losing the bet, they lose the good they had without attaining the illicit good they sought.¹⁴⁹

d) The “serpent” doesn’t tell an outright lie. Instead, he tells a half-truth. A double-entendre. For their eyes will indeed be “open,” but not in the sense they anticipated.

The “serpent” is a good tactician. A half-truth is more convincing than an outright lie. And it also carries a malicious irony.

tion which actually moved the woman’s mind. The nearest one comes to it is her noting that the fruit is good to make one wise,” *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality*, 13. I think Barr’s penchant to play the iconoclast betrays his exegetical judgment. To begin with, he sets up a false dichotomy between wisdom and divinity. But it’s not just any kind of wisdom they are tempted to seek. Rather, it’s specifically “godlike” wisdom. Illicit, forbidden wisdom precisely because they trespass their appointed boundaries. Moreover, The “good and evil” motif will be revisited when they consummate their transgression (v22). The narrator has already linked the wisdom to the knowledge of good and evil. That association has been established. And it foreshadows the fateful denouement.

¹⁴⁹ According to Currid, Adam was an eyewitness to the entire transaction. See J. Currid, *Genesis 1:1–25:18* (Evangelical Press 2003), 120. Cf. J. Walton, *Genesis*, 206. In that case, Adam lent tacit consent to the temptation by his failure to intervene—the man’s sin of omission complementing the woman’s sin of commission. But however we construe the sequence, Adam was complicit.

E. Secondary Cases

1. Ahab

1 Kg 16:31-33

And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, he took for his wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal and worshiped him. He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria. And Ahab made an Asherah. Ahab did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him.

i) Ahab is an example of a corporate apostate. It's unlikely that he ever had personal faith in Yahweh. So his behavior doesn't represent a loss of faith. Rather, he was born into the covenant community. By becoming a covenant-breaker, he committed apostasy.

ii) Ahab is a paradigmatic apostate. As one scholar notes,

Jezebel was of royal blood and every bit a queen. She could be ruthless in pursuing her goals (1 Kgs 21:11-15). Her personality was so forceful that even Ahab feared her and was corrupted by her (16:31; 21:25). Both the northern kingdom (16:32-33) and the southern kingdom, through the marriage of her step-daughter Athaliah into the royal house of Judah (2 Kgs 8:16-19; 11:1-20; 2 Chron 21:5-7), experienced moral degradation and spiritual degeneracy through her corrupting influence.¹⁵⁰

The narrator's evaluation reinforces the divine estimation of Ahab: Ahab was the vilest of all the Israelite kings. Completely under the domination of his wicked, pagan wife, he was unmatched in evil and spiritual harlotry in Israel.¹⁵¹

Jehoram's ungodly character is noted along with the primary factor in the spiritual apostasy: his marriage to Ahab's daughter (v18; cf. ch. 11). Indeed, the royal marriage of the two houses of Israel and Judah was to spell catastrophe for Judah. Already Athaliah's influence was felt in Jehoram's murder of the royal house (cf. 2 Chron 21:4) and the subsequent introduction of Baal worship (1 Kgs 16:29-33; 2 Kgs 11:17-18; 2 Chron 24:7). Both Jehoram and Ahab, his father-in-law, were dominated by strong willed femmes fatales, by whom they would fall both spiritually and physically (cf. 1 Kgs 21:25-26; see Josephus, Ant. 9:96 [5.1]).¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ R. Patterson & H. Austel, 1, 2 Kings, *NECB* 3 (Zondervan 2009), 782.

¹⁵¹ Ibid. 795.

¹⁵² Ibid. 846-47.

iii) Ahab illustrates the principle that election cuts across family lines. Piety is not hereditary. Pious fathers can beget impious sons, while impious fathers can beget pious sons.

iv) His heathen wife was instrumental in his apostasy. Since it is unlikely that he was ever devout, he had no resistance to her pagan agenda. He was religiously indifferent, whereas she was a religious zealot, but in the service of her pagan faith. So he deferred to her agenda.

2. Ahaz

2 Kg 16:3-4

But he walked in the way of the kings of Israel. He even burned his son as an offering, according to the despicable practices of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel. And he sacrificed and made offerings on the high places and on the hills and under every green tree.

2 Chron 28:22-25

In the time of his distress he became yet more faithless to the LORD—this same King Ahaz. For he sacrificed to the gods of Damascus that had defeated him and said, "Because the gods of the kings of Syria helped them, I will sacrifice to them that they may help me." But they were the ruin of him and of all Israel. And Ahaz gathered together the vessels of the house of God and cut in pieces the vessels of the house of God, and he shut up the doors of the house of the Lord, and he made himself altars in every corner of Jerusalem. In every city of Judah he made high places to make offerings to other gods, provoking to anger the Lord, the God of his fathers.

Ahaz is a throwback to Ahab. Indeed, the Chronicler is no doubt drawing attention to a vicious cycle. As one scholar explains:

The text wastes no time in giving the reader an evaluation of Ahaz...We are told that Ahaz "did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord (2 Chron 28:1 // 2 Kgs 16:2)...In addition to this normal way of evaluating a king, the text also adds that Ahaz was "unlike David his father." This is the only example of the Chronicler negatively comparing a Judean king with David...As such, this passage set Ahaz¹⁵³ in direct opposition to the Chronicler's ideal king David...As we will see, Ahaz represented the very opposite of what a king of Judah should be.

Ahaz had become as evil as the Canaanites of long ago whose evil practices had brought the divine judgment of Israel's conquest against them (see Gen 15:18-21; Deut 18:9-12)...Ahaz also involved himself in a vast array of pagan worship practices...In the Chronicler's history Ahaz was the worst of Judah's apostate

¹⁵³ R. Pratt, *1 and 2 Chronicles*, 405.

kings.¹⁵⁴

The purpose of this story [28:22-25] was to show that he had become “even more unfaithful” than before... To demonstrate the depth of Ahaz’s apostasy the Chronicler noted that the king stopped all worship of the Lord. He went so far as to remove “the furnishings from the temple” for use in pagan worship and “shut the doors of the Lord’s temple (28:24; see 28:21)... Ahaz had sunk so far into infidelity that he no longer even made pretense of serving the God of his fathers. He had completely turned “to other gods” (28:25a).¹⁵⁵

3. Asaph

Ps 73:2-3

But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

This is a paradigm-case of a true believer who suffers a crisis of faith. It’s all the more striking because Asaph was a prophet.

The psalm is logically subdivided into three sections which charge the stages of his crisis and recovery: the trigger, the turning-point, and the resolution.

In his case, the trigger is both emotional and theological. At an emotional level, he was indignant at the prosperity of the wicked. The wicked often prosper while the faithful often suffer. That is unjust and disheartening. It can be hard to remain faithful when fidelity goes unrewarded or even punished while infidelity seems to harvest rich rewards. Not only does that undercut the incentive to be pious, but the sheer injustice is galling.

This in turn was aggravated, at the time, by Asaph’s inadequate eschatology. Either his eschatology was defective, or else he wasn’t, up-until-now, considering the practical implications of his eschatology.

A believer can be perfectly orthodox, yet his orthodoxy is a rather abstract orthodoxy. He doesn’t connect it with a real world situation. He doesn’t apply it at a concrete level to his own experience.

In Asaph’s case, he was judging events from a sublunary perspective. How, in this life, the scales of justice are skewed. How the wicked seem to get away with evil. Go unpunished. Indeed, do better for themselves.

But in verses 17ff, he shifts from a sublunary perspective to a God’s-eye perspective (sub specie aeternitatis). There will be a reversal of fortunes in the world to come. Of course,

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. 406; cf. 410-11.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 413.

that, of itself, is an act of faith. Faith in God's promises regarding a presently intangible future. As one scholar explains:

The reason for the crisis comes to expression in two strophes: a short strophe that describes the psalmist's plight (73:1-3) and a long strophe that describes the wicked's prosperity (73:4-12)...This is simply not the way things are supposed to be.¹⁵⁶

A change begins with the psalmist's brutal honesty about what he thought and how he felt during the crisis... Sometimes the doubts of a believer run so deep that we think our faith is in vain. The Bible says that God is good to those who have pure hearts—and we are among the pure in heart, but where is the goodness of God? Sometimes it seems to be just a theological category with no concrete manifestation.¹⁵⁷

But the psalmist did not remain in this condition. He refused to “talk on in this way” (NRSV), so as not to betray his faith and his community of faith (73:15). Rather, he resolved to find a resolution to the crisis, difficult as that may have been. The resolution came when the psalmist came into the presence of God in the sanctuary and brought the future into the equation.¹⁵⁸

With new clarity brought about by thinking beyond the present, the psalmist became confident that God would lead him to a glorious future, one that stood in sharp contrast with that of the wicked. That future was not yet his experience. His circumstances had not yet changed. His health may have been failing and his life force diminishing, but God was there to give him inner strength. So God himself became the psalmist's supreme desire in heaven and on earth. Though not yet experiencing the glorious future, the psalmist did already experience the ultimate good from which all future goodness would flow, the presence of God.¹⁵⁹

4. David

2 Sam 11:1-15

In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel. And they ravaged the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem.

It happened, late one afternoon, when David arose from his couch and was walking on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful. And David sent and inquired about the woman. And one said, "Is not this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah

¹⁵⁶ M. Futato, *The Book of Psalms* (Tyndale House 2009), 243.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 243.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 243.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid. 244.

the Hittite?" So David sent messengers and took her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she had been purifying herself from her uncleanness.) Then she returned to her house. And the woman conceived, and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant."

So David sent word to Joab, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent Uriah to David. When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab was doing and how the people were doing and how the war was going. Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house and wash your feet." And Uriah went out of the king's house, and there followed him a present from the king. But Uriah slept at the door of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house. When they told David, "Uriah did not go down to his house," David said to Uriah, "Have you not come from a journey? Why did you not go down to your house?" Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah dwell in booths, and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field. Shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do this thing." Then David said to Uriah, "Remain here today also, and tomorrow I will send you back." So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day and the next. And David invited him, and he ate in his presence and drank, so that he made him drunk. And in the evening he went out to lie on his couch with the servants of his lord, but he did not go down to his house. In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it by the hand of Uriah. In the letter he wrote, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, that he may be struck down, and die."

Aside from David's lust, the Biblical account does give much information regarding his motives in this tawdry affair. This is partly because the Bible takes certain things for granted. It is written to fallen human readers. As such, we can fill in the motives on the basis of our own experience.

i) The immediate trigger was lust. Unbridled lust.

However, some men resist lustful impulses. Why did David give in? Likewise, is not a direct motive for murder. So whatever factors may have contributed to his sin?

ii) David was a promiscuous man. Like many kings, he maintained a harem. It's not surprising that a promiscuous man has a lowered resistance to sexual temptation.

iii) David was the king. Kings are used to getting their way. Since they have no earthly peers or superiors, no one can say "no" to them. Unchecked power is a tremendous test of self-restraint, and most men flunk the test.

Of course, David was answerable to God—but God was far from his mind at the time.

iv) David had gone soft. Although he rose to power as a warrior, he had at this point delegated combat to his best general while he had too much idle time on his hands in Jerusalem.

Elitism easily results. A loss of solidarity with the men you order into battle. The sense of shared risk and camaraderie.

v) David was a battle-hardened soldier. He personally killed men in hand-to-hand combat. And he ordered the death of many others.

That's not the same thing as murder, if the cause is just. Israel had to defend herself against pagan foes. Indeed, that was a divine mandate.

However, you can't dispatch so many men without becoming somewhat callous. Inured to death. And it can be a short step from killing your enemy to killing a subordinate who gets between you and something you want. For you've already lost your inhibitions about taking human life.

vi) David backed himself into one of those no-win situations where, having sinned, that committed him to sin again to cover his tracks for the previous sin. That's a familiar, vicious cycle. It's not that David was forced to go down that road, but sin has a certain momentum to it. It takes a special effort to slam on the brakes after you bust through the first barricade. The temptation is to keep on going.

vii) But unlike the apostate, David was a child of gone, and he underwent spiritual restoration (Ps 32; 51). As such, he's a paradigmatic backslider rather than apostate.

5. Demas

2 Tim 4:10

For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.

Demas was formerly one of Paul's coworkers (Col 4:14; Philm 24). On the basis of Paul's brief statement here, we can't draw any definitive conclusions about his spiritual status. But despite the attempt of some tenderhearted commentators (I. H. Marshall, Cesslas Spicq, Philip Towner) to downplay the gravity of Demas' defection, Paul's indictment is rather damning. As one commentator points out:

The fact that Paul attributes his desertion to love of this present age suggests that he apostatized from the faith...Paul uses *egkataleipein*, "to desert," to describe the abandonment by his friends at his first defense (v16). It is a strong word...The use of *agapan*, "to love," contrasts with its use in v8; a crown awaits those who love Jesus' return, but because Demas loved this age (*agapesas*, "because he loved," is a causal participle), he deserted Paul, *ton nun aiona*, "the present age," is a common idiom (cf. 1 Tim 6:17; Tit 2:12; cf. Rom 12:2; 1 Cor 2:6; 2 Cor 4:4).¹⁶⁰

¹⁶⁰ W. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 589-90.

6. Eli

1 Sam 2:22-25

Now Eli was very old, and he kept hearing all that his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who were serving at the entrance to the tent of meeting. And he said to them, "Why do you do such things? For I hear of your evil dealings from all the people. No, my sons; it is no good report that I hear the people of the Lord spreading abroad. If someone sins against a man, God will mediate for him, but if someone sins against the Lord, who can intercede for him?" But they would not listen to the voice of their father, for it was the will of the Lord to put them to death.

i) We can debate whether or not Eli should be included in a discussion of apostasy. I include him here in part because infidelity ranges along a continuum. Eli was in a position of spiritual authority and responsibility. He undermines the true faith by omission rather than commission, passivity rather than activity.

His behavior is simply to that of Ahab, Ahaz, and Solomon insofar as he allowed personal, familial affections to take precedence over his religious duties. And even though he didn't personally oppose the true faith, he allowed others to do so, even though it lay within his power to restrain them.

Unlike Ahab and Ahaz, he may have been a man of genuine piety. But he was weak. An indulgent father.

And in some ways his pious streak makes his complicity more culpable, not less.

ii) Many parents, including many Christian parents, have a blind spot where their own kids are concerned. While that's understandable inasmuch as parents naturally tend to identify with their kids, this can be taken to an unhealthy and amoral extreme. A counter-productive and destructive love. By backing whatever their children do, whether right or wrong, they contribute to their children's perdition. They become enablers of their children's self-destruction—like handing a loaded revolver to a suicidal child.

This is why feelings need to be tempered by duty. Misguided love is hateful love. It destroys the very thing it loves.

It does your children no favors to excuse or rubberstamp their spiritual rebellion. You chauffeur them to hell.

7. Hymenaeus

1 Tim 1:19-20

Holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.

2 Tim 2:17-18

And their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some.

Hymenaeus was a hardened heretic and apostate. He sinned against the light. He resisted church discipline. He had firsthand knowledge of apostolic doctrine, but rebelled against apostolic authority.

According to one scholar, his eschatological heresy (hyperpreterism) had its source in a baptismal heresy. Hymenaeus evidently took the picturesque resurrection imagery which Paul uses in conjunction with baptism (Rom 6:3-8; Eph 2:5; Col 2:12) too literally.¹⁶¹ Is so, then this would be a case of taking a partial truth to a false extreme. That's a typical way in which heresies develop. It also illustrates the dangers of misplaced literalism, which fails to appreciate figures of speech.

8. Jehoream

1 Kg 8:18-19

And he walked in the way of the kings of Israel, as the house of Ahab had done, for the daughter of Ahab was his wife. And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. Yet the Lord was not willing to destroy Judah, for the sake of David his servant, since he promised to give a lamp to him and to his sons forever.

This is another instance of a corporate apostate. And the same time, it illustrates the Lord's fidelity to his promises despite the infidelities of man.

9. Jeroboam

1 Kgs 12:25-33

Then Jeroboam built Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim and lived there. And he went out from there and built Peniel. And Jeroboam said in his heart, "Now

¹⁶¹ P. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 528-29; cf. I. H. Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, 753.

the kingdom will turn back to the house of David. If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the temple of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn again to their lord, to Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah." So the king took counsel and made two calves of gold. And he said to the people, "You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." And he set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. Then this thing became a sin, for the people went as far as Dan to be before one. He also made temples on high places and appointed priests from among all the people, who were not of the Levites. And Jeroboam appointed a feast on the fifteenth day of the eighth month like the feast that was in Judah, and he offered sacrifices on the altar. So he did in Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that he made. And he placed in Bethel the priests of the high places that he had made. He went up to the altar that he had made in Bethel on the fifteenth day in the eighth month, in the month that he had devised from his own heart. And he instituted a feast for the people of Israel and went up to the altar to make offerings.

1 Kg 13:33-34

After this thing Jeroboam did not turn from his evil way, but made priests for the high places again from among all the people. Any who would, he ordained to be priests of the high places. And this thing became sin to the house of Jeroboam, so as to cut it off and to destroy it from the face of the earth.

Yet another example of a corporate apostate. Ironically, some of the most ardent opponents of the faith can be products of the faith. They were raised in the faith, but turn against it with a vengeance.

This is a common theme in church history. It's partly symptomatic of arrested teenage rebellion. While it's natural for some adolescents to go through a period of rebellion as they come of age, and redefine their social roles as they embark on the independence of adulthood, some men and women never outgrow this stage.

In addition, those who've grown up in the faith often have nothing to compare it to. They take the blessings of their religious heritage for granted. They chaff against the perceived restrictions. They find the prospect of infidelity liberating.

By contrast, some men and women who've grown up in a godless environment entertain no illusions about a godforsaken existence. They don't idealize atheism, for they realize, from firsthand experience, the dire moral consequences of atheism.

10. John the Baptist

Mt 11:2-6

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his

disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

Here's a paradigm case of a true believer who suffered a crisis of faith. This is all the more striking because John was a prophet, as well as a cousin of Jesus. He enjoyed a level of religious experience which few very few Christians can match.

So what accounts for his religious doubts? Matthew doesn't say, but it was probably emotional, due to his immediate circumstances. He was imprisoned. That meant he was socially isolated. And he was facing execution.

As Gary Habermas classifies it, this is probably a case of "emotional doubt" rather than "factual doubt":

We have already referred to this species of uncertainty as emanating chiefly from one's passions or moods, usually involving a subjective response(s) by the individual. It perhaps most frequently masquerades as intellectual doubt and hence does not immediately reveal its disguised emotional basis.¹⁶²

11. Judaizers

The peril of apostasy is a central theme of Galatians:

The situation at Galatia was serious, not just, of course, because of the presence of Judaizers, but because the Judaizers had persuaded Gentile Christians to turn away from "the truth of the gospel" (2:5,14) to "a different gospel—which is not at all the same gospel" (1:6-7). Their arguments were persuasive (cf. 3:1; 5:7-8), and those who claimed the name of Christ were beginning to carry out their directives (cf. 4:9-11). As yet, however, Paul's converts seem not to have submitted to the rite of circumcision, and so Paul exhorts them to stand firm in their Christian freedom (5:1)—even, in fact, expressing confidence that they will (5:10).¹⁶³

According to the Judaizers,

The "full" gospel included circumcision as an indispensable requirement; the gospel which they had received from Paul as a truncated gospel. To which Paul replied that such a "full" gospel, denying as it did the all-sufficiency of Christ, as no gospel at all, and insofar as it involved a reversion to legal bondage it undercut the message of justification by faith, disallowed the claim that Jesus by his death and

¹⁶² G. Habermas, *Dealing with Doubt* (Moody 1990); http://garyhabermas.com/books/dealing_with_doubt/dealing_with_doubt.htm#ch4

¹⁶³ R. Longenecker, *Galatians* (Word (1990), xcix.

resurrection had inaugurated the messianic age which superseded the age of law and thus in effect disallowed his title to be the Messiah. Far from being a gospel in any sense, such teaching was plain apostasy from Christ.¹⁶⁴

12. Judas

Mt 26:14-16

Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?" And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him.

Lk 22:3-6

Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was of the number of the twelve. He went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers how he might betray him to them. And they were glad, and agreed to give him money. So he consented and sought an opportunity to betray him to them in the absence of a crowd.

Jn 12:6

He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it.

Jn 13:2,27

During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him...Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly."

i) At one level, Judas epitomized Hannah Arendt's oft-quoted cliché about the banality of evil. Not that evil is always banal. But in a fallen world, it's quite possible for ordinarily evil men to commit extraordinarily evil deeds. Their evil deeds are disproportionate to any conceivable temptation or provocation. They do so, not because they love evil for evil's sake, but because they fail to love goodness for goodness' sake. What Arendt said of Eichmann is broadly true of Judas:

She controversially uses the phrase "the banality of evil" to characterize Eichmann's actions as a member of the Nazi regime, in particular his role as chief architect and executioner of Hitler's genocidal "final solution" (Endlösung) for the "Jewish problem." Her characterization of these actions, so obscene in their nature and consequences, as "banal" is not meant to position them as workaday. Ra-

¹⁶⁴ F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on Galatians* (Eerdmans 1988), 32.

ther it is meant to contest the prevalent depictions of the Nazi's inexplicable atrocities as having emanated from a malevolent will to do evil, a delight in murder. As far as Arendt could discern, Eichmann came to his willing involvement with the program of genocide through a failure or absence of the faculties of sound thinking and judgement. From Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem (where he had been brought after Israeli agents found him in hiding in Argentina), Arendt concluded that far from exhibiting a malevolent hatred of Jews which could have accounted psychologically for his participation in the Holocaust, Eichmann was an utterly innocuous individual. He operated unthinkingly, following orders, efficiently carrying them out, with no consideration of their effects upon those he targeted. The human dimension of these activities were not entertained, so the extermination of the Jews became indistinguishable from any other bureaucratically assigned and discharged responsibility for Eichmann and his cohorts.

Arendt concluded that Eichmann was constitutively incapable of exercising the kind of judgement that would have made his victims' suffering real or apparent for him. It was not the presence of hatred that enabled Eichmann to perpetrate the genocide, but the absence of the imaginative capacities that would have made the human and moral dimensions of his activities tangible for him. Eichmann failed to exercise his capacity of thinking, of having an internal dialogue with himself, which would have permitted self-awareness of the evil nature of his deeds. This amounted to a failure to use self-reflection as a basis for judgement, the faculty that would have required Eichmann to exercise his imagination so as to contemplate the nature of his deeds from the experiential standpoint of his victims. This connection between the complicity with political evil and the failure of thinking and judgement inspired the last phase of Arendt's work, which sought to explicate the nature of these faculties and their constitutive role for politically and morally responsible choices.¹⁶⁵

To judge by the NT evidence, Judas was just a petty thief. A small-time crook who sold out his Lord and Savior for a modest sum of money.

It wasn't motivated by theology or ideology. Wasn't done in the pursuit of some great cause. Wasn't even triggered by disillusionment or a personal slight—that we know of. In the words of Oscar Wilde, Judas was a man who knew the price of everything and the value of nothing.¹⁶⁶

ii) At another level, there was an added factor in his defection and betrayal. A diabolical factor (Lk 22:3-6; Jn 13:2,27).

¹⁶⁵ M. Yar, "Arendt, Hannah," *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*;
<http://www.iep.utm.edu/arendt/#H6>

¹⁶⁶ Of course, Wilde's bon mot is highly ironic considering that his own moral and spiritual priorities were just as misguided.

Both the text and syntax of Jn 13:2 are somewhat uncertain.¹⁶⁷ Indeed, the ambiguous syntax may well have spawned the textual variants.

But taken in context, the gist of the statement is clear enough. Both here and v27, Satan is using Judas as a pawn, to some extent a willing pawn, to do his bidding. That's corroborated by Lk 22:3-6.

iii) Judas was a thief. What is worse, he stole from the poor (Jn 12:6). That greatly aggravates his theft.

Satan exploited that susceptibility in prompting Judas to betray Jesus. That was Satan's point of entrée into the heart of Judas.

iv) So Judas became a diabolic plant. A Satanic spy who infiltrated the inner circle of Jesus' coterie.

That was a very ingenious scheme. No doubt Satan was quite pleased with himself. Look at how he cleverly outmaneuvered the Son of God! Planted a spy right under his nose!

But Satan was too clever by half. If Judas was Satan's pawn, then Satan was God's pawn. A diabolical chessboard set within a divine chessboard.

Satan planted his conspiracy in the mind of Judas, but God planted his own conspiracy in the mind of Satan. Unbeknownst to him, Satan's treacherous plan was actually part of a larger, divine plan (Jn 13:18; 17:12). So Satan lost by winning. He apparently won on Good Friday, only to lose on Easter Sunday—and Good Friday was instrumental to Easter Sunday. It never pays to bet against the heavenly casino, for God holds all the high cards.

v) Should we consider the suicidal remorse of Judas to be a sign of genuine repentance? Probably not. Suicidal impulses are reportedly a common symptom and side-effect of occult bondage.¹⁶⁸ In context, it seems more likely that taking his own life was a further manifestation of same demonic possession which prompted Judas to betray Jesus.

Judas was Satan's flunky and fall-guy. Having completed the mission which Satan assigned, Satan disposed of Judas.

¹⁶⁷ Cf. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 461-62; B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (UBS 1994), 204.

¹⁶⁸ K. Koch, *Demonology: Past and Present* (Kregel 1973), 97; *Occult ABC* (Kregel 1986), 278; K. McAll, *A Guide to Healing the Family Tree* (Queenship Publishing Co., 1996), 180-85.

13. Manasseh

2 Chron 33:1-17

Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign, and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem. And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel. For he rebuilt the high places that his father Hezekiah had broken down, and he erected altars to the Baals, and made Asherahs, and worshiped all the host of heaven and served them. And he built altars in the house of the Lord, of which the Lord had said, "In Jerusalem shall my name be forever." And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the Lord. And he burned his sons as an offering in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, and used fortune-telling and omens and sorcery, and dealt with mediums and with necromancers. He did much evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger. And the carved image of the idol that he had made he set in the house of God, of which God said to David and to Solomon his son, "In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name forever, and I will no more remove the foot of Israel from the land that I appointed for your fathers, if only they will be careful to do all that I have commanded them, all the law, the statutes, and the rules given through Moses." Manasseh led Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem astray, to do more evil than the nations whom the Lord destroyed before the people of Israel.

The Lord spoke to Manasseh and to his people, but they paid no attention. Therefore the Lord brought upon them the commanders of the army of the king of Assyria, who captured Manasseh with hooks and bound him with chains of bronze and brought him to Babylon. And when he was in distress, he entreated the favor of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. He prayed to him, and God was moved by his entreaty and heard his plea and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord was God.

Afterward he built an outer wall for the city of David west of Gihon, in the valley, and for the entrance into the Fish Gate, and carried it around Ophel, and raised it to a very great height. He also put commanders of the army in all the fortified cities in Judah. And he took away the foreign gods and the idol from the house of the Lord, and all the altars that he had built on the mountain of the house of the Lord and in Jerusalem, and he threw them outside of the city. He also restored the altar of the Lord and offered on it sacrifices of peace offerings and of thanksgiving, and he commanded Judah to serve the Lord, the God of Israel. Nevertheless, the people still sacrificed at the high places, but only to the Lord their God.

Manasseh is a paradigmatic backslider. An example of someone whom God rescues or restores from the depths of depravity: As one scholar notes,

A number of passages indicate that the Canaanites were particularly wicked

people deserving the judgment of Israel's conquest (see Gen 15:16; Deut 18:9-12; Lev 18:28; 20:23). This accusation against Manasseh highlights the severity of his apostasy... Later, a more serious violation occurs in the temple (2 Chron 33:7-9). The repetition of these themes strongly suggests that the Chronicler considered the violation of the temple Manasseh's worst sin. He defiled the place of God's holy presence and thereby incurred the wrath of God (see comments on 33:7-9).¹⁶⁹

Manasseh's captivity was one of "distress," but he prayed for deliverance... To entreat the face of God was to seek his benevolent countenance, his favor (see Num 6:24). This phraseology alludes to God's promise after Solomon's dedicatory prayer. There God commanded the people to "see my face" to find deliverance from trouble... Second, the Chronicler noted that Manasseh "humbled himself greatly." Once again, the allusion to 7:14 is evident... Upon his arrival in Jerusalem, Manasseh's attitude toward God was radically changed. He "knew that the Lord is God." Similar expressions occur frequently in Ezekiel's prophecies as descriptions of experiencing the power of God (e.g. Ezk 6:10,13).¹⁷⁰

14. Peter

Mt 26:69-75

Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came up to him and said, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean." But he denied it before them all, saying, "I do not know what you mean." And when he went out to the entrance, another servant girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." And again he denied it with an oath: "I do not know the man." After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you." Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know the man." And immediately the rooster crowed. And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

Peter is a paradigm-case of a backslider in distinction to an apostate. What comes across in this account is not a loss of faith, but a loss of nerve. Cowardice.

In principle, turning one's back on Christ out of fear can, indeed, be an act of apostasy. That, however, is different than a momentary loss of nerve. Indeed, learning to overcome one's fear of persecution can be a spiritual exercise.

It was the Resurrection which restored Peter's confidence. In that respect, he didn't rebound all by himself. Of course, if Jesus hadn't risen from the grave, there would be no reason to bounce back.

¹⁶⁹ Pratt, *1 and 2 Chronicles*, 464-65.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. 467.

This does, however, illustrate that God preserves the faithful in part by the situation he puts them in. It's not merely a matter of inward grace. Outward circumstances can either be a preservative or solvent.

15. Saul

1 Sam 8-31

Saul seems to be the case of a naturally decent, but weak man. He might be your beer buddy. Someone who's ordinarily willing to lend a helping hand.

But he's a fair-weather friend. He lacks a sense of inner direction or inner resolve. He lives by sight rather than by faith. A pure pragmatist. Saving face, not saving grace, is his trademark.

The moment your need conflicts with his self-interest, he'd sell you out in a heartbeat. Not the sort of passenger you'd choose to bring along in the lifeboat.

He takes things as they come. Acts on the spur of the moment. Does whatever it takes to survive and prosper.

Because he lacks inner direction, his conduct is entirely attuned his circumstances. As such, it only takes a gentle nudge to push him into a moral freefall. One sin commits him to a graver sin, in a chain-reaction of evil. There's nothing to halt the downward spiral once he takes the initial plunge.

The basic problem is that he doesn't trust God. As a result, he will never take a risk at his own expense. Every moral he takes, he fails.

Men like this are always at a moral tipping point. If they happen live in good times, they may lead virtuous lives. But all it takes is a moral challenge to tip the precarious balance of their conventional piety or morality. As one writer notes:

We see the hero's fatal tendency to take the path of expediency rather than obedience...As part of Saul's tragic flaw, we already see his tendency to rationalize his wrong choices with high-sounding piety...Here is a tragedy of weak leadership. Unlike the heroic leaders of the Bible, Saul is unwilling to risk himself by an act of faith in what God has directed.¹⁷¹

As another scholar observes:

Saul's specific deeds of disobedience are but symptomatic of his fundamental in-

¹⁷¹ L. Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Baker 1987), 152-53.

ability to accommodate himself to the necessary requirements of theocratic kingship. In short, they are symptomatic of his lack of true faith in God (cf. 1 Chron 10:13).¹⁷²

Saul's spiritual anointing (1 Sam 10:6ff.), followed by his subsequent apostasy, raises the question of whether a man can lose his salvation. However, his spiritual anointing is not equivalent to regeneration or sanctification.¹⁷³ Rather, in context, it serves two different (but complementary) purposes:

i) His ability to "prophesy" is an outward sign which (provisionally) legitimates his kingship.¹⁷⁴

ii) His spiritual endowment gives him the courage to be a warrior-king.¹⁷⁵

As such, there's nothing about his spiritual condition or deterioration which calls into question the Reformed doctrine of perseverance.

As a side note, one contributing factor in Saul's decline is demonic possession (1 Sam 16:14). This triggered bouts of murderous paranoia, and mounting alienation (18:10-11; 19:9).

¹⁷² V. P. Long, "Saul," *NIDOTTE* 4:1180.

¹⁷³ "It is not accurate to speak in this case of conversion in the way Christians often use the term... In both cases, persons not previously associated with the 'prophets' were endowed with prophetic gifts temporarily, which probably confirmed their legitimacy," B. Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Zondervan 2003), 169; "Here the spirit of the Lord functions as the means by which he takes ordinary people and makes them fit for his service... by being equipped with power to play a new role as Gideon and Jephtha did when the spirit of God came upon them (Jdg 6:34; 11:29). Thus, as Wilson notes, 'Saul's possession has to do with his election, not with his becoming a prophet,'" D. Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel* (Eerdmans 2007), 288; "As Saul left Samuel, God produced a change in Saul's heart. Exactly what is meant by this expression is not further indicated. That it is not to be understood in soteriological terms of spiritual regeneration seems clear because of Saul's later persistence in willful disobedience to the Lord. In this context, it would appear to be a reference to the Lord's equipping Saul with the necessary disposition of mind and will to assume the responsibilities of kingship," J. R. Vannoy, *1-2 Samuel* (Tyndale House 2009), 98; cf. 244-45.

¹⁷⁴ "Parker ('Possession Trance,' 275-78) further observes that possession by 'the Spirit of the Lord' (v6), in whose name Saul has just been anointed leader over Israel (v1), confirms and legitimates that appointment—a function of possession trance attested elsewhere in the OT (Num 11:16-17, 24-29) as well as in other cultures... The Spirit of the Lord, coming on Saul in power, authenticated him as Israel's next ruler and produced the visible evidences of ecstatic behavior (see comment on v5)," R. Youngblood, *1 Samuel–2 Kings*, *NEBC* 3 (Zondervan 2009) 105-06.

¹⁷⁵ "The same powerful accession of God's Spirit would energize Saul to lead his troops into battle against the Ammonites some time later (11:6)," *ibid.*, 106.

This raises the possibility that possession, or lesser influences of the same kind, are sometimes (but certainly not always) a factor in apostasy. In the sequence of the narrative, Saul's possession is both a penal consequence of his prior infidelity as well as a cause of additional and even greater infidelities. It's a form of judicial hardening, and it represents a vicious cycle. Having crossed a line of no-return, the rebel is now liable to divine punishment, which—in turn—fosters a further intensification of his spiritual rebellion.

Saul's demise also illustrates the Bible principle that to whom much is given, much is required (Lk 12:48). God elevated Saul from a farm boy to be the monarch of his theocratic kingdom on earth. And he endowed him with enhanced abilities to discharge his royal duties. But with that privileged position came commensurate responsibilities. His sins were aggravated sins due to his exalted status.

16. Simon Magus

Acts 8:9-24

But there was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the power of God that is called Great." And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, "Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money? You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity." And Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

i) The account of Simon Magus raises a number of questions. In what sense did he “be-

lieve”? Was he a “true believer”?¹⁷⁶

Was he truly contrite when Peter reproved him? Did he become an apostate?

ii) To say that Simon “believed” is insufficient to resolve the Arminian/Calvinist dispute, since the generic verb (*pisteuein*) is not that discriminating.¹⁷⁷

iii) I think the most consistent overall interpretation of the account is that Simon was a sorcerer from first to last. He wanted a piece of the action.¹⁷⁸ As one scholar explains:

Simon’s submission to the cleansing ritual demonstrates the superiority of Christianity to magic: even a competitor recognizes something better when he sees it. But Luke’s editorial postscript to the baptism, reporting that Simon “the great Power” stuck close to Philip and was “amazed” by Philip’s signs and “great deeds of power” (v13b), leaves a bright thread dangling. The reader recalls that “amazement” was precisely the onlookers’ reaction (mentioned twice, in vv 9,11) to Simon’s own deeds. Indeed, one reason Luke used the flashback arrangement—awkwardly postponing until vv9-11 the account of Simon’s (chronologically prior) magical activities—may have been in order to bring the reports of the people’s earlier amazement at Simon together with the similar report of Simon’s subsequent amazement at Philip. By delaying the first reports (vv9,11), and molding the second (v13) after the first, Luke succeeds in creating the impression that Simon has interpreted the Christian signs as feats of “magic” like that which he himself performed. The reader is thereby encouraged to conclude that, although Simon did believe Philip, his motives for conversion were wrong.¹⁷⁹

In having Simon make such an offer to Peter, Luke reinforces his earlier hint that Simon mistakenly regarded the Christian leaders as magicians like himself.¹⁸⁰

A close examination of Peter’s rebuke of Simon helps to clarify the magician’s relationship to Satan...The expression “gall of bitterness” alludes to LXX Deut 29:17 (MT 29:18), a curse against those who disobey the covenant by committing

¹⁷⁶ Simon Magus later became the object of unbridled legendary embellishment. Cf. A. Ferreiro, *Simon Magus in Patristic, Medieval and Early Modern Traditions* (Brill 2005).

¹⁷⁷ One doesn’t have to be a Calvinist to doubt the authenticity of his conversion. Although a doctrinaire Arminian, Ben Witherington takes the position that “Simon was never converted at all...v23 is as telling a description of an unregenerate person as one could want...In short, Luke portrays Simon as not converted, only strongly impressed with the apparent miracle-working power of Philip and Peter,” *The Acts of the Apostles* (Eerdmans 1998), 288-89.

¹⁷⁸ Magic could be a lucrative profession. Luke himself will touch on the commercial aspect of magic in 19:18-19; Cf. D. Bock, *Acts* (Baker 2007), 333; 604-05; S. Garrett, *The Demise of the Devil: Magic and the Demonic in Luke’s Writings* (Fortress 1989), 70.

¹⁷⁹ S. Garrett, *ibid.*, 69.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 70.

idolatry. The Lord's punishment for these wicked persons is extremely harsh (LXX Deut 29:19; MT 29:20).¹⁸¹

Not only the threat of destruction but also the stress on the impure and idolatrous heart precipitating such punishment (LXX v18) call to mind the description of Simon in Acts 8:21-22. By having Peter perceive that Simon is in the "gall of bitterness," Luke implies that Simon, though he has supposedly entered into the Christian community, is still an idolater, subject to punishment because still trapped (along with all idolaters) under the authority of Satan. This interpretation is supported by Peter's ensuing description of Simon as in the "bond of iniquity." The expression is an allusion to Isa 58:6—an important verse for Luke, as it is made clear by his thoughtful appending of it to Isa 61:6 in the introduction to Jesus' ministry of healing and exorcism (Lk 4:18-19). Isaiah 58:6 summarizes for Luke Jesus' task in confronting Satan (cf. Acts 10:38)...Now Peter tells Simon that the yoke still weighs upon his neck—in other words, Simon is himself still in bondage to Satan. Clearly Philip's visible and audible message of "release to the captives" had not been appropriated by Simon the magician, who had failed to obtain either forgiveness of sins or a share in "this word."¹⁸²

If anything, the magician resembles a cornered criminal, frightened at the prospect of punishment although not obviously remorseful over his crimes. Further, the way Simon's request for intercession echoes the requests made of Moses by Pharaoh (Exod 8:8,28 [LXX 8:4,24]; 9:28; 10:17)—who repeatedly "hardened his heart" once such intercession had achieved the desired result—suggests that Luke viewed Simon as insincere.¹⁸³

Simon Magus graphically illustrates the dangers of a shallow, ill-motivated conversion.

17. Solomon

1 Kgs 11:1-8

Now King Solomon loved many foreign women, along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the na-

¹⁸¹ Ibid. 71; "This terminology recalls Deuteronomy 29:18 (LXX 29:17, *en chole kai pikria*), where the image of a root producing 'bitter poison' describes a person going after false gods and leading others to do the same (cf. Heb 12:15)...The expression 'captive to sin' appears to be an allusion to Isaiah 58:6," D. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Eerdmans 2009), 289.

¹⁸² Ibid. 71-72. "In Deut 12:12 and 14:27,29, to which Acts 8:21 is an allusion, *kleros* refers to the inheritance of the land, in which the Levites do not share; against this background *kleros* in Acts 8:21 would again seem to refer to the inheritance of salvation (for 'the land' as a typological pattern for the Christian inheritance, see Acts 7:3,5; cf. also 20:32)," *ibid.* 146-47n50.

¹⁸³ Ibid. 72.

tions concerning which the Lord had said to the people of Israel, "You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods." Solomon clung to these in love. He had 700 wives, princesses, and 300 concubines. And his wives turned away his heart. For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and did not wholly follow the Lord, as David his father had done. Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Molech the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem. And so he did for all his foreign wives, who made offerings and sacrificed to their gods.

This may reflect the law of unintended consequences. To some extent, royal polygamy was just a political expedient to form military or economic alliances with neighboring countries by wedding the daughter of a king. In addition, a king inherited the harem of his predecessor.

However, royal harems also existed to indulge the sexual appetite of the monarch, and there's no reason to think that Solomon's motives were exceptional in that regard.

Therefore, what started out as a marriage of convenience or one-night stand eventually led to emotional entanglements which, in turn, eventually led to religious entanglements.

III. Philosophical Theology

1. Original Sin

The fall of Lucifer (as well as Adam and Eve) is often thought to present a psychological conundrum. To commit sin, you must find sin appealing. How could a sinless being ever form the initial desire to sin?

Even if you subscribe to libertarian freewill, that's of no avail here. Freewill can't explain how a sinless being could acquire a sinful motive. What would make sin appealing to a sinless being in the first place? To entertain a sinful desire, you must find sin desirable. How would a sinless being get to that point? How would a sinless agent take the first sinful step?

Once the process is under way, you can explain the outcome, but how does it get under-way? How does it ever get started in the first place?

However, this dilemma may be a pseudoproblem. I think the source of the problem lies in the failure to distinguish between possible and actual agents.

The Bible uses certain literary metaphors to describe God's creative role. God is the Word, the Logos. The world is like a book or lyric poem. God "spoke" the world into existence, like a bard or oral storyteller. God has written every chapter of the book before the world existed. The book of life. The life of David (Ps 139:16).

So the Bible uses a literary metaphor to describe God's creatorship. Let's play along with that illustration.

When a novelist contemplates a novel, he contemplates various characters who may populate his novel. Not only does he consider different characters, but variations on the same character. There's a wide range of things which each character could do. What a character could possibly do is only limited by the imagination of the novelist, as well the relation of one character to other characters, and to his fictional environment.

A possible character can do whatever a novelist can make him do, in the fictive sense of all the possible actions a novelist can think of. What is possible for the character comes down to what is possible for the novelist to contemplate. All of the possible actions or events which the mind of the novelist can imagine.

Possible worlds are to the real world what fiction is to reality. A possible person is a fictional character in the mind of God. He becomes a real person if God objectifies his concept in real time and space. (At least in real time.)

However, not all possibilities are compossible. One character must interact with other characters. He must interact with his fictional circumstances. So the range of possibilities is narrowed down by the demands of the story. A coherent story in which what one cha-

character does must be consistent with everything else that happens in the story.

Out of the larger range of hypothetical possibilities, the novelist chooses one set of possibilities to commit to writing about. He instantiates one set of possibilities to the exclusion of others.

There is, however, no prior constraint on what possible character could do. A merely possible character has no default setting. This no particular course of action which he would have done. Rather, he could have done any number of things. He could have done whatever the novelist could conceive of him doing.

By contrast, an actual character will only do one thing. At a concrete level, he can only do one thing. In the actual story, the novelist selects one combination of serial possibilities to the exclusion of others. The novelist instantiates one combination to the exclusion of others.

When we think about it this way, the fall of Lucifer, or Adam and Eve, it doesn't strike me as especially mysterious or paradoxical. It's only a problem when we start with the concrete individual. With the actual person. Then it seems out of character for a sinless character to sin.

But we need to go back a step. Considered as a merely possible agent, there is nothing either in character or out of character. There is nothing in particular which a possible agent was or wasn't going to do. His field of action is only limited by the imagination of the author. A possible agent is a concept. A concept in the mind of God. A divine idea.

What distinguishes acting out of character from acting in character is subsequently determined by the creative act of the author when he resolves on one set of actions to the exclusion of other possible actions. Only then does the agent have a settled persona or course of action.

When God creates Lucifer, he instantiates one possibility—out of many. Considered in abstraction, as a merely possible agent, there is nothing that Lucifer was incapable of doing—consistent with his finitude.

The only thing that delimits his practical field of action is which possible action God chooses to instantiate. There's a sense in which God makes every creature do whatever it does, but not in the sense of making it do something contrary to what it would otherwise do, of its own accord. For there's no one thing which a possible agent was going to do, or refrain from doing.

There are certain abstract possibilities which God will not allow to be realized. God's choices are characterized by his wisdom and justice. But hypothetically speaking, there was no prior constraint on Lucifer's field of action, or Adam's field of action. What we have, instead, is a posterior constraint due to the creative act itself. A character can't act out of character once the novelist has finalized a concrete combination of abstract possi-

bilities. A subset of hypothetical scenarios.

So there is, in this sense, nothing to get started—since it doesn’t start with the actual agent. Rather, starts with a possible agent—an agent with an indeterminate field of conceivable actions. God’s creative fiat crystallizes one subset of conceivable actions. Renders an indeterminate possibility a determinate reality. God instantiates that particular idea—his own idea—to the exclusion of other ideas.

Creation selects for one of these possibilities. Creation causes that possibility to be realized. But it doesn’t cause the agent to do something in the sense of making him act other than how he’d act on his own. It’s not as if a possible agent was going to do one thing rather than another until God intervened. Rather, as a merely possible agent, he could do a number of different things. A possible agent doesn’t have a bias one way or the other in terms of what he’d do. There is no predisposition to do A rather than B, or B rather than A. At this juncture, his field of action is only delimited by what is logically compossible. By what the infinite mind of God is able to coherently “imagine” or conceive in relation to the same basic character.

And just as there is no one thing, in the infinite mind of God, that Adam or Lucifer would do, there’s no one thing that Adam’s posterity would do. God can imagine a wide variety of alternate endings, surprise endings or plot twists (as it were). At the level of possible worlds, there’s more than one way the story can come out. For a possible person or possible timeline is simply a measure of what God is able to conceive.

There are one or more logically possible worlds in which all of Adam’s posterity are sinners, since it is not logically impossible for God to imagine that scenario.

If God chooses to instantiate that possibility, he does us no wrong. For it’s not as if there was something else we were going to do until he stepped in to thwart it.¹⁸⁴

2. Apostasy & Assurance

Arminians frequently attack Calvinism because, according to them, there’s something about Calvinism that uniquely undermines the assurance of salvation.

i) One objection targets the doctrine of election. But this is muddled. As one writer both states the objection and responds to it:

The objection is rarely articulated with precision, but as best I can make out the idea is that a Calvinist can’t enjoy assurance of salvation because he’ll always be

¹⁸⁴ For a philosophical argument treating abstract possibilities as divine ideas, cf. G. Welty, *An Examination of Theistic Conceptual Realism as an Alternative to Theistic Activism* (Oxford 2000); <http://www.proginosko.com/welty/mphil.pdf>; *Theistic Conceptual Realism: The Case For Interpreting Abstract Objects As Divine Ideas* (Oxford 2006).

fretting about whether or not he's really elect. What if he's a reprobate after all? He longs to peer into the secret will of God, but all in vain — for as Deuteronomy 29:29 declares, the “secret things” belong to the Lord God alone.

The objection involves a serious misunderstanding of what Calvinists have meant by the “secret will” of God. God's “secret will” is what the Westminster Confession refers to as his “eternal decree”... In other words, God's secret will is nothing other than what God from eternity has infallibly ordained will take place in history. But then it follows that God's secret will is, by definition, being progressively revealed moment by moment — and can therefore be known as easily as any historical fact. When three items of mail appear in my mailbox, I know something about God's secret will; namely, that it was his good pleasure to decree from eternity that three items of mail appear in my mailbox today. Likewise for any other event you care to mention.

Once this point is understood, we can see that Calvinism poses no special problem for the doctrine of assurance. Quite the contrary, in fact. On the Calvinist view, only the elect come to saving faith in Christ (leaving aside exceptional cases, such as those dying in infancy). It therefore follows that if a person — let's call him Sam — has a saving faith in Christ then he must be elect. So the question of whether or not Sam is elect translates immediately into the question of whether or not Sam has saving faith in Christ. Answer the latter and you've immediately answered the former.

Of course, these tests aren't infallible. A professing Christian can deceive others and even himself. But the important point to see here is that the Calvinist is in no worse a position than the Arminian in this respect. The criteria the Arminian applies to confirm that he has a saving faith in Christ are the same as those applied by the Calvinist. Arminians don't have infallible access to their present state of grace any more than Calvinists. (I should note in passing that this shouldn't be thought a problem; as in most other areas of life, one can have assured knowledge without having apodictic certainty. I don't have apodictic certainty that I'm writing this blog post — it's logically possible that I'm dreaming or hallucinating — but that doesn't bother me in the slightest.)

In fact, we can go further: the Calvinist is in a much stronger position with regard to assurance than the Arminian. For according to Reformed doctrine, those who are genuinely converted will surely persevere to the end.

So the Reformed doctrine of perseverance has this crucial implication: if I have saving faith today then I will also have saving faith on my final day — and thus be eternally saved. So if I'm justified in believing (on the basis of the biblical tests) that I have saving faith today, then I'm also justified in believing that I will be finally saved. In other words, I have an assurance of salvation worth having!

Unfortunately, matters are not so assured for the Arminian, simply because Armi-

nianism (in both its classical and Wesleyan forms) rejects the Reformed doctrine of perseverance and thus severs any necessary connection between my state of grace today and my state of grace in the future. On the Arminian view, if I have saving faith today it's still entirely possible that I won't have saving faith a year from now. There's nothing even close to a guarantee that I won't fall away and completely apostatize. Knowing that I have saving faith today is like knowing that I'm cancer-free today. How much does that tell me about whether or not I'll succumb to cancer some day in the future?

So if the Arminian has it right, knowing that I presently have saving faith isn't nearly sufficient for me to know that I will be finally saved. It all depends on whether I choose to persevere in the faith. But if whether or not I persevere in the faith ultimately depends on me, a fickle and frail sinner, how can I ever have any assurance of final salvation?

Consequently it seems clear to me that it isn't Calvinism that undermines the doctrine of assurance; on the contrary, it's Arminianism. Calvinism alone has the theological capital to fund the assurance that Christ has indeed prepared a place for us.¹⁸⁵

ii) One related objection turns on the possibility of self-delusion. However, that's hardly unique to Calvinism. Except for antinomians and Sandemanians, just about every Christian tradition allows for the possibility (and actuality) of spiritual self-delusion.

iii) Apropos (ii), we need to distinguish between rational and irrational doubt:

a) It's irrational to indulge in self-doubt simply because you can imagine that you might be self-deluded. For example, somebody who's insane might be sure he's sane, while he's equally sure that everyone else is insane.

As such, a sane person could doubt his sanity by saying to himself, "Well, I seem to be in my right mind. But if I were out of my mind I'd feel the very same way! Therefore, I have no reason to trust my own sanity!"

We could extend the dilemma to analogous cases, viz. somebody who's dreaming, somebody who took a hallucinogen. Maybe I'm high on LSD. How could I tell the difference? In the nature of the case, somebody who's self-deluded can't detect his self-delusion from within the self-delusion.

If you take this dilemma seriously, it borders on global skepticism. Of course, that's a good reason not to take it seriously!

b) At the same time, somebody who is self-deluded is not in the same condition as some-

¹⁸⁵ J. Anderson, "Calvinism, Assurance, and Inerrancy";
<http://proginosko.wordpress.com/2009/12/03/calvinism-assurance-and-inerrancy/>

body who's in his right mind. Their respective conditions are asymmetrical. They don't have the same experience, the same perception of reality.

c) One of the ways in which global skepticism is self-defeating is that the very notion of a delusive experience presupposes a veridical experience which sets the standard of comparison. You can't rationally doubt everything, for you'd only doubt one thing in relation to something else you don't treat as doubtful.

d) Hence, my distinction between rational and irrational doubt. The mere ability to imagine self-delusive scenarios is not a rational motive to doubt yourself. Those are just imaginary doubts, on the same plane as my ability to imagine that I'm Superman. Absent positive evidence that appearances are deceiving, it is irrational to doubt yourself.

Because human beings have been endowed with a lively imagination, we can indulge in self-referential imaginary scenarios—including imaginary dilemmas. But that is not a good reason to think I may really be a brain-in-a-vat (or whatever), even if I can't disprove it.

iv) Apropos (iii), we need to distinguish between knowledge and proof, or knowledge and certainty. If I experience saving faith, then I can know I'm saved. I have an experience which the reprobate does not.

If I experience saving faith, then I have veridical subjective assurance. The fact that a reprobate may have delusive subjective assurance isn't a reason to question my own assurance, for his subjective experience isn't the same as mine. He has no experience of God's saving grace.

So I can know, under those conditions, that I'm saved, even though I can't disprove a hypothetical scenario involving my self-deception.

It's true that one individual can't directly compare and contrast his spiritual experience with the spiritual experience of the next guy. The unregenerate can't access the mind of the regenerate, while the regenerate can't access the mind of the unregenerate. So we lack that intersubjectival reality check.

But that holds true for just about any first-person experience. It's hardly unique to the assurance of salvation.

v) Apropos (iv), we need to distinguish between first- and second-order belief. As one philosopher puts it:

So part of the structure of faith, including religious faith, is not simply that one who has faith has good evidence for what is trusted in, but also that he has a set of beliefs about what is desirable for himself. So faith involves two sorts of beliefs: beliefs about oneself, and beliefs about things other than oneself...on the belief that I am myself a believer. This is not a belief about what I want, but a belief about what is believed to be true of me; that it, it is a second-order belief, a belief

about a belief.”

For countless people the question of the relation between faith and evidence is not the question...of whether or not there is enough evidence—call it objective evidence—to warrant...belief in God.

Rather, what preoccupies them is the question of whether or not they possess enough evidence—call it subjective evidence—to warrant the belief that they are themselves believers.¹⁸⁶

3. Counterfactual Precautions

Arminians often attack Calvinism on the grounds that if predestination and perseverance are true, then Biblical warnings about apostasy are meaningless. However, that objection is misguided or problematic on several grounds:

i) Arminian Molinists

While Wesley Arminians reject perseverance, some Classical Arminians as well as some Arminian Molinists defend perseverance. So, in that respect, the objection to perseverance is not simply a dividing line between Arminians and Calvinists, but an intramural debate within Arminianism itself.¹⁸⁷

ii) Foreknowledge & Freedom

Traditional Arminians affirm divine foreknowledge. But if God foreknows the outcome, then the outcome is certain. In that event, the outcome can't go either way. A foreknown outcome is not an open-ended outcome.¹⁸⁸ In that event, when God issues a warning, he can't intend a different outcome than he foresaw. And that's true even if we reject predestination.

¹⁸⁶ P. Helm, *Faith with Reason* (Oxford 2000), 158-59.

¹⁸⁷ “The group is open to both what one might call 4-point Arminians (those who believe that true believers cannot stop believing and so lose their salvation) and 5-point Arminians (those who believe that true believers can stop believing and perish), though its basic orientation is 5 point (understanding that Arminianism accepts total depravity, but differs with Calvinism about its implications) in that members of the group are free to argue for the fifth point while arguing against it does not fall within the purview of the group's activity,” <http://evangelicalarminians.org/node/30>

¹⁸⁸ Cf. M. Sudduth, “Does Divine Timelessness Resolve the Problem of Foreknowledge and Human Freedom?” <http://philofreligion.homestead.com/files/Foreknowledgefreedom.html>; L. Zagzebski, “The argument for theological fatalism,” <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/free-will-foreknowledge/#1>; “Recent Work on Divine Foreknowledge and Free Will,” *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, R. Kane, ed. (Oxford University Press), 45-64.

iii) Conditional Election

Traditionally, Arminians subscribe to conditional election. And there are still leading proponents who defend conditional election.¹⁸⁹

However, that logically commits an Arminian who espouses conditional election to a corollary commitment to perseverance. On this view, God not only foresees who the faithful will be, but elects the faithful on the basis of foreseen faith.

Yet in that event, the faithful cannot be faithless. Since they were foreknown to be faithful, and God elected on the basis of their faith, they are no longer free to do otherwise. If their faith is not only foreseen, but God has chosen them on the basis of their faith, then apostasy is not a live option for them. They cannot still be free to do otherwise (i.e. be faithless).

iv) Counterfactuals

Must a counterfactual be a viable option to be meaningful? Take 1 Cor 15:12-19:

12Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? 13But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. 14And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. 15We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. 16For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. 17And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. 18Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

Does Paul regard the falsity of the Resurrection as a live possibility? Hardly! Paul is using this example as a *reductio ad absurdum*.

v) How Divine Warnings Function

Before we can say a warning is meaningless, we have to define the purpose of a warning. In particular, what's the function of a divine warning? In my opinion, divine warnings have a two-pronged purpose:

Either:

a) Deter x from doing y

¹⁸⁹ R. Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will*, (Randal House), 53ff. Some Arminians now favor corporate election over conditional election. However, corporate election still runs afoul of divine foreknowledge (see above).

Or:

b) Inculcate x for doing y

In Reformed theology, (a) applies to the elect, while (b) applies to the reprobate.

In cases of (a), where the function of the warning lies in its deterrent value, an ineffective warning would subvert the purpose of the warning.

In cases of (b), where the function is not to deter the sinner, but to either inculcate the sinner or aggravate his guilt, then the warnings serve their purpose when the sinner suffers the consequences of his defiant misbehavior.

Divine warnings invariably achieve their intended effect, but they also have more than one purpose.

vi) Arminianism takes the eccentric position that divine warnings are only genuine or sincere in case divine warnings are potentially ineffectual or futile. It must always be possible to violate a warning. Thus, it's essential to the Arminian definition of a divine warning that it always be potentially ineffective.

From an Arminian perspective, what does God intend when he warns us to avoid something? Does he warn us so that we will avoid the forbidden behavior? But if his intention is to deter us from committing the forbidden behavior, then why would a warning be meaningless in case it is invariably successful in achieving God's purpose?

Calvinism, by contrast, doesn't equate functionality with futility. Although not all warnings are meant to deter misconduct, some warnings are meant to deter misconduct, and if—in those cases—the purpose of the warning lies in its deterrent value, then it would sabotage the intent of the warning if it failed to deter the sinner.

vii) In ethics generally, contemplating the consequences of a hypothetical course of action can, of itself, have a deterrent effect. It's because we fear the hypothetical consequences of that action that we don't go down that fork in the road.

viii) God will prevent his elect from committing apostasy. However, that doesn't happen in a vacuum. God engages our minds. So counterfactual precautions can be efficacious deterrents. That may seem to be paradoxical, but counterfactuals are superficially paradoxical.

Their paradoxicality isn't unique to predestination. Rather, that's a feature of counterfactual history (or alternate history) in general. As one philosopher notes,

A “counterfactual conditional” along the lines of “If Napoleon had stayed on Elba, the battle of Waterloo would never have been fought” is, in effect, a condi-

tional that elicits a consequence from an antecedent which represents a belief-contravening hypothesis. Any such conditional will accordingly exhibit the same problems and difficulties found to be generally present in aporetic situations. For the reality of it is that in the context of prevailing beliefs counterfactual hypotheses are always paradoxical.¹⁹⁰

Every hypothetical change in the physical makeup of the real sets in motion a vast cascade of physical changes either in the physical makeup of the real or in the laws of nature...Such deliberations indicate that we cannot make hypothetical redistributions in the makeup of the real without thereby raising an unending series of questions. And not only do redistributions raise problems but even mere erasures, mere cancellations do so as well because reality being as it is they require redistributions to follow in their wake...Their density means that facts are so closely intermeshed with each other as to form a connected network. Any change anywhere has reverberations everywhere.¹⁹¹

ix) When Arminians claim that Calvinism renders divine warnings meaningless, their basic error is to construe Reformed assurance and perseverance fatalistically. But predestination is very different from *que sera sera* fatalism. In fatalism, it matters not what you do or fail to do, for every alternate route leads to the same destination. Hence, the ill-fated individual feels trapped or victimized by his ill-fortune.

But in predestination, the means are predestined as well as the end. It is not the same end irrespective of the means.

Since, moreover, we don't know in advance of the fact what God has predestined, it's not as though we feel compelled to do one thing rather than another. Predestination is not an oracle of doom which you futilely labor to evade. As one philosopher explains, on a related issue:

Before going into the arguments for determinism, it is necessary to remove some misconceptions about the determinist position. To begin with, it must be emphasized most strongly that determinists do not deny that people make choices...Furthermore, the experience of choosing—of seeing alternatives, weighting their desirability and finally making up one's mind—is not any different whether one is a libertarian or a determinist. For while determinists believe that there are sufficient conditions which will govern their choices, they do not know at the time when they are making a decision what those determinants are or how they will decide as a result of them. So, like everyone else, they simply have to make up their own minds. The difference between libertarian and determinist lies in the interpretation of the experience of choice, not in the experience itself.¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ N. Rescher, *Paradoxes: Their Roots, Range, and Resolution* (Open Court 2001), 233-34.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.* 235.

¹⁹² W. Hasker, *Metaphysics: Constructing a World View* (IVP 1983), 37.

As yet another philosopher explains:

Paradoxically, it is the very ignorance of the detail of the divine plan which contributes to its fulfillment. Were we to know what God had planned for us then one of two possibilities seems likely. It is likely either that a principle of counter-suggestibility would operate, or that we would experience psychological coercion or pressure to do what we did not want to do. One of the things that being free (in a sense that is compatible with determinism) means is that the prediction of what I will do, when communicated to me, is an additional factor which relevantly affects my choice...Not knowing the future in detail, people are free, psychologically and ethically free, to behave in a responsible way. We are ethically free, in the sense that we are free to do what we believe we ought to do. The fact that we are ignorant of how our actions will turn out is neither here nor there. We do know, though, that our actions are part of a causal order and will not have effects that put God's purposes at risk, but will in fact further them.

We are also psychologically free; our ignorance of the future means that we are not constrained to bring about that outcome by belief that the outcome will have some determinate form. This means that we can make up our minds about what to do freed from any constraints from knowledge about what we will in fact do.¹⁹³

So believing predestination in the abstract doesn't lead to a concrete paralysis of action. It's not as though I'm a doppelganger, looking over my own shoulder as I anticipate my next predetermined move before I make it.

x) To ask whether a counterfactual raises a "real" possibility is simplistic. For, in the nature of the case, the possibility of the hypothetical consequent is contingent on the possibility of the hypothetical antecedent. Therefore, this is not the sort of question which admits a yes-or-no answer. The consequent is "really" possible if (and only if) the antecedent is "really" possible.

xi) In addition, some nominal Christians do commit apostasy. Hence, failure to heed the warnings was a live possibility in their case.

¹⁹³ P. Helm, *The Providence of God* (IVP 1994), 229-30.

IV. Excurses

Excursus 1: Literary Allusions in Heb 6

I already quoted Matthewson's conclusion that "that in analogy to the old covenant community the people depicted in 6:4-6 are not genuine believers or true members of the new covenant community."¹⁹⁴ Here is some of the supporting material which he adduces to document his conclusion:

Hermeneutically, one of the most significant observations for interpreting Heb 6:4-6 has been articulated by McKnight. As mentioned above, the warning passages in Hebrews should not be read in strict isolation from one another, as is frequently the case, but should be read synthetically.⁴

McKnight helpfully suggests that formally each warning is comprised of four basic components that provide a basis for comparison with the other warnings: audience, sin, exhortation, and consequences.⁵ Based on this observation, a key feature comes into play which points to a neglected element in interpreting 6:4-6. Scholars have frequently noticed that one of the common features of the warning passages in Hebrews is that each exhibits an OT example to illustrate the warning in question. The following comparison displays the warnings found in Hebrews along with the corresponding OT examples contained in each warning.

<i>Warning</i>	<i>OT Example</i>	
2:1-4	2:2 -	disobedience to the Mosaic law
3:7-4:13	3:16-19; 4:2-	the failure at Kadesh-barnea
10:19-39	10:28 -	disobedience to the Mosaic law
12:14-29	12:16-17 -	the failure of Esau;
		12:25-26 failure to listen to
		God's voice at Sinai.

The exhortation articulated in 6:4-6 follows on the heels of a previous, lengthy warning embedded in chaps. 3-4; therefore this section requires brief analysis in order to provide the context for the ensuing discussion. In the second warning given in Heb 3:7-4:13 the Kadesh-barnea incident from Numbers 13-14 is recalled via Psalm 95 (94):7b-11, which the writer of Hebrews quotes in 3:7-11 and repeatedly recalls in 3:15; 4:3, 5, 7, as the basis for his exhortation to his readers not to become hardened to the promise of salvation.¹¹ According to the Numbers 14 narrative, the Israelites were camped at Kadesh-barnea, prepared to enter the land of Canaan which constituted the goal of their Exodus from Egypt (cf. Exod 3:8; 6:4; Num 13:1). However, because of unbelief and hard hearts the wilderness generation refused to enter the promised land, and consequently incurred

¹⁹⁴ D. Matthewson, "Reading Hebrews in Light of the Old Testament," WTJ 61 (1999), 209-25; http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/Ted_Hildebrandt/OTeSources/04-Numbers/Text/Articles/Mathewson-Heb6OT-WTJ.pdf; Cf. G. Beale & D. A. Carson, eds. Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament (Baker 2007), 962.

God's wrath (Num 14:11-12). Psalm 95 recalls and interprets Israel's rebellion and unbelief in the wilderness from Numbers 14, an event which became paradigmatic of Israel's disobedience,¹² as a warning not to emulate the catastrophe at Kadesh-barnea. The writer of Hebrews appropriates Psalm 95 in order to place the same warning before the new covenant community not to rebel and refuse the promise of rest which lay before them as a present reality (cf. Sh[<]meron, Heb 3:13; 4:7). According to Ceslas Spicq, the comparison between Israel under the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant community presupposes an exact correspondence between the successive generations of the people of God. . . . Israel and Christians exhibit a certain symmetrical relationship, as it were, designed by God. They are recipients of the same promises, they go through analogous trials, they are exposed to the same dangers of apostasy, they are exhorted to the same faithfulness, in identical terms.¹³

Thus, the relationship between the old and new people of God in Hebrews is a typological one, where the experience of the wilderness generation in Num 14 (cf. Ps 95) is recapitulated in and finds its climax in the situation of the new people of God, the new Israel, in Heb 3:7-4:13.¹⁴ The story of the wilderness generation in the Mosaic era, then, becomes the story of the new community and the focal lens through which they are to view their experience. This assumption underlies the direct application of the Ps 95 text to the present community in Hebrews.¹⁵ Further, that the wilderness generation plays a crucial role beyond 3:7-4:13 can be deduced from the fact that the tabernacle, rather than the temple, provides the predominant model for the author of Hebrews (8:5; 9:1-10),¹⁶ and exodus typology is confirmed more broadly with the emphasis on the incident at Sinai (12: 18-21, 25, 29) and the comparison between Moses and Christ (3:1-6).

I would contend that the author's language in 6:4-6 is colored by OT references by means of allusion and echo apart from direct citation. Initial justification for finding OT influence behind 6:4-6, especially with reference to the wilderness generation, includes: 1) this era from the life of Israel has already played a prominent role in the exhortation of 3:7-4:13; 2) this aspect of Israel's life serves as a model throughout Hebrews more broadly; 3) as already observed, an OT illustration can be detected behind all the other major warnings in Hebrews.²⁰ Further substantiation comes from observing the linguistic and conceptual parallels in the descriptive phrases in 6:4-6 ("having once for all been enlightened," "having tasted the heavenly gift," "having become partakers of the Holy Spirit," "having tasted of the good word of God and the powers of the coming age") with descriptions of the wilderness generation found in the OT, associations which "bleed over" from 3:7-4:13 into 6:4-6.²¹ Most of the parallels to the statements in 6:4-6 can be discovered in Exodus and Numbers with their descriptions of the people as they traveled through the wilderness on their way to Canaan, as well as in Nehemiah 9 (esp. vv. 13-15, 19-21) and in related Psalms, where the history of God's dealing with Israel is rehearsed in somewhat extended fashion.²²

I. 6:4a

Commentators frequently draw attention to plausible NT parallels for the phrase "having once been enlightened," and several have suggested a baptismal reference for this description.²³ However, the following considerations and analysis suggest that more atten-

tion needs to be paid to the possible light that the OT might shed on the interpretation of this phrase. Given the prominence of the wilderness generation as a model for the author, the most important parallel is the light that God provided for the wilderness generation in the desert. According to Exod 13:21, as the Israelites traveled through the desert following their deliverance from Egypt, along with a pillar of cloud during the day, God provided them with a pillar of fire to enlighten their way at night. This specific event is recalled in Nehemiah 9 in a section in which the author recites what God did for his people on their trek from Egypt through the desert (v. 12), a section which offers several important linguistic and conceptual parallels to Heb 6:4-6.

This event is also referred to in Ps 105 (104):39, which is situated in a catalogue of God's mighty actions on behalf of the Israelites. With this "wilderness generation" background in mind, it appears that this aspect of the Exodus narrative has provided a primary impetus for the author's conception here, a proposal that receives further corroboration when the subsequent statements in vv. 4-5 are examined. The author's reference to "enlightenment" here probably corresponds to 10:26: "we have received knowledge of the truth" (cf. v. 32).²⁴

2. 6:4b

The second phrase in the repertoire of statements in 6:4-6, "having tasted the heavenly gift," also resonates with overtones from the wilderness incident. Although the verbal parallels are not as precise as the previous instance, for those whose ears were attuned to the OT background, this phrase, which occurs only here in the NT, would have recalled the manna which God provided from heaven for his people during their sojourn in the wilderness. According to Exod 16:4, God would rain bread down from heaven for the Israelites' sustenance in response to their grumbling over their perceived misfortune in comparison to what they had in Egypt (cf. 16:31, 33, 35; Num 11:7-9; Deut 8:3, 16). This provision of "heavenly bread" became important for subsequent articulations of God's intervention on behalf of his covenant people, and is explicitly recalled in the historical recital of Ps 105 (104):40. In rehearsing the events following the incident at Sinai, Neh 9 also draws on this description of heavenly bread which God gave to his covenant people (9:15; cf. v. 20). Further, along with the Nehemiah 9 reference, in Exod 16:15 and Ps 78 (77):24 the bread is described as something which the Lord gave (LXX *edoke[n]*) to his people to eat, suggesting that the bread is a divine gift. Moreover, according to later exegetical traditions there was an expectation of a second, eschatological provision of bread from heaven corresponding to God's provision in the past (2 Bar. 29:8; Eccl. R. 1:9; Sib. Or. 7:145).²⁵ Thus, along with the Exodus narrative, the retrospective lists noted above, which include mention of the provision of heavenly bread as a gift from God to the wilderness generation, provide plausible parallels to the writer's second statement in Heb 6:4, where the readers have "tasted the heavenly gift" in the age of eschatological fulfillment.²⁶

3. 6:4c

Furthermore, with this proposed OT context still in mind, the author's third descriptive statement, "having become partakers of the Holy Spirit," sustains the continuous allusion to the experience of God's people in the wilderness. According to Neh 9:20, part of the experience of the people as they wandered in the wilderness was the reception of the gift

of God's Spirit to instruct them (*sunetisai autou*). This reference probably reflects Num 11:16-29, a text which contains several references to God's Spirit which rests upon certain members of the covenant people. Following the Israelites' departure from Sinai, in response to Moses' lament due to the grumbling of the people, in Numbers 11 God assures Moses that he will not have to carry the burden of the people alone (v. 17). Thus, God will take the Spirit which is upon Moses and place it upon the seventy elders of Israel who subsequently prophesied (11:17, 25). Further, both Eldad and Medad are singled out as recipients of the Spirit and they likewise prophesy (11:26).

Along with the mention of the deliverance at the Red Sea, this reference to God's provision of the Holy Spirit finds its place in a recital of what God did for the Israelites in the prophetic literature in Isa 63:11c, where God set his Holy Spirit among the people in the days of Moses, most likely a recollection of the incident in Numbers 11 (cf. Hag 2:5). Within the broader context of Israel's wilderness experience the author's statement regarding the experience of becoming partakers of the Holy Spirit in Heb 6:4c, then, has been anchored in the OT conception of God's provision of the Holy Spirit for the wilderness generation. The readers of Hebrews have experienced the work of the Spirit in their midst, perhaps more specifically with reference to the gift of prophecy (cf. Num 11:26) and the "signs and wonders" which accompanied the proclamation of the Gospel and the in-breaking of the age to come (cf. 2:4; 6:5b).

4. 6:5

The next descriptive phrase in 6:5 contains two expressions ("the good word of God;" "the powers of the coming age") which function as the dual object of the verb *geusamenou*, a term which has already occurred in the second descriptive phrase in 6:4 in allusion to God's provision of bread from heaven for the wilderness generation. Although some commentators have pointed to the ostensible parallel in 1 Pet 2:3 (*ei] egeusasthe oi chrestos kurios*), an allusion to Ps 34 (33):9,29 as Ellingworth rightly notes, the language and respective contexts of 1 Peter (cf. Ps 34:9) and Hebrews are substantially different.³⁰ The concept of God's word being sweet to the taste is found several places in the OT (cf. Ezek 2:8; 3:1-3; Psalm 119 [118:34]).

However, it is also plausible that the allusion to the bread from heaven which God provided the people in the wilderness and which featured in the second description above in 6:4 continues to influence the reference to the "tasting" here. The referent of *rhema theou* is probably the word which was preached to the covenant community and confirmed by signs and wonders in 2:1-4.31 (The term *r[h? ma* is characteristic of the author of Hebrews, occurring three other times in 1:3, 11:3, and 12:19. This last reference is intriguing since it constitutes a reference to the word of God given to Moses at Sinai (cf. Acts 7:38: *logia zonta*). In Exod 20:1 God speaks the words of the law to Moses, which Moses was subsequently commanded to communicate to the people (v. 22). According to the historical recital in Nehemiah 9, on Sinai God spoke to the people from heaven, giving them good commands (v. 13, LXX *entola*

agatha). Moreover, as other commentators have suggested, linguistically, a closer parallel to Heb 6:5a exists in Josh 21:45 (21:43) and 23:14.³² Both of these Old Testament texts provide statements which follow upon the conquest of the land of Canaan, and reaffirm that God has kept all his promises in bringing the people into the promised land. Most likely, these references to the good words of God, including the words which were

spoken by God at Sinai, provide the scriptural matrix for the author's assertion in Heb 6:5a.³³ Like the old covenant community, the new community addressed by the author of Hebrews have tasted the good word of God, the Gospel which has been preached to them within the context of the Christian community (cf. 2:4).

Heb 6:5a
kalon geusamnou theou rhema

Josh 21:43 (LXX)
panton ton rhematon ton kalon
Josh 23:14
Panta tare mata ta kala
Neh 9:13
kai entola Agatha

The final descriptive phrase asserts that the readers have tasted the powers (*dunamei*) of the coming age (6:5b). Intratextually, the closest parallel to 6:5b is 2:4, where the message of salvation which was heard by the readers was testified by "signs, wonders and various miracles" (*semeioi te kai terasin kai poikilai dunamesin*).³⁴ This same threefold expression occurs elsewhere in the NT in Acts 2:22 with reference to the verification of Christ and his message, and the fixed twofold form of the expression, *semeia kai terata*, characterizes the ministry of the apostles in Acts.³⁵ However, the principal scriptural background for the phrase in Heb 2:4 is the use of these terms in depicting the miraculous events surrounding the Exodus, especially since neglect of the Gospel in 2:3 is explicitly compared to disobedience to the Mosaic legislation which was given at Sinai (2:2). In the OT the epithet "signs and wonders" often carried specific semantic associations, being frequently associated with the events surrounding the Exodus and the wilderness generation (cf. Exod 7:3: *ta semeia . . . kai ta terata*). According to Karl Hein Rengstorf, "When the OT speaks of God's signs and wonders . . . the reference is almost always to the leading of the people out of Egypt by Moses and to the special circumstances under which the people stood up to the passage of the Red Sea and in all of which God proved Himself to be the almighty and showed Israel to be His chosen people."³⁶ Moreover, "in the LXX the formula *semeia kai terata* . . . seems to be reserved for God's wonders in the days of Moses."³⁷ Thus, the "signs and wonders" which accompanied and accredited God's speaking in the Gospel are seen in analogy to the "signs and wonders" which confirmed God's presence with and his speaking to his first covenant people.

It is this reference to the "signs and wonders" which accompanied God's activity in Egypt and beyond which grounds the writer's articulation of the experience of the powers of the age to come in the new covenant community in Heb 6:5b.³⁸ The employment of *dunamis* links 6:5 closely to 2:4, which is clearly patterned after Exodus events. Moreover, several OT texts which recall the events surrounding the Exodus depict those events with *dunamis* (Exod 7:4; Psg 66 [65]:3; 77 [76]: 15; cf. *dunasteia* in 78 [77]:4, 26; 106 [105]:8). Therefore, like the wilderness generation who experienced God's mighty acts and miraculous powers, (cf. Exod 7:3; Deut 11:3; Num 14:11,22; Psg 78:4, 11, 32, 43; 105:27; 106:21-22; cf. Acts 7:36), within the context of the new covenant community the subjects of Heb 6:5 have witnessed and experienced the miraculous powers of God, the in-breaking of the eschatological powers of the age to come (Heb 6:5b; 2:4).

Heb 6:5c See Exod 7:3, 4; Num 14:11, 22;
 dunamei . . . mellonto aiono Ps 66 (65):3; 77 (76):15;
 78 (77):4, 26, 43; 106 (105):8;
 cf. Acts 7:36; Heb 2:4

Following this extended description of the readers' experience in vv. 4-5, verse 6 describes the error that the readers are in danger of committing: *parapesonta*. According to Lane, in the LXX this term refers to "a total attitude reflecting deliberate and calculated renunciation of God."³⁹ The potential danger facing the readers of Hebrews corresponds precisely to that which the wilderness generation faced.⁴⁰ The wilderness generation had experienced all these things (God's good word, provisions and miraculous powers), yet they responded in unbelief and rebellion (Num 14:11,22; Pss 95:8-9; 106:21-22; Heb. 3:16), and subsequently incurred God's wrath.

Likewise the subjects of Heb 6:4-5 had experienced all these things (vv. 4-5) as members of the new covenant community, and now had rebelled and fallen away as their ancestors once did.

Excursus 2: Thomas Schreiner

In his monograph on *The Race Set Before Us*, Schreiner has a discussion of Heb 6.¹⁹⁵ In the course of his analysis, he makes a number of useful observations:

i) He cautions us against the danger of asking leading questions which prejudice the answer. He thinks that Arminians and Calvinists are both guilty of begging the question by the way they frame their questions in relation to Hebrews.

That's a good point.

ii) By contrast, he thinks,

The first question we should ask concerning the five [warning] passages in Hebrews concerns the function of each passage. What purpose or objective does it serve? What was the author's intention? To what end were these passages penned?¹⁹⁶

That's another good point.

iii) He also says

Conditional warnings in themselves do not function to indicate anything about possible failure or fulfillment. Instead, the conditional warnings appeal to our minds to conceive or imagine the invariable consequences that come to all who pursue a course of apostasy from Christ.¹⁹⁷

That's a crucial distinction.

iv) He objects to the Arminian interpretation on the grounds that:

McKnight's use of conditional warnings in Hebrews is subversive to Christian belief and confidence, not encouraging or consoling, as the preacher intends them to be (Heb 13:22)...If McKnight's interpretation of the warnings is correct, we would have to doubt whether or not we will inherit God's promised salvation in order that we might feel the full impact of the warnings both to believe them and to avoid God's judgment and inherit salvation. We would have to cast aside confidence in God's faithfulness to keep his promise to us (Heb 10:22-23), in order to obey God's warning lest we "willfully persist in sin" and "fall into the hands of the living God" and be consumed along with his enemies (Heb 10:26-31).¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁵ T. Schreiner & A. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance & Assurance* (IVP 2001), 193-204.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid. 195.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid. 199; cf. 207ff.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. 200.

Hebrews does not call on us to doubt our inheritance of God's sworn promise in order to heed God's urgent warning against falling away and perishing without hope of renewed repentance... Strong as these admonitions are, the warning that follows hardly suggests that one has to doubt either one's "confession of hope" or that "he who has promised is faithful" to secure us for the approaching day of salvation and judgment (Heb 10:23,25).

This is an interesting argument:

- a) It has the exegetical advantage of integrating the warning passages with the promissory passages.
- b) It also makes the important point that the Arminian interpretation fosters doubt in God's promises, which is antithetical to Biblical faith and piety.

I think points (i-iv) make a solid contribution to the debate.

- v) Schreiner faults Grudem on the grounds that Grudem,

Redirects the orientation of the passages from prospective warnings to retrospective characterizations of certain people whom the author of Hebrews singles out and addresses... The root problem with Grudem's interpretation of the warnings in Hebrews is that he fails to acknowledge that salvation, according to Hebrews, is fundamentally future oriented, as McKnight correctly demonstrates (cf. Heb 1:14; 2:3,10; 5:9; 9:28). Because Grudem conceives of salvation in terms of the past rather than the future, he reads the consequences (the apodosis) of the warnings retrospectively.¹⁹⁹

What are we to make of this criticism?

- a) It's true that if the soteric orientation of Hebrews is futuristic, then there's the danger of superimposing an extraneous framework onto the author's soteriology if we don't take that future orientation into account. In particular, if salvation, or final salvation, is a future event, then it would be premature or anachronistic to say the apostate lost his salvation. He can't lose something he never had. And if possession lies in the future, then it's not something that can be lost at a prior time.

So, if we interpret Hebrews on its own terms, it's important to make allowance for that perspective.

- b) Having said that, Schreiner's objection is vulnerable to equivocation. If, for the sake of argument, he's correct in stating that Grudem has reoriented the soteric framework, then he and Grudem are no longer operating with the same concept of salvation. In that case,

¹⁹⁹ 198-199.

it's not just a difference of opinion over the relative timing of the event—as if both agree on the nature of salvation in Hebrews, but disagree on the timeframe of its application.

Put another way, if Grudem views salvation in past-tense terms while Hebrews views it in future-tense terms, the futuristic orientation doesn't thereby obviate the past aspect or accidental necessity of salvation unless the finality of salvation is exclusively futuristic. Even if a past-tense orientation is an inaccurate way to describe the perspective of Hebrews, that doesn't ipso facto mean it's inaccurate in its own right. Salvation could have a past dimension, even if the author of Hebrews chooses to focus on the future dimension.

In terms of systematic theology, it would still be necessary to integrate the future aspects of salvation with the past aspects of salvation. Even if salvation has stages, the question is whether you can have an abortive salvation, in which salvation breaks down at some point in the process.

c) As a matter of fact, however, Grudem does cast his position in the explicit categories of Hebrews. And he does acknowledge the futuristic dimension. At the same time, he also draws attention to a past or present dimension in Hebrews.²⁰⁰ So it's odd to see him faulted for failing to take into account something he specifically took into account—more than once.

d) Ironically, even I. H. Marshall, a premier Arminian scholar, says:

When the author speaks about “inheriting” salvation (1:14), the implication is not just that the salvation is future, but more that believers can be sure here and now that they will be finally saved.²⁰¹

In a later work, Schreiner reiterates and summarizes some of what he said in the earlier work, but makes some additional points:

i) He spends three pages arguing that the readers and/or referents of Heb 6:4ff. are “believers” or “Christians.”²⁰²

Yet, at the tail-end of that argument, he goes onto say that the author's

Purpose is not to answer the question, “Were those who have fallen away genuine Christians?” He does not look back and retrospectively and assess the state of those who have departed from the Christian faith. The intent of the letter is quite different...He does not cast a glance backward, contemplate the state of those

²⁰⁰ W. Grudem, “Perseverance of the Saints: A Case Study from the Warning Passages in Hebrews,” T. Schreiner & B. Ware, eds. *Still Sovereign* (Baker 2000), 136-37; 162-68; 136n8; 163n69; 165n71.

²⁰¹ I. H. Marshall, “Soteriology in Hebrews,” R. Bauckham et al. eds., *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology* (Eerdmans 2009), 256.

²⁰² T. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology* (Baker 2008), 592-94.

who have lapsed, and ask whether they were ever genuine believers...the warnings are prospective, designed to prevent the readers from drifting away from the gospel that they embraced.²⁰³

a) But it's hard to see how these two propositions go hang together. Didn't he just argue that the author identifies the would-be apostates as one-time Christians? In that event, doesn't the author answer the question of their spiritual status?

Perhaps Schreiner is attempting to draw a subtle distinction between what the author intends, in terms of his literary strategy (i.e. the function of the warning passages), and an incidental implication of his descriptions.

But even if the author didn't consciously intend to answer that question, he implicitly answers that question. So I don't see how Schreiner's dichotomy is tenable.

b) Moreover, Schreiner fails to distinguish between the literary audience and the literary referents in Heb 6 & 10. But surely there is some difference. The addressees are specific, concrete individuals. Members of the house-church the author wrote to.

By contrast, the referents in Heb 6 & 10 are abstractions. It represents an idealized job description of a Christian apostate. In that sense it's hypothetical. Drawing a picture of a hypothetical apostate. It's not a description of an actual apostate, or prediction of a prospective apostate. It doesn't state what has been or will be. Rather, it's a cautionary depiction. He's holding up an ominous object lesson, then saying, "Don't be like that!"

At this same time, this doesn't mean it's unrealistic. It doesn't preclude that outcome as a live possibility or viable danger.

To be sure, there's a relationship between the audience and the referents. The referents are obviously modeled on potential or actual defectors whom our author is trying to dissuade in his letter. Someone with their religious background.

c) Furthermore, the audience is necessarily general. The author can't speak to the individual and internal state of each reader. He can only speak in generalities, which may or may not be applicable in any particular case.²⁰⁴

d) Apropos (c), this undercuts Schreiner's "even more decisive argument" that the author includes himself in the warning passages. That's a literary device. When an author identifies with his audience, that's a way of ingratiating himself with the audience. They will be more likely to heed his words if they think he's speaking with them rather than at them. Listeners resent judgmental salvos. But if the speaker includes himself, that tends to disarm their knee-jerk resistance.

²⁰³ Ibid. 596.

²⁰⁴ A distinction which Grudem is careful to maintain. Ibid. 157n57; 162n67.

And there's a sense in which any conscientious Bible writer or spokesman is prepared to apply conditional threats and promises to himself. He doesn't exist in a class apart from all other sinners.

ii) Schreiner says:

Most important, the author says that the readers "shared in the Holy Spirit" (Heb 6:4)...So too, the most natural way to read the verses is to understand the author to be saying that the readers have received the Holy Spirit. The reception of the Holy Spirit is the hallmark of being a Christian.²⁰⁵

But unfortunately, Schreiner is filtering this verse through an extraneous prism. We need to start with the pneumatology of Hebrews. 6:4 doesn't say the readers "received" the Spirit. For that matter, the literary referent in 6:4 isn't identical with the readers.

More to the point, how does the author of Hebrews describe the work of the Spirit? Most often as the agent of Biblical inspiration. You hear the Spirit speaking through the Word he inspired. And on one occasion it's related to signs and wonders (2:4). Not coincidentally, there's an allusion to OT signs and wonders in Heb 6:5.²⁰⁶

In both cases, the work of the Spirit is mediated by something else. By Scripture. Or signs and wonders. This is external to the observer or the listener. Something he sees or hears. It is not a direct experience of the Spirit's activity. Rather, in these situations, the individual experiences the work of the Spirit by experiencing the outward effect of his activity.

iii) In reference to Heb 10:29, Schreiner says:

It will not do to say that the sanctification of here is merely outward or ceremonial, for the book in view here is the blood of Jesus. OT sacrifices only purify externally and outwardly, but the blood of Christ cleanses the conscience and is effective, in contrast to the sacrifices offered under the old covenant.²⁰⁷

There are some basic problems with that argument:

a) We need to guard against investing the Greek word for "conscience" with all of the conceptual content that this word has acquired in centuries of philosophical and theological discussion.

²⁰⁵ *New Testament Theology*, 593-94.

²⁰⁶ In addition, there is one possible allusion to the work of the Spirit as the agent of the Resurrection.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.* 594.

b) The proper contrast is not between the inefficacy of OT oblations and the efficacy of Christ's oblation. Pious Jews were forgiven in observance of the ceremonial law. Such ceremonies were instrumental in their forgiveness.

Rather, the distinction is between intrinsic and extrinsic efficacy. An OT sacrifice was intrinsically inefficacious, but extrinsically efficacious due to the retroactive merit of Christ.

In addition, the attitude of the individual made a difference. Simply going through the motions didn't make the rite efficacious.

c) The author of Hebrews is using cultic categories to expound both covenants at least in part because his audience is conditioned to think in cultic categories. The letter is directed to Messianic Jews. So his recourse to cultic imagery is, at the very least, a case of audience adaptation—although it could be more than that. How far should we press that *ad hominem* usage? How far should we press cultic imagery in general?

Consider his extension and application of the cultic imagery to a cosmic temple. But it would be a mistake to treat that as a blueprint for heaven.

And he's telling them that OT sacrificial system is obsolete. But, of course, there was a time when Jews could be saved under that system.

iv) Schreiner says:

We have noted that all the warning passages must be interpreted together: They cannot be sheared off from one another so that Heb 6 is interpreted in isolation from the other warning texts.²⁰⁸

That's true, but that cuts both ways. In that event, we shouldn't construe the passages about NT apostates in isolation to the passages about OT apostates. And, indeed, in the author's argument, the OT precedent supplies the paradigm for any NT counterparts. So we also need to compare the language of Heb 6 & 10 with the language of 3-4. Why type of religious experience is in view?

v) Schreiner says:

There is no doubt that the writer was familiar with some who had departed from the Christian faith. However, the point here is that he does not address that question specifically.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁸ *New Testament Theology*, 594.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.* 596.

Even though he may not answer that question specifically, if he's aware of such cases, then either such apostates lost their salvation, or never had a salvation to lose. So where does that leave Schreiner's original argument?

In another book, Schreiner faults some scholars because they start reading the warning of Heb 6 as if it represents a defection that has already taken place:

For example, Osborne fails to grasp this point when he insists that the participle "fall away" (*parapesontas*) cannot be conditional ("A Classical Arminian View," 112,114). In drawing this conclusion Osborne turns this text against the other warning passages in Hebrews, so that Hebrews 6 makes a declaration about those who have fallen away, while the other warning passages warn the readers from falling away. It is quite improbable, though, that the author is both warning the readers against falling away in some passages and declaring that some have already fallen away in others. Hebrews 6 should be read in the same way as the other exhortations in Hebrews—as a warning.²¹⁰

Schreiner has to say this because he thinks that Heb 6 (and Heb 10) characterize true believers, so the only way to maintain that interpretation consistent with God's preservation of the elect is to treat these passages as cautionary counterfactual scenarios. But if we reject his interpretation, then this distinction is unnecessary.

However, even if we reject his interpretation, this distinction may still be sound in its own right. And this would be one more reason to invalidate the Arminian inference that such passages describe the loss of salvation.

²¹⁰ T. Schreiner, *Run to Win the Prize* (Crossway 2010), 41n24.

Excursus 3: Luke Timothy Johnson

Luke Timothy Johnson makes a number of related comments regarding the significance of the cultic language in Hebrews, such as:

But in order to grasp how Hebrews regards the sacrifice of Jesus as superior to that of the first covenant we need to understand how Hebrews shares a further set of premises characteristic of other Jewish thinkers, like Philo Judaeus, who used the symbolism of cult, but understood the covenant between God and the people primarily in terms of a moral relationship rather than a cultic one. In this understanding, it is the human heart—that is, human interior dispositions—that defines the relationship with God more than external observances. When people sin, their conscience is polluted: they have acted in a way that, because of God’s law, they know is wrong. In order to be truly reconciled with God, then, there needs to also be an internal change, a “purification of conscience.”²¹¹

Hebrews argues that Jesus alone has effectively accomplished the purification that earthly priests could not (9:8-14), by purifying them internally in their conscience (9:14,20,23), and once for all (10:2). For the understanding of the ritual language of “purification” as a moral or religious cleansing of the person...²¹²

The greater effect accomplished by Christ’s offering is likewise internal rather than external, moral rather than ritual: the blood of the Messiah “will cleanse our conscience.” In language that deliberately echoes that of the “cleansing of the flesh” in ancient purification rituals, the author declares that Christ’s death does what external observances cannot, that is, perfect the conscience of the worshiper (9:9).²¹³

The rhetorical question in 10:2 makes clear the author’s same understanding of perfection: if such sacrifices had only “once cleansed” worshipers, they would no longer have “an awareness of sins” (syneidesis hamartion; cf. 9:9 and 9:14). The proper effect of priestly activity is therefore moral rather than simply ritual. Ritual cleansing worked to prepare a people for participation in the public cult of Israel and to “approach God” in the earthly sanctuary. But only if the conscience is cleansed from the “awareness of sins” are people morally capable of approaching the living God.²¹⁴

I don’t think this analysis successfully captures the intended comparison and contrast in the argument of Hebrews:

i) For one thing, he fails to relate the principle of efficacy/inefficacy with the principle of

²¹¹ *Hebrews*, 27.

²¹² *Ibid.* 71.

²¹³ *Ibid.* 238.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.* 249.

repeatability/unrepeatability. Yet these are interrelated. What made the cultus impotent to “cleans the conscience”?

It was the repetitive character of the cultus which made it inefficacious in that respect. By having to reiterate the same rituals, that served to remind the offender of his sins rather than clear his conscience. It made him acutely aware of his sinfulness rather than making him aware of his forgiven state. And, indeed, that was a primary reason for the repetition. So this is one of the things that make the cultus inherently inefficacious in that respect.

ii) In addition, the cultus was inherently inefficacious because the various ceremonies were merely tokens of redemption and remission. They didn’t actually effect redemption or remission. Rather, they were retroactively effective in the extrinsic sense that they foreshadowed the atonement of Christ. OT saints were proleptically forgiven on the credit of that future atonement.

iii) There’s a sense in which “cleansing the conscience” is “internal” rather than “external.” However, it doesn’t involve an inner transformation in the same sense as regeneration. Rather, it involves a merely intellectual apprehension of one’s legal guilt or innocence.

iv) We need to be circumspect about rendering *syneidesis* as “conscience.” The Greek word has a wider semantic range: “conscience,” “consciousness,” “conscientiousness.”²¹⁵ By the same token, we also need to guard against reading into the Greek word the modern sense of a moral intuition.

From what I can tell, the author of Hebrews merely uses the word to denote self-awareness of one’s legal culpability or inculpability.

v) Moreover, it was possible to be morally guilty, but ritually guiltless—or ritually guilty, but morally guiltless. One is “internal” while the other is “external.”

²¹⁵ Cf. Ellingworth, *ibid.* 442; *BDAG*, 967-68.

Excursus 4: Buist Fanning

Earlier I quoted some statements by Buist Fanning on the sufficiency and superiority of the Atonement in Hebrews as a backdrop to better understand the apostasy passages. However, his appeal was criticized by two Arminian contributors. For a couple of reasons, it's worthwhile to interact with their criticisms: (i) if their objections were sound, then they would undermine my use of Fanning; (ii) although their objections specifically target Fanning's essay, they also represent stock Arminian strategies. So in evaluating their objections, I'm also assessing the general force of Arminian objections to the Reformed reading of Heb 6 & 10.

I. Cockerill

1. He accuses Fanning of drawing inferences which the author of Hebrews fails to draw: "One must show that Hebrews intends such an implication. Fanning, however, draws upon his own implication from these descriptions of Christ's sufficiency and ignores the way in which Hebrews actually applies them."²¹⁶

"The inherent weakness in this argument is twofold. First, these are not deductions that Hebrews makes from the full sufficiency of Christ. They are deductions that Fanning makes from Hebrew's descriptions of that sufficiency."²¹⁷

"The bottom line, however, is that Fanning deduces perseverance from Hebrews's descriptions of Christ's adequacy. Hebrews does not make that deduction."²¹⁸

However, there are three basic problems with this objection:

i) Whether or not a writer consciously intended an implication and/or drew an inference from his own statement is irrelevant to the validity or invalidity of a reader deducing that conclusion. A logical implication is objectively true. The subjective intentions or awareness of the writer has no bearing on what can be validly inferred from his statements.

Indeed, NT writers often draw inferences from OT passages which may or may not have been in mind when the OT speaker or writer made his statement. But as long as that inference is truly implicit in the original statement, there's nothing wrong with making explicit what was already implicit.

Likewise, NT writers (as well as later OT writers) will sometimes apply OT passages in a way that goes beyond the original situation. But that, of itself, isn't wrong as long as the application is analogous to the original situation.

²¹⁶ *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, 238.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.* 239.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.* 240.

For Cockerill's objection to have any force, he'd have to show, not that Fanning is Fanning is drawing inferences which the author of Hebrews failed to draw or intent, but whether the inferences are fallacious.

ii) Cockerill's objection also begs the question. For I think Fanning would take the position that the author of Hebrews really meant to stress the assurance of salvation, and also meant to ground the assurance of salvation in the sufficiency of the Atonement. So I think Fanning would contend that he is simply respecting the flow of the argument in Hebrews.

iii) Ironically, Cockerill is guilty of the very thing he faults in Fanning. The reason that Cockerill objects to Fanning's inference regarding the sufficiency of the Atonement is that Cockerill draws a contrary inference regarding the phenomenon of apostasy. He assumes that if apostasy is a viable option, then that is with eternal security (p242).

Keep in mind, though, that the author of Hebrews doesn't ever say that. The author doesn't say a Christian can't be sure of his salvation given the possibility of apostasy. Now it may seem obvious to Cockerill that the phenomenon of apostasy is incompatible with the assurance of salvation. But that is a deduction which he is drawing from the text, not a deduction which the author of Hebrews is drawing from his own text.

2. Cockerill also thinks that what Hebrews says about the sufficiency of the Atonement is reducible to a gracious "provision":

"What positive benefit do believers receive from his sufficient saving work? We have given the answer above: provision for perseverance."²¹⁹

"It cannot be emphasized too strongly that within the context of Hebrew's Christ's sufficiency is not the guarantee of perseverance but the provision for perseverance."²²⁰

But a glaring problem with this explanation is that it fails to explain the superiority of the Atonement. What makes the new covenant superior to the old covenant? That's a major theme in Hebrews.

Wasn't there "provision" for salvation and perseverance in the Mosaic covenant? After all, OT Jews could be saved. Indeed, just look at Heb 11.

From a Reformed perspective, a major difference is that, under the old covenant, membership in the covenant was a birthright. If you were born a Jew, that made you a member of the covenant community.

Faith was not a factor. Inner renewal was not a prerequisite.

But under the new covenant, membership in the covenant is a new birthright.

²¹⁹ Ibid. 240.

²²⁰ Ibid. 241.

3.Cockerill says, “The way in which Hebrews relates the adequacy of Christ to the warning passages most assuredly does affirm that believers can cut themselves off from the Christ-provided benefits of salvation through apostasy.”²²¹

Two basic problems:

i) As an objection to Calvinism, this is fatally equivocal. Calvinism doesn’t need that “believers” can defect from the faith. For Calvinism distinguishes between true believers and nominal believers.

So Cockerill’s objection fails to engage the opposing position. He isn’t even dealing with Calvinism on its own terms.

ii) The author of Hebrews doesn’t characterize apostates as “believers.” To the contrary, faith is a missing ingredient. Apostates, including closet apostates, lack a heart of faith.

4.Cockerill says “virtually every reference to the readers describes them in terms one would normally take as indicative of believers. For instance the author refers to them as ‘brothers’ and ‘children’ of Christ in 2:5-18, and addresses them as ‘holy brothers and sisters, partakers of the heavenly calling’ in 3:1.”²²²

But this objection is homiletically naïve. It fails to make allowance for the nature of mass communication. A public letter written to a congregation will naturally be phrased in generalities. Yet the internal composition of the congregation may well be more varied. A “mixed audience.”²²³ Indeed, individual variations are almost inevitable. As one commentator (not a Calvinist!) notes:

Nevertheless, Hebrews surely does not address a whole assembly that is contemplating falling away. Many in the congregation are no doubt as committed to the confession and hope as the author himself, and indeed his strategy depends on having a solid core of believers who will encourage the wavering, warn those who are being deceived by sin, and assist those who are in danger of stopping short of the prize. Hebrews will function to ground such hearers in the values they already hold, even while it seeks to dissuade the wavering from choosing a disadvantageous course of action. Ultimately, the condition of each individual hearer will determine whether Hebrews will achieve the goals of epideictic or deliberative rhetoric. Confusion about its genre results from the rather general nature of the two courses it contemplates, and from the nature of the speech itself. It resembles the sort of speech one would hear on the eve of a great battle, in the midst or at the end of a long campaign. Some of the hearers are ready for the fight, and so the

²²¹ Ibid. 242.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ For a thorough exposition of this distinction, cf. Thomas, *A Case for Mixed-Audience with Reference to the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews* (esp. chap 4).

speech reinforces the commitment with which they come to the field. Some have lost their initial vision and zeal for the fight and need encouragement to reinvest themselves in the endeavor. Some need to be kept from running off the field during the night. For the first group, Hebrews will function more like an epideictic speech—the deliberations are purely academic. For the second two groups, the question of whether or not to continue investing themselves in a particular course of action is real, and thus the book’s discussions of the ramifications of each choice are real.²²⁴

5. Cockerill says, “The engraving of God’s laws on the hearts and minds of his people does not mean that they can’t fall away any more than it means they can no longer sin. If the new heart does not eliminate the possibility of sin, why should it eliminate the possibility of apostasy?”²²⁵

i) Well, one obvious reason is that, according to the primary argument in Hebrews, the new covenant isn’t subject to the same liabilities as the old covenant. If, however, Christians are just as vulnerable to apostasy as members of the ill-fated Exodus-generation, then where’s the signal advantage?

ii) In addition, even Arminians go to great lengths to distinguish between sin and apostasy when they try to define the nature of the sin in Heb 6 & 10. They don’t treat just any old sin as equivalent to the irrevocable sin of apostasy.

II. Osborne

1. Osborne says: “It could not be more obvious that it is the genuine believers, not the unbelievers in the congregation, who are being warned of the danger of apostasy.”²²⁶

Of course, that begs the very question at issue.

2. Osborne says: “There is no question that this teaches the security of the believer, seen in both the ongoing salvation he brings and the continual intercession he makes. Yet, is this security unconditional or conditional?”²²⁷

“But again this [Heb 6:9-20] is conditional rather than unconditional assurance.”²²⁸

“This is assurance but not final assurance.”²²⁹

“Yet is this process [Heb 10:14,17] guaranteed or contingent?”²³⁰

²²⁴ De deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 56-57.

²²⁵ *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, 240.

²²⁶ Ibid. 225.

²²⁷ Ibid. 226.

²²⁸ Ibid. 227.

²²⁹ Ibid. 230.

“Again, there is definite assurance, but it is not absolute.”²³¹

Here we see a dialectical strategy which Osborne typically deploys to blunt the force of statements regarding the security or assurance of the Christian. But this strategy suffers from some basic flaws:

i) Osborne simply attaches an adjective to a noun, as if that explains anything. In effect, he is taking two concepts, and then opposing them, with the net result that each concept means something less after the collision. So he turns one verse against another—like a demolition derby. But after the smoke clears, what is left?

His strategy doesn’t begin to explain what remains of the attenuated concept once it has been relativized by Osborne’s dialectical strategy. For example, what does it mean to say the assurance is “definite,” but not “absolute”? Osborne simply leaves the result dangling in midair.

Part of the problem is that he seems to confuse words with concepts. He apparently believes that if he can just modify a noun with an adjective, then that harmonizes the relation between two different concepts. But, of course, that’s a purely rhetorical gambit. It’s not a logical or psychological solution.

ii) Another problem is his unspoken assumption that if salvation is, in some sense, dependent on perseverance, then that disproves Calvinism.

However, Calvinism doesn’t deny that perseverance is a condition of salvation. But that admission merely pushes the question back a step. For the question that raises is whether perseverance is dependent on human willpower, or the will of God to preserve his people?

Osborne appears to lack an elementary grasp of the position he presumes to oppose. Does he think that merely introducing contingencies into the equation disproves Calvinism?

But predestination is teleological. A plan with means and ends. Likewise, providence involves secondary agents and agencies.

3. Osborne says, “God still has a rest available for his people, but not that that rest is absolutely guaranteed.”²³²

Is it merely “available”? Does the author of Hebrews view Jesus as a pioneer or forerunner whose entrance into heaven anticipates our own? As one scholar explains:

²³⁰ Ibid. 229.

²³¹ Ibid. 227.

²³² Ibid. 227.

The description of Jesus as a “scout” [6:20], a military figure who goes ahead of the main body of troops, recalls the author’s earlier presentations of Jesus as the one who goes before the main body of God’s “sons and daughters,” leading them to their God-appointed destiny of glory (2:5-10). The author raises again the expectation that where Jesus has gone the many believers will follow... To those who feel rootless in the world, who have begun to feel the need for security and “place” again, the author holds out the lifeline connected to the anchor of hope, “firm and secure” in the unshakable realm of God’s heaven.²³³

As another scholar explains:

Its most common uses, however, were for a “leader” and a “founder. The rendering “pioneer” reflects both aspects of meaning. Regarding the former, we have seen that God’s leading his sons and daughters to glory has been interpreted in exodus categories of the Old Testament where Israel is his people, uniquely led by him. The notion of Christ as the new larder (archegos) of that people has also been read in light of this fundamental theme of Old Testament theology. The term was used for those who led the tribes in the wilderness (Num 10:4; 13:2-3) and in battle (Judg 5:15; 9:44; 11:6,11; 1 Chron 5:24; 26:26; 2 Chron 23:14; Neh 2:9). Here in Hebrews 2:10 Christ is led by God through suffering to glory so becoming the leader of his people on the journey to salvation. The closest parallel to this in Hebrews is the title “forerunner” (6:20).²³⁴

4. Osborne says, “[God] is there to aid them in the task of maintaining their hold on Christ.”²³⁵

God is there to merely “aid” them? Doesn’t Hebrews use far stronger language to assure the faithful?

5. Osborne says, “In Hebrews 9:15 ‘those who are called’ are promised they will ‘receive the promised eternal inheritance’ (NIV). The context concerns the blood of Christ as a ransom payment freeing the believer from sin, so that ‘eternal redemption’ is secured (9:12). This is not a passage on the assurance of the believer but on the salvation procured by Christ the high priest and its superiority to ‘the blood of goats and calves’ (9:12).”²³⁶

Two problems:

i) As is his wont, notice not Osborne arbitrarily dichotomizes Atonement and assurance. But isn’t the believer’s assurance expressly grounded in the superiority of the Atonement?

²³³ D. deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 251-52.

²³⁴ O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 106.

²³⁵ *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, 228.

²³⁶ *Ibid.* 228.

ii) Moreover, in the very verse he cited, this passage is very much about the assurance of the believer. It is not merely a statement about redemption, considered in isolation, but the redemption in relation to the redeemed. The effect it has on them.

Indeed, how can he drive a wedge between the heirs and the inheritance? They naturally go together. An heir inherits the estate.

Osborne's dialectical strategy is just a gimmick

Excursus 5: Arminianism & Apostasy

Reformed theology generally regards the apostates in Heb 6 as nominal Christians. John Owen is the classic exponent of that interpretation.

Arminians generally regard the Reformed interpretation as special-pleading. A case in which our systematic theology forces an unnatural interpretation on the text.

However, Ben Witherington, although a doctrinaire Arminian, also interprets the text in a way which avoids the assumption that the apostates were true believers:

Rhetorically speaking, an orator must be able to keep the attention of the audience, especially if the discourse is going to be long...this being the case...the wise rhetor will pull out the emotional stops, use more colorful language, engage in rhetorical hyperbole, up the volume on “amplification.”²³⁷

One of the issues that many commentators misunderstand, because of failure to read the rhetorical signals, is that our author to some degree is being ironic here and engaging in a preemptive strike. That is, we should not read this text as a literal description of the present spiritual condition of the audience.²³⁸

One of the key factors in analyzing this section [Heb 5:11-6:12] is to realize that our author is trying to put the “fear of God” into his audience by using rhetoric to prevent defections, and so one is not sure how far to press the specifics here, since it is possible to argue that some of this involves dramatic hyperbole.²³⁹

Our author is deliberately engaging in dramatic rhetorical statements for the purpose of waking up the audience. The function is not to comment on something that is impossible for God...In other words, these words were intended to have a specific emotional effect, not to comment in the abstract about what is impossible...In an honor-and-shame culture this is intended to be shocking language.²⁴⁰

In my judgment, these are the right kinds of questions to ask about an epideictic discourse clearly given to hyperbole at points. Two things result from taking such rhetorical factors into account: (1) our author really does think that at least some of the audience is in danger of apostasy and warns against it and (2) we may suspect that the ‘no restoration’ remark functions as a device to make clear how horrible committing apostasy really is. It is another way of pleading ‘please don’t go there.’ The consequences of apostasy are thereby shown to be grim by the use of hyperbolic language.²⁴¹

²³⁷ B. Witherington, *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians* (IVP 2007), 203.

²³⁸ Ibid. 204.

²³⁹ Ibid. 205.

²⁴⁰ Ibid. 212-15.

²⁴¹ Ibid. 218.

We may or may not agree with his interpretive strategies. The point is simply to document the fact that you don't have to be a Calvinist to interpret the text in a way that assumes a Christian can lose his salvation.

More generally, Witherington has also said:

This is an excellent question, and it is quite impossible to answer on the basis of what little you have said about this person. But consider these two possibilities: 1) the first go around the person was not in fact a Christian, did not love the Lord with all their heart etc. They were in a state much like the demons described in the Gospels-- who knew very well who Jesus was and did not dispute it, but this truth had not transformed their lives and behavior, as evidence by this person going AWOL. Mental assent to the Gospel is not the same as being saved. The issue is had they trusted and adhered to, and been transformed by and lived on the basis of that truth? 2) The very fact that this person now has a heart for God, and the other things you mentioned, is evidence that they did not commit apostasy in the first place which is a soul destroying act.²⁴²

Likewise, John Wesley said:

Whatever other passages of Scripture may condemn you, it is certain, you are not condemned either by the sixth or the tenth of the Hebrews. For both those passages speak wholly and solely of apostates from the faith which you never had. Therefore, it was not possible that you should lose it, for you could not lose what you had not. Therefore whatever judgments are denounced in these scriptures, they are not denounced against you. You are not the persons here described, against whom only they are denounced.

Now, which of you has thus fallen away? Which of you has thus "crucified the Son of God afresh?" Not one: Nor has one of you thus "put him to an open shame." If you had thus formally renounced that "only sacrifice for sin," there had no other sacrifice remained; so that you must have perished without mercy. But this is not your case. Not one of you has thus renounced that sacrifice, by which the Son of God made a full and perfect satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. Bad as you are, you shudder at the thought: therefore that sacrifice still remains for you. Come then, cast away your needless fears! "Come boldly to the throne of grace." The way is still open. You shall again "obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need."²⁴³

Ironically, this is the type of explanation which a Calvinist would ordinary offer. We dis-

²⁴² <http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2008/02/christian-apostasy-and-hebrews-6.html?showComment=1203077760000#c7582433999683856630>

²⁴³ "A Call to Backsliders." <http://new.gb-gm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/86/2/>

tinguish between the spiritual experience of the backslider and the spiritual experience of the apostate.

Likewise, Scot McKnight, another Arminian (or Anabaptist) scholar, has stated that:

In light of the futurity of salvation in Hebrews it is reasonable to contend that one cannot in fact “lose one’s salvation,” since one has not yet acquired it...Rather, I think it is wisest to say that those who are phenomenologically believers can “lose their faith” and the enjoyment of God’s salvation that persevering faith would have made possible for them.²⁴⁴

In the same vein, David deSilva says,

Are the people described in 6:4-5 ‘saved’ individuals in the estimation of the author of Hebrews? They cannot be, since ‘salvation’ is, for this author, the deliverance and reward that awaits the faithful at the return of Christ. Those who have trusted God’s promise and Jesus’ mediation are ‘those who are about to inherit salvation’, a deliverance (‘salvation’) which comes at Christ’s second coming (9:28), a deliverance (‘salvation’) thus comparable to that enjoyed by Noah (11:7). Noah was not saved when he began to build the ark; he was saved when he finished, stocked, and boarded the ark (and, even more especially, when he found himself still alive after the flood). The deliverance offered by the Son is indeed ‘eternal’ (5:9), but this ‘eternal salvation’ is what the obedient believers look forward to inheriting and enjoying, specifically on the Day when the Son comes to judge the world and reward his junior sisters and brothers who have maintained their trust in and loyalty toward him in a hostile world.²⁴⁵

And Michaels makes the same basic claim:

The question of whether the person in question was ever really “saved” or “converted” is moot, for salvation depends on the “end” (telos), on how it all turns out, not on how it began.²⁴⁶

Once again, the immediate point at issue is not whether we happen to agree with their take on the exclusive futurity of salvation in Hebrews. The point, rather, is that you needn’t be a Calvinist to reject the conventional Arminian view of Heb 6 & 10.

²⁴⁴ Scot McKnight, “The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions,” *Trinity Journal* 13 (1992), 58.

²⁴⁵ D. deSilva, Hebrews, 6:4-8: A Sociorhetorical Investigation (Part 1),” *TynBul* 50/1 (1999), 43;
http://www.tyndalehouse.com/TynBul/Library/TynBull_1999_50_1_03_deSilva_Hebrews6.pdf

²⁴⁶ J. Ramsey Michaels, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary 17: Hebrews* (Tyndale, 2009), 375.

I'd hasten to add that systematic theology is not irrelevant to exegetical theology. While we shouldn't use systematic theology to prescribe what a Bible writer may mean, there is a sense in which systematic theology can proscribe what a Bible writer may mean. If Scripture is inerrant, then what one Bible writer says must ultimately be consistent with what another Bible writer says. That, of itself, doesn't tell us the direction in which mutual adjustment should go. But it does establish certain parameters concerning what the overall teaching of Scripture will allow or disallow. If, for instance, Reformed perseverance is widely attested in other Bible writers, then we shouldn't cultivate self-induced amnesia when we come to Hebrews.

Excursus 6: Ophidian Symbolism

The garden of Eden is set somewhere in Mesopotamia (Gen 2:14). The implied reader of the Pentateuch is an emancipated Egyptian slave. Thus, both Egyptian and Mesopotamian ophiolatry and ophiomancy supply potentially pertinent background material in considering the identity of the Tempter in Gen 3. A “serpent” with preternatural abilities (e.g. wisdom, speech) would trigger cultural associations for an ancient Israelite.

There may also be a polemic thrust to serpentine motif in Gen 3. Cursing of the “serpent” (3:14-15) places pagan ophiolatry and ophiomancy under divine condemnation. As one scholar notes:

Serpents are often the object of curses in the ancient world, and the curse in verse 14 follows somewhat predictable patterns...Some spells enjoin the serpent to crawl on its belly (keep its face on the path). This is in contrast to raising its head up to strike. The serpent on its belly is nonthreatening while the one reared up is protecting or attacking.²⁴⁷

And this carries over into the NT. The Apocalypse was addressed to churches in Asia Minor, where snake cults were common. In Rev 12 & 20 (the “snake,” the “dragon”), there’s a dual tie-in between literary allusions to the OT and well as cultural associations with local idolatry. So Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Hellenistic forms of ophiolatry and ophiomancy are potentially germane to what the ophidian or saurian Tempter would connote to the implied reader of Genesis and Revelation.

I. Mesopotamia

The snake-dragon (with horns, snake’s body and neck, lion’s forelegs and bird’s hind legs) is represented from the Akkadian Period down to the Hellenistic Period as a symbol of various gods or as a generally magically protective hybrid not associated specifically with any deity.

The snake gods of ancient Mesopotamia, especially Nirah, seem to be the only fully animalian, non-anthropomorphic, deities (although Ia-Tarak may have had a leonine face and worn a lion’s skin). The snake god Nirah was worshipped at the city of Der, located on the northern border between Mesopotamia and Elam, as the minister of Istaran, the city god of Der (see local gods). His cult there is attested from the earliest times and was long-lived. He was also worshipped until Middle Babylonian times in the E-kur, the temple of Ellil (Enlil) in Nippur, where he was regarded as a protective deity of the temple and a protective presence. The cult of Irhan, a deity of the city of Ur and probably in origin a god representing the river Euphrates, remained independent until the period of the Third Dynasty of Ur, but was later syncretised with the cult of Nirah. It is possible that the snake symbol found on kudurrus [inscribed stones] represents the god Nirah (see

²⁴⁷ J Walton, *Genesis* (Zondervan 2001), 224-25.

snakes).

An anthropomorphic god with the lower body of a snake, shown on cylinder seals of the Old Akkadian Period, may also represent Nirah.

On the cylinder seal of Gudea, prince of Lagas, the ruler is introduced into the presence of a superior deity by a god from each of whose shoulders a horned snake rises. This is probably intended to represent Ningiszida, regarded by Gudea as his personal protective deity (see personal gods).

Representations of snakes are naturally frequent in iconography from the prehistoric periods onwards, but it is not always easy to decide whether or not they carried any religious value. When depicted as attributes of deities they are seen associated with both gods and goddesses. And independent symbol of the snake appears on kudurrus and is identified by the inscription on one as symbolizing the minister of the god Istaran (and so is possibly Nirah; see snake gods). Snakes continued to be portrayed in religious and secular art in later periods. As a divine symbol in Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian art, the snake can be identified from ritual texts directly as the god Nirah.

The horned viper (*Cerastes cerastes*), a mildly venomous snake native to the Middle East, has a pair of spike-like folds of skin on its head. In art, the form of a snake with a pair of horns rising from the forehead occurs as a symbol on Kassite kudurrus and in Neo-Assyrian art as an element of seal designs and in the form of magically protective figurines...A variant horned snake with forelegs was apparently regarded as a different creature...Originally one of the trophies of Ninurta (see Slain Heroes), it was later—when the snake-dragon became Marduk's animals—the symbol of various gods formerly associated with the snake-dragon, including Ningiszida.²⁴⁸

II. Egypt

The Egyptians associated serpents in general with magic. Even Pharaoh's uraeus, itself an embodiment of the cobra goddess Wedjet, was believed to imbue Pharaoh with magical power.²⁴⁹

We may see the snake as the embodiment of the commonest Egyptian word for "statement" (*tjd*), written as a serpent, a word that appears in Egyptian magical texts as a synonym for "spell."²⁵⁰

²⁴⁸ J. Black & A. Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary* (U. of Texas 1997), 166-68.

²⁴⁹ Noegel, S. "Moses and Magic: Notes on the Book of Exodus," *JANES* 24 (1996), 48; <http://faculty.washington.edu/snoegel/PDFs/articles/Noegel%2019%20-%20JANES%201996.pdf>

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 50.

The clearest expression of the dual nature of “venom spitting” is embodied in the symbol of the uraeus, through which the powers of the feared serpent are made to serve gods, the kind, and mankind.²⁵¹

The traditional understanding of these animals as defeated and trampled enemies has been questioned by Quaegebeur... The primary notion of such images, however, is to express the deity’s mastery of the beasts... The animal is shown to be subject/subservient to the god, whether as an assistant or opponent. In either case, the iconologic notion remains “superposition=control”... The primary magical method of neutralizing serpents, et cetera, is to make their attack recoil on themselves... The cobra is first and foremost a dangerous animal; its dangerous force may be controlled and thus directed by a god... The image of a god walking on (‘controlling’) a uraeus is therefore not so surprising... the deity controls and directs the force which the animal incarnates.”²⁵²

The presence of the goddess Beset conforms to the imagery of the ivory knives where she also appears, with her power over noxious animals indicated by the standard device of the “master of animals” pose, used elsewhere by Heka, Horus, and underworld deities.²⁵³

The animals most commonly held are to snakes, which become two staves crossed upon the chest of Heka.²⁵⁴

As a protective image, the uraeus is common.²⁵⁵

See the use of four uraei to guard the cardinal points in the temple rituals at Edfu on behalf of the kind and in the ritual of the House of Life on behalf of Osiris. The fire-spitting serpents repel enemies and demons at night.²⁵⁶

For the Egyptian bedroom, various protections have already been discussed, but these are supplemented by a formal ritual for “4 uraei of pure clay with flames in their mouths,” placed in each corner of the room in which men and women sleep together.¹²⁰ Acting as defensive ‘nightlights’ against nightmares and pests, the serpents are noted in written records from Deir el-Medina and Ptolemaic temples, while actual clay serpents have been excavated throughout Egypt, and related serpent imagery even appears on the legs of beds.¹²¹ Similar protections for sleep are placed on headrests, where Bes (grasping snakes) is depicted to repel night

²⁵¹ R. Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice* (Oriental Institute 2008), 83.

²⁵² Ibid. 128n583.

²⁵³ Ibid. 224.

²⁵⁴ Ibid. 224n1041.

²⁵⁵ Ibid. 224.

²⁵⁶ Ibid. 224n1042.

terrors, noxious animals, etc.122.²⁵⁷

III. Asia Minor

For readers of the Apocalypse some symbols would have not only scriptural associations but also various pagan mythical associations. In attempting to trace these it is important to keep as close as the evidence allows to the local forms of cult and myth in the area of the seven churches of Asia, an area where indigenous religious traditions were strong and often distinctive. Common to the whole hellenistic world, but strikingly evidenced from the coinage and other evidence of this area in particular, was the association of serpents with divinity. The serpent was the symbolic of the cult of Asklepios, perhaps once a divine snake himself, and represented by a real snake in healing rites. Snakes were also used to represent the god in the Dionysiac mysteries and the rites of the Phrygian Sabazios...Serpents were associated with the cult of Isis...and with the cult of the local goddess (Cybele) at Sardis and at Hierapolis, where the echidna was a dominant force in religious life. Pergamum, where the serpent was associated with all three major cults, of Asklepios, Dionysos and Zeus, has been said to be “obsessed with the symbol of the serpent...The serpent featured not only as the cultic symbol of the god but also in well known myths as the opponent of the god or hero who slays it.”²⁵⁸

As we can see from these examples, the snake often functioned as an occultic being or emblem in ancient Egypt. It’s a symbolic embodiment of a numinous reality.

This background helps to explain why the figure of the serpent in Gen 3 requires so little introduction. A sagacious and malevolent snake would be no ordinary animal. Rather, it would be a visible token or omen of an invisible evil force. Such a creature moves within the aegis of witchcraft and black magic.

²⁵⁷ <http://proteus.brown.edu/fairburn/admin/download.html?attachid=8661009>

²⁵⁸ R. Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy* (T&T Clark, 1993), 195-96.

Excursus 7: Ophidian Possession

The fact that Scripture uses ophidian or saurian symbolism doesn't mean there is no corresponding or underlying reality. Here are two ostensible cases demonic possession which manifested themselves in ophidian or saurian terms, as reported at firsthand by a Harvard-educated psychiatrist:

I still did not know precisely when and why Beccah had become possessed. I knew that around age six she had developed an abnormal attraction to a book of woodcuts that told one version of the pact with the devil story.²⁵⁹

The extraordinary amount of restraint required was one of the less remarkable features of the exorcism. The most remarkable was the change in the appearance of Beccah's face and body. Except during break times and a few other occasions when Satan would seemingly be replaced by Beccah, she did not appear to be a human being at all. To everyone present, her entire face became like that of a snake. I would have expected it to be the usual kind of poisonous snake with a triangular head, but that was not the case. The head and face of this snake were remarkably round. The only exception to this roundness was its nostrils, which had a distinct snub-nosed look. Most remarkable of all were the eyes. They had become hooded.²⁶⁰

During another appointment, again for but a minute, Beccah's face appeared to be that of a very dry, thick-skinned, lizardlike creature—possibly an iguana. Definitely a reptile but nothing like a snake.²⁶¹

²⁵⁹ M. Scott Peck, *Glimpses of the Devil: A Psychiatrist's Personal Accounts of Possession, Exorcism, and Redemption* (Free Press 2005), 214-15.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 173.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.* 225.

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