

# Body and Soul in the Old Testament

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn addresses how the Old Testament treats body and soul. What does it have to say about the nature and destiny of humanity?*

## The Breath of Life

The worldview of Naturalism tells us that the natural world is all that exists. There is nothing “above” or “beyond” this. Space, time, matter, and energy, the sort of things studied in physics, are the only material entities. You are your body, and nothing more. You do not have an immaterial mind or soul that is (in some sense) distinct from your body. You *are* your body. And when your body dies, you will cease to exist.

But is this true? In this article we address body and soul in the Old Testament. What does the Old Testament have to say about the nature and destiny of humanity?



Let's begin with the creation of Adam. Consider the way in which the Bible describes this event: “Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature” (Genesis 2:7). Note that Adam is created from two distinct elements: the dust of the ground and the breath of life. His body is composed of “dust from the ground.” But he doesn't become “a living creature” until God takes the second step of breathing “the breath of life” into his nostrils. Although this description may well be metaphorical in certain respects, it seems evident that God must add “the breath of life” for Adam to become a living human being.

Here's another observation. Notice that Adam doesn't suddenly

spring to life once the dust of the earth has been ordered in a particular way. Apparently, human personality does not spontaneously emerge once God has formed the dust of the ground into a human body.<sup>{1}</sup> Merely ordering the physical elements into a human body is not enough (at least, at this initial stage of human development) to get a human person. That second step, in which God breathes the breath of life into the already formed body, is also necessary.

So what are we to make of this? Does Genesis give us a picture of a human being as a body-soul composite? At this point, such a conclusion would be premature. We have not yet considered what a soul is, nor whether “the breath of life” in some way corresponds to, or produces, it. One thing seems clear, however. The Bible seems to suggest that human beings are more than just physical bodies. There appears to be an additional component to our nature, and we need to spend some time gaining a better understanding of what that is.

## **Surviving the Death of the Body**

The book of Genesis briefly describes the death of Jacob’s wife, Rachel, as she gave birth to their son, Benjamin.<sup>{2}</sup> We read that “as her soul was departing (for she died),” she named her son (Genesis 35:18).

How are we to understand the phrase, “as her soul was departing”? In Hebrew, the word here translated “soul” is the term *nephesh*. Part of the difficulty in understanding the phrase is that *nephesh* can be used in a variety of ways. According to the Christian philosopher J. P. Moreland, “The term *nephesh* . . . is used primarily of human beings, though it is also used of animals (Genesis 1:20; 9:10; 24:30) and of God Himself (Judges 10:16; Isaiah 1:14).”<sup>{3}</sup>

Depending on the context, the term might refer to a part of the body, like the neck (Psalm 105:18) or throat (Isaiah

5:14). It can also be used of the principle of life, as in Leviticus 17:11: “the life [that is, *nephesh*] of the flesh is in the blood.” Strangely, however, it can also refer to a dead human body (Numbers 5:2; 6:11). Moreover, it can be used of various psychological aspects of human experience, like emotions or desires (Proverbs 21:10; Isaiah 26:9; Micah 7:1). Finally, there are also indications that the term can refer to what might be called the “soul”—the immaterial component of a human being in which one’s personal identity is located.[{4}](#)

So when we read that Rachel’s “soul was departing,” does this simply mean that she was dying, that the “principle of life” (which had sustained her to this point) was departing? Or could it mean that her “soul,” an immaterial component of her being encompassing her personal identity, was departing? In other words, is this verse merely telling us that Rachel’s body was dying, or is it also telling us that, as her body was dying, her soul was leaving her body (possibly to continue its existence elsewhere)?

If we examine other passages of Scripture, we see evidence that the human soul continues to exist after the death of the body. Consider Psalm 49:15: “But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.” In Hebrew thought, Sheol was the place of the dead, somewhat like the Greek conception of Hades.[{5}](#) In this passage, the Psalmist expresses confidence that God will ransom his “soul” from the place of the dead and receive the Psalmist to himself. This view of the soul becomes even clearer when we examine what the Old Testament has to say about the afterlife.

## **The Place of the Dead**

In the Old Testament the place of the dead is called Sheol. Of course, in some places the term simply refers to the grave. Nevertheless, according to John Cooper, “There is virtual

consensus that the Israelites did believe in some sort of ethereal existence after death in a place called Sheol.”[{6}](#)  
What sort of place was this?

Job describes it as a place of “ease,” where “the wicked cease from troubling” and “the weary are at rest” (3:13, 17-18). That sounds pretty good! However, it’s also described as a place of “darkness” and “the land of forgetfulness” (Psalm 88:12), a place where not much is happening. As the author of Ecclesiastes puts it: “There is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going” (9:10). Hence, J. P. Moreland observes, “Life in Sheol is often depicted as lethargic and inactive.”[{7}](#)

But there are exceptions. Consider the case of Saul and the medium of Endor (1 Samuel 28). The prophet Samuel had died, and Saul is preparing to go to war against the Philistines (vv. 1-4). After seeing the Philistine army, however, Saul is afraid (v. 5). He inquires of the Lord, but the Lord does not answer him (v. 6). In desperation, Saul seeks out a medium at Endor, and asks her to call up Samuel from the dead (vv. 7-11). Incredibly, the plan works, and Samuel actually makes an appearance (vv. 12-14).

Saul inquires of Samuel, but Samuel essentially rebukes Saul (vv. 15-16), reminding Saul of his prior disobedience. He tells Saul that Israel will be defeated by the Philistines and informs him that “Tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me” (vv. 18-19). It’s a fascinating story, but we must not lose sight of what (for us) is the main point.

Notice that Samuel, who had previously died, and whose body had been buried (v. 3), retains his personal identity in the shadowy underworld of Sheol. He still knows who he is, remembers Saul, and can function as the Lord’s prophet. Although Samuel is pictured in the story as “an old man . . . wrapped in a robe” (v. 14), Moreland reminds us that the Bible often uses such imagery “in a nonliteral way to describe

immaterial, invisible realities.”[{8}](#) Regardless, the Old Testament teaches that human beings continue to exist after the death of the body. Moreover, the righteous express a hope that God will rescue their souls even from Sheol.

## Redemption from Sheol

The Old Testament pictures all those who die as going initially to Sheol, the place of the dead. However, it also intimates a hope for the righteous even “beyond the grave.” As John Cooper notes, “Several Psalms read most naturally as confessing a steadfast if unspecified trust in God beyond death.”[{9}](#)

Consider Psalm 49. The psalmist observes that all people die. Sooner or later each person’s life ends in death (vv. 5-12). But for the psalmist that is not the end of the story. Though he knows that this life will end with the death of his body, he nonetheless confidently proclaims: “But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me” (v. 15).

Or consider Psalm 73. The psalmist begins by confessing that he was “envious of the arrogant” and “wicked” (v. 3). However, as he contemplated that their end is “destruction,” his hope in God was renewed (vv. 17-24).

Although the psalmist recognized that he, too, would die, he declares his hope in God: “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (v. 26). After surveying such material, one Old Testament scholar notes that before God “there is not only the alternative between this life and the shadow existence in the world of the dead; there is a third possibility—a permanent, living fellowship with him.”[{10}](#) This third possibility was the confident hope of the psalmists.

Of course, if we're going to be fair, we must also agree with C. S. Lewis, who observes that throughout much of the Old Testament, belief in the afterlife held virtually no "religious importance" whatever.[{11}](#) What mattered to the ancient Israelite was life on this earth. It is here that we can enjoy fellowship with family, friends—and God.

So why did God reveal so little to the ancient Israelites about the nature of the afterlife? Lewis suggests that God may have wanted His people to come to love Him primarily as an end in itself—and not for any rewards he might bestow in the afterlife. If one becomes friends with God in this life, then one will naturally fear to lose this relationship in death. And at this point, God can step in with the "good news" that friendship with Him can continue beyond death.[{12}](#) Indeed, God even promised to raise the bodies of his people from the dead, to continue their friendship with him on a new earth!

## **The Resurrection of the Body**

The resurrection of the body is a doctrine that many believers rarely think about. Yet this doctrine is not only taught throughout the New Testament, it's even found in the Old Testament.

Consider Daniel 12:2: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." This verse is not denying a disembodied afterlife between death and resurrection. Rather, it is affirming that the souls of the dead, whose bodies appear to be asleep in in the "dust of the earth," shall be "awakened" and raised from the dead.

Notice that some are raised "to everlasting life," but others to "everlasting contempt." Cooper writes, "This verse . . . connects resurrection, judgment, and two eternal

destinies.”<sup>{13}</sup> The Old Testament suggests that the souls of the dead will one day be reunited with their bodies for all eternity. As Moreland observes, “Old Testament teaching implies that the soul or spirit is added to flesh and bones to form a living human person (Genesis 2:7; Ezekiel 37) and that the resurrection of the dead involves the re-embodiment of the same soul or spirit (Isaiah 26:14, 19).”<sup>{14}</sup>

How might we sum up Old Testament teaching about the nature and destiny of human beings? First, human beings appear to be composed of both body and soul. When God created Adam, he first formed his body from the dust of the earth, and then “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (Genesis 2:7). This at least hints at the possibility that human beings are a body-soul composite. The evidence for this is strengthened, however, when we consider Old Testament teaching about life after death.

Throughout the Old Testament we see evidence for continued personal existence, after the death of the body, in a place called Sheol. An interesting example of this can be seen when Saul, with the help of a medium, calls up the prophet Samuel from the dead. We saw that Samuel continues to exist and retain his personal identity even after the death of his body (1 Samuel 28).

But this was not the end of the story. For the Old Testament also teaches that the souls of the dead will one day be reunited with resurrected bodies, either to enjoy eternal life on a new earth, or to suffer eternal shame and contempt. This, in a nutshell, is what the Old Testament has to say about the nature and destiny of human beings.

## Notes

1. John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI:

Eerdmans, 2000), Loc. 727-39, Kindle.

2. See the story in Genesis 35:16-20.

3. J. P. Moreland, *The Soul: How We Know It's Real and Why It Matters* (Chicago: Moody, 2014), 45, Kindle.

4. The material in this paragraph is indebted to Moreland, *The Soul*, 45-46.

5. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Loc. 810.

6. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Loc. 783.

7. Moreland, *The Soul*, 51.

8. Moreland, *The Soul*, 52.

9. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Loc. 906. The preceding words, concerning hope "beyond the grave" are also taken from Cooper, Loc. 902.

10. Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 109; cited in Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Loc. 912.

11. C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1986), 36.

12. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 36-43.

13. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Loc. 916.

14. Moreland, *The Soul*, 53.

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## Tradition and Scripture

*While many evangelical Christians treat tradition with suspicion if not hostility, Dr. Michael Gleghorn makes a case for the value of tradition in understanding and supporting our faith.*

### Understanding Tradition

In this article we'll be thinking about tradition and its relationship to Scripture. Now I realize that some of you may

already be asking, “Tradition! Can anything good come from there?” The answer of course is “yes”—for if it were not, then I wouldn’t bother writing about it. Indeed, it’s actually an important topic to address, for in our day many evangelicals seem to harbor an attitude of suspicion—if not outright hostility—toward the very notion of tradition.<sup>[1]</sup> In support of this attitude, some might point to what Jesus said to the religious leaders of his day: “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions” (Mark 7:9 NIV). And if this is what Jesus said, then aren’t we better off to simply dismiss tradition and focus solely on the teaching of Scripture?



Before we jump to that conclusion, we must first determine what we mean when we use the word “tradition.” After all, in other passages Scripture speaks very favorably of tradition. Paul told the Corinthians, “Now I praise you because you . . . hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you” (1 Cor. 11:2 NASB). Traditions, it seems, can sometimes be good—and sometimes bad. And this is true even of the *Christian* tradition. But in order to talk intelligently about our subject, we must first understand precisely what we’re talking about. What, then, is the meaning of “tradition”?

When theologians speak about the Christian tradition, they are typically referring to the ways in which the faith has been understood by previous generations of Christians. For example, what understanding did our Christian forbears have of worship and theology, and how did they express their understanding through creeds, confessions, sermons, and books? Stanley Grenz and John Franke describe the Christian tradition “as the history of the interpretation and application of canonical scripture by the Christian community, the church, as it

listens to the voice of the Spirit speaking through the text.”[{2}](#) And Richard Lints describes it as “the faith transmitted by the community of interpreters that has preceded us.”[{3}](#)

Defined in this way, we must candidly admit that the Christian faith has been understood somewhat differently from one time and place to another. How are we to think about such differences? Should they always be viewed negatively, as a corruption of the original faith deposit? Or might they sometimes be seen as a positive and healthy development of this deposit?

## **Tradition: A Metaphor**

In a fascinating discussion of these issues, Colin Gunton asks us to think of tradition as an organism.[{4}](#) He notes that just as a child or plant may grow larger and stronger over time, so too the content of Christian doctrine can become more elaborate and enriched with the passage of time. He then observes, “If revelation is something given in the beginning—as undoubtedly one dimension of it is, the faith once for all delivered to the saints—then it may be argued that through tradition what began as a seed or a seedling is enabled to expand without falsifying its beginnings.”[{5}](#) This comment helps us see the interconnectedness of tradition and revelation—an issue which we will return to later.

For now, it’s important to notice what this metaphor does for us. It enables us to see tradition, like the growth of a child or a plant, as something *natural* and *healthy*—indeed, something to be *hoped for*, *encouraged*, and *expected*. This is an important reminder for those of us who might be tempted to view tradition solely in negative terms.

At the same time, however, Gunton is aware that things can always go wrong. He writes, “The organism might become

diseased, and require surgery; or it might simply grow too many branches, or branches in the wrong places, and require pruning.”{6} In this case, instead of the tradition developing in a natural and healthy way from the original revelation, it develops in an unnatural and unhealthy way. We might identify this latter situation with the unpleasant possibility of heresy—something which needs to be corrected or even surgically removed so that the organism doesn’t die or mutate into a completely different, unrelated life-form. If that were to happen, then while we might still have tradition of a sort, it could no longer be properly thought of as *Christian* tradition.{7} It will be helpful for us to keep this metaphor in mind as we continue to reflect on the role of tradition and its relationship to Scripture, particularly because we must now deal with a problem that this discussion inevitably raises.

## **Scripture and Tradition: A Problem**

Stanley Grenz and John Franke view tradition as a “source or resource” of the Christian church, which can aid in the church’s task of both theological construction and lived performance.{8} Some of the specific elements of the Christian tradition which they see as especially valuable in informing how we accomplish these tasks are the histories of worship, liturgy, and theology, as well as the “classic” theological formulations of the church, such as creeds and confessions. Of course, they are careful to point out that while these resources are extremely valuable, they “must always and continually be tested by the norm of canonical scripture.”{9}

In a similar way, Richard Lints describes the “goal of theology” as bringing “the biblical revelation into a position of judgment on all of life,” including tradition.{10} But this raises a bit of a problem, for in order to bring tradition under the authority of Scripture, Scripture must first be interpreted. And many scholars maintain that the Christian

tradition primarily consists of the scriptural interpretation and application of faith communities from the past. Indeed, this is basically how Lints himself defines the term. “In the discussion that follows,” he says, “*tradition* will signify the faith transmitted by the community of interpreters that has preceded us.”[{11}](#)

Moreover, Lints rightly believes that we neglect this tradition at our peril. For in banishing past interpretations of Scripture from our present consideration in doing theology, we can easily become ensnared “in a web of subjectivism” regarding our own interpretation of the Bible.[{12}](#) And this would be an incalculable loss to the church in her ongoing task of preaching and teaching the Bible. The fact of the matter is that these past interpretations are a necessary aid, both in revealing our own biases and blind spots, and in helping us avoid “what C. S. Lewis aptly called ‘chronological snobbery’—the conceit that we are necessarily wiser than our forbears.”[{13}](#)

But this leads to the following problem: If Scripture is to be brought into a position of judgment over all of life (including the Christian tradition), it must first be properly interpreted. But it would be irresponsible to engage in this interpretative task without the aid of the very tradition of past interpretation over which Scripture is to sit in judgment. How can this difficulty be resolved? Does Scripture occupy a place of authority over tradition, or does tradition rather occupy a place of authority over Scripture?

## **Scripture and Tradition: A Solution**

Before we attempt to respond to this question, we should first take time to remember just how it was that Scripture came into being in the first place. As Grenz and Franke remind us,

[T]he community precedes the production of the scriptural

texts and is responsible for their content and for the identification of particular texts for inclusion in an authoritative canon to which it has chosen to make itself accountable. Apart from the Christian community, the texts would not have taken their particular and distinctive shape. Apart from the authority of the Christian community, there would be no canon of authorized texts. In short, apart from the Christian community the Christian Bible would not exist.[{14}](#)

It might now be interesting to ask what the Christian community and the Christian Bible have in common. According to Grenz and Franke, it is the work of the Holy Spirit—a work that grants to each one its respective authority. They write,

In this conception, the authority of both scripture and tradition is ultimately an authority derived from the work of the Spirit. Each is part of an organic unity, so that even though scripture and tradition are distinguishable, they are fundamentally inseparable. . . . The authority of each—tradition as well as scripture—is contingent on the work of the Spirit, and both scripture and tradition are fundamental components within an interrelated web of beliefs that constitutes the Christian faith. To misconstrue the shape of this relationship by setting scripture over against tradition or by elevating tradition above scripture is to fail to comprehend properly the work of the Spirit.[{15}](#)

Does this mean, then, that there is no sense in which all of life (including tradition) should be brought under the judgment of Scripture? This does not seem to be what Grenz and Franke are saying. Although they do contend that the triune God “is disclosed in polyphonic fashion through scripture, the church, and even the world,” they then qualify this by noting, “albeit always normatively through scripture.”[{16}](#) In their view, Scripture is still theology’s “norming norm,” but since Scripture must always be interpreted, it cannot be easily separated from tradition. Scripture still holds the place of

prominence in doing theology, but in a carefully nuanced and qualified way that gives appropriate weight to God's other mediums of revelation, such as tradition, creation, and the church.

## **Tradition in Scripture and Theology**

In one of his 1993 Warfield Lectures, the late Colin Gunton observed that two of the narrative sections in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians contain possibly the most easily recognizable accounts of "the working of tradition in the New Testament."[{17}](#) In both 1 Corinthians 11, where Paul discusses the Lord's Supper, and 1 Corinthians 15, where he refers to Jesus' death and resurrection as the heart of the gospel, Paul specifically declares that he is delivering to the Corinthians certain traditions about Jesus which he himself had previously received. In other words, the biblical writings themselves are seen to be "part of a tradition of interpretation of that which is in certain respects prior to them."[{18}](#)

The unique revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ is *prior* to the traditions about Him which Paul had received. And the traditions which Paul had received, including the meaning given them by the early church and Paul himself, are also *prior* to his deliverance of them to the Corinthians (as well as those of us who have subsequently read this letter). Tradition, it seems, cannot always be so easily separated from the Bible itself.

Of course, very few Christians would disagree that traditions like those passed on by the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians are "authoritative for the faith and life of the church."[{19}](#) The problem rather arises with how the original revelation "is interpreted and handed on by those who follow the . . . apostles: the way in which revelation is mediated by tradition."[{20}](#) How should we understand this relationship?

For one thing, we should probably grant a certain degree of freedom, in response to the Spirit's guidance, to the way in which the tradition is articulated in different cultural and historical contexts. This allows the tradition to grow in a healthy way which, at the same time, is still amenable to correction when necessary. Granted, we are speaking of the development of tradition in something like an ideal setting, and the world in which we now live is certainly not ideal. But if tradition is one of the means which God has chosen for mediating revelation from one generation to another, then for better or worse, it will (and should) continue to play an important role in the life of the church. As Gunton wisely concludes, "although we may and must be critical of tradition, as the action of fallible and sinful human beings, we may not lay aside the means which God has himself chosen."[{21}](#)

## Notes

1. Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 109.
2. Ibid., 118.
3. Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 84.
4. Colin E. Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 85-87.
5. Ibid., 85.
6. Ibid., 86.
7. Ibid., 87.
8. Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 120-29.
9. Ibid., 124.
10. Lints, *The Fabric of Theology*, 82.
11. Ibid., 84.
12. Ibid., 93.
13. Ibid., 96.
14. Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 115.

15. Ibid., 117.
16. Ibid., 117-18.
17. Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation*, 93.
18. Ibid., 95.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 102-03.

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# Historical Criticism and the Bible

*Historical criticism of the Bible often threatens believers' faith. Dr. Michael Gleghorn explains that it is often grounded in false assumptions.*

## What Is Historical Criticism?

Throughout the history of Christianity, students of the Bible have used many different methods of interpreting the text. But since the Enlightenment, one particular method (or rather, family of methods) has been quite influential, especially in the academy. [\[1\]](#) I'm speaking of what is often called *historical criticism*, or the *historical-critical method* of biblical interpretation.



So what is historical criticism, you ask? Although the term gets used in different ways, I will here be using it to refer to a method of biblical interpretation which attempts

to read the Bible as a *purely* human document from the distant past. In other words, the historical-critical method does not typically regard the Bible as divinely inspired. It is *merely* a human book, like any other, and should thus be read like any other book.”[{2}](#)

In the past (and to some extent even today) scholars liked to portray this method as “scientific” in character, able to obtain “assured” and “objective” interpretive results. But critics tell a different story. For example, Eta Linnemann, who before her conversion to Christianity was a well-respected scholarly advocate of historical-criticism, claims that in practice the so-called “scientific” character of this method is grounded in a prior assumption of naturalism, perhaps even atheism. As Linnemann observes, “Research is conducted . . . if there were no God.”[{3}](#)

Another critic of this method is the renowned Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga. After rehearsing certain principles of historical investigation, which many historical critics would endorse, Plantinga notes that these principles are understood “to preclude” God’s direct involvement in the world.[{4}](#) Because of this, he notes, such principles “imply that God has not in fact specially inspired any human authors in such a way that what they write is really divine speech addressed to us; nor has he . . . performed miracles of any other sorts.”[{5}](#)

As I’m sure you can see, at least some of the results of this method come about simply because of assumptions the interpreter brings to the text. The problem, however, is that the assumptions are biased *against* Christianity in *favor* of naturalism. We must thus think rather critically about the historical-critical method. But first, we need a bit of background on how and when this method originated.

# The Origins of Historical Criticism

Although many scholars helped develop the historical-critical method, Johann Salomo Semler, an eighteenth-century theologian, is widely regarded as its “father.”<sup>{6}</sup> Semler was primarily interested in “critical work” on the canon of biblical writings.<sup>{7}</sup> For our purposes, the “canon” can simply be thought of as the books of the Old and New Testaments. The Church regards these books as the divinely inspired Word of God and, hence, completely authoritative for Christian faith and practice.

Semler, however, considered these books (especially those of the Old Testament) to be largely of merely historical interest. They might give us some interesting information about the religion of ancient Israel or (in the case of the New Testament) the beliefs of the early church, but they could not be regarded, at least in their entirety, as the divinely inspired Word of God.<sup>{8}</sup> Hence, Semler was led to make a distinction between “the Scriptures and the Word of God.”<sup>{9}</sup> Although the Church had always considered the Scriptures to be the Word of God, Semler made a distinction between them. In his opinion, “some books belong in the Bible through historical decisions of past ages, but do not make wise unto salvation.”<sup>{10}</sup> Books of this sort, he reasoned, can still be called “Scripture” (for they are part of the biblical canon), but they are *not* the Word of God (for in his view, they are not divinely inspired).

Although historical criticism continued to be developed after Semler, it's easy to see why many consider him to be this method's “father.” In his own study of the Bible, Semler generally disregarded any claims that either it or the Church might make regarding its divine inspiration and authority and attempted instead to read the Bible like any other book. In the opinion of theologian Gerhard Maier, it's “the general acceptance” of Semler's view which “has plunged theology into

an endless chain of perplexities and inner contradictions.”[{11}](#) Before we examine such difficulties, however, we must first consider why so many scholars see value in the historical-critical method.

## **Some Proposed Benefits of Historical Criticism**

To begin, virtually everyone agrees that when you’re attempting to understand a book of the Bible, it can be helpful to know something about the origin of the book. Who was the author? When did he live? What sorts of things were happening at the time the book was written? Was the author influenced by any of these things, or attempting to respond to them in some way? Who was he writing for? How might they have understood him? Answering such questions can often clarify what the author may have been trying to communicate in his book. Historical critics are right to see this as an important part of understanding the books of the Bible. And most everyone agrees on this point.[{12}](#)

More controversial would be the principles of historical investigation originally proposed by Ernst Troeltsch in an essay written in 1898.[{13}](#) These principles are still generally embraced (though with some modifications) by historical critics today.[{14}](#) Briefly stated, Troeltsch proposed three principles that can simply be called the principles of criticism, analogy, and correlation.[{15}](#) Although there’s no universal agreement about how these principles should be used in actually doing historical research, historical-critical scholars have generally regarded these principles as helpful guides in critically evaluating what is written in the Bible in their effort to determine what *really* happened. This is considered a great benefit of historical criticism. For, rather than simply accepting the claims of a biblical author uncritically, Troeltsch’s

principles provide some help in critically evaluating such reports in order to assess their believability.[{16}](#)

Now in one sense this is commendable, for it is good to search for truth about what the Bible is trying to teach us. But there's a problem with how these principles are typically understood by historical-critical scholars. As the Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga reminds us, such scholars generally take these principles to exclude any "*direct divine action* in the world."[{17}](#) That is, such principles forbid us to believe that God has ever directly intervened in the world which He has made. And for Christians, this presents a real difficulty with historical criticism.

## **Some Problems with Historical Criticism**

According to Christian scholars Norman Geisler and William Nix, a fundamental problem with historical criticism is that "it is based on an unjustified antisupernatural bias which it superimposes on the biblical documents."[{18}](#) This can easily be seen by examining some of the things which have been written by proponents and advocates of this method.

For example, Rudolf Bultmann, who was interested in "demythologizing" the New Testament, famously wrote, "It is impossible to use electric light . . . and to avail ourselves of modern medical . . . discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles."[{19}](#) Similarly, another theologian has written that whatever the biblical authors may have believed about such things, "we believe that the biblical people lived in the same" world we do, that is "one in which no divine wonders transpired and no divine voices were heard."[{20}](#)

Now if we ask such scholars why it is that we're to think that miracles are either unbelievable or impossible, we'll usually notice rather quickly that the responses are generally short

on arguments and long on assumptions. That is, such scholars typically just *assume* that God is not directly involved in the world and that miracles never occur. But if a personal Creator of the universe exists (and there are [good reasons](#) to think that one does), then why should we simply *assume* that He would never directly intervene in the world which He has made? Such intervention would hardly seem *impossible*. And if it produced an effect which would not have come about had nature been left to itself, then this could quite properly be regarded as a miracle.

So it seems to me that if a personal God exists, then miracles are possible. And if miracles are possible, then it is nothing more than “an unjustified antisupernatural bias” (as Geisler and Nix assert) to simply *assume* that the Bible’s reports of miracles are all false and unbelievable. And since historical criticism of the Bible often begins with just such an assumption, it appears to offer us an inadequate method for correctly reading the Bible.

## **An Alternative to Historical Criticism**

Having looked at some problems with historical criticism, we can now consider a preferable alternative, namely, theological interpretation.[{21}](#)

So what is theological interpretation? As I’m using the terminology here, it’s a method of reading the Bible like a Christian, with the aim “of knowing God and of being formed unto godliness.”[{22}](#) Theological interpretation takes a sober and serious account of what Christianity is, believes, and teaches. It then attempts to read and interpret the Bible as “a word from God about God.”[{23}](#)

It’s a radically different way of reading the Bible from that practiced by historical critics. Of course, as theologian Russell Reno reminds us, “There is obviously a historical

dimension" to the truth found in the Bible. "Nevertheless," he continues, "to be a Christian is to believe that the truth found in the Bible is the very same truth we enter into by way of baptism, the same truth we confess in our creeds, the same truth we receive in the bread and wine of the Eucharist."[\[24\]](#)

But historical criticism attempts to read the Bible in the same way one would read any other book from the ancient world. It assumes that the Bible is merely a human book. The only way to really understand a book of the Bible, then, is to try to understand how it originated and what the original author was trying to say.

Theological interpretation, on the other hand, does not view the Bible as a merely human book. Of course, it realizes that each of the biblical books has a human author. But it also insists, along with the consensual teaching of the Christian community, that each of these books also has a Divine author.[\[25\]](#) It thus views the Bible as a divinely-inspired document.

Is this a legitimate way to read the Bible? Alvin Plantinga has written extensively on the theory of knowledge.[\[26\]](#) According to him, the biblical scholar who is also a Christian "has a perfect right to assume Christian belief in pursuing her inquiries." Doing so, he says, is just as legitimate as assuming the principles of historical criticism.[\[27\]](#) Indeed, for the Christian it is arguably better—for it allows us to read the Bible in continuity with the tradition and faith we profess and believe.

## Notes

1. Gregory Dawes, for example, notes that both form criticism and redaction criticism would fall under the umbrella of historical criticism. See Gregory Dawes, "'A Certain Similarity to the Devil': Historical Criticism and Christian Faith," in *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Authority of*

*Scripture: Historical, Biblical, and Theoretical Perspectives*, ed. Carlos R. Bovell (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 354.

2. Benjamin Jowett, "On the Interpretation of Scripture," in Josephine M. Guy, *The Victorian Age: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*. n.p.: Routledge, 1998. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost (accessed February 9, 2013), 295.

3. See Eta Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology?* trans., Robert Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001), 84.

4. Alvin Plantinga, "Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship," in "*Behind*" *the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Craig Bartholomew, C. Stephan Evans, Mary Healy and Murray Rae (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 33.

5. Ibid.

6. James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 29.

7. Ibid.

8. Peter Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Toward a Hermeneutics of Consent* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 38-40.

9. Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 19.

10. Ibid.

11. The first sentence of Maier's book declares, "The general acceptance of Semler's basic concept that the Bible must be treated like any other book has plunged theology into an endless chain of perplexities and inner contradictions." See Gerhard Maier, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method*, trans., Edwin W. Leverenz and Rudolph F. Norden (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 11.

12. Plantinga, echoing the language of Robert Gordon, grants that we might refer to the attempt to answer such questions as a "warranted" form of historical biblical criticism. See Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Scripture Scholarship: A Response to Robert Gordon and Craig Bartholomew," in "*Behind*" *the Text*,

94.

13. For those interested in this essay, see Ernst Troeltsch, "Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology (1898)," trans. E. Fischhoff, rev. W. Bense in *Religion in History-Ernst Troeltsch: Essays*, trans. J. L. Adams and W. F. Bense (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991).

14. Edgar Krentz states, "Contemporary historians use Troeltsch's three principles, but with significant modifications" (*The Historical-Critical Method*, 56). However, it does not seem necessary to qualify the modifications of Troeltsch's principles by practicing historical-critical scholars with the adjective "significant," for (in my opinion, at any rate) they are generally more severe in critically evaluating the sources with which they are dealing than the average historian is with his.

15. For two very helpful discussions of Troeltsch's principles, see Alvin Plantinga's discussion of "Troeltschian HBC" in "Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship," in "*Behind*" the Text, 31-35, as well as Gregory Dawes discussion in "'A Certain Similarity to the Devil': Historical Criticism and Christian Faith," in *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Authority of Scripture*, 358-70. Although Plantinga and Dawes reach different conclusions about if and how Troeltsch's principles can be legitimately employed, both discussions are well worth reading.

16. Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, 45.

17. Alvin Plantinga, "Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship," in "*Behind*" the Text, 33.

18. Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible: Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 440.

19. Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth*, edited by Hans Werner Bartsch (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 5.

20. Langdon Gilkey, "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language," reprinted in Owen C. Thomas, ed., *God's*

*Activity in the World: the Contemporary Problem* (Chico, CA: Scholar's Press, 1983), 31; cited in Alvin Plantinga, "Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship," in "*Behind*" the Text, 34.

21. Kevin Vanhoozer defines "theological interpretation" as "the process of keeping the canonical practices alive and well in the believing community." A bit later he describes a "canonical practice" as "divinely authorized use of language and literature, which, when learned, presents and forms Christ." As examples of "canonical practice," he discusses, first, the typological, or Christological, interpretation of the Old Testament in light of the person and work of Jesus Christ and, second, prayer. He concludes his discussion by noting, "Christians learn to speak about, to think about, and to live for God by indwelling the diverse canonical practices that comprise the Scriptures. By participating in such practices-interpreting figurally, praying to the Father, and the like-Christians grow in faith toward understanding." This, it seems to me, is a helpful way of fleshing out, in greater detail, all that is involved in the concept and practice of the "theological interpretation" of Scripture. See Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 219-226. The citations in this note are from pp. 219 and 226.

22. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Introduction," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Craig G. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Treier, and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 25.

23. *Ibid.*, 23.

24. R. R. Reno, "A Richer Bible," *First Things* (August/September, 2010), 44.

25. I adopt this language from Thomas Oden who, in his book on *Classic Christianity*, states as his intention the setting forth of the "classic consensual ecumenical teaching" of the church throughout history. See Thomas Oden, *Classic Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), xiii.

26. See, for example, Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford, 1993), *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford, 1993), and *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford, 2000).

27. Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Scripture Scholarship: A Response to Robert Gordon and Craig Bartholomew," in *"Behind" the Text*, 99.

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## The All-Powerful God

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn examines the important doctrine of the omnipotence of God, and what it means for God to be all-powerful.*

### Introducing Omnipotence

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her that she would give birth to Israel's promised Messiah, she was stunned. After all, she was a virgin. How could she possibly give birth to a son? But the angel informed her that God's power was more than sufficient to accomplish such a thing, "for nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:37; NIV).



A foundational element of a Christian worldview is a proper view of God. This article is about God's omnipotence. Although the term may sound a bit intimidating, it simply means that God is all-powerful. A number of scriptural passages speak to this issue.

For example, through the prophet Jeremiah God warned the

people of Judah that because of their wickedness their land would soon be conquered by the Babylonians (Jer. 32:26-35). Nevertheless, God also promised that he would one day restore his people to their land and bless them with great prosperity (Jer. 32:37-44). As if to make clear that the Lord was completely able to fulfill his promise, the context twice leads us to reflect upon the fact that nothing is too difficult for God (Jer. 32:17, 27). The text, therefore, seems to clearly indicate that God is all-powerful, or omnipotent.

This power is revealed in a number of different ways. For example, the creation of the universe reveals his “eternal power and divine nature” (Rom. 1:20; Heb. 1:3). The resurrection of Jesus reveals his “mighty strength,” which not only raised Christ from the dead, but which seated him at the right hand of God, “far above all . . . power and dominion” (Eph. 1:18-23). Finally, his might is also revealed in the gospel, which the apostle Paul described as “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16).

In fact, He is often referred to as God *Almighty*. In the book of Revelation the twenty-four elders who are seated before the throne of God fall on their faces and worship the Lord declaring, “We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign” (Rev. 11:17).

The cumulative picture is indeed a grand one—and quite naturally leads to the believer’s affirmation that God is all-powerful, or omnipotent. But how is this attribute to be understood? What exactly does it mean to say that God is omnipotent? These are some of the questions with which we’ll grapple in the remainder of this article.

## **Omnipotence and Creation**

The Apostle’s Creed begins, “I believe in God the Father

almighty, creator of heaven and earth.”{1} Not only does this statement affirm a central (and biblical) Christian truth-claim, namely, that God is the creator of the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1), it also clearly links this affirmation with God’s attribute of omnipotence by referring to him as “God the Father *almighty*.” By linking God’s omnipotence with creation in this way, the creed reaffirms what the Apostle Paul had previously taught in his letter to the Romans, that God’s “eternal power and divine nature” are “clearly seen in what has been made, so that men are without excuse” (Rom. 1:20).

But why does the Bible, and Christian tradition, link God’s omnipotence with creation in this way? One of the most important reasons is to be found in the Christian doctrine of creation itself. You see, unlike certain pagan doctrines of creation, which taught that the universe was *formed* out of pre-existent matter, Christianity teaches that God *created* the universe out of nothing. And when we say that God created the universe “out of nothing,” we are claiming, as the theologian Thomas Torrance reminds us, that the universe “is not created out of anything.” Rather, “it came into being through the absolute fiat of God’s Word in such a way that whereas previously there was nothing, the whole universe came into being.”{2}

Now what’s astonishing about this is that it’s perfectly consistent with today’s standard Big Bang model of the origin of the universe! This is because, as physicist P. C. W. Davies observes, “On this view the big bang represents the creation event; the creation not only of all the matter and energy in the universe, but also of spacetime itself.”{3} Hence, the origin posited by this model is “an absolute origin” out of nothing.{4}

This is why omnipotence and creation are so closely linked in the Christian tradition. It’s one thing to merely *form* a universe out of pre-existent matter. It is another thing entirely to *create* a universe out of absolutely nothing! As

Christian philosophers Paul Copan and Bill Craig observe, “It is difficult to imagine any more stunning display of God’s almighty power than the world’s springing into being out of nothing, at his mere command.”[\[5\]](#)

## **Omnipotence and Morality**

Now you might be thinking that if God is all-powerful, then he can do absolutely anything. But if we adopt this understanding of omnipotence, we quickly run into conflict with the teaching of Scripture, for Scripture tells us plainly that there are some things God cannot do.

For example, in Numbers 23:19 we read: “God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?” According to this text, God is not the sort of being to tell a lie. When he makes a promise, we can be confident that he will keep it, because God does not lie (see also 1 Sam. 15:29 and Tit. 1:2).

This is particularly important for New Testament believers, for God has made many wonderful promises to those who have trusted Christ for salvation. Is there any reason to fear that God may not keep some of these promises? No, there is not, for as the author of Hebrews reminds us, “it is impossible for God to lie” by making a promise and then failing to keep it. And because of this, our hope in Christ is “firm and secure” (Heb. 6:18-19).

But if we say that God cannot lie, or break a promise, or do anything else that is morally evil, then haven’t we denied that God is all-powerful? Not necessarily. The vast majority of Christian theologians throughout the history of the church have consistently taught that God’s omnipotence does not include the ability to do that which is logically impossible or contradictory.

Of course, there is no contradiction in saying that an omnipotent being can commit a morally evil act. But there does seem to be a contradiction in saying that a completely good, morally perfect being can perform such an act. As a morally perfect being, God not only has no moral faults, but as James reminds us, he cannot even be tempted by sin and evil (James 1:13). Hence, as one Christian philosopher observes, “for an essentially morally perfect being, doing what is wrong is just a special case of doing what is impossible for that being to do.”<sup>{6}</sup> And clearly, the inability to do what is morally evil should not be seen as detracting from God’s omnipotence. Instead, it should be viewed as exalting his moral perfection.

## Omnipotence and Freedom

We’ve seen that omnipotence cannot mean that God can do absolutely *anything*. For as a morally perfect being, God is incapable of doing what is morally evil. This might lead us to think that God can do anything that is consistent with his morally perfect nature. But most theologians would still reject such a view. They would insist that some things are just logically impossible and that it can’t count against God’s omnipotence to admit that he cannot do such things.

Let’s consider an example. A square is a geometrical object with four angles. A triangle has only three. This being so, what do you think the chances are of constructing a square triangle? Not very good, right? After all, if something has four angles, then it has more than three. And if it has only three angles, then it has less than four. Regardless of how much power one has, a square triangle is a *logical impossibility*.

With this in mind, let’s now consider another example. Suppose that John is the kind of person who, if married, would *always* freely seek his wife’s input before making any major financial decision. If this is true, then it would seem that not even

God could create John, place him in such circumstances, and have him freely *refrain* from seeking his wife's input—for this is simply *not* what John would *freely* do in such circumstances.

Of course, God still has plenty of options. He could always refuse to create John, or refuse to let him get married, or refuse to let him be confronted with a major financial decision. Alternatively, God could put John in the circumstances we're considering, but *make* him decide not to seek his wife's input. But what he cannot do is place John in these circumstances and then *make* him *freely* decide not to seek his wife's input. For to *make* John *freely* do something is as logically impossible as creating a square triangle.[{7}](#)

Of course, God's inability to perform a logically impossible task can't fairly count against his omnipotence. For this would suggest "that a task has been specified, that transcends the capacities . . . of Omnipotence. But no task at all has been specified by uttering a self-contradictory . . . mixture of words."[{8}](#) So we needn't worry that we've abandoned the doctrine of omnipotence by admitting that God cannot perform meaningless tasks! We've simply clarified the meaning of omnipotence.

## The Importance of Omnipotence

The doctrine that God is omnipotent, or all-powerful, is, as one philosopher has observed, "not a bit of old metaphysical luggage that can be abandoned with relief." Instead, it's "indispensable for Christianity." After all, God has made many wonderful promises to his people. But if he "were not almighty . . . he might . . . sincerely promise, but find fulfillment beyond his power."[{9}](#) So only if God is omnipotent can we confidently bank on his promises. But this is a bit of a two-edged sword.

On the one hand, the doctrine of God's omnipotence can be very

comforting for believers, who are rightly related to God through faith in Jesus Christ. After all, “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1). Whatever problems and difficulties we face in life, our omnipotent God has more than enough power to see us through. If he chooses, he can easily deliver us from fire or water, sword or famine, sickness or disease. And if he lets us go through such things, he can provide all the grace and strength we need to endure. While the suffering of God’s saints can indeed be great, we must also remember that this life is not the end of our story, for “in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness” (2 Pet. 3:11). A promise our omnipotent God is more than able to fulfill!

On the other hand, however, an omnipotent Deity is a most frightening prospect for anyone who persists in spurning his love and grace. For as the author of Hebrews reminds us, we are each “destined to die once, and after that to face judgment” (9:27) and “it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (10:31)—especially when that God is all-powerful! It’s a sobering thought to remind ourselves that not one of us can ultimately escape God’s power and judgment. If we make the omnipotent God our enemy, then no one can deliver us from his hand.

Thankfully, however, peace with God is available to anyone who wants it. The Bible tells us that God does not want anyone to perish, but for all to come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). He pleads with men to be reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:16-21). “Whoever is thirsty,” he says, “let him come . . . let him take the free gift of the water of life” (Rev. 22:17b). The omnipotent God offers us all good things in Christ—and nothing can prevent him making good on his offer!

## **Notes**

1. John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: John Knox, 1982), 24.
  2. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being, Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 207; cited in Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, *Creation out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 14.
  3. P. C. W. Davies, "Spacetime Singularities in Cosmology," in *The Study of Time III*, ed. J. T. Fraser (New York: Springer Verlag, 1978), 78-79; cited in Copan and Craig, *Creation out of Nothing*, 222.
  4. Copan and Craig, *Creation out of Nothing*, 223.
  5. *Ibid.*, 26.
  6. Edward Wierenga, "Omnipotence Defined," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 43, no. 3 (1983): 367.
  7. See J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 539.
  8. Antony Flew, ed., *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, Rev. 2nd ed. (New York: Gramercy Books, 1999), s.v. "impossibility."
  9. All of these citations are taken from P. T. Geach, "Omnipotence," *Philosophy* 48, no. 183 (1973): 8.
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# **A Pilgrim's Progress: Suffering in the Life of John Bunyan – A Christian View of**

# Suffering

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn considers the lessons presented by the life and writings of the famous author of The Pilgrim's Progress to give each of us a better understanding of the role of suffering in the lives of followers of Christ.*

## A Suffering Pilgrim

John Bunyan is known to most people today as the author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, a book he began writing in prison. It tells the story of "Christian," who makes his way from the "City of Destruction" (which represents this world) to the "Celestial City" (which represents Heaven). It's been described as "perhaps the world's best-selling book" (after the Bible), and has been "translated into over 200 languages."<sup>{1}</sup> Written in the form of an allegory, it essentially relates the story of Bunyan's own Christian journey.<sup>{2}</sup> And just as *his* life was full of trials and suffering, so also "Christian" must face many hardships and difficulties as well.



Bunyan was born in England in 1628 at a time of great political and religious unrest. In 1644, at just fifteen years old, both his mother and sister died within a month of each other. Later that year, "when Bunyan had turned sixteen, he was drafted into the Parliamentary Army and for about two years was taken from his home for military service."<sup>{3}</sup> He married in 1648, at about the age of twenty, but his wife died just ten years later, leaving him with four children, the oldest of whom was blind. He married again the following year, in 1659, but incredibly, just one year after this, "Bunyan was arrested and put in prison."<sup>{4}</sup> His wife, who was pregnant at the time, suffered a miscarriage, probably because of the added stress which this ordeal created. She was then left to care for Bunyan's four children while he spent the next twelve

years in jail.[{5}](#)

As you can see, Bunyan was no stranger to suffering. Indeed, he had an intimate, firsthand acquaintance with heartache, trials, and difficulties. But what crimes had he committed to be cast into prison? Essentially, the charges against him were two: first, “he refused to attend the services of the Established church” of England; and second, he “preached to unlawful assemblies.”[{6}](#) You see, Bunyan had converted to Christianity during his first marriage and had become a powerful and respected preacher. But in the volatile political and religious climate of that day, the freedom of Nonconformist preachers like Bunyan eventually came to an end. And when it did, he was arrested and put in prison.

In the remainder of this article we’ll look at some of the trials this man endured, how he responded to them, and what they might teach us as we each make our own spiritual journey.

## **The Pilgrim’s Conversion**

*The Pilgrim’s Progress* is one of the best-selling Christian books of all time. But as Bunyan tells us in another of his books, the autobiographical *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, before becoming a Christian he had few equals in “cursing, swearing, lying and blaspheming the holy name of God.” Indeed, prior to his marriage, he says he was “the very ring-leader of all the youth . . . into all manner of vice and ungodliness.”[{7}](#)

Bunyan’s young wife had a very godly father. When he died, he left her two books which she brought into her marriage: *The Plain Man’s Pathway to Heaven* and *The Practice of Piety*. According to Bunyan, although these books did not awaken him to his “sad and sinful state,” they nevertheless did arouse within him “some desires to religion.”[{8}](#) One of the practical effects of these new desires was Bunyan’s regular attendance

at a local church.

Soon Bunyan also began to read the Bible. He then came under such powerful conviction of sin that he scarcely knew what to do. "Sin and corruption," he wrote, "would as naturally bubble out of my heart, as water would bubble out of a fountain. . . I thought none but the devil himself could equalize me for inward wickedness and pollution of mind." [{9}](#) Bunyan was plunged into a state of despair over the greatness of his sin which, he tell us, "continued a long while, even for some years together." [{10}](#)

Eventually, after years of spiritual and emotional agony, Bunyan described "what seemed to be the decisive moment." [{11}](#) He was heading into the field one day when suddenly this sentence broke in upon his mind: "Thy righteousness is in heaven." At this, he says, "I . . . saw . . . that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse: for my righteousness was Jesus Christ himself, *the same yesterday, and today, and for ever* (Heb. 13:8)." "Now," he said, "did my chains fall off my legs indeed . . . my temptations also fled away . . . now went I . . . home rejoicing, for the grace and love of God." [{12}](#)

After years of spiritual anguish, Bunyan had been set free by the grace of God from some of his worst fears and torments. But as we'll see, this was not to be the end of his experience with suffering. As one set of trials was ending, another was soon to begin.

## **The Pilgrim's Imprisonment**

According to Bunyan, five or six years after his conversion, in about the year 1655, some of the believers in his local congregation began entreating him "to speak a word of exhortation unto them." [{13}](#) Although initially hesitant,

Bunyan agreed to their request “and suddenly a great preacher was discovered.”[{14}](#) Apparently, word spread quickly through the English countryside. According to one author, “In the days of toleration, a day’s notice would get a crowd of 1,200 to hear him preach at 7 o’clock in the morning on a weekday.”[{15}](#)

Unfortunately, it was not to last. In 1660, the same year in which Charles II was brought home as king in the Restoration of the Monarchy, John Bunyan was arrested and imprisoned “for preaching without state approval.”[{16}](#) Officially, he was charged with being in violation of the Elizabethan Conventicle Act of 1593. According to this Act, anyone found guilty of “abstaining from coming to church to hear divine service, and . . . being a common upholder of several unlawful meetings . . . could be held without bail until he or she submitted to the authority of the Anglican church.”[{17}](#) As a Nonconformist preacher, this Act applied to men like Bunyan.

What’s interesting, however, is that Bunyan could have gone free at any time, so long as he agreed to give up preaching. But as he was firmly persuaded that he had been called by God to this ministry, he was completely unwilling to abandon his calling. He thus spent the next twelve years in prison, largely cut off from his wife, children, friends, and church.

I say “largely cut off” for, strange as it may seem, it appears that Bunyan was occasionally let out “to see his family or make brief trips.”[{18}](#) Of course, this was the exception and not the rule. Nevertheless, by “the standards of the seventeenth century the conditions in which he was held were not particularly brutal.”[{19}](#) On the other hand, Bunyan was largely fortunate in this respect: “hundreds of Dissenters died in prison, and many more came out with their health broken by foul, over-crowded conditions.”[{20}](#)

Although these qualifications must be admitted, we must never lose sight of the fact that Bunyan was willing to endure twelve long years of this suffering, rather than agree to give

up preaching. And thankfully, as we'll see, God brought a great deal of good out of His faithful servant's suffering.

## The Pilgrim's Writings

Most people today know John Bunyan as the author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, but this is just one of many works written by the metal-worker turned minister. His first book was written in 1656, when he was twenty-eight years old. But by the time of his death, some thirty-two years later, he had authored fifty-seven more! [{21}](#) John Piper notes:

*The variety in these books was remarkable: books dealing with controversies (like those concerning the Quakers . . . justification and baptism), collections of poems, children's literature, and allegory (like *The Holy War* and *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman*). But the vast majority were practical . . . expositions of Scripture built from sermons for the sake of . . . helping Christian pilgrims make their way successfully to heaven. [{22}](#)*

What's especially astonishing about the size and variety of Bunyan's literary legacy is that it came from a man with almost no formal education. As a child Bunyan had been taught to read and write, but nothing more. He had no university or seminary degrees in which to boast. And yet his diligent study of the Bible, born mainly out of a burning desire to find peace with God, made Bunyan mighty in the Scriptures. Indeed the Bible, more than any other book, would be the primary influence upon his many writings. So evident was this to Charles Spurgeon, the famous nineteenth century Baptist preacher, that he once wrote of Bunyan:

*He had studied our Authorized Version . . . till his whole being was saturated with Scripture; and though his writings are . . . full of poetry, yet he cannot give us his *Pilgrim's Progress*—that sweetest of all prose poems—without continually*

*making us feel and say, "Why, this man is a living Bible!" Prick him anywhere; and you will find that his blood is Bibline, the very essence of the Bible flows from him.* [{23}](#)

Not even his suffering in prison could dampen Bunyan's enthusiasm for the Word of God or for writing. Indeed, if anything, it increased it. Some of his best-known works were written from the confines of a prison cell. These include *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, written during his first imprisonment, as well as *The Pilgrim's Progress*, apparently completed during a second, briefer period of imprisonment in 1677. [{24}](#) Bunyan's writings are surely one of his greatest gifts to the church.

## **Lessons from a Suffering Pilgrim**

A thoughtful examination of John Bunyan's reflections on the purpose and value of suffering can give us much wisdom in how best to deal with it in our own lives. Near the end of his spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, he appended a brief account of his imprisonment in the Bedford jail. In it, he tells of how he tried to prepare himself for imprisonment, and possibly even death, when he realized that he might soon be called upon to suffer for the cause of Christ. Naturally, as one might well expect, one of the things he did was pray. He was particularly concerned to ask God for the strength to patiently endure his imprisonment, even with an attitude of joy (Col. 1:11). [{25}](#)

However, it's the second thing he says that I find especially interesting and helpful. He reflects on the words of the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 1:9: "[W]e had the sentence of death within ourselves in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead" (NASB). Commenting on this verse, he then makes the following two observations:

*By this scripture I was made to see that if ever I would*

*suffer rightly, I must first pass a sentence of death upon everything that can properly be called a thing of this life, even to reckon myself, my wife, my children, my health, my enjoyments and all, as dead to me, and myself as dead to them. . . . The second was, to live upon God that is invisible; as Paul said in another place, the way not to faint, is to look not at the things that are seen, but at the things that are not seen; for the things that are seen are temporal; but the things that are not seen, they are eternal*[{26}](#).

Bunyan realized that, like it or not, suffering, pain, loss and death would all come to him in one way or another. Indeed, sooner or later every single one of us must ultimately face these terrifying realities. How, then, can we best prepare to meet them? As Bunyan reminds us, if we only prepare for prison, say, then we will be unprepared for beatings. But if we stop our preparation with beatings, then we will be unprepared for death. But we cannot evade or cheat death forever. And thus, concludes Bunyan, “the best way to go through sufferings, is to trust in God through Christ, as touching the world to come; and as touching this world.”[{27}](#) This was how Bunyan lived, and with God’s help it was also how he died. May the eternal and unseen God grant each of us the grace to follow his example.

## Notes

1. Christopher Hill, *A Tinker and a Poor Man: John Bunyan and His Church, 1628-1688* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 375, cited in John Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God: The Fruit of Affliction in the Lives of John Bunyan, William Cowper, and David Brainerd* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2001), 60.
2. W. R. Owens, “Introduction,” in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (New York: Penguin, 1987), xxiii.
3. Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God*, 49.
4. *Ibid.*, 54.

5. Ibid.
6. Owens, "Introduction," xv.
7. John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, ed. W. R. Owens (New York: Penguin, 1987), 8.
8. Ibid., 10.
9. Ibid., 24.
10. Ibid.
11. Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God*, 52.
12. Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, 59.
13. Ibid., 67-68.
14. Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God*, 53.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 47.
17. Owens, "Notes," in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 127, n. 137.
18. Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God*, 48.
19. Owens, "Introduction," xvi.
20. Ibid.
21. Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God*, 60.
22. Ibid., 60-61.
23. Charles Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1973), 159; cited in Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God*, 77.
24. Owens, "Introduction," xvi-xvii.
25. Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, 79.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.

# “Where Are the Rest of Jesus’ Teachings?”

I have been searching for text/documents/anything that Jesus taught. He had over three years of anointed ministry, and only a few lines in the Gospels are recorded. Where is the rest of His teachings? I doubt that He wrote them down to a great extent, but surely some of his followers wrote down His teachings.

It’s great to hear about your excitement for the teachings of Jesus! May the Lord increase your tribe!

There is, unfortunately, a lot of nonsense written about Jesus—both at the scholarly and popular level (though doubtless more at the popular level). The fact of the matter is that the earliest and best historical evidence concerning Jesus and his teachings is to be found in the New Testament. Nothing else even comes close.

Of course, Jesus is mentioned in some ancient non-Christian sources. I have written a brief article about it here: [probe.org/ancient-evidence-for-jesus-from-non-christian-sources-2/](http://probe.org/ancient-evidence-for-jesus-from-non-christian-sources-2/)

Additionally, the Gospel of Thomas appears to contain some of Jesus’ actual sayings. According to New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman, probably about 1/3 of this gospel contains actual sayings of Jesus (or something close), about 1/3 of the sayings are full-blown Gnosticism (espousing things that Jesus never taught), and the final 1/3 are somewhere in between these two.

But here’s the thing. The Gospel of Thomas is an early second century production. The other apocryphal and pseudepigraphical gospels are later still. By contrast, all of the New Testament documents (including the four gospels) are first century

productions. So bottom line: if you want to know what Jesus really taught, you need to read the New Testament (and the NT gospels in particular). Indeed, the reason scholars think that some of the sayings in the Gospel of Thomas are probably authentic sayings of Jesus is because they are consistent with sayings we find in the New Testament Gospels—the earliest and most historically trustworthy documents we have concerning the life and teachings of Jesus.

A few other books you might enjoy by good, solid, evangelical Jesus scholars:

1. *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels*, by Craig A. Evans:

[www.amazon.com/Fabricating-Jesus-Scholars-Distort-Gospels/dp/0830833188/](http://www.amazon.com/Fabricating-Jesus-Scholars-Distort-Gospels/dp/0830833188/)

2. *Reinventing Jesus: How Contemporary Skeptics Miss the Real Jesus and Mislead Popular Culture*, by Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace:

[www.amazon.com/Reinventing-Jesus-J-Ed-Komoszewski/dp/082542982X/](http://www.amazon.com/Reinventing-Jesus-J-Ed-Komoszewski/dp/082542982X/)

3. *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ*, by Gary R. Habermas:

[www.amazon.com/Historical-Jesus-Ancient-Evidence-Christ/dp/0899007325/](http://www.amazon.com/Historical-Jesus-Ancient-Evidence-Christ/dp/0899007325/)

May the Lord greatly bless you in your studies!

Shalom in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn

Posted April 27, 2017

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# **“I Stopped Believing After Visiting an Atheist Webpage; Can God Forgive Me?”**

I accepted Christ but then I went to the atheistic page that convinced me and I stopped completely believing for a few days. Later, I realized it was a mistake and repented. Can God forgive me? Am I apostate? Hebrews 6:4-6 is why I'm afraid.

Thanks for your letter. Hebrews 6:4-6 is a highly disputed passage with a variety of interpretations on offer. Fortunately, however, I do not think that we really need to delve into any of these in your case. The sort of sin that is in view in Hebrews 6:4-6 appears to be a very willful and determined apostasy from Christ. It appears to picture someone who, in spite of numerous spiritual benefits experienced, nonetheless turns his back on Christ and utterly rejects Him forever. In other words, the passage seems to suggest that anyone who has committed this sin will never turn to God again in repentance. Their heart has been (or is) irrevocably hardened against God and they will not repent.

But this is clearly not you! As you say in your letter, you realized that you had made a mistake and you thus repented and turned back to God. Sometimes atheist websites can seem convincing and a believer might be temporarily fooled by them, so to speak. But for a true believer, this will be very temporary indeed (as again, your own case shows). For the true believer has the witness of the Holy Spirit within him (or her) self—and this witness testifies to the truth of Christ

with all of the authority of God himself!

The bottom line, I think, is this: anyone who is willing to repent of their sin and turn to Christ for forgiveness and salvation cannot have committed this sin. For the person who has committed this sin is irrevocably hardened against God and will never again be brought to repentance.

One final note. As believers it is important for us to grow in our understanding of the riches of our faith. Although some believers are called by God to engage with the material on atheist websites, the Lord always prepares such believers exceedingly well beforehand. Personally, I would encourage you as a brother in Christ to stay away from the atheist websites. The fact is, these sites are utterly wrong in their denial and rejection of God. They will not encourage nor build you up in your faith. Instead, I would recommend daily reading (and actually studying) your Bible, getting involved with a good Bible-believing and Bible-teaching church (and small group), and reading good works of theology and Christian apologetics. Take the time to carefully read something like John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, for example. And for apologetics, read the articles on the Probe website ([www.probe.org](http://www.probe.org)) – and check out the material as well on William Lane Craig's site, Reasonable Faith ([www.reasonablefaith.org](http://www.reasonablefaith.org)). Don't waste your time—I say this in all seriousness—with atheist websites. Rather, go deep in your study of the Bible, Christian theology, and Christian apologetics. You won't regret it!

Shalom in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn

Posted April 27, 2017

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# Those Admirable English Puritans

*Michael Gleghorn corrects a number of misunderstandings and stereotypes about the Puritans, suggesting there is much about them to admire.*

## Introducing the Puritans

J. I. Packer begins his book, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life*, by comparing the English Puritans to the California Redwoods. He writes, “On . . . the northern California coastline grow the giant Redwoods, the biggest living things on earth. Some are over 360 feet tall, and some trunks are more than 60 feet round.”<sup>{1}</sup> A bit later he draws this comparison: “As Redwoods attract the eye, because they overtop other trees, so the mature holiness and seasoned fortitude of the great Puritans shine before us as a kind of beacon light, overtopping the stature of the majority of Christians in most eras.”<sup>{2}</sup>

Of course, in our day, if people think of the Puritans at all, it’s usually only for the purpose of making a joke of one kind or another. As one author notes, “the Puritans are the only collective stock-in-trade that virtually every cartoonist feels free to use to lampoon society’s ills.”<sup>{3}</sup>



But who were the Puritans really? When did they live? And, most importantly, why should we care?

Many scholarly studies of English Puritanism begin by noting the variety of ways in which the term “Puritanism” has been used and defined. Christopher Hill begins his book, *Society*

*and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England*, with a chapter entitled, “The Definition of a Puritan.”<sup>{4}</sup> And John Spurr, in his book on English Puritanism, has an introductory section on “Defining Puritans.”<sup>{5}</sup> But we’ll leave it to the scholars to haggle over details. For our purposes, it’s good enough to say that the Puritans were English Protestants who were influenced by the theology of the Reformation. They were zealous to “purify” not only the Church of England, but also their society, and even themselves, from all doctrinal, ceremonial, and moral impurity—and to do so for the glory of God.<sup>{6}</sup> The time period of English Puritanism spans roughly the years between 1550 and 1700.<sup>{7}</sup>

So that’s who the Puritans were, but why on earth should we care? Personally, I think it’s because the Puritans can offer us a great deal of wisdom, wisdom that could really benefit the church and society of our own day. As Packer reminds us, “The great Puritans, though dead, still speak to us through their writings, and say things . . . that we badly need to hear at the present time.”<sup>{8}</sup>

## **The Puritans and God**

Before going any further, we need to come right out and admit that, at least on the popular level, the Puritans really seem to suffer from an “image problem.” According to J. I. Packer, “Pillorying the Puritans . . . has long been a popular pastime.”<sup>{9}</sup> Likewise, Peter Marshall and David Manuel observe that “Nearly everyone today seems to believe that the Puritans were bluenosed killjoys in tall black hats, a somber group of sin-obsessed, witch-hunting bigots.”<sup>{10}</sup> Of course, like Packer, they regard this view as “a monstrous misrepresentation.”<sup>{11}</sup> But when a view is so widely held, we seem to be in for an uphill battle if we want to suggest some ways in which the Puritans were admirable!

So where do we begin? Let’s briefly consider the way in which Puritans sought to live their lives before God. The

*Westminster Shorter Catechism*, a teaching device highly esteemed by many Puritans, [{12}](#) begins by asking, “What is the chief end of man?” That’s a great question, isn’t it? They answered it this way: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” [{13}](#)

Now what follows if this answer is correct? Well first, it would mean that human life is *objectively* full of meaning, value, and purpose, for God exists and (as General Maximus asserted in the hit movie, *Gladiator*) “what we do in life echoes in eternity.” [{14}](#) But second, in claiming that “man’s chief end” consists not only in *glorifying* God in the here and now, but also in *enjoying* Him *forever*, we see the potential for the complete and eternal fulfillment of human existence. For what could be better than enjoying God, the greatest good, forever and ever?

It is doubtless for reasons such as this that the Puritan theologian, William Perkins, defined theology as “the science of living blessedly forever”! [{15}](#) He understood that theology is not some dry, academic discipline, with no relationship to the rest of one’s life. Rather, theology is all about knowing God personally. And this, according to Jesus, is eternal life, the life of supreme blessedness (John 17:3). So the first reason for seeing the Puritans as admirable is that they sought to live their lives in such a way that they would glorify God and enjoy Him forever—and what could ultimately be wiser, more fulfilling—or more admirable—than that?

## **The Puritans and Books**

Now some may have thought of the Puritans as ignorant, or anti-intellectual—people who either feared or hated learning. But this, claims Leland Ryken, is “absolutely untrue.” Indeed, he says, “No Christian movement in history has been more zealous for education than the Puritans.” [{16}](#) Many leaders of the Puritan movement were university educated and saw great value in the life of the mind. One can list individual

Puritans who were interested in things like astronomy, botany, medicine, and still other subjects from the book of nature.[{17}](#)

Above all, however, Puritanism was a movement which prized that greatest of all books, the Bible. Puritans loved their Bibles—and deemed it both their joy and duty to study, teach, believe and live out its promises and commandments. According to Packer, “Intense veneration for Scripture . . . and a devoted concern to know and do all that it prescribes, was Puritanism’s hallmark.”[{18}](#)

Indeed, so great was this Puritan veneration for Scripture that even those without much formal education often knew their English Bible exceedingly well. A great example of this can be seen in John Bunyan, the famed author of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Although he did not have much in the way of formal education, one of his later editors declared (doubtless with *some* exaggeration) that “No man ever possessed a more intimate knowledge of the Bible, nor greater aptitude in quoting it than Bunyan.”[{19}](#)

For Puritans like Bunyan, the Bible was the inspired word of God. It was thus the highest court of appeal in all matters of Christian faith and practice. Indeed, since the Bible came from God, it was viewed as having the same divine authority as God himself. It was therefore worth one’s time to know the Bible well, and to be intimately familiar with its contents. As two contemporary scholars of Puritanism remind us, the Bible was both “the mirror before which each person could see the . . . status of one’s soul before God, and the guidebook for all human behavior . . .”[{20}](#)

The Puritan stress on knowing, believing, and obeying God’s inspired word is refreshing. What might the church in America look like if it *really* recaptured this Puritan vision for the importance of Scripture? Here the writings of the Puritans can still be a valuable resource for the church today, which is

yet another reason for seeing them as admirable.[{21}](#)

## The Puritans and the Church

Even in our own day, the Puritans remain fairly well-known for their desire to “purify” the Church of England from anything which, in their estimation, smacked of doctrinal, moral, or ceremonial impurity.[{22}](#) The Puritans were passionate about the purity of the church. But how were they to determine if a particular doctrine or practice was suspect?

For the Puritans, it was only natural that God’s inspired word, the Bible, should serve as the final authority in all such matters. If a doctrine was taught in Scripture, then it should also be taught in the church. And if not, then it shouldn’t. The same standard would apply to all moral and ceremonial issues as well. Scripture was to have the final word about whether any particular doctrine or practice was, or was not, to be taught or permitted in the church of God.[{23}](#) Of course, this is right in line with what we said above about the Puritan devotion to Scripture.

But once one is committed to judging everything *within* the church according to the standard of Scripture, it probably won’t be long before one’s view *of* the church undergoes a similar biblical scrutiny. Such scrutiny soon led Puritans to “the notion that the church is a spiritual reality.” The church is not the building in which the redeemed gather to meet, it is rather “the company of the redeemed” themselves.[{24}](#) Doubtless this was one of the reasons why the Puritans were eager to purify not only the church, understood in a corporate sense, but themselves as individuals as well.

It also helps explain the Puritans’ devotion to both the fellowship of the saints and the discipline of an erring brother or sister in the faith. The Puritan pastor Richard Sibbes urged God’s people “to strengthen and encourage one another in the ways of holiness.”[{25}](#) And Robert Coachman

reminded his readers that “it is no small privilege . . . to live in . . . a society” where one’s brothers and sisters in Christ “will not suffer them to go on in sin.”[{26}](#)

But isn’t it all too easy to allow Christian fellowship to lapse into something that is superficial, boring, and sometimes even frankly unspiritual? Yes; and this is why the great English Puritans are quick to remind us (sometimes in the most forceful of ways) that we must continually seek, in our fellowship together, to promote both faith and holiness, along with a deep love and reverent fear of the Lord our God. And isn’t that an admirable reminder?

## **The Puritans on Marriage and the Family**

If there’s one thing that almost everyone thinks they know about the Puritans it’s that they “were sexually inhibited and repressive,” right?[{27}](#) But just how accurate is our knowledge about the Puritans on this score? Well according to some scholars, it’s wide of the mark indeed.[{28}](#)

Of course, it’s certainly true that the Puritans believed, just as the New Testament teaches, that human sexual behavior should be enjoyed only within the marriage relationship between a husband and wife. And naturally enough, they disapproved of any sexual behavior outside of this relationship. But within the union of heterosexual marriage, the Puritans were actually quite vocal proponents of a rich and vibrant sex life. Indeed, one Puritan author described sex as “one of the most proper and essential acts of marriage” and encouraged married couples to engage in it “with good will and delight, willingly, readily and cheerfully.”[{29}](#) And need I add that the Puritans thought it important to *practice* what they preached?!

But with Puritan couples so “readily and cheerfully” enjoying their sexual relationships within marriage, they naturally had to give some serious thought to the raising of children and

the purpose of the family! So what did they have to say about such matters?

For the Puritans, the family ultimately had the same purpose as the individual; namely, “the glory of God.” The reason this is important, notes Ryken, is that “it determines what goes on in a family,” by setting “priorities in a spiritual rather than material direction.”[\[30\]](#)

The Puritans rightly saw that if one wants a spiritually healthy church and a morally healthy society, one must first have spiritually and morally healthy individuals and families—for the former are inevitably composed of the latter.[\[31\]](#) Hence, if we want healthy churches and societies, we must also prize healthy individuals. And such individuals are best produced within spiritually and morally healthy families.

Now I personally find it difficult to argue with the Puritan logic on this point. And although they lived in a different era, Puritan views on the purpose of the family really seem to offer “some attractive possibilities for our own age.”[\[32\]](#)

And now we’ve reached the end of our discussion of English Puritanism. Of course, the Puritans also had their faults—and I’ve no desire to pretend otherwise.[\[33\]](#) But I hope you’d agree that there’s much to admire about these oft-maligned and misrepresented giants of the past. And I also hope this might encourage you to read (and profit from) these giants for yourself!

## Notes

1. J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1990), 11. I should probably note that the California Department of Parks and Recreation gives figures slightly different from those in Packer’s book, but this is really immaterial for my purposes in this article. See, for example, “How Big are Big Trees,”

California Department of Parks and Recreation, accessed February 12, 2015, [www.parks.ca.gov/?page\\_id=1146](http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=1146).

2. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 11.

3. Bruce C. Daniels, *New England Nation: The Country the Puritans Built* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 230.

4. Christopher Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 1-15.

5. John Spurr, *English Puritanism, 1603-1689*, ed. Jeremy Black, *Social History in Perspective* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 3-8.

6. Definitional help was gathered from the sources cited above, as well as the article by Mark A Noll, "Puritanism," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 897-900.

7. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 11.

8. *Ibid.*, 16.

9. *Ibid.*, 21.

10. Peter Marshall and David Manuel, *The Light and the Glory: 1492-1793*. Revised and expanded edition (Grand Rapids: Revell, 2009), 211.

11. *Ibid.*

12. According to Packer, the Puritan Richard Baxter used this catechism to help instruct (and encourage) his parishioners in the truths of the Christian faith. See Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 45.

13. This catechism can be found many places on the internet. See, for example, "The Westminster Shorter Catechism," The Westminster Presbyterian, accessed February 15, 2015,

[www.westminsterconfession.org/confessional-standards/the-westminster-shorter-catechism.php](http://www.westminsterconfession.org/confessional-standards/the-westminster-shorter-catechism.php).

14. For a philosophical defense of this view, please see the chapter entitled, "The Absurdity of Life without God," in William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 65-90.

15. William Perkins, *A Golden Chain, or The Description of Theology* (1592). In *The Work of William Perkins*, ed. Ian Breward. Courtenay Library of Reformation Classics 3 (Appleford, England: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1970), 177; cited in *Reformed Reader*, ed. William Stacy Johnson and John H. Leith (Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 7.

16. Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 7.

17. See the brief discussion in Charles Pastoor and Galen Johnson, *The A to Z of the Puritans* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2009), s.v. "Science."

18. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 98.

19. *The Works of John Bunyan: Allegorical, Figurative, and Symbolical*, ed. George Offor, vol. 3 (London: Blackie and Son, 1859), 396.

20. See Pastoor and Johnson, *The A to Z of the Puritans*, s.v. "Scripture."

21. Packer says much the same thing. See *A Quest for Godliness*, 16.

22. For the Puritans, of course, this was typically some vestige of Roman Catholicism. I purposefully chose not to mention this on the radio, however, because I did not want any of our listeners to somehow get the mistaken idea that this was an anti-Catholic program. It's not. My purpose in this program is to extol the virtues of the Puritans—not to vilify

some other segment of the Christian community.

23. Leland Ryken has an excellent discussion of this issue in his chapter on “Church and Worship” in *Worldly Saints*, 111-135. See particularly pp. 112-115.

24. This, and the previous quotation, are both taken from Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, 115.

25. Richard Sibbes, “The Church’s Visitation” (London, 1634), cited in Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, 133.

26. Robert Coachman (or Cushman), *The Cry of a Stone* (London, 1642), cited in Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, 133.

27. Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, 39.

28. See, for example, Ryken’s chapter on “Marriage and Sex” in *Worldly Saints*, 39-55.

29. William Gouge, *Of Domestical Duties* (London, 1622), edited, updated and revised by Greg Fox (Puritan Reprints, 2006), 158.

30. Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, 74.

31. Ryken provides numerous examples of this view from the writings of *Puritans in Worldly Saints*, 74-5; 84-7.

32. *Ibid.*, 73.

33. See Ryken’s chapter, “Learning from Negative Example: Some Puritan Faults,” in *Worldly Saints*, 187-203.

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# C.S. Lewis, the BBC, and Mere Christianity

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn explains how a series of radio talks during WWII became one of Christianity's most cherished classics.*

One can rarely predict all the consequences which will follow a particular decision. On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland. Two days later, France and Britain declared war on Germany. World War II was officially underway. Back in England, C. S. Lewis was “appalled” to find his country once again at war with Germany. Nevertheless, he believed it was “a righteous war” and was determined to do his part “to assist the war effort.”[\[1\]](#)

At this point in his life, Lewis was already a fairly successful Oxford don. “His academic works and lively lectures attracted a large student following.”[\[2\]](#) Although he published a number of academic studies, Lewis also enjoyed writing popular literary, theological and apologetic works. In 1938 he published the first volume of his science-fiction trilogy, *Out of the Silent Planet*. And in 1939, as the war began, he was working on *The Problem of Pain*, a thought-provoking discussion of the problem of evil and suffering.[\[3\]](#)



It was this latter work which attracted the attention of James Welch, the Director of Religious Broadcasting for the British Broadcasting Corporation, or BBC. Welch and his assistant, Eric Fenn, were both committed Christians who firmly believed that Christianity had something vital to say to the men and women of England as they faced the horrors and challenges of war. According to Welch:

In a time of uncertainty and questioning it is the

responsibility of the Church – and of religious broadcasting as one of its most powerful voices – to declare the truth about God and His relation to men. It has to expound the Christian faith in terms that can be easily understood by ordinary men and women, and to examine the ways in which that faith can be applied to present-day society during these difficult times.{4}

After reading *The Problem of Pain* by C. S. Lewis, Welch believed that he had found someone who just might meet his exemplary standards of religious broadcasting. He wrote to Lewis at Oxford University in February 1941, and asked if he might consider putting together a series of broadcast talks for the BBC.{5} Lewis responded a couple days later, accepting the invitation and indicating a desire to speak about what he termed “the law of nature,” or what we might call “objective right and wrong.”{6} Although Lewis could hardly have known it at the time, this first series of talks would eventually become Book I in his bestselling work of basic theology, *Mere Christianity*.

## Right and Wrong

*Mere Christianity* originated as a series of talks entitled *Right and Wrong: A Clue to the Meaning of the Universe*. Lewis pitched his idea to James Welch, the Director of Religious Broadcasting at the BBC, in the following terms:

It seems to me that the New Testament, by preaching repentance and forgiveness, always *assumes* an audience who already believe in the law of nature and know they have disobeyed it. In modern England we cannot at present assume this, and therefore most apologetic begins a stage too far on. The first step is to create, or recover, the sense of guilt. Hence if I gave a series of talks, I shd [sic] mention Christianity only at the end, and would prefer not to unmask my battery till then.{7}

In certain respects, this was a rather difficult time to be involved in religious broadcasting. Most of the talks were not pre-recorded, but were given live. And because of the war, the British government was anxious to insure that no information that might be “damaging to morale or helpful to the enemy” end up in a broadcast.[{8}](#) As Eric Fenn, the BBC’s Assistant Director of Religion, who worked closely with Lewis in the editing and production of his talks, later recalled, “. . . every script had to be submitted to the censor and could not be broadcast until it bore his stamp and signature. And thereafter, only that script—nothing more or less—could be broadcast on that occasion.”[{9}](#)

Lewis not only had to contend with these difficulties, however, he also had to learn (as anyone who writes for radio must) that this is a very precise business. Since “a listener cannot turn back the page to grasp at the second attempt what was not understood at the first reading,” the content must be readily accessible for most of one’s listening audience.[{10}](#) Additionally, the talks must fit within a narrowly defined window of time. In Lewis’s case, this was fifteen minutes per talk – no more, no less. As one might well imagine, Lewis initially found it rather difficult to write under such constraints.[{11}](#)

Eventually, however, the combination of Fenn’s coaching and Lewis’s natural giftedness as a writer and communicator paid off. The talks were completed and successfully delivered. The BBC was pleased with its new broadcasting talent and quickly enlisted Lewis for a second series of talks.[{12}](#)

## **What Christians Believe**

This second series would be titled *What Christians Believe*. Since these talks would require Lewis to more directly communicate some of the core truths of the Christian faith, he sent “the original script to four clergymen in the Anglican,

Methodist, Presbyterian and Roman Catholic Churches for their critique.”[{13}](#) Although Lewis was a brilliant and well-read individual, he was nonetheless a layman with no formal training in theology. Since his desire was to communicate the central truth-claims of Christianity, and not just the distinctive beliefs of a particular denomination, he wanted to be sure that his talks were acceptable to a variety of Christian leaders. Although a couple of them had some minor quibbles with certain things that Lewis had said, or not said, they were basically all in agreement. This was important to Lewis, who later tells us, “I was not writing to expound something I could call ‘my religion,’ but to expound ‘mere’ Christianity, which is what it is and was what it was long before I was born and whether I like it or not.”[{14}](#)

The BBC was elated with this second series of talks, liking them even more than the first. According to Justin Phillips, who wrote a book on the subject, it was this second series of talks which most closely fulfilled James Welch’s original vision as Director of Religion for the BBC “to make the gospel relevant to a people at war. It speaks of the core doctrines of Christianity and explains them in plain English to the general listener.”[{15}](#)

Eric Fenn, who helped with the editing and production of the talks, wrote appreciatively to Lewis afterwards to tell him he thought they were excellent. He then asked if Lewis might consider doing yet another, even longer, series sometime in the near future.[{16}](#) Lewis would agree to the request, but he was beginning to get a little disenchanted with some of the unanticipated consequences of his success. Already a very busy man, with a variety of teaching, writing, and administrative responsibilities, Lewis now found himself, in addition to everything else he was doing, nearly overwhelmed by the avalanche of mail he was receiving from many of his listeners. This Oxford don was clearly making a powerful connection with his audience!

## Why Was Lewis So Popular?

According to Justin Phillips, “Even though Lewis was a prolific correspondent himself, even by his standards it was all becoming a bit too much to cope with.”[{17}](#) Indeed, were it not for the able secretarial support of his brother Warnie, Lewis may *not* have been able to keep up with it all.

Jill Freud, one of the children evacuated from London at the start of the war, lived with the Lewises for a while. She recalled just how much help Warnie offered his brother, whom they called “Jack”:

He did all his typing and dealt with all his correspondence which was considerable – so huge it was becoming a problem. There was so much of it from the books and then the broadcast talks. And he was so meticulous about it. Jack wrote to everybody and answered every letter.[{18}](#)

Indeed, Warnie later estimated that he had pounded out at least 12,000 letters on his brother’s behalf![{19}](#) So what made Lewis so popular? What enabled him to connect so well with his readers and listeners?

In the first place, Lewis was simply a very talented writer and thinker. When it came to communicating with a broad, general audience, Lewis brought a lot to the table right from the start. But according to Phillips, the BBC should also be given some credit for the success of the broadcast talks. He writes, “The attention given to Lewis’s scripts by his producers in religious broadcasting made him a better writer.”[{20}](#)

Ironically, even Lewis’s rather volatile domestic situation may have contributed to his success. Lewis was then living with his brother, who had a drinking problem, a child evacuee from London, and the adoring, but also dominating, mother of a friend who had been killed in World War I. Phillips notes:

All this helped to 'earth' Lewis's writings in the real world. . . . It took him out of the seclusion of the Oxford don . . . and gave him a real home life more like that of his listeners than many of his professional colleagues.{21}

Finally, Lewis combined all of this with a rather disarming humility in his presentations. He wasn't pretending to be better than others; he was only trying to help. And his listeners responded in droves.

## The Impact of the Broadcasts

The BBC eventually got a total of four series of talks out of Lewis. Each of the series was so successful that the BBC continued, for quite some time, to entreat Lewis to do more. But according to Phillips, Lewis was becoming increasingly disillusioned with broadcasting. The BBC issued one invitation after another, but nearly eighteen months after his fourth series concluded Lewis had turned down every single one of them.{22} Although he would eventually be tempted back to the microphone a few more times, the days of his broadcast talks were now a thing of the past. While he was glad to be of service in this way during the war, Lewis never really seemed to care that much for radio. Indeed, in one of his less serious moods, he even blamed the radio "for driving away the leprechauns from Ireland!"{23}

In spite of this, however, the impact of the broadcasts has been immense. Since first being aired on the BBC, these talks have generated (and continue to generate) a great deal of interest and discussion. *Mere Christianity*, a compilation of the talks in book form, continues to show up on bestseller lists even today.{24} And Phillips, speaking of the cumulative impact of *all* of Lewis's writings, observes that while numbers vary, "in the year 2000 some estimates put worldwide sales of Lewis's books at over 200 million copies in more than thirty languages."{25}

As the origin of *Mere Christianity* shows, however, we cannot often predict how it may please God to use (and perhaps greatly multiply) our small, seemingly insignificant, investments in the work of His kingdom. Lewis was simply trying to do his part to be faithful to God and to help his countrymen through the horrors of World War II. But God took his humble offering and, like the story of the loaves and fish recounted in the Gospels, multiplied it far beyond anything Lewis could ever have reasonably imagined.

This should be an encouragement to us. As we faithfully exercise our gifts and abilities in the service of Jesus Christ, small and inconsiderable though they may seem to be, we may one day wake to find that incredibly, and against all odds, God has graciously multiplied our efforts to accomplish truly extraordinary things!

## Notes

1. Justin Phillips, *C. S. Lewis in a Time of War: The World War II Broadcasts that Riveted a Nation and Became the Classic Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002), 4.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. James Welch, *BBC Handbook 1942*, 59; cited in Phillips, *C. S. Lewis in a Time of War*, 78.
5. Phillips, *C. S. Lewis in a Time of War*, 80-81.
6. Ibid., 82.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 33.
9. Interview with Eric Fenn by Frank Gillard for the BBC Oral History Archive, 4 July 1986; cited in Phillips, *C. S. Lewis in a Time of War*, 33.
10. Ibid., 88.
11. Ibid., 87-88.
12. Ibid., 134-35.
13. Ibid., 142.

14. C. S. Lewis, "Preface," in *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1960), vii.
15. Phillips, *C. S. Lewis in a Time of War*, 153.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 155.
18. Interview with Jill Freud, 19 November 1999; cited in Phillips, *C. S. Lewis in a Time of War*, 157.
19. Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Companion & Guide* (London: Harper Collins, 1966), 33; cited in Phillips, *C. S. Lewis in a Time of War*, 158.
20. Phillips, *C. S. Lewis in a Time of War*, 165.
21. Ibid., 183.
22. Ibid., 268.
23. C. S. Lewis, *Letters to an American Lady* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967); cited in Phillips, *C. S. Lewis in a Time of War*, 276.
24. See, for example, [www.bookvideoawards.com/bookstandard/images/BestSellersAwards\\_Program.pdf](http://www.bookvideoawards.com/bookstandard/images/BestSellersAwards_Program.pdf) and [peopleofthebook.us/2007/02/](http://peopleofthebook.us/2007/02/).
25. Phillips, *C. S. Lewis in a Time of War*, 279.

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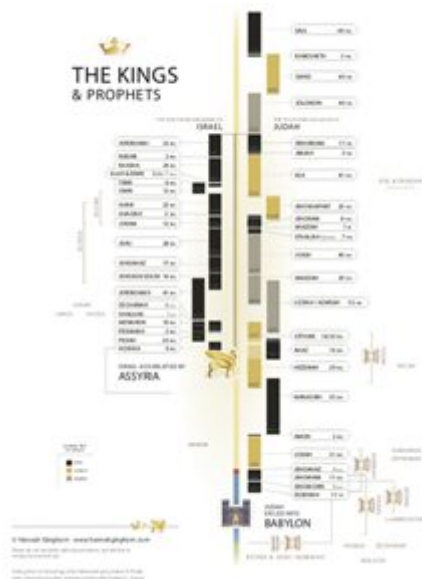
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## The Reliability of Kings and Chronicles

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn shows how the apparent contradictions of two Old Testament historical books can be explained.*



Over the past year and a half my wife has been working on what might be called a “visual Bible.” By training and profession my wife, Hannah, is a [graphic designer](#). She tends to understand things best when she can visualize them in some way. Hence, when she began team-teaching a women’s Bible study that covers the entire Bible in just two years, she felt the need to create visuals of what she was studying in order to help her grasp some of the key points in a single glance. Thus, week-by-week, as she readied herself for class, she also prepared a wide array of graphically-designed visuals of the written contents of Scripture.



Everything was going fairly well until she came to the Old Testament books of Kings and Chronicles. Since these books give us a great deal of information about the kings of Israel and Judah, including the order in which they reigned, the lengths of their reigns, and so on, she decided to create some charts that would present all of this information visually. She had no idea that she was about to enter one of the most baffling and perplexing issues of biblical chronology!

To put it bluntly, the chronology of Kings and Chronicles initially appears to be a hopelessly muddled, and even downright contradictory, mess! Examining this material as an intelligent layperson, Hannah could make no sense of it at all. It also meant that she could not represent the material in a visually coherent way.

Feeling increasingly frustrated, she asked if I knew of any books that dealt with these problems. Although this is an area I know little about, I remembered a book which (I had heard) handled these issues quite well. That book, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, by Edwin Thiele, offered her some much-needed help in making sense of the apparently confused and contradictory information in the books of Kings and Chronicles.[{2}](#) Although this book did not solve *all* the difficulties she was facing, it did bring a great deal of order to the apparent chaos of this section of Scripture.

In the remainder of this article we'll first consider the problems posed by "the mysterious numbers of the Hebrew kings." Afterward, we'll briefly look at how all these problems have been solved by contemporary scholars, so that what was previously thought of as a hopeless muddle is instead a testimony to the accuracy of the historical parts of the Old Testament.

## **Some Difficulties with Old Testament Chronology**

In the original preface to *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, Edwin Thiele began his discussion with these words:

*For more than two thousand years Hebrew chronology has been a serious problem for Old Testament scholars. Every effort to weave the chronological data of the kings of Israel and Judah into some sort of harmonious scheme seemed doomed to failure.*

*The numbers for the one kingdom could not, it seemed, be made to agree with the numbers of the other.* {3}

Indeed, the difficulties with Old Testament chronology at this point were so great that many scholars simply assumed that the biblical records were unreliable. But why? What was it about these numbers that made so many scholars think they were in error?

Since we'll later be discussing the two different kingdoms of Israel and Judah, let's begin by considering two *imaginary* kingdoms, both of which celebrate a new king coming to the throne on March 1 of the same year. In other words, both kings begin their reigns on exactly the same day. Now one would probably think that, as the ensuing years go by, court historians from both kingdoms would agree about how many years each of these kings have ruled their kingdoms. But in fact, this is not necessarily true.

Suppose that one of these kingdoms counts the first year of their new king's reign from his first day on the throne. If he began his reign on March 1 of the year 2000, then this is considered the first year of his reign. {4} On January 1, 2001, he thus begins the *second* year of his reign. But suppose that in the *other* kingdom, the year 2000 is regarded as the *last* year of the *prior* king's reign. In this kingdom, then, even though a new king began to reign in the year 2000, the official first year of his reign is counted from the beginning of the new year, January 1, 2001. {5}

Hence, although both kings began to rule on precisely the same day, the years of their reigns are counted differently. The first king begins his *second* year of rule on January 1, 2001, while the second king only begins his *first* official year at that time. This is just one of *many* issues that complicate the dating of the kings of Israel and Judah as they're recorded for us in the Bible. Once these issues are taken into account,

however, a completely harmonious chronology of these kings becomes possible. Let's now consider a biblical example.

## A Biblical Case Study

We've been looking at some of the chronological puzzles in the biblical books of Kings and Chronicles. With apologies for the unavoidable names and numbers which follow, let's consider an example.

After the ten tribes split from Judah and Benjamin to form the northern kingdom of Israel, their first ruler was Jeroboam. Jeroboam was followed by his son Nadab. With Nadab we have a series of synchronisms with the long reign of Asa of the southern kingdom, Judah. The first synchronism is that Nadab began to reign in year 2 of Asa.[{6}](#) The Bible then says that Nadab reigned two years and died in year 3 of Asa.[{7}](#) But it is only one year from Asa's second year to his third year, so how could Nadab begin in year 2 of Asa, reign two years, and die in Asa's 3rd year? Next, Baasha, who killed Nadab, is said to reign 24 years starting in year 3 of Asa;[{8}](#) this should surely put his end, 24 years later, in Asa's year 27. But the Bible says that Baasha died in year 26 of Asa, not year 27.[{9}](#) Baasha's son, Elah, reigned two years, and his death was not in year 28 of Asa (that is, 26 plus 2), but in year 27.[{10}](#)

At this point we have a decision to make. We could decide that all of this shows that the Bible is not to be trusted in its numerical and historical statements. This is the path taken by critics who say that these parts of the Bible were invented many years later than the happenings they describe. Or, we could give the authors of these texts the benefit of the doubt and consider that these texts show a consistent pattern. The pattern is that the northern kingdom was counting the years of reign for their kings in the fashion mentioned previously, where a king could count the year in which he came to the throne as his first year of reign, so that even if he only

reigned exactly one year, he would be given credit for the calendar year in which he became king and also for the calendar year in which he died. This is a method that was used by other Near Eastern kingdoms. With this second approach, success has been achieved in reconstructing the history and exact chronology of the Hebrew kingdom period. We will now consider other factors necessary in understanding these so-called “mysterious numbers” of the Bible.

## **Co-regencies and Rival Reigns**

We’ve seen a pattern in the chronological numbers that the Bible gives for the first years of the divided kingdom. We saw that, in these early years at least, the northern kingdom was counting the year that a king died twice; once for him, and once for his successor, so that one year must be subtracted from a reign length when counting elapsed time. By carefully considering the facts as given in the Bible itself, we can determine when the two kingdoms were using this method of counting, and when they were using the other method in which a king’s first year was not counted until he reigned a full calendar year.

The Bible also gives us sufficient information to determine when there was a co-regency. The word “co-regency” is not a Biblical word, but the principle is there. A co-regency begins when the reigning king appoints one of his sons as his successor. This was always a smart thing to do. We have an example in our own time. When Kim Jong Il, the dictator of North Korea, became ill he appointed his son, Kim Jong Un, as his successor so there wouldn’t be any trouble when he died. In the Bible, after two of David’s sons, Absalom and then Adonijah, tried to usurp the kingdom from their father, the prophet Nathan told David to make it known who was to be his successor. David then had Nathan perform a public anointing of Solomon.[{11}](#) Another example of a co-regency is when Uzziah was struck with leprosy and had to live in a separate house,

so that his son Jotham became the real ruler of the land.[{12}](#)

Other co-regencies are not quite so obvious, but the books of Kings and Chronicles always give us enough information so that we can determine when the years of a king's reign are being measured from the start of a sole reign or from the start of a co-regency. For the northern kingdom, Israel, there are also two cases of a rival reign, similar to the rival reigns of Egyptian pharaohs that Egyptologists take into account when reconstructing the chronology of Egypt. As an example, Omri, the father of Ahab, is said to have reigned for twelve years,[{13}](#) but this only makes sense if the twelve years includes the five years in which he had a rival, Tibni, reigning in a different capital.[{14}](#) Co-regencies and rival reigns are the second major key to understanding the chronology of the Hebrew kingdom period.

## **The Accuracy of Kings and Chronicles**

In previous sections we considered two factors to take into account when interpreting the rich chronological data of Kings and Chronicles. The first is that there were two ways of counting the first year of a king's reign; whether it was to be counted twice, once for him and once for the king who died in that year, or just once so that the king's first year was his first full year of reign. The second factor was that occasionally a king's reign was measured from the start of a co-regency or rival reign rather than from the start of his sole reign. Both principles were applied, although not consistently, by some earlier interpreters.[{15}](#) A third principle, discovered by Edwin Thiele, however, was not used by these interpreters. This principle showed that the southern kingdom, Judah, started counting the years of a king's reign in the fall month of Tishri, while the northern kingdom, Israel, started six months earlier in the spring month of Nisan. Many earlier interpreters thought that both kingdoms started their year in Nisan, but this produced several small

errors that they were unable to reconcile. Unknown to Thiele, all three of these principles had been previously found back in the 1920s by a Belgian scholar.[{16}](#) But Thiele worked out things in a more satisfactory way, and so his *Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* should be the starting place for understanding the chronology of the kingdom period.

Regrettably, however, Thiele did not recognize that a problem he had with the texts of 2 Kings 18 is explained by a co-regency between Ahaz and Hezekiah.[{17}](#) His chronology also needed slight adjustments for the reign of Solomon and for the end of the kingdom period.[{18}](#) In our own studies we have followed the corrections to Thiele published in several articles by Rodger Young.[{19}](#) Young responds to the specious claim that the harmony now evident in the chronology of the kingdom period might be the result of a clever manipulation of the data by those who follow the principles outlined by Thiele. Young answers, "The complexities of 124 exact synchronisms, reign lengths, and dates in 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Jeremiah and Ezekiel negate that possibility unless the data were historically authentic."[{20}](#) With the proper understanding of the methods used by the ancient authors, the chronological data of Kings and Chronicles offer a remarkable testimony to the strict accuracy of the Bible's 400-year history of the two Hebrew kingdoms.

## Notes

1. This article was written by Michael Gleghorn and Rodger Young. Gleghorn's initial inspiration for writing this program resulted from conversations with his wife, who struggled with the "mysterious numbers" in Kings and Chronicles for quite some time before encountering the help provided in the book by Edwin Thiele and, more particularly, the articles of Rodger Young. Mr. Young received a B.A. degree from Reed College, B.A. and M.A. degrees in mathematics from Oxford University, and has done graduate work in theology and biblical languages at the Nazarene Theological Seminary in Kansas City. He

retired from IBM in 2003 and began writing about OT chronology. He and his wife attend the West Overland Bible Church in the St. Louis area.

2. Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, New rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1994).

3. *Ibid.*, 15.

4. Thiele describes this as “nonaccession-year dating” or “antedating”. See Thiele, *Mysterious Numbers*, 231.

5. Thiele terms this “accession-year dating” or “postdating.” See *Ibid.*

6. 1 Kings 15:25.

7. 1 Kings 15:25, 28.

8. 1 Kings 15:27, 33.

9. 1 Kings 16:8.

10. 1 Kings 16:8, 15.

11. 1 Kings 1; 1 Chronicles 23:1.

12. 1 Kings 15:5.

13. 1 Kings 16:23.

14. 1 Kings 16:21-23.

15. For example, James Ussher.

16. Valerius Coucke, “Chronologie des rois de Juda et d’Israël,” *Revue Benedictine* 37 (1925): 325-64; *idem*, “Chronologie biblique” in *Supplément au Dictionnaire de la Bible*, ed. Louis Pirot, vol. 1 (Paris: Librairie Letouzey et Ané, 1928), cols. 1245-79.

17. According to Rodger Young, “Several authors put forth this rather obvious solution, among whom were Kenneth Kitchen and T. C. Mitchell, Siegfried Horn, Harold Stigers, R. K. Harrison, Leslie McFall, and Eugene Merrill.” Of course, we could also add Rodger Young’s name to this list as well. For details see Young, “When Was Samaria Captured? The Need for Precision in Biblical Chronologies,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47, no. 4 (2004): 580.

18. For a one-year correction to Thiele’s dates for Solomon through Athaliah, see Rodger C. Young, “When Did Solomon Die?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 46, no. 4 (2003): 589-603. By showing that the dates of Solomon through

Athaliah must be moved one year earlier than in Thiele's chronology, Young has resolved a problem that Thiele addressed by revisions in the third and final edition of *Mysterious Numbers*, but Thiele's revisions merely moved his problem with the reign of Jehoshaphat to the reign of Athaliah. Among those accepting Young's solution of the problem are Leslie McFall, "The Chronology of Saul and David," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 53, no. 4 (2010): 533 (chart), and Andrew E. Steinmann, *From Abraham to Paul: A Biblical Chronology* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2011), 133-34, 138. Young has also written extensively on why 587 BC, not Thiele's 586 BC, is the correct date for the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. See "When Did Jerusalem Fall?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47, no. 1 (2004): 21-38; "Ezekiel 40:1 as a Corrective for Seven Wrong Ideas in Biblical Interpretation," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 44, no. 2 (2006):267-70.

19. For those who are interested in pursuing these matters further, please see "Rodger Young's Papers on Chronology" here: [www.rcyoung.org/papers.html](http://www.rcyoung.org/papers.html)

20. Rodger C. Young, "Inductive and Deductive Methods as Applied to OT Chronology," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 18, no. 2 (2007): 116.

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