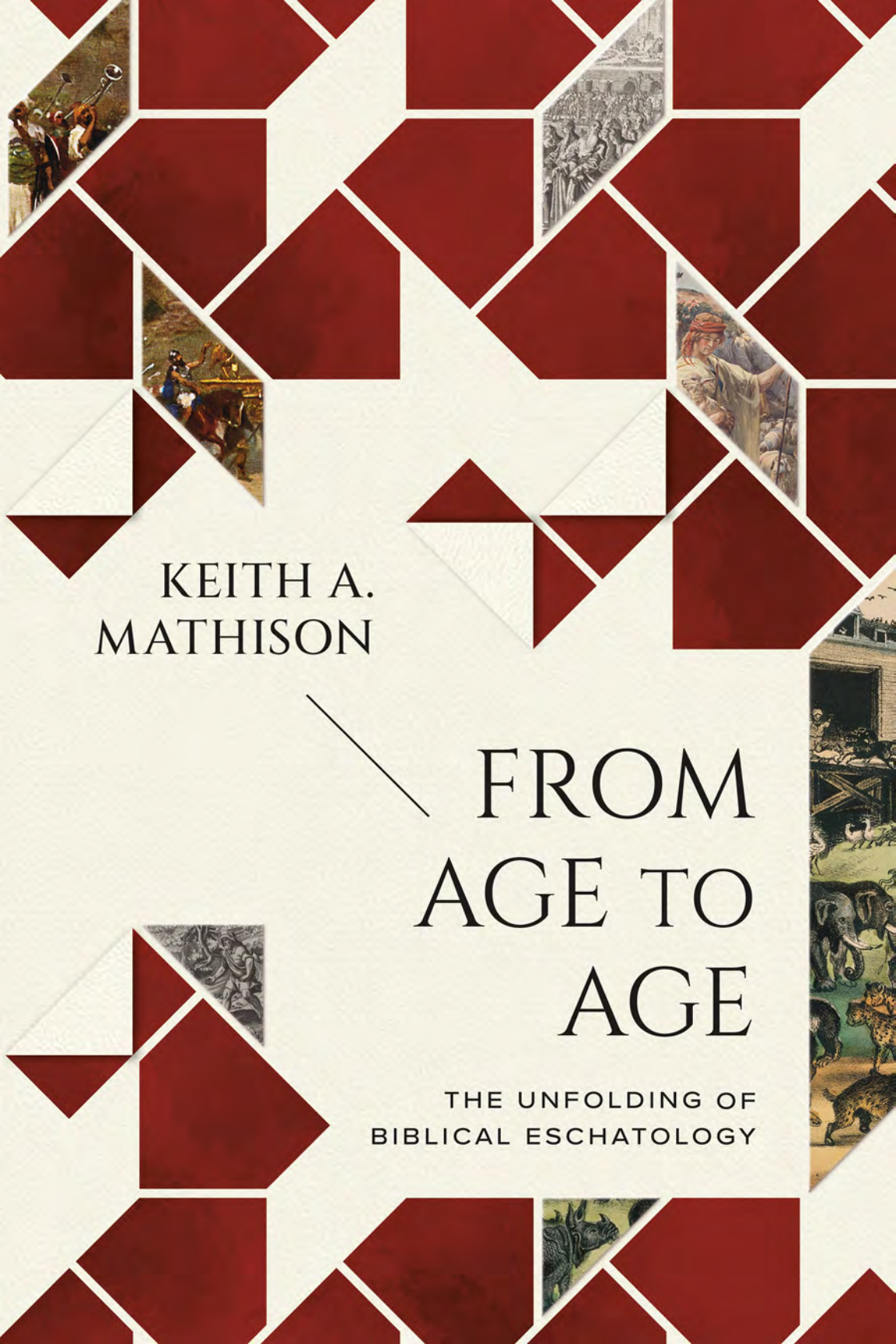




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AGE

THE UNFOLDING OF
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From Age to Age

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The Unfolding of Biblical Eschatology

KEITH A. MATHISON



LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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To
Dr. R.C. Sproul

Contents

Preface to Ligonier Edition	xi
Preface.....	xiii
Abbreviations	xv
Introduction	1

PART ONE: THE OLD TESTAMENT

1	The Pentateuch I: Genesis	17
2	The Pentateuch II: Exodus to Deuteronomy	49
3	The Historical Books	81
4	The Psalms, the Wisdom Books, and the Song of Solomon	117
5	The Eighth-Century Prophets I: Jonah, Amos, Hosea, and Micah...	151
6	The Eighth-Century Prophets II: Isaiah	181
7	The Seventh-Century Prophets: Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Joel, and Jeremiah/Lamentations.	209
8	The Exilic Prophets: Obadiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel	241
9	The Postexilic Prophets: Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi	289
	Excursus: The Intertestamental Period.....	319

PART TWO: THE NEW TESTAMENT

10	The Gospel of Matthew	345
11	The Gospels of Mark and Luke	393
12	The Gospel of John	431
13	The Book of Acts.....	459

14	The Pauline Epistles I: Galatians and Thessalonians	501
15	The Pauline Epistles II: Corinthians and Romans.....	547
16	The Pauline Epistles III: The Prison Epistles and the Pastoral Epistles.....	597
17	The Book of Hebrews and the General Epistles.....	625
18	The Book of Revelation	651
	Conclusion.....	709
	Bibliography	715
	Scripture Index	761
	Subject Index.....	813
	About the Author.....	837

Preface to Ligonier Edition

Several years after J.R.R. Tolkien died, his son Christopher published a collection of works written by his father under the title *Unfinished Tales*. In a strange way, *From Age to Age* is also an “unfinished tale.” Most of those who have read this book since its original publication are not aware that it was intended to be the first part of a larger three-part work. The original goal was a thorough study of the doctrine of the last things (i.e., eschatology). Part one was to be an exegetical study of relevant biblical texts, from Genesis to Revelation. Part two was to be a study of the history of eschatology from the early church to modern times. Part three was to be a constructive systematic explanation of eschatology, discussing both old and new questions.

I completed a rough draft of part one sometime around 2007, but due to several unforeseen circumstances, I was unable to begin work on parts two and three. This forced a reconsideration of what to do with part one. As written, it was not really suitable to be published as a standalone work. Part three, in particular, would have tied some things together that remained incomplete in part one by itself. After some discussion with the editor, we decided that I would do some revisions to the rough draft of part one so that it could be released as a single volume of biblical theology. I did this, and in 2009, part one was published as *From Age to Age*.

I was not unhappy with the result, but the book does not look exactly the way it would have looked had I started with the goal of writing it as a standalone volume. Had I started with that goal, the exegetical work would have remained, but there would have been a more balanced emphasis on tracing the development of the most important biblical-theological themes from Genesis to Revelation. Some of what was intended for part three would have also been

incorporated into a standalone volume. There would have been a more balanced look at the forest in addition to the close look at the trees.

Based on some of the reviews that I have seen over the years, I think a lot of readers have been unsure what to make of the book. Is it a biblical theology book? Is it a survey of the Bible? Is it something else altogether? The puzzled reactions of these readers are due to the fact that they are reading an unfinished tale that was revised after the fact to make it a somewhat “finished” tale. Hopefully, readers will now have more context to help them understand what they are reading and why it is structured the way it is.

To this day, I have not begun work on the originally planned part two and part three. Part of the reason for this is that in order to accomplish my original goal for this project, I would have to begin again with a rewrite of part one before moving to parts two and three. There is simply too much great work that has been done in the field of biblical theology over the last fifteen years by men such as Greg Beale and Michael Morales, and I would want to incorporate the insights of these and other great biblical theologians.

So is there any point in reprinting the existing unrevised work? I may be biased, but I do think that the work, as it stands, may still be of some service to the church. There are so many eschatological debates about how to interpret this or that passage of Scripture. A book that contains exegetical work on most of those passages might still be of use. And although I have come to the conclusion that *amillennialism* and *postmillennialism* are no longer very useful as theological terms, I have not radically changed any of the exegetical conclusions found in *From Age to Age*.

I would be remiss if I did not mention my gratitude to Ligonier Ministries for republishing *From Age to Age* after it went out of print. I have worked for Ligonier Ministries in some capacity for almost thirty years, and Ligonier has always been supportive of my writing. I would also like to thank all of the editors for the incredible work they have done. I worked side by side with them for many years when I was an editor of *Tabletalk* magazine, so I know firsthand their dedication to excellence. *From Age to Age* was originally dedicated to Dr. R.C. Sproul. He died in 2017, and although those of us who remain here miss him, we rejoice that he is in the presence of the Lord he loved and proclaimed. This book remains dedicated to him.

Preface

This is the fifth book I've written with my two index fingers and right thumb. I do take some comfort in the fact that J.R.R. Tolkien typed the successive drafts of his great book *The Lord of the Rings* with only two fingers, but there were times during the composition of my work when I sorely wished I had learned to type. In spite of its slow progress, however, the writing of this book has been a blessing. Every time we prayerfully dig into the Word of God, we are instructed, encouraged, and exhorted, and my own study has been no exception.

Several friends have asked why I have chosen to write another book on the subject of eschatology. This is a fair question that deserves a reasonable response. In the first place, my interest in biblical eschatology began not long after I became a Christian, and it has continued to this day. This book is, first and foremost, the result of this personal interest. The ongoing controversies concerning eschatology are another reason for the writing of this book. When the church has been arguing about a subject for as long as it has been arguing about the subject of eschatology, it can never hurt to go back to the Word of God and see if any fresh insight can be found.

The process of writing this book, although an encouragement and blessing, has not been without challenges. The pathway has included unexpected detours as well as wrong turns and dead ends. I have been forced many times to rethink previous conclusions. Sometimes such rethinking has resulted in the confirming of my convictions. At other times, further reflection has led to the discovery of mistakes in need of correction. I certainly do not consider this book to be the last word on the "last things," or even *my* last word on the last things. It is merely my attempt to contribute to the ongoing theological conversation. It is my sincere hope and prayer that it will be of help to other students of Scripture.

There are a number of people whose help has been invaluable and without whom I could not have finished this project. I would like to thank first of all a man who is my pastor and my mentor, Dr. R.C. Sproul. His ministry

and his example have been a great encouragement and great example to me for many years now, and he has continually encouraged my research and writing. His admonition to teach what the Bible teaches and not what we might want it to teach is one we would all do well to heed. It is for these reasons that I gratefully dedicate this book to him.

There are several others to whom thanks are due. First, I thank Allan Fisher for asking me to begin this daunting project. I'm not sure I would have taken the first step had it not been for his encouragement. I also thank my colleague Chris Donato, who read large portions of the manuscript and who offered many helpful suggestions. Another colleague, Kevin Struyk, saved me countless hours by picking up numerous books and articles at the local seminary. And once again, I owe special thanks to Grace Mullen at the library of Westminster Theological Seminary. I have lost count of the number of bibliographical references she has helped me track down and verify and the number of articles she has located that I could not find anywhere else. I also thank my parents for their encouragement throughout the long process of writing this book. Finally, I thank my wife, Tricia, and my children Sarah and Joseph for bringing so much joy to my life.

A brief word about translation and transliteration is necessary. Unless otherwise noted, I have used the English Standard Version of the Bible throughout this work—with one important exception. Where the ESV translates the Hebrew divine name (*YHWH*) as “LORD,” I translate it consistently as “Yahweh.” Most English versions follow the same practice as the ESV, translating the divine name as “LORD.”¹ I agree with Michael Williams, however, that to translate it in this way obscures the fact that it is God's revealed name, “not a title or an office.”² For the apocryphal books, I have used the New Revised Standard Version. With the exception of occasional instances in quotations from the works of other authors, I have transliterated all Hebrew and Greek words in the body of the text. In the footnotes, I have sometimes provided the Hebrew text in addition to the transliteration.³

1 Very few English versions translate the divine name as a name. *The Darby Bible* (1884/1890) and the American Standard Version (1901) translate the divine name as “Jehovah.” The *New Jerusalem Bible* translates the divine name as “Yahweh.”

2 Williams 2005, 28.

3 For Hebrew transliteration, I have used the general purpose style outlined in the *SBL Handbook of Style* (§5.1.2).

Abbreviations

GENERAL

AD	anno Domini
BC	before Christ
DSS	Dead Sea Scrolls
Gk.	Greek
Heb.	Hebrew
LXX	Septuagint

BIBLE

Old Testament

Gen	Genesis
Exod	Exodus
Lev	Leviticus
Num	Numbers
Deut	Deuteronomy
Josh	Joshua
Judg	Judges
Ruth	Ruth
1 Sam	1 Samuel
2 Sam	2 Samuel
1 Kgs	1 Kings
2 Kgs	2 Kings
1 Chr	1 Chronicles
2 Chr	2 Chronicles
Ezra	Ezra
Neh	Nehemiah
Esth	Esther

FROM AGE TO AGE

Job	Job
Ps/Pss	Psalms
Prov	Proverbs
Eccl	Ecclesiastes
Song	Song of Solomon
Isa	Isaiah
Jer	Jeremiah
Lam	Lamentations
Ezek	Ezekiel
Dan	Daniel
Hos	Hosea
Joel	Joel
Amos	Amos
Obad	Obadiah
Jonah	Jonah
Mic	Micah
Nah	Nahum
Hab	Habakkuk
Zeph	Zephaniah
Hag	Haggai
Zech	Zechariah
Mal	Malachi

New Testament

Matt	Matthew
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
John	John
Acts	Acts
Rom	Romans
1 Cor	1 Corinthians
2 Cor	2 Corinthians
Gal	Galatians
Eph	Ephesians

ABBREVIATIONS

Phil	Philippians
Col	Colossians
1 Thess	1 Thessalonians
2 Thess	2 Thessalonians
1 Tim	1 Timothy
2 Tim	2 Timothy
Titus	Titus
Phlm	Philemon
Heb	Hebrews
Jas	James
1 Pet	1 Peter
2 Pet	2 Peter
1 John	1 John
2 John	2 John
3 John	3 John
Jude	Jude
Rev	Revelation

APOCRYPHA

Bar	Baruch
Pr Azar	Prayer of Azariah
Bel	Bel and the Dragon
Sg Three	Song of the Three Young Men
Sus	Susanna
1 Esd	1 Esdras
Add Esth	Additions to Esther
Ep Jer	Epistle of Jeremiah
Jdt	Judith
1 Macc	1 Maccabees
2 Macc	2 Maccabees
Sir	Sirach/Ecclesiasticus
Tob	Tobit
Wis	Wisdom of Solomon

OLD TESTAMENT PSEUDEPIGRAPHHA

2 Bar.	2 Baruch (Syriac Apocalypse)
3 Bar.	3 Baruch
1 En.	1 Enoch (Ethiopic Apocalypse)
2 Esd.	2 Esdras
Jub.	Jubilees
Pss. Sol.	Psalms of Solomon
Sib. Or.	Sibylline Oracles
T. Benj.	Testament of Benjamin
T. Dan	Testament of Dan
T. Gad	Testament of Gad
T. Iss.	Testament of Issachar
T. Jos.	Testament of Joseph
T. Jud.	Testament of Judah
T. Levi	Testament of Levi
T. Naph.	Testament of Naphtali
T. Reu.	Testament of Reuben
T. Sim.	Testament of Simeon

DEAD SEA SCROLLS

1QM	1Q War Scroll
1QS	1Q Rule of the Community
4Q521	4Q Messianic Apocalypse

JOSEPHUS

<i>Ant.</i>	<i>Antiquities of the Jews</i>
<i>J.W.</i>	<i>Jewish War</i>
<i>Life</i>	<i>The Life of Flavius Josephus</i>

SECONDARY SOURCES

Journals, Periodicals, Major Reference Works, and Series

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	D.N. Freedman (ed.), <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
ACNT	Augsburg Commentaries on the New Testament
AnBib	Analecta Biblica

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ANET</i>	J.B. Pritchard (ed.), <i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts</i>
AOTC	Apollos Old Testament Commentary
<i>APOT</i>	R.H. Charles (ed.), <i>Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament</i>
AUMSR	Andrews University Monograph Studies in Religion
AUSDDS	Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series
<i>AUSS</i>	<i>Andrews University Seminary Studies</i>
BCOTWP	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms
BDAG	F.W. Danker (rev. and ed.), <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament</i>
BDB	F. Brown, S.R. Driver, and C.A. Briggs, <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
BDF	F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and R.W. Funk, <i>A Greek Grammar of the New Testament</i>
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
BIS	Biblical Interpretation Series
BLS	Bible and Literature Series
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentaries
<i>BSac</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
BSC	Bible Student's Commentary
BST	The Bible Speaks Today
<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für altorientalische und biblische
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CC	Continental Commentaries
CCom	Communicator's Commentary
CGTC	Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary
<i>DBI</i>	L. Ryken et al. (eds.), <i>Dictionary of Biblical Imagery</i>
DSB	The Daily Study Bible
<i>DTIB</i>	Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.), <i>Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible</i>
EBC	Expositor's Bible Commentary
ECC	Eerdmans Critical Commentary
<i>EDT</i>	W.A. Elwell (ed.), <i>Evangelical Dictionary of Theology</i>

<i>EvQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
FOTL	The Forms of the Old Testament Literature
GKC	E. Kautzsch (ed.), <i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</i> , trans. A.E. Cowley
<i>GNS</i>	<i>Good News Studies</i>
<i>HALOT</i>	W. Baumgartner et al., <i>Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
HNTC	Harper's New Testament Commentaries
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
<i>IBHS</i>	Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, <i>An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>IDB</i>	G.A. Buttrick (ed.), <i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i>
ILPT	International Library of Philosophy and Theology
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
IRT	Issues in Religion and Theology
<i>ISBE</i>	G.W. Bromiley (ed.), <i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i> (rev. ed.)
ISFCJ	International Studies in Formative Christianity and Judaism
IVPNTC	The IVP New Testament Commentary
<i>JAOS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JNES</i>	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
Joüon	Paul Joüon, <i>A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew</i> , trans. T. Muraoka
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	JSNT Supplement Series
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	JSOT Supplement Series
JSPSup	Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigraph Supplement Series
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LCC	Library of Christian Classics
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LEC	Library of Early Christianity

ABBREVIATIONS

MLBS	Mercer Library of Biblical Studies
MPS	The Master's Perspective Series
NAC	New American Commentary
NCB	New Century Bible
NCBC	New Cambridge Bible Commentary
NIBC	New International Biblical Commentary
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
<i>NIDNTT</i>	Colin Brown (ed.), <i>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</i>
<i>NIDOTTE</i>	W.A. VanGemenen (ed.), <i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i>
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NovTSup	Supplements Novum to Testamentum
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
NTC	New Testament Commentary
NTM	New Testament Monographs
NTP	New Testament Profiles
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
NTTS	New Testament Tools and Studies
OBS	The Oxford Bible Series
OTL	Old Testament Library
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
PTMS	Princeton Theological Monograph Series
<i>SBET</i>	<i>Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology</i>
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLDS	SBL Dissertation Series
SBLMS	SBL Monograph Series
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
SBTS	Sources for Biblical and Theological Study
SHS	The Scripture and Hermeneutics Series
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series

SP	Sacra Pagina
SubBi	Subsidia Biblica
TCGNT	B.M. Metzger, <i>A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament</i>
TDNT	G. Kittel and G. Friedrich (eds.), <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
TDOT	G.J. Botterweck et al. (eds.), <i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>
<i>Them</i>	<i>Themelios</i>
TLOT	E. Jenni and C. Westermann (eds.), <i>Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
<i>TJ</i>	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
TWOT	R.L. Harris et al. (eds.), <i>Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament</i>
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WCS	Welwyn Commentary Series
WEC	Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary
WPC	Westminster Pelican Commentaries
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

Introduction

At various times in her history, different doctrines have been at the center of the church's attention. In the first few centuries after the death and resurrection of Christ, for example, the church struggled mightily to formulate accurately the biblical teaching concerning the Trinity and the person of Christ. The fruit of this struggle is found in the writings of numerous church fathers and in the Nicene Creed and the Definition of Chalcedon. Many centuries later, during the Reformation, soteriology and ecclesiology became the central focus of much of the church's attention. Debates surrounding those doctrines continue to this day. Eschatology, on the other hand, while not ignored in earlier centuries, truly moved to the forefront of the church's attention in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. From the emergence of popular dispensationalism in the late nineteenth century to the influential writings of Schweitzer, Dodd, Moltmann, and others in the twentieth century, it is clear that eschatology has risen to a place of prominence in biblical, theological, and historical studies.

Defining Eschatology

What do we mean when we speak of *eschatology*? The English word is based on a combination of two Greek words: *eschatos* ("last") and *logos* ("word"). Traditionally, eschatology has been defined as the "doctrine of the last things" in relation to both the individual (e.g., death and the intermediate state) and to cosmic history (e.g., the return of Christ, the general resurrection, the final judgment, heaven, and hell).¹ Because of this definition, most studies of eschatology have limited themselves to a discussion of events that have yet to occur—events at the end of the individual's life or events at the end of history.²

1 Hoekema 1979, 1.

2 E.g., Hendriksen 1959; Helm 1989.

Eschatology in a broader sense, however, concerns what Scripture teaches about God's purposes in Christ for history. As such, eschatology does include a study of the consummation of God's purposes at the end of history, but it also includes a study of the stages in the unfolding of those purposes.³ This understanding of eschatology affects the content of this volume in a number of ways. If, for example, the first coming of Christ inaugurated "the last days," then a study of biblical eschatology must include a study of Christ's first advent as well as His second. It must also include a study of God's preparation in history for the eschatological first advent of Christ. In other words, eschatology must involve a redemptive-historical study of the entire Bible. This book is written with this broader understanding of eschatology in mind.

Biblical Theology

The subtitle of this book is *The Unfolding of Biblical Eschatology*. The subtitle indicates something about the basic approach I have taken to the subject under consideration. The inspiration for this approach lies in the works of Reformed biblical theologians such as Geerhardus Vos and Herman Ridderbos.⁴ Following their lead, I have approached the subject of eschatology from the perspective of biblical theology. There are many outstanding works that approach the subject from the perspective of systematic theology, but this book is not one of them.⁵ It is important to note that biblical theology should not be understood as a substitute for systematic theology. Both are necessary. Biblical theology is simply a different, and complementary, approach to the same biblical teaching.

But what exactly is "biblical theology"? Many trace the origins of biblical theology to the inaugural lecture of the theologian Johann Gabler in 1787, in which he distinguished biblical theology from systematic theology.⁶ Gabler, however, was deeply committed to a rationalistic approach to the Bible, so his understanding of biblical theology necessarily differs from the understanding

3 Smalley 1998, 265.

4 See Vos 1948; Vos 1991; Ridderbos 1962.

5 E.g., Hoekema 1979; Venema 2000. Those works that approach the subject from the perspective of systematic theology are organized topically. Each section or chapter will summarize everything the Bible has to say on any given eschatological topic. There will, therefore, be sections or chapters on topics such as death, the second coming, the millennium, and the final judgment.

6 See *DTIB*, 84.

INTRODUCTION

of those who accept Scripture as the inspired Word of God. Some identify biblical theology with the so-called biblical theology movement of the mid-twentieth century. This movement, however, was strongly influenced by neoorthodoxy and accepted the methodology of higher criticism. It ultimately collapsed under the criticisms of Langdon Gilkey and James Barr.

Setting aside these inadequate versions of “biblical theology,” how should we understand it? The Reformed theologian Geerhardus Vos provides a helpful introductory definition. “Biblical Theology,” he writes, “is that branch of Exegetical Theology which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible.”⁷ A helpful expanded definition is provided by Paul Williamson.

Biblical theology is arguably best thought of as a holistic enterprise tracing unfolding theological trajectories throughout Scripture and exploring no biblical concept, theme or book in isolation from the whole. Rather, each concept, theme or book is considered ultimately in terms of how it contributes and advances the Bible’s meta-narrative, typically understood in terms of a salvation history that progresses towards and culminates in Jesus Christ.⁸

When we view biblical theology from this perspective, it could be argued that this approach had its true precursors in the work of the early Reformed covenant theologians, particularly men such as Johannes Cocceius (1603–1669).⁹

Many attempts at biblical theology have failed because of an exclusive focus on the human authors of Scripture. Particular books and/or authors are studied in isolation from the larger biblical context. The Bible is a collection of sixty-six books written by various authors over a vast period of time, but it is also a single book inspired by God.¹⁰ Charles Scobie explains the significance of this fact for our approach to biblical theology.

This means that the individual books and authors are to be studied not only in their original historical contexts, but also in the context of canonical

7 Vos 1948, 5. For a fuller explanation by of the idea of biblical theology by the same author, see Vos 2001, 3–24.

8 Williamson 2007, 17.

9 See Golding 2004, 14–16.

10 Waltke 2007, 10.

Scripture as a whole. This does affect the way books are interpreted; the canonical Bible is more than the sum of the sixty-six books that contains. The OT is read in light of the NT, and vice versa.¹¹

In other words, a biblical theology that takes seriously the divine inspiration of Scripture will be a “whole-Bible biblical theology.”¹²

The fact that there is one ultimate author of the whole Bible also means that it is not futile to seek an underlying unity among the sixty-six books. Numerous biblical theologians have despaired of finding any unifying principle for the Old Testament alone, much less the entire Bible. Gerhard Hasel, for example, says, “It has been demonstrated that any attempt to elaborate an OT theology on the basis of a center, key concept, or focal point inevitably falls short of being a theology of the entire OT, because no such principle of unity has as yet emerged that gives full account of all the material in the Bible.”¹³ This conclusion stems not only from a failure to take into account the Bible’s one ultimate author but also from a failure, ironically, to consider how the different types of books in Scripture are related.

If we look carefully at the content of the biblical books, we notice that some of them present an ongoing redemptive-historical narrative. The Pentateuch and the Historical Books, for example, provide a historical account that proceeds from creation to the restoration of Israel from exile. In the New Testament, the Gospels and Acts function in the same way. These books, which outline redemptive history, form the narrative backbone or framework of the Bible. Other books assume that framework as their context.¹⁴ Most of the Old Testament prophets, for example, wrote their books during the history narrated in 2 Kings. The Apostle Paul wrote most of his epistles during the history narrated in the book of Acts. All of the biblical books that are not historical narrative were written during the times described in that narrative. Many of them interpret the events that are described in that narrative. It is in this historical narrative, this backbone of the Bible, that we see a unifying principle in the history of the outworking of God’s plan to establish His kingdom.

11 Scobie 2003, 74–75.

12 Cf. Hafeman and House 2007, 15.

13 Hasel 1982, 93.

14 Ciampa 2007, 255.

This plan involves His covenants with man and His work of redemption, and it culminates in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Hermeneutical Considerations

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to deal briefly with some basic hermeneutical issues. The term *hermeneutics* is used to refer to “the study of those principles that should guide our work of interpretation.”¹⁵ Hermeneutics has been considered an important issue throughout the history of the church, but it is hardly an exaggeration to say that it is *the* issue in much of the Western church and culture today.¹⁶ Contemporary hermeneutical discussions are often quite sophisticated and complex, and to enter into this larger discussion in detail would require a separate volume of considerable size.¹⁷ However, while a detailed explanation of these issues is beyond the scope of this book, it is necessary at this point to explain briefly some of the factors that influence my interpretation of Scripture.

The Reformed Tradition and Scripture

In the first place, I acknowledge without apology that I approach the interpretation of Scripture as a Christian believer who stands within the Reformed tradition. The word *Reformed* is typically used to distinguish the Calvinistic branch of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation from the Lutheran and Anabaptist branches.¹⁸ The doctrines of the Reformed Protestant churches were most clearly expressed in confessions and catechisms such as the Gallican Confession (1559), the Scots Confession (1560), the Belgic Confession (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Second Helvetic Confession (1564), and the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647).¹⁹ Some of the most important theologians in the history of the Reformed tradition are men such as John Calvin, Francis Turretin, John Owen, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge, Benjamin B. Warfield, Herman Bavinck, and Louis Berkhof.

15 Silva 1996b, 15.

16 See Lundin 1993.

17 For an introduction to some of the many issues involved, see Thiselton 1980; Cotterell and Turner 1989; Thiselton 1992; Silva 1996b; Vanhoozer 1998; Lundin, Walhout, and Thiselton 1999; Osborne 2006.

18 See *EDT*, 921.

19 See Cochrane 2003.

It is important for the readers of this book to understand that I stand within this Reformed confessional tradition. Every reader of this book stands within his or her own basic theological (or a-theological) tradition, be it Reformed, Lutheran, dispensationalist, or something else. These traditions profoundly influence and shape our basic worldview and assumptions, which then affect the way in which we approach theological and biblical questions. In fact, they often dictate the very questions that we ask. In describing myself as a Reformed Christian, I am simply informing the reader as well as consciously reminding myself of the theological tradition within which I stand as I proceed to examine this topic.

Philosophy and Scripture

Even a cursory reading of the history of Christian hermeneutics and theology will quickly reveal the effects philosophical presuppositions have had on biblical interpretation and theological reflection. From the Neoplatonism of certain early church fathers to the nominalism of many late medieval scholastics, from the neo-Kantianism and existentialism of Rudolf Bultmann to the deconstructionism of John Dominic Crossan, philosophical presuppositions are unavoidable. Those who believe they do not have any philosophical presuppositions when they approach Scripture are simply unconscious of them and more easily misled by them.

Those of us who were born in the West in the twentieth century have been raised in a culture whose very way of seeing the world has been shaped by numerous philosophical strands of thought.²⁰ We simply cannot change the fact that we live after Descartes and Hume, after Kant and Hegel, after Marx and Nietzsche, and after Rorty and Derrida. The intellectual world in which we live has been affected in various ways, not only by rationalism and empiricism, but also by pragmatism, naturalism, existentialism, and relativism. We live in an era in which the confident arrogance of modernism is gradually giving way to the skeptical arrogance of postmodernism. These various philosophies affect the way we think about God, man, language, revelation, history, science, ethics, politics, and more. Although we cannot pretend that these various strands of thought have not been part of the very intellectual air

20 Of course, various philosophical strands of thought have also influenced those born in the East.

we breathe, we can make every effort to become self-consciously aware of the ways in which they influence and affect us. Only then are we able to detect these influences in our own thinking and critically examine them.

Certain philosophical strains of thought that arose during the Enlightenment resulted in a fierce anti-supernaturalism that entailed the rejection of the possibility of special revelation. The Bible began to be seen as a merely human book whose teachings should be measured against the ultimate standard of autonomous human reason. The traditional Christian view of revelation, sometimes referred to as the *propositional* view, was then rejected.²¹ In contrast with the modernist view, I affirm that the traditional view of revelation is defensible, and I affirm that God has, in fact, revealed Himself and His will in the Bible.²² I approach Scripture, therefore, as the inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word of the living God.

Because of the nature of scriptural revelation, a word must be said about language. The literature that exists on issues related to this topic is enormous, and it is not possible in this brief space to list every relevant issue, much less discuss each one. It is necessary, however, to mention a few basic issues relevant to the purpose of this section. In the early twentieth century, two of the most significant challenges to the traditional Christian understanding of language were those set forth by logical positivists on the one hand and neoorthodox theologians on the other. Logical positivists attempted to make the case that all religious language is cognitively meaningless because it claims to speak of things that are not empirically verifiable.²³ Neoorthodox theologians raised different questions about the adequacy of human language because of their belief that revelation is essentially a nonpropositional personal encounter with God.²⁴ These challenges to the traditional Christian understanding of language are not at the forefront of the debate today. Logical positivism and the verification principle upon which it rests have repeatedly been shown to be self-referentially incoherent.²⁵ The neoorthodox doctrine of revelation

21 This traditional view is often caricatured as the belief that *all* revelation is propositional or that everything in Scripture is a proposition. For a response to this caricature, see Nash 1982, 44–45.

22 A thorough defense of this basic presupposition is beyond the scope of the present volume. For a defense of the traditional view of revelation, see Nash 1982, 43–54; cf. also Jensen 2002.

23 E.g., Ayer 1952.

24 E.g., Brunner 1946.

25 See Evans 1982, 141–44.

and its claims about the inadequacy of human language, while still popular in many circles, have also been shown to be seriously flawed.²⁶

In the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, deconstructionists such as Jacques Derrida and neopragmatists such as Richard Rorty present the most serious philosophical challenges to a Christian understanding of language. Both Derrida and Rorty reject the idea that we can know whether our language refers to any kind of extralinguistic reality. Derrida rejects what he refers to as logocentrism, “the belief that there is some stable point *outside* language—reason, revelation, Platonic Ideas—from which one can ensure that one’s words, as well as the whole system of distinctions that order our experience, correspond to the world.”²⁷

The neopragmatic philosophy of Richard Rorty has been applied to literary criticism most effectively by Stanley Fish, who argues that meaning is not found in a text or in the intention of an author. Instead, readers produce meaning in the act of reading.²⁸ The views expressed by each of these authors are much more complex and nuanced than can be explained in this short space. Suffice it to say that the philosophies of Derrida, Rorty, and their disciples are incoherent. Despite objections to the contrary, their views inevitably result in a linguistic nihilism that renders pointless both writing and reading.²⁹ Their views are incompatible with a Christian understanding of revelation.

History and Scripture

Questions related to history and biblical interpretation are numerous and important.³⁰ One of the most obvious of these questions concerns the historicity of the events recorded in Scripture. Until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, most within the church simply assumed that the events described in Scripture were historically accurate. The first rumblings of real discontent with the traditional view began to be felt with the rise of philosophical rationalism in the writings of Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz and with the rise of skeptical empiricism, particularly in the work of David Hume. Among those

26 See Jensen 2002; Nash 1982, 35–41; Packer 1980.

27 Vanhoozer 1998, 53 (emphasis in original).

28 See Fish 1980.

29 For an informed critique of both views, see Vanhoozer 1998.

30 See Bartholomew, Evans, Healy, and Rae 2003.

who attempted to formulate a rationalist religion in response to these philosophical movements were the English Deists.³¹

The Deists insisted “that the supernatural cannot be admitted as a factor in history.”³² This fundamental assumption affected many influential scholars. The work of Hermann Reimarus, for example, which was posthumously published by Gotthold Lessing, expressed grave doubts about the historical value of Scripture. The philosophical writings of Immanuel Kant raised doubts about whether it is even humanly possible to discover history as it actually was. His writings contributed to the growing historical skepticism of the age. The influence of Kant’s thought upon biblical studies continued to be felt well into the twentieth century.³³ It continues to be felt even today.

In 1835, David Friedrich Strauss’ *Life of Jesus* was published and proved to be a hugely controversial book that changed the face of biblical scholarship.³⁴ Strauss argued that biblical accounts of the supernatural were instances of “mythical” language.³⁵ His work caused no small controversy both in Germany and England and profoundly influenced numerous scholars in subsequent generations. Rudolf Bultmann, for example, is well-known for his twentieth century project of demythologization.³⁶ Since Strauss’ time, it has become commonplace in critical biblical scholarship to deny the historical nature of much, if not all, of the biblical record. The most well-known contemporary example of this tendency is found in the work of the Jesus Seminar.³⁷

The historical claims of these skeptical critical scholars are based on faulty philosophical assumptions, and they are also based on a failure to deal with the actual evidence. Numerous scholars have addressed the problematic philosophical assumptions of the critics.³⁸ The actual positive evidence confirming the historical accuracy of Scripture has also been dealt with in numerous

31 Brown 1990, 202–7.

32 Brown 1990, 212.

33 See Thiselton 1980, 205–17, for a discussion of the Kantian influence on the work of Rudolf Bultmann.

34 Strauss 1972.

35 See Neill and Wright 1988, 13–20.

36 Bultmann, 1961.

37 See Funk and Hoover 1993; Funk 1998.

38 See, for example, Provan, Long, and Longman 2003, 37, 43–49; Coady 1992; cf. also Plantinga 2003. For a specific critique of the faulty methods and assumptions of the Jesus Seminar, see Wilkins and Moreland 1996; Wright 1999b.

works.³⁹ The “assured results” of skeptical biblical criticism have been demonstrated time and again to be anything but assured.

Exegesis of Scripture

As a Reformed Christian I confess that Scripture, as the inspired and inerrant Word of God, is our sole source of written divine revelation. The fact that Scripture is inspired, however, does not mean that it is written in some mysterious and esoteric heavenly language. It is not an ahistorical document that fell from the sky. The human authors of Scripture were real men who wrote in real human languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) within real historical contexts. What this means is that the proper interpretation of Scripture requires some understanding of the nature of human language in general, the languages of Scripture in particular, and the broader historical context within which the various books were written and received.⁴⁰ In other words, it requires an understanding of both text and context.

Human beings are created in the image of God, and as such have been given the gift of language in order to communicate with their Creator and with one another. John Searle rightly observes that to speak a language—any language—is to engage “in a (highly complex) rule-governed form of behavior.”⁴¹ When those rules are mastered and when language is functioning properly, human beings are able to understand and to be understood. In other words, they are able to communicate through the spoken word and through written texts.

In order to understand any text, one of the first steps that must be taken is to determine its genre.⁴² Since language is governed by certain rules, and since many of those rules depend on genre, it is important to understand what *kind* of communicative act is taking place in a given text.⁴³ The importance of understanding the genre of a particular communicative act may be illustrated by reference to the *War of the Worlds* panic in 1938. When Orson Welles began

39 E.g., Kitchen 2003; Bruce 1981; Blomberg 1987; Evans 1996.

40 For helpful introductions to Old and New Testament exegesis, see Stuart 2001; Bock and Fanning 2006; cf. also Carson 1996.

41 Searle 1969, 12.

42 As Hirsch (1967, 76) explains, “All understanding of verbal meaning is necessarily genre-bound.”

43 Questions of genre are closely related to the kinds of issues discussed in various works on speech act theory (e.g., Austin 1962; Searle 1969; Searle 1979).

reading a dramatic adaptation of H.G. Wells' story over the radio, many listeners mistook one genre (drama) for another (a factual news report) and thus believed that Martians were invading the earth. Those who panicked that night understood the meaning of the individual words and sentences. They understood the grammar and syntax. But that was not sufficient. Because they failed to recognize the correct genre, they completely misinterpreted what they were hearing. The same kinds of problems can occur when the text of Scripture is being interpreted. If poetry is interpreted as historical narrative, for example, or if historical narrative is interpreted as parable, misunderstanding is inevitable.

In order to determine the genre of a text, both the text itself as well as certain contextual factors must be taken into consideration. Vanhoozer helpfully defines context as "the various factors one has to take into consideration together with the text in order to understand the author's intention."⁴⁴ The context can help us to determine, for example, whether a particular biblical author is speaking literally or figuratively. If the context indicates that the author is writing poetry, there is a strong likelihood that figurative language will be used.

Canonical and historical contexts are also important in the task of exegesis. If the Bible as a whole is understood to be a complete and unified text communicated by God, then the various books of the Bible cannot be fully understood as merely self-contained individual texts. They must be understood within the context of the whole Bible. Individual texts must also be interpreted within their historical context. As an example, it is important to know whether a particular Old Testament prophecy was written before, during, or after the exile.

The building blocks of larger texts are words and sentences. An understanding of both the smaller building blocks as well as the larger contexts is necessary for proper interpretation. In fact, to understand one requires an understanding of the other. As Anthony Thiselton explains, "Understanding a whole stretch of language or literature depends on an understanding of its component parts, while an understanding of these smaller units depends, in turn, on an understanding of the total import of the whole."⁴⁵ The interpreter, then, must continually move from one to the other.

⁴⁴ Vanhoozer 1998, 250.

⁴⁵ Thiselton 1980, 104.

The purpose and role of individual words in the actual use of language has often been misunderstood with negative exegetical results.⁴⁶ It is important to observe, for example, that the basic unit of linguistic meaning is the text as a whole taken in its broader context. The basic unit of meaning is not the individual word taken in isolation.⁴⁷ Most individual words are polysemous; that is, they have a range of possible meanings.⁴⁸ Which of those possible meanings is the specific meaning of a word is only determined by the use of that word in a particular sentence.⁴⁹ It must also be remembered, however, that the meaning of an individual sentence can also depend on its context.⁵⁰ In short, proper exegesis requires a careful examination of the details (e.g., vocabulary, grammatical and syntactical issues) as well as the larger picture (e.g., genre, historical context).

Two final issues that must be addressed concern the necessity of faith for proper interpretation and the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. According to some authors, such as Moisés Silva, “A right relationship with its divine author is the most fundamental prerequisite for proper biblical interpretation.”⁵¹ This statement is supported by biblical passages such as 2 Corinthians 3:14–16 and 4:4, which seem to presuppose the necessity of faith for proper understanding. Other passages of Scripture, however, seem to have been written for the purpose of producing faith (cf. John 20:31).

Because Scripture is to be interpreted in and by the community of faith, faith is a necessary prerequisite for a full and proper interpretation of Scripture as a whole. However, this does not mean that an unbeliever is unable to understand anything in Scripture. Both the believer and the unbeliever

46 See Carson 1996, 27–64.

47 Vanhoozer 1998, 310–11.

48 A cursory glance at the entries in any substantive dictionary will reveal the truth of this statement. The English word *round*, for example, has some seventy distinct meanings listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

49 The meaning of the word *board*, for example, depends on whether we are speaking of the materials found in a carpenter’s shop, a company’s group of managing directors, or the act of getting on a bus, train, ship, or airplane.

50 The sentence “I saw her duck” can mean either “I saw her duck her head” or “I saw a duck that belongs to her.” The context will determine the precise meaning. The meaning of the sentence “Students hate annoying professors” depends on whether the word *annoying* is being used as a verb or an adjective. Only the context will reveal the intended meaning. The potential ambiguity of sentences has often been used to humorous effect. Many are familiar with Groucho Marx’s one-liner: “I once shot an elephant in my pajamas.” The ambiguity is revealed in the punch line: “How he got in my pajamas, I’ll never know.”

51 Silva 1996b, 15.

can understand the basic propositional content of a given biblical text. They are both able to use the available linguistic tools to gain an understanding of Hebrew and Greek vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. They are both able to study the historical context and determine the genre of a text. However, to use a term coined by the speech act theorists, the text has a different “illocutionary effect” on the believer than it has on the unbeliever.

Here an illustration may prove helpful. Imagine that you move into an old home and find a dusty box of letters in the attic. In the box, you find a love letter written by a Mr. Jones to a Mrs. Jones in 1858. You can read the letter and understand the propositional content in the same way that Mrs. Jones was able to understand the propositional content in 1858. But the force and effect of the letter is different for you because it was not directly addressed to you. Something similar occurs when an unbeliever interprets Scripture. The unbeliever can understand the propositional content, but the unbeliever does not believe that God is the author of the text, and he certainly does not believe that the text is directed in any way to him.⁵²

The illuminating work of the Holy Spirit is also necessary for a full and proper interpretation of Scripture. The Spirit was sent to teach the church (John 14:26) and to guide the church into all truth (John 16:13). The Spirit is given in order that believers might know and understand (1 Cor 2:12). As the one who inspired the Scriptures, the Spirit is also the one who reveals its full meaning to the people of God. The illumination of the Spirit should not, however, be understood as an alternative to careful exegetical study. We should not expect the Spirit to reward intellectual laziness by providing grammatical, syntactical, and contextual information that we have failed to learn. Because the illuminating work of the Spirit is both necessary and mysterious, those who would interpret the Word of God rightly must be in prayerful communion with God.

Structure and Approach

The contents of this book follow a generally canonical order, with two exceptions. First, in the chapters dealing with the Old Testament prophetic books, the individual books are dealt with in chronological order. This allows us to

52 Thiselton 1992, 598.

see the messages of the various prophets within the broader narrative context of redemptive history, as both Israel and Judah spiraled down toward exile. Second, in the chapters dealing with the Pauline epistles, the individual epistles are also dealt with in chronological order. Again, this allows us to see the epistles more clearly against their narrative background in the book of Acts.

The approach I have taken throughout the book can be described as a “narrative method,” a method that traces “the theological development of the ideas in a book.”⁵³ Osborne explains well the strengths and weaknesses of such an approach: “This [method] has enormous value in helping students see how themes emerged and intertwined in the development of the book, but it can often degenerate into a glorified survey of the contents of the book.”⁵⁴ In one sense, this is a weakness. However, when examining a theme, such as eschatology, it can be beneficial to survey the contents of the biblical books, emphasizing where and how each book develops this theme.

I have, however, attempted to alleviate this problem to some degree by adapting the approach somewhat. If we compare the content of Scripture to a pathway through a large forest, the bulk of each chapter consists of a more or less detailed look at the “trees” on a particular section of the path. Throughout the bulk of each chapter, we are using a zoom lens, as it were, looking at the specific eschatological themes as they are developed in individual books. At the end of each chapter, however, we pull back with a wide-angle lens to get a broader perspective of where we are in terms of the big picture of the biblical narrative. The reader will gain the most benefit from this approach if he or she prayerfully reads the relevant section of Scripture before our discussion of it.

⁵³ Osborne 2006, 369.

⁵⁴ Osborne 2006, 369.

Part One

THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Pentateuch I

Genesis

Most people, when reading a book, do not begin with the final chapter. In fact, the contents of a book's final chapter will usually make little sense if the reader does not know what has preceded it. Many Christians, however, in their desire to understand what the Bible teaches about the last days, begin by turning to the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation is certainly important for an understanding of the outworking of God's redemptive work in history, but the book of Revelation is, so to speak, the final chapter. In order to understand biblical eschatology, we must understand the entire Bible. It is true that biblical eschatology focuses on the end of redemptive history, but the end of that history can only be understood within the context of the whole of that history. The redemptive events described in the New Testament are the fulfillment of the promises found in the Old Testament. These ancient promises go back to the very beginning, to the five books of Moses.

The Pentateuch in Context

Christians and others have used the term *Pentateuch* since at least the third century to refer to the first five books of the Bible. In Jewish tradition, however, these books are usually referred to as the Torah and are the first section of the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible.¹ The overarching genre of the Pentateuch

¹ Alexander 2002, 3.

is historical narrative, but it also contains other genres such as law and poetry. The historical narrative of the Pentateuch, like that of the other historical books of the Old Testament, may best be described as “theological history.” In other words, the Pentateuch is a historical account written for a specific purpose—namely, to reveal the nature of Israel’s God.²

The books of the Pentateuch themselves nowhere indicate the name of their author, but the New Testament and Jewish tradition both attribute authorship to Moses (cf. Matt 19:7; 22:24; Mark 7:10; 12:26; John 1:17; 5:46; 7:23).³ In the nineteenth century, this traditional understanding of the authorship of the Pentateuch was challenged with the rise of the documentary hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, the Pentateuch is composed of four distinct sources: the Yahwist source (J), the Elohist source (E), Deuteronomy (D), and the Priestly source (P). These sources were gradually combined and edited, eventually resulting in the final form of the Pentateuch in approximately the fifth century BC. It is well beyond the scope of this work to provide a critique of the documentary hypothesis.⁴ Suffice it to say, however, that while more conservative scholars have always rejected the hypothesis, critical scholars are now reevaluating it as well. The literary unity of the Pentateuch is now much more widely acknowledged.⁵

Among those who accept not only literary unity but also Mosaic authorship for the Pentateuch, there is a general consensus regarding its original audience and the historical occasion for its writing. These five books were written and originally addressed to the people of Israel during that time in their history following the exodus from Egypt when they were on the plains of Moab, east of the Jordan River preparing to enter the promised land.⁶ Moses, their leader since the exodus from Egypt, would not be entering the land with them (cf. Num 20:12). But because he knew what his people needed, he composed the Pentateuch. Within these five books, Moses explains to the people

2 Dillard and Longman 1994, 64.

3 Both Jewish and Christian scholars have also acknowledged that some later minor editing occurred.

4 For a traditional conservative Christian critique of the documentary hypothesis, see Allis 1949; cf. also Harrison 1969, 1–82. For a helpful Jewish critique, see Cassuto 1961. For more recent studies, see Kikawada and Quinn 1985; Wenham 1988; Garrett 1991; and Whybray 1994.

5 Reevaluation of the documentary hypothesis by critical scholars, however, has not led to their acceptance of Mosaic authorship.

6 Sailhamer 1992, 5–6.

of Israel who they are, why God brought them out of Egypt, and what God expected of them in terms of His covenant with them. The Pentateuch, then, was originally addressed to a specific people (Israel) within a specific historical context (the eve of their conquest of Canaan).

For the sake of convenience, it is helpful to deal with each of the five books of Moses as separate documents. It should be noted, however, that the five books of the Pentateuch are in actuality a unified literary entity. As T.D. Alexander observes, the later books of the Pentateuch presuppose knowledge of the earlier books, while the earlier books are incomplete without the later ones.⁷ In addition, the Pentateuch as a whole has a distinct thematic connection with the books of Joshua to 2 Kings. As we look at the individual books and the smaller sections within each of these books, this larger literary context must always be kept in mind.

Genesis

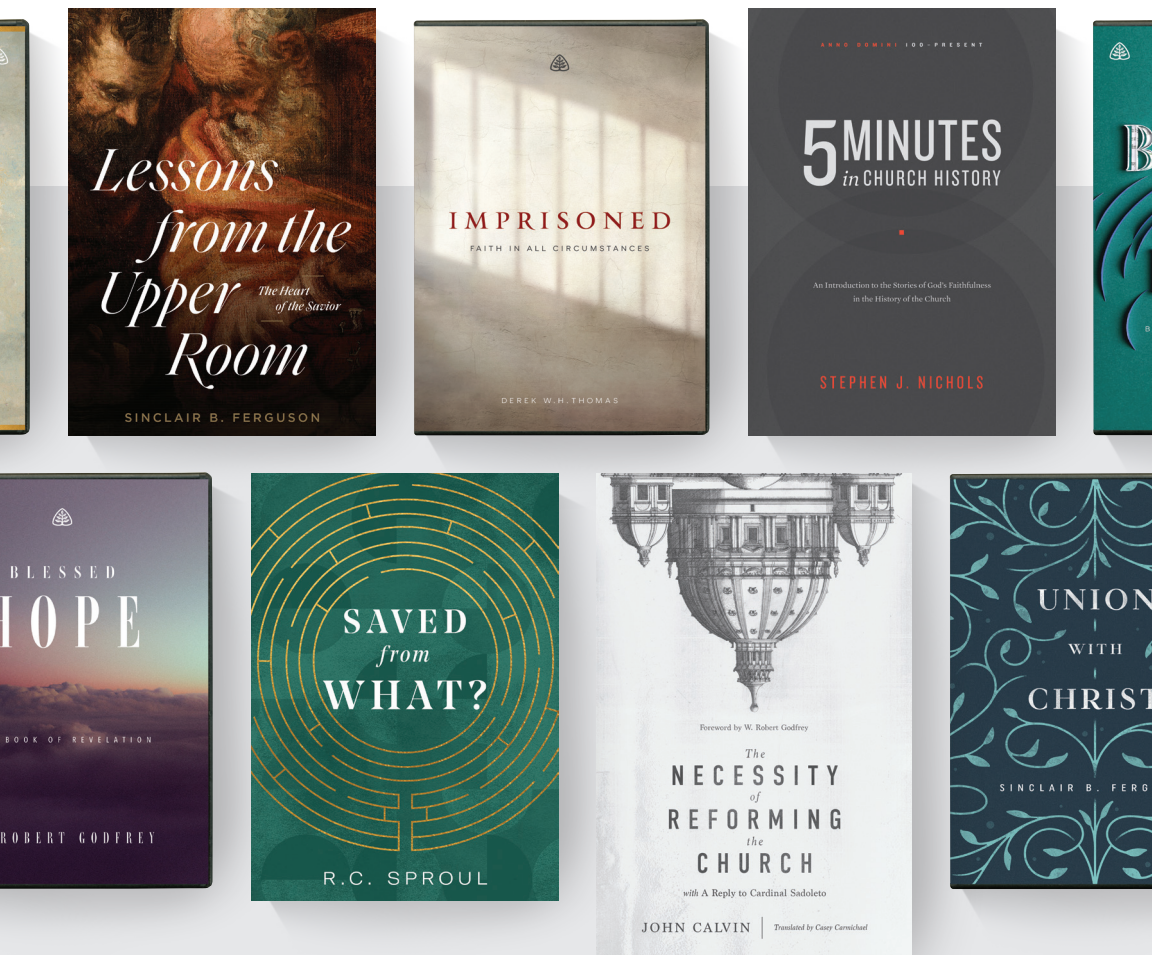
The book of Genesis may be divided into two major sections: the primeval history (1:1–11:26) and the patriarchal history (11:27–50:26). Within this broad outline there exists a distinctive literary structure. Following a brief prologue (1:1–2:3), the book is divided into ten sections of varying length that are indicated and introduced by variations of the phrase “These are the generations [*toledot*] of . . .” (cf. 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1; 37:2). Some of the *toledot* headings introduce extended historical narratives, while others introduce genealogies.

The Primeval History (Gen 1:1–11:26)

Of the fifty chapters of Genesis, the first eleven narrate what is often referred to as “the primeval history.” These chapters recount history from creation to the time of Abram’s call. The amount of space the author devotes to the primeval history (eleven chapters) compared to the amount of space he devotes to the patriarchal history (thirty-nine chapters) indicates that the primeval history is essentially introductory and preparatory. The patriarchal narratives are the author’s primary interest. The first eleven chapters of Genesis place the patriarchs in a broader creational context. They reveal, as Gordon Wenham

7 Alexander 2002, xvn3.

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