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From the Editor's Desk

Dear Readers,

We are happy to announce that we would like to include book reviews for the coming issues of the JMAT. I like to invite you to consider serving as a book reviewer.

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Thank you for considering this opportunity to contribute to the ongoing scholarly and ministerial conversation through the *Journal of Ministry and Theology*. Joel and I would be grateful for your participation and look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Mark McGinniss, Ph.D.
Lead Editor

What is the Meaning of ‘All Nations, Tribes, Peoples, and Tongues’ in Revelation 7:9?

Paul Scharf

Key Words: nations, tribes, peoples, tongues, Revelation

Introduction

When Christ removes His church from the earth by means of the pretribulational rapture, its active witness will be finished. It will certainly leave behind a wealth of print, audio, video and online resources, but there will be no one alive with the understanding or skill to guide unbelievers specifically into the knowledge of salvation. Yet God, in His grace, will still provide amazing opportunities for many, many people to respond to the gospel—even in that time of tribulation, and in the midst of extreme circumstances—through the ministries of some incredibly special witnesses.

At first—perhaps soon after the rapture—there will be just two of them. The ministry of these “two witnesses” (Rev. 11:3) is described by John in Rev. 11:3-12.¹ Probably the most common understanding among dispensationalists is that the two witnesses will be Moses and Elijah (cf. Mal. 4:4-6; Matt. 17:1-13)—resuscitated from death to succeed where they once failed, and to undertake the glorious second aspect of their earthly ministries (cf. John 11:43-44).² Thus, they will appear *supernaturally*.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982). Scripture quotations marked ESV are from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001).

² Alva J. McClain, writing about the two witnesses, stated: “The effect of their testimony is very impressive, appearing very early in the

In Revelation 7, the Apostle John introduces the readers of Revelation to 144,000 additional Israelite witnesses. Their story is told in Rev. 7:2-8, as well as Rev. 14:1-5. These will be young Jewish men who will have grown up in the normal fashion—but missed the rapture as unbelievers. Thus, they will appear *naturally*, in their non-glorified human bodies, and will ultimately become the “firstfruits” of the saved and restored nation of Israel (Rev. 14:4; cf. Isa. 4:3; Zech. 13:8-9; Rom. 11:26).

By implication from the text, the assertion in this paper is that the two witnesses will identify, evangelize, train, and commission these 144,000 witnesses—12,000 from each of the 12 tribes of Israel.³ Furthermore, it is this writer’s understanding that these events will transpire during the first half of the tribulation. By further implication, it appears from Rev. 7:9-17 that John is forming a logical connection between the worldwide outreach of these 144,000 witnesses and, presumably, their evangelization of a global congregation that responds to the proclamation of the “gospel of the kingdom” (Matt. 24:14).⁴ As Pentecost stated:

Book of Revelation and probably accounting for the martyrs seen under the fifth seal (6:9). In chapter 7 the effect greatly expands, including 144,000 Israelites (vss. 3-8), and also ‘a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations’ (vss. 9-14).” *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1974), 458.

³ This list of 12 tribes is unique among the many listings of the tribes found throughout the Old and New Testaments (this also being the final one in the canon). Including Joseph and his sons Manasseh and Ephraim, there is a total of 14 tribal names from which to select to comprise a list of 12. Notable for its exclusion here is the tribe of Dan. On the basis of Jacob’s prophecy in Gen. 49:16-17, some have conjectured that the tribe of Dan will produce the antichrist. This reasoning is questionable, however, because Dan is indeed included in the list of tribes that will inherit land in the millennial kingdom (see Ezek. 48:1, 2, 32).

⁴ Tim LaHaye (whose view will be discussed further later in this paper) is perhaps the most famous advocate of the scenario presented here. He wrote: “These witnesses will harvest a multitude which no man

can number according to Revelation 7:9. This would indicate ... that the early days of the Tribulation will experience the greatest revival in world history." Tim LaHaye, *Revelation—Illustrated and Made Plain*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 196. David Larsen was thinking in the same vein when he wrote: "Revelation 11 describes how the 144,000 are converted, and with their conversion a great multitude of Gentiles comes to Christ during the Tribulation. The Tribulation period is a time of salvation, as every period must be, because of our great God's gracious and loving plan of salvation. He wants people to be saved!" David L. Larsen, *Jews, Gentiles, and the Church: A New Perspective on History and Prophecy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers, 1995), 294. Andy Woods agrees, saying: "In the first part of the chapter people are numbered, 144,000, 12,000 from each tribe. The group in the second part of the chapter they're innumerable, you can't number them. The group in the first part of the chapter are Hebrews; the group in the second part of the chapter come from all the nations. The group in the first part of the chapter are sealed by God; this second group though, as we'll see today, is slain and many of them suffer martyrdom. The first group is sealed before the tribulation period or at least towards the beginning of it. The second group, as I'll show you, is converted out of the coming tribulation period. You sort of get the idea here of cause and effect. The cause is the first part of the chapter, the effect is in the second part of the chapter which explains to a large extent why these evangelists are Jews, Hebrews, coming from the twelve tribes. They are fulfilling, in essence, God's purpose for the nation of Israel." Andy Woods; "So Great a Salvation (Revelation 7:9-17)"; *Spirit and Truth*, last modified 13 January 2019; https://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Revelation_by_Andy_Woods/026_Revelation_7_9-17/20190113_026_revelation_7_9-17_transcript.html?x=x. The highly respected commentator Robert Thomas took a different view, writing regarding the words, "After these things I looked," at the beginning of Rev. 7:9. He stated: "It is not a connective phrase advancing what John has just seen by way of a causal connection, i.e., the fruit of the ministry of the 144,000 being the Gentile multitude of the second vision. Conditions depicted in the two visions appear to be simultaneous rather than consecutive." See Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1992), 483.

... 144,000 set apart from the tribes of Israel ... evidently will be brought to faith in Messiah the same way Saul of Tarsus was brought to faith in Christ on the Damascus road. They will be given a revelation of the person of Christ and they, like Saul, will be set apart to be God's messengers to the Gentiles. The result of their ministry will be that "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language" (v. 9) will "[wash] their robes and [make] them white in the blood of the Lamb" (v. 14).⁵

As Ice states: "I believe Scripture indicates that millions of people will be saved during the Tribulation. We see, in Revelation 7:9, a report of what are the apparent results of the evangelistic efforts of the 144,000 Jewish witnesses."⁶ Fruchtenbaum concurs, stating:

The expression "after these things" means that the salvation of these myriads of Gentiles follows chronologically the 144,000 Jews, and there is a cause and effect relationship. After describing the worship of the One on the throne (vv. 11-12), the text proceeds to identify who these Gentiles are that are found around the throne (vv. 13-14). They have come out of the great tribulation. ... Since they follow chronologically the ministry of the 144,000 Jews, the implication is that they are the Gentiles who come to Messiah as a result of the preaching of these people.⁷

5] Dwight Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1995), 252. Pentecost also reinforced the basic prophetic arrangement presented in this paper in *Things to Come*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), 237-238.

⁶ Thomas Ice; "Salvation in the Tribulation: Revisited," *Rapture Ready*, last modified 1 March 2017; <https://www.raptureready.com/2010/07/09/salvation-in-the-tribulation-revisited-by-thomas-ice/>.

⁷ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events*, rev. 6th ed. (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2023), 228.

It is important, from this writer's perspective, to place these events during the first three-and-a-half years of the tribulation—before the critical events at the midpoint that are described at such great length in Revelation 12 and 13, when the Antichrist rises to assume worldwide control.⁸ Hindson reinforced the point that the multitude is certainly not saved before the tribulation when he stated: “The fact that one of the elders (representing the Church) asks who they are (7:13) implies they are not Church Age saints.”⁹ Levy writes:

... it is possible that the *sheep people* (saved Gentiles), who come to the Lord during the Tribulation, will do so through the witness of Jewish people (the 144,000) who are scattered worldwide because of persecution by the Antichrist. These saved Gentiles will have housed, clothed, fed, visited in prison, and provided medical care to the Lord's brethren (Jews) during the Tribulation ([Mt. 25:31, 35–40](#)) and will have heard of their salvation.¹⁰

⁸ Whitcomb stated: “... the basically regenerated nation, called ‘the woman’ in Rev. 12, will flee into the wilderness and be nourished by God for 1,260 days (Rev. 12:6, 14; cf. Isaiah 26:20-21), namely, the last half of the week. ‘The dragon,’ Satan, will then ‘make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ’ (12:17), presumably the 144,000 witnesses from the 12 tribes of Israel and multitudes of their Gentile converts. .” John Whitcomb, “The Two Witnesses: First of Second Half of the Tribulation,” Pre-Trib Research Center, accessed 31 August 2025, <https://pretrib.org/pretribfiles/pdfs/WitcombTheTwoWitnessesFirstOrSecoNdHalfOfTheTribulation.pdf>.

⁹ Edward Hindson, *The Book of Revelation: Unlocking the Future*, in Twenty-First Century Biblical Commentary Series, vol. 12, ed. Mal Couch and Ed Hindson (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2002), 91. This, of course, presumes that the elders represent church-age saints in Rev. 4:4, 10; 5:5, 6, 8, 11, 14; 7:11, 13; 11:16; 14:3; and 19:4.

¹⁰ David M. Levy, *Revelation: Hearing the Last Word* (Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc., 1999), 101.

This “great multitude,” then, is comprised of people from “all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues” (Rev. 7:9). Here is the key phrase which this paper will examine. It is actually found, in various forms, seven times throughout the book—in a slightly different format in each occurrence.

The thing that makes this collection of people so unique and intriguing is that John tells us, in fact, that this is a group “which no one could number.” Based on the text in Rev. 9:16, this must certainly be more than “two hundred million” in number—perhaps well beyond a billion people. Fruchtenbaum therefore pronounces this “a worldwide revival.”¹¹

Assuming that the inferences presented above are valid, this whole scenario raises a number of questions which we must consider, such as:

- What is the significance of the four descriptive words in this phrase?
- Why does this phrase appear differently in each usage in Revelation?
- Is this a description of Gentiles, or of the tribes of Israel?
- How does this phrase relate to John’s concept of *earth-dwellers*?
- How does this phrase relate to Jesus’ words in the Olivet Discourse?
- How does this phrase relate to Daniel’s vision of “all peoples, nations, and languages” (Dan. 7:14) in the future kingdom of Christ?

This paper will strive to answer these questions in such a way as to uncover the significance of this oft-neglected and sometimes abused text Rev. 7:9.

¹¹ Fruchtenbaum, 228.

What Is the Significance of the Four Descriptive Words in This Phrase?

As we consider Rev. 7:9, as well as the other texts where John utilizes a similar descriptive phrase, we wonder why he selected these four words—even as he employed them somewhat differently in each case. Are there any clues in any of these uses, or any of their contexts, that shed light on the particular meaning or significance of this combination of words?

The terms themselves are somewhat straightforward. *Nations*, biblically, are traced back to the so-called *Table of Nations* in Genesis 10, which forms a point of reference to be used throughout Scripture into the prophetic future, regarding the identity of nations from God's perspective. *Tribes* would appear to be defined broadly by its first usage in the book of Revelation, in Rev. 1:7, where it refers to "all the tribes of the earth," and John uses it in both Jewish and universal contexts. *Peoples* seems to be self-explanatory, understood as the various people groups that trace their origins back, ultimately, to the scattering from the Tower of Babel in Gen. 11:1-9.¹² *Tongues*, like people groups, are traced to Babel (Gen. 11:7-9)—and will continue to exist until the day when the Lord "will restore to the peoples a pure language" (Zeph. 3:9). Lenski stated eloquently regarding Rev. 7:9:

This multitude is gathered from over all the world ... no matter what sort of division is applied, that of nations bound by their customs and laws, that of tribes bound by blood ties, that of peoples as organized masses, that of tongues as the tie of language.¹³

Kistemaker offers the following comment related to the four basic terms, as found in Rev. 5:9, where the phrase first appears:

¹² The writer intentionally refrains from using the term *race*, which is not a biblical concept (cf. Acts 17:26).

¹³ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Revelation* (Columbus, OH: The Wartburg Press, 1943), 255.

The word *tribe* conveys the meaning of physical ties and descent, while the term *language* has a much broader connotation and points to linguistic communication. The word that I have translated as *people* relates to an ethnic group of common descent; and the expression *nation* refers to a political entity with distinct geographic boundaries. But because of the frequent appearance of these four categories in Revelation, it is better to interpret them as an all-encompassing idiom.¹⁴

Smith's commentary on Rev. 7:9 is also insightful. He stated:

The four groups mentioned constitute the world population. Four is the world number. The word *kindred* is the word usually translated *tribe*; hence when these groups are mentioned, Jews are not excluded, for they are frequently referred to under tribe.¹⁵

Thus, the words in and of themselves are not unusual, or technical, and do not convey any deep significance. Strung together, they form the outline of a worldwide populace that may be swayed toward either good or evil purposes. In the text at hand, however, the descriptor is especially meant to convey the magnitude of this enormous group of people—"a great multitude which no one could number" (Rev. 7:9).

Why Does This Phrase Appear Differently in Each Usage in Revelation?

Variations of the phrase found in Rev. 7:9 appear seven times in the book of Revelation. The first—a truly positive reference—describes church age saints in heaven and is found in 5:9. It designates them as being from "every tribe and tongue and

¹⁴ Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 211. Kistemaker notes in his footnote: "Apparently, John uses the phraseology of Daniel 3:4 (Old Greek and Theod.), 'nations and lands, languages and tribes.'"

¹⁵ J.B. Smith, *A Commentary on the Book of Revelation: A Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1961), 134.

people and nation.” This surely informs us regarding the nature of the church today, since it will have this appearance in retrospect—even following the glorification of all believers (cf. 1 John 3:2), when they are seen in heaven. The next reference, our main passage in this paper, is also positive, speaking of the evangelism of tribulation saints, which will be accomplished by the 144,000 witnesses (Rev. 7:2-8), under the direction of the two witnesses. Rev. 7:9 states that these believers come from “all nations, tribes, peoples and tongues.”

The third reference occurs in Rev. 10:11. It is neutral—simply outlining those regarding whom John would yet “prophesy” as including “many peoples, nations, tongues, and kings” (note the change in the last term). The fourth citation is entirely negative—referencing those *earth-dwellers* who “rejoice over” (11:10) the death and desecration of the bodies of the two witnesses. These come “from the peoples, tribes, tongues, and nations” (11:9). Green called them, “People of every ethnicity....”¹⁶ Ironside wrote, “We see the whole apostate world – Christendom and Judaism alike – congratulating one another....”¹⁷

Rev. 13:7 offers another negative reference, related to those who are under the “authority” of the antichrist. They are, again, from “every tribe, tongue and nation.” Note that there is a textual variant here. The ESV reflects the critical Greek text—and the Majority text—when it states: “every tribe and people and language and nation.”¹⁸

Pentecost writes about this passage:

... Antichrist will be given political power over all the earth (v. 7). By establishing a one-world government, he will imitate

¹⁶ Daniel Green, “Revelation,” in *The Moody Bible Commentary*, ed. Michael Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014), 2014.

¹⁷ H. A. Ironside, *Lectures on the Book of Revelation* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1920), 194.

¹⁸ See the textual footnote in the NKJV.

the worldwide authority that will belong to Jesus Christ in His kingdom.... Further, he will introduce a one-world religion ... which will be an imitation of that authority which Jesus Christ will exercise as King-Priest when He reigns.¹⁹

An angelic gospel presentation is the basis for the sixth usage in Rev. 14:6, which uses the phrase “every nation, tribe, tongue, and people” to speak of the universal nature of this proclamation.

Finally, in 17:15, John once again changes one of these terms when he writes about those under the grip of the Babylonian system, calling them “peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues.” He replaces “tribe” with “multitude” in this reference. LaHaye said of this passage, “This can only mean a one-world religious system.”²⁰ Comparing the references in color-coded chart form, they display as follows:

5:9	tribe	tongue	people	nation
7:9 ²¹	nations	tribes	peoples	tongues
10:11	peoples	nations	tongues	kings
11:9	peoples	tribes	tongues	nations
13:7	tribe	people ²²	tongue	nation
14:6	nation	tribe	tongue	people

¹⁹ *Thy Kingdom Come*, 303.

²⁰ *Revelation—Illustrated and Made Plain*, 234.

²¹ In Greek, “nations” is singular in this verse, while the other three terms are plural. Fanning notes: “The Greek wording for this phrase shifts from an initial singular (‘every nation’) to a series of plurals (‘and tribes and peoples and tongues’) but the universal sense of the ‘every’ carries over to all of the nouns by agreement according to sense... .” Buist M. Fanning, *Revelation*, in *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Clinton E Arnold (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 267.

²² “People” is taken from the ESV. See the textual footnote in the NKJV.

17:15	peoples	multitudes	nations	tongues
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Here are some observations about this chart:

- 1) No two of the word lists are identical. John never uses the same word order twice in presenting these categories. Smith provided a rationale for these differences in his commentary on Rev. 11:9, first saying the list “denote[s] the sum total of humanity dwelling upon the earth,” then stating: “... they never appear in the same order, signifying apparently the confusion and disorder prevailing in the world system at this time.”²³
- 2) Thus, it appears that John uses this formula as a way of describing the entirety of the population of the world, yet assigns no technical meaning—especially to the order of the terms, and apparently not to the terms themselves. The power of the phrase lies in the arrangement of the words as they are united together—yielding a linguistic force that is greater than the sum of its parts.
- 3) The main combination of the four basic words, found first in Rev. 5:9, is used in five of the seven references—three times in the singular and twice in the plural.²⁴
- 4) Overall, as John alternates between the use of singular and plural, he favors the plural in four of the seven cases.²⁵
- 5) The Greek root words behind the corresponding terms John uses are consistent in all seven passages.
- 6) The words *tongue*, *people* and *nation* (in either singular or plural) are used in all seven lists.
- 7) John inserts two additional terms, in addition to the main four—*kings* in Rev. 10:11 and *multitudes* in Rev. 17:15.
- 8) The first two listings are related to saved groups of people. In Rev. 5:9, they cover church-age saints,

²³ Smith, 173.

²⁴ See footnote no. 21 regarding “nations” in Rev. 7:9.

²⁵ See footnote no. 21 regarding “nations” in Rev. 7:9.

speaking of their past experience on this earth. In Rev. 7:9, they speak of those who will be saved in the future during the tribulation.

- 9) Of the remaining references, Rev. 10:11 and 14:6 are neutral—at least as far as the current spiritual condition of the population so described is concerned—while 11:9, 13:7 and 17:15 each describe a worldwide coalition of the wicked.
- 10) Thus, we must conclude that these terms can be applied to both believers and unbelievers—as well as to those unbelievers who are still in need of the gospel, and will indeed hear it proclaimed.

Is This a Description of Gentiles, or of the Tribes of Israel?

The use of the term “tribe” in this listing has prompted some to posit that this listing describes the Jewish people specifically, rather than the entire world at large.²⁶ Other than this word, however, which certainly can be used in a Jewish context (see Rev. 7:5-8, where a form of this word is used 13 times), there seems to be little evidence to take these as being descriptions solely of the nation of Israel. First, we must recognize that—in spite of differences in the order of the terms—these words, taken together, do appear to have a technical significance related to the whole population of some particular entity, be that Israel or the entire world. If that entity is Israel, would this imply that the entire group of church age saints are Jewish (cf. Rev. 5:9)? Also,

²⁶Johnson ties the 144,000 to the great multitude, stating: “The identification of this second group is related to the identification of the first one (vv. 1-8). ... Thus, what some have seen as contrasts may actually be designed to complement each other and show the continuity of the first group with the second.” Alan F. Johnson, “Revelation,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 12, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 484.

what would be the distinctions of “tongues” and “peoples” if these terms relate exclusively to the people of Israel?

Another challenge to the theory that these terms describe Israel is found in Rev. 7:9. John says that this group comprises “a great multitude which no one could number.” Comparing this text to Rev. 9:16, we know that this must be more than “two hundred million” people (cf. Dan. 7:10). Practically speaking, this has surely never been an accurate description of the nation of Israel. From a futurist perspective, this is not a definitive argument, as no one can state with certainty what the population of Israel will be during the future time of tribulation. It appears unlikely, however, that they would attain such vast numbers. And, if that were a requirement for the fulfillment of this prophecy, this would seem to call the doctrine of imminence into question as well.

Juxtaposed against the 12 Israelite tribes in Rev. 7:1-8, it would also seem highly unlikely that the *tribes* mentioned beginning in verse 9 would continue the discussion about the *tribes* of Israel. Rather, there is a contrast strongly implied here between Israel and the *nations*. Fruchtenbaum said that “... John sees a multitude of Gentiles from every nationality...”²⁷ MacArthur wrote that they are simply, “All the earth’s people groups,”²⁸ and stated, “Those four terms ... encompass all of humanity.”²⁹ Leading off a string of documentation from dispensational commentators, we read the words of Robert Thomas:

The best solution is to identify this vast crowd as Gentile and Jewish believers who have died either natural or violent deaths during the period of the first six seals and come out from the Great Tribulation. The universality of terminology agrees with this....³⁰

²⁷ Fruchtenbaum, 228.

²⁸ John MacArthur, gen. ed., *The MacArthur Study Bible*, 2nd ed., ESV (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2021), 1,841, note on Rev. 7:9.

²⁹ John MacArthur, *Revelation 1-11*. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 172.

³⁰ Thomas, 485.

Walvoord stated:

The second half of chapter 7 of Revelation demonstrates that not only will many be saved in Israel but also many Gentiles will come to Christ in the great tribulation. ... In contrast to those coming from the twelve tribes as pictured earlier in the chapter, this throng comes from all nations.³¹

Wiersbe dealt with this issue succinctly, stating:

There is no doubt as to who this multitude is, because one of the elders explained it to John (Rev. 7:14): they are Gentiles who have been saved through faith in Christ during the Tribulation. ... John himself did not know who they were! If they had been Old Testament believers, or the church, John would have recognized them. That the elder had to tell John who they were suggests that they are a special people, which, indeed, they are.³²

Levy writes:

Who is this multitude of people? They are not the 144,000 mentioned earlier. The first group is exclusively Jewish, whereas this new multitude is a mixture of Gentile and Jewish believers. This group is a vast multitude of people who became believers during the Tribulation, many of whom died violent deaths.³³

Hindson stated:

³¹ John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), 144. In another reference, he refers to this group as “the saints in general, both Jews and Gentiles, who will suffer martyrdom (7:9-17).” See John F. Walvoord, *The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1990), 535.

³² Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1989), 590-591.

³³ Levy, 100.

The innumerable multitude is not just Jews from the twelve tribes of Israel. They are a host of people from every nation (Gentiles and Jews) and are so great in number they cannot humanly be counted.... The partitive *ek* ("from") means only some from every one of these groups ["nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues"] will be represented.³⁴

Ironside agrees that these *tribes* are composed of Gentiles but saw them—not in heaven—but specifically in “the millennial temple.”³⁵ He stated:

This great multitude embraces the Gentile nations who will enter into millennial blessing. It is the great ingathering of the coming dispensation, when ... a vast throng from all parts of the earth will be redeemed to God by the blood of the Lamb, and will enter into the earthly kingdom of our Lord. During the dark days of the great tribulation they will heed the testimony which will be carried to the ends of the earth by Jewish missionaries....³⁶

Pentecost agreed, stating:

It is also God’s purpose to populate the millennium with a multitude of saved Gentiles, who are redeemed through the preaching of the believing remnant. This is accomplished in the multitude from “all nations, and kindreds, and people, and

³⁴ Hindson, 91.

³⁵ Ironside, 129.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 128-129. Ironside’s view that these Gentile tribulation saints, converted under the ministry of the 144,000 Jewish evangelists, will apparently survive physically to go into the millennium does not affect the overarching purpose of this paper, although the writer does not share it. If anything, it would disrupt the writer’s view of the flow and purpose of events in the tribulation. It should be noted that some dispensational expositors also extend the ministry of the 144,000 witnesses into the earthly millennial kingdom. The writer of this paper also rejects that view. Walvoord deals with this view, and presents the view of this paper’s author—that this group actually appears in heaven, following their death as martyrs. See *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 145-146.

tongues” (Rev. 7:9) and in the “sheep” (Matt. 25:31-46) that enter the millennial age.³⁷

He also calls this group “saved Gentiles”³⁸ in another reference. Whether they are seen here in heaven—the view of the writer of this paper—or in the millennial kingdom makes little difference as to the identity and magnitude of the group being referenced. De Haan stated,

... the great masses in the world who have never heard the Gospel of God’s grace will hear the message in the Tribulation from the lips of these 144,000 Israelites, and as a result a great number will be saved, most of whom will be martyred....³⁹

He goes on to make his point unmistakably clear: “a great multitude of Gentiles are saved.”⁴⁰

Kroll added, likewise: “An election out of Israel [the 144,000] will be redeemed with an innumerable multitude of Gentiles.”⁴¹ Ryrice stated, “This group is composed of many nationalities.”⁴² Price sums it up well: “... the 144,000 Jewish witnesses ... ministry is to both Jews and Gentiles worldwide (7:1-17)....”⁴³ Thus, it appears to most mainstream dispensational commentators that this is indeed a description of a worldwide

³⁷ *Things to Come*, 238.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 298.

³⁹ M. R. De Haan, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1946), 135.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁴¹ Woodrow M. Kroll, *Jesus Shall Reign* (Greenville, SC: Ambassador Publications, 1998), 23.

⁴² Charles Caldwell Ryrice, *Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 52.

⁴³ Randall Price, *Jerusalem in Prophecy: God’s Stage for the Final Drama*, rev. and expanded (Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc., 2020), 137-138. Elliott Johnson also takes this group to be Gentiles. See *A Dispensational Biblical Theology* (Allen, TX: Bold Grace Academic, 2016), 486.

evangelistic effort, during the future tribulation, that leads to the salvation of an innumerable assembly of people, at least most of which must be Gentiles.

How Does This Phrase Relate to John’s Concept of *Earth-Dwellers*?

Another one of the most fascinating and highly descriptive phrases in the book of Revelation is found first in Rev. 3:10—“those who dwell on the earth.” It is interesting that this description ties to the main phrase under consideration in this paper in three of its seven contexts (see Rev. 11:9-10; 13:7-8; and 14:6). MacArthur called this “a phrase used as a technical term in the book of Revelation for unbelievers....”⁴⁴ Feinberg pointed out that “Gk is not merely *oikeō*, to dwell, but *katoikeō*, to settle down, which is contrary to the pilgrim nature of the church, cf. Phil. 3:18-20; I Pet. 2:11.”⁴⁵ Thomas commented persuasively about the people referred to here, stating: “This is a company of people constantly in view throughout the Apocalypse as objects of God’s wrath because of their rebellion against Him.”⁴⁶ He went on, in a footnote, to explain:

... in Revelation it includes all peoples. The phrase is used ten other times in Revelation and always in a bad sense. These are men given up to evil and hatred of God’s saints (cf. 6:10; 8:13; 11:10 [twice]; 13:8, 12, 14 [twice]; 17:2, 8....⁴⁷

Price describes *earth-dwellers* as “a term used of the unbelieving Gentile nations that resist the witness of the 144,000.”⁴⁸ Morris says “it seems always to refer to unregenerate mankind as a

⁴⁴ MacArthur, *Revelation 1-11*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, 124.

⁴⁵ Charles L. Feinberg, “Revelation,” in Jerry Falwell, exec. ed., *Liberty Bible Commentary: New Testament* (Lynchburg, VA: The Old-Time Gospel Hour, 1982), 800.

⁴⁶ Thomas, 289.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* Kistemaker, in a footnote, adds to this list, stating “compare also 13:12; 14:6; 17:2,” 163.

⁴⁸ Price, 138.

whole.”⁴⁹ Ironside, I believe, captured the essence of the meaning of this technical phrase very well when he wrote:

It does not simply mean those who live in the world, but a careful reading of the various passages in which this peculiar term is found, will make it manifest that “the earth-dwellers” are in contrast to those whose citizenship is in heaven. They are persons who, while professing to be Christians, refuse the heavenly calling, and prove by their earthly-mindedness and worldly ways, that they really belong to this world. All their hopes are here, and their treasures likewise, and the Lord has said, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” The coming Great Tribulation will be, for them, a time of fearful trial.⁵⁰

Johnson said, “the phrase ... refers not to believers but to unbelievers who are the objects of God’s wrath—i.e., the ‘beast-worshippers’...”⁵¹ Levy, likewise, notes, “The phrase ... refers, not to the church, but to unbelievers who will be settled into the world’s system during the Tribulation.”⁵²

Pentecost, fittingly, defined the members of this group as “those that have settled down to permanent occupancy,” and clarified, “it can have no reference to the church.”⁵³ Showers sums it up by stating: “... they will be unsaved people of the future period of testing who will never get saved.”⁵⁴

On the basis of the textual evidence, one would have to say that the term *earth-dweller* can be used to describe the worldwide populace that is categorized by the main phrase under

⁴⁹ Leon Morris, *Revelation*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 106.

⁵⁰ Ironside, 72.

⁵¹ Johnson, 454.

⁵² Levy, 56.

⁵³ *Things to Come*, 197.

⁵⁴ Renald Showers, *Maranatha—Our Lord, Come!* (Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc., 1995), 216.

consideration in this paper—especially as it is used in Rev. 11:9-10; 13:7-8; and 14:6. Certainly, however, these two descriptive phrases are not identical, as the worldwide congregations found in Rev. 5:9 and 7:9 could not rightfully be described as *earth-dwellers*.

How Does This Phrase Relate to Jesus’ Words in the Olivet Discourse?

Jesus’ own prophetic description of the worldwide gospel ministry that will take place during the tribulation, given in the Olivet Discourse, is truly astounding when one considers the magnitude of the outreach that He predicted. Matt. 24:14 speaks of “all the world” and “all the nations” as the target of gospel proclamation and “witness,” respectively. Showers was referring to this verse when he stated: “... it must refer to the entire inhabited earth, not just the Roman Empire.”⁵⁵ Hindson, also writing on Matt. 24:14, notes: “The gospel shall be preached in all the world (Gr *oikoumenē*), i.e., the inhabited world and unto all nations (Gr *ethnos*), ‘gentile nations,’ as contrasted with the Jews.”⁵⁶

MacArthur stated: “... the message ultimately penetrates every part of the globe. God is never without a witness, and he will proclaim the gospel from heaven itself if necessary (cf. Rev. 14:6).”⁵⁷ Jesus went on to talk about “all the tribes of the earth” in Matt. 24:30, and “the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” in Matt. 24:31. Regarding Matt. 24:31, Showers stated, “... the elect will be gathered from all over the world at Christ’s

⁵⁵ Showers, 214.

⁵⁶ Edward E. Hindson, “Matthew,” in *Liberty Bible Commentary: New Testament*, ed. Jerry Falwell (Lynchburg, VA: The Old-Time Gospel Hour, 1982), 81. While Hindson’s comment is helpful, it must be noted, in fairness, that—surprisingly—he also stated in the same note “that the ‘gospel of the kingdom’ refers to the missionary expansion of the church into all the world,” and “Then shall the end come would then refer to the end of the church age” (Ibid.).

⁵⁷ *The MacArthur Study Bible*, 1,307, note on Matt. 24:14.

coming with His angels.”⁵⁸ Woods states, “Only after this regathering does Matthew then portray the inauguration of Christ’s reign on David’s throne (Matt. 25:31).”⁵⁹ D.A. Carson writes regarding Matt. 24:31:

The “four winds” represent the four points of the compass (Ezek. 37:9; Dan. 8:8; 11:4): the elect are gathered from all over (cf. [Matt.] 8:11), “from one end of the heavens to the other” (from every place under the sky), since that is how far the gospel of the kingdom will have been preached (v. 14).⁶⁰

Clearly, the phrase under consideration in Rev. 7:9 must be taken in the context of Jesus’ earlier statements—and Matthew’s inspired recording of them. This background makes it all the more clear that John was indeed describing a worldwide revival during the days of the tribulation.

⁵⁸ Showers, 182.

⁵⁹ Andrew M. Woods, *The Coming Kingdom* (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2016), 243.

⁶⁰ D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 506.

How Does This Phrase Relate to Daniel’s Vision of “all peoples, nations, and languages” (Dan. 7:14) in the Future Kingdom of Christ?

There is a counterpart to the phrase that John penned these seven times—which long predates his use of it. Indeed, John may have drawn on none other than the prophet Daniel in formulating his phrase. Leon Morris writes the following in commenting on our main text, Rev. 7:9:

The universal scope of redemption is brought out by piling up expressions to show that the redeemed come from no restricted group but from all over the world. ... The expression resembles the ‘peoples, nations and men of every language’ (Dn. 3:4, 7, 29 *etc.*), and indeed some think that John is quoting Daniel. ...for the most part Daniel has three members whereas John has four. John is probably using an expression of his own, though one suggested by the language of Scripture.⁶¹

Thomas wrote: “The origin of the expression is the prophecy of Daniel (cf. Dan. 3:4, 7, 29; 5:19; 6:25; 7:14)....”⁶² Kistemaker stated: “John alludes to the Book of Daniel, where a threefold phrase (people, nations, languages) occurs six times.”⁶³ He points in the footnote to Dan. 3:4, 7; 4:1; 5:19; 6:25; and 7:14. Walvoord also includes Dan. 7:23 in his comment on Rev. 13:7-8.⁶⁴ This verse is more definitive, perhaps, than the others, but does not follow the same basic pattern as they do—that of “peoples, nations, and languages” (Dan. 3:4).

It is interesting that Daniel, like John, favors such a phrase, and also uses it in a variety of contexts (compare, for instance, Dan. 3:4 with 6:25). Daniel’s phrase serves to provide

⁶¹ Morris, 97.

⁶² Thomas, 401.

⁶³ Kistemaker, 317.

⁶⁴ John F. Walvoord, “Revelation,” in *Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 961.

background for John’s phrase, both in terms of its construction, and by means of the sense it provides, and John apparently assumed and built upon this meaning by employing his own sevenfold phrase.

Conclusion

John’s description of the “great multitude” in Rev. 7:9, composed of people “of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues,” is a testimony to the incredible richness of God’s grace—yet to be displayed in the future, but described for us now, to motivate us in the present. The writer of this work calls it “the great untold story of Bible prophecy.” This paper has attempted to unfold the unique place that this innumerable group occupies in the history of God’s redeemed people—with regard to the timing of their redemption, the significance of their ministry and, especially, the universal nature of their influence. It appears to this writer that this understanding flows directly from the text of Scripture, and this has been obvious to many dispensational Bible teachers—numbers of which have been quoted here.

This discussion would be lacking, however, without a concluding reference to one of the leading teachers of biblical prophecy during the 20th and 21st centuries, and the unique perspective he had concerning this text. World-renowned prophecy teacher and author Tim LaHaye offered a very provocative commentary regarding this incredible seventh chapter of Revelation when he stated:

The greatest revival the world has ever known will not occur during the church age but immediately following, during the first 21 months of the Tribulation. According to Revelation 7, while the Antichrist is busy orchestrating his political advances, the Holy Spirit, working through a group referred to as the 144,000, will move in the hearts of millions of people. He will lead them into a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, resulting in the largest soul harvest in earth’s history.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Tim LaHaye, “One Hundred Forty-Four Thousand,” in *The Popular Encyclopedia of Bible Prophecy*, ed. Tim LaHaye and Ed Hindson (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2004), 256.

He went on to write:

The total number of people who come to the Lord during the first part of the Tribulation could possibly exceed the number of those who have converted to Christ during the last 2000 years. Several factors could make this possible, including the size of the world's population, the chaotic conditions during the Tribulation, and the powerful work of the Holy Spirit through the tireless evangelism of the 144,000 witnesses.⁶⁶

Of course, such figuring involves a measure of speculation and makes much sense especially at this late hour in history, due to the vast increase in global population. Interestingly, however, LaHaye did not adopt this view only in recent years, or after co-authoring the wildly successful *Left Behind* series. He presented the concept roughly 30 years before the previous reference, in his commentary on Revelation. There he stated:

... during the first part of tribulation the greatest soul harvest in all history will take place. In fact, it is this writer's belief that more people will accept Christ during the early months of the tribulation, before the Antichrist really has a chance to consolidate his one-world government and set up his one-world religion of self-worship (Rev. 13:5-7), than have been converted in the entire 1900+ years of the church age.⁶⁷

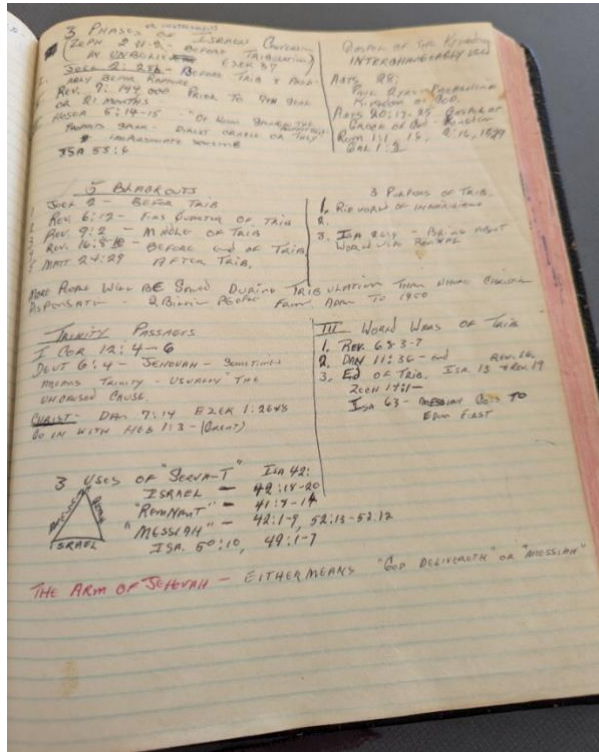
Even this, however, does not uncover the origin of LaHaye's view. To locate that, we must consider this picture of a page in the back of

⁶⁶ Ibid, 257.

⁶⁷ *Revelation—Illustrated and Made Plain*, 114.

LaHaye's personal study Bible, which is filled with handwritten notes.

In it, he wrote the following statement on a lined page in the back of that Bible: "More people will be saved during tribulation than whole Christian dispensation - 2 billion people from Adam to 1950."⁶⁸



As readers of John's "Revelation of Jesus Christ" (Rev. 1:1), we must be truly astounded at this "great untold story of Bible prophecy," and ought to thus be motivated toward becoming involved in global evangelism—with an ever-growing passion—in these closing days of the church age.

⁶⁸ Credit goes to Dr. Cory Marsh for the opportunity to study LaHaye's Bible and to use this photo here. Marsh received this Bible as a gift from the LaHaye family upon the passing of Tim LaHaye.

Counterpoint: Comparative Views on Whether Hosea 6:7 Teaches a Covenant of Works Relative to Genesis 2

Mike Stallard

Key Words: Hosea 6, Adam, covenant of works, man, mankind.

Introduction

The Westminster Confession of Faith notes that “the first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.” This statement codified a belief in a covenant of works between God and Adam in Genesis 2 which was broken in Genesis 3, thereby entailing the necessity of a covenant of grace for individual redemption. These two covenants, especially the latter, form the heart and soul of covenant theology. The defense of this theological view has many facets to it. However, this paper will focus on only one passage that is used as a prooftext by some exegetes and theologians to defend the idea of a covenant with Adam in Genesis 2. That passage is Hosea 6:7. The significance of this study flows from the possibility that this verse states a covenant between God and Adam when Genesis 2 itself does not mention a covenant. The view that emerges from the study is that a covenant between God and Adam is not stated in Hosea 6:7. It must be admitted, as will be shown, that some dispensationalists affirm that a covenant was made in Genesis 2 and that Hosea 6:7 alludes to this covenant. After a brief review

of how various translations, theologies, and commentaries have handled Hosea 6:7, an exegetical and theological analysis will be undertaken.

Translations of Hosea 6:7

To understand the passage as speaking of the personal *Adam*, *men*, *land*, or a *specific place* would naturally be expressed at the translation level. However, the identification of the covenant in view depends upon a study of the context and is not surfaced entirely through the translation. Below are several translations to show the similarities and contrasts.

ASV (American Standard Version—1901)	But they like Adam have transgressed the covenant: there have they dealt treacherously against me.
Berkeley (Modern Language Bible)	But they, like Adam, transgressed the covenant; there they broke faith with Me.
CEV (Contemporary English Version)	At a place named Adam, you betrayed me by breaking our agreement.
CSB (Christian Standard Bible)	But they, like Adam, have violated the covenant; there they have betrayed Me.
Darby	But they like Adam have transgressed the covenant: there have they dealt treacherously against me.
Die Heilige Schrift (Luther)	Sie haben den Bund ubertreten bei Adam; dort wurden sie mir untreu (they transgressed the covenant with Adam; there they were unfaithful to me).
ESV	But like Adam they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me.
Israel Bible	But they, to a man, have transgressed the Covenant. This is where they have been false to me.

KJV	But they like men have transgressed the covenant: there have they dealt treacherously against me.
La Sainte Bible (French)	A la façon des hommes [men] ils ont enfreint l’alliance. C’est la qu’ils m’ont trahi (In the manner [or fashion] of men they have broken the covenant. That’s where they betrayed me).
Latin Vulgate	Ipsi autem sicut Adam transgressi sunt pactum: ibi praevaricati sunt in me (but they like Adam have transgressed the covenant; there they have dealt treacherously against me).
Living Bible	But like Adam, you broke my covenant; you refused my love.
LXX (Septuagint)	αὐτοὶ δὲ εἰσιν ὡς ἄνθρωπος παραβαίνων διαθήκην, ἐκεῖ κατεφρόνησέν μου (but they are like a man transgressing a covenant, there they despised me).
NAB (New American Bible – Roman Catholic)	But they, in their land, violated the covenant; there they were untrue to me.
NASB95	But like Adam they have transgressed the covenant; There they have dealt treacherously against Me. (marginal note for <i>Adam: men</i>)
NEB (New English Bible)	At Admah they have broken my covenant, there they have played me false. (footnote >> At Admah: <i>prob. rdg.; Heb. Like Adam</i>)
NIV	Like Adam, they have broken the covenant – they were unfaithful to me there. (marginal note for Adam: Or <i>As at Adam; or Like men</i>)
NKJV	But like men they transgressed the covenant; There they dealt treacherously

	with Me. (marginal note for <i>men</i> : Or <i>Adam</i>)
NLT (New Living Translation)	But like Adam, you broke my covenant and rebelled against me.
RSV	But at Adam they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me. (footnote >> Heb <i>like</i> (in place of “at”))

Among these selected twenty translations, the personal *Adam* is the chosen wording in Luther, the Vulgate, Living Bible, Darby, Berkeley, NLT, NIV, ASV, CSB, ESV, and NASB. The translations that favor the meaning of *men* in some way are the NKJV, La Sainte Bible, the Israel Bible, LXX, and the KJV. Those translations seeing the word *Adam* as a place name are NEB, RSV, and CEV. Only one translation, the NAB, could be taken to translate Adam as a general reference to the *land*, although this could perhaps be a way of referencing a place name.

Commentaries and Theologies on Hosea 6:7

The comments of theologians and exegetes are as varied in their views as the translation options. In table format, several examples will be given below:

Berkhof, <i>Systematic Theology</i>	One of the arguments that Berkhof gives in favor of a covenant of works in Genesis 2 is Hosea 6:7. He rejects the translations of “at Adam” or “like men.” He appeals to a similar passage in Job 31:33 as support. ²
Calvin, <i>Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets</i>	To my knowledge, Calvin does not reference Hosea 6:7 in <i>The Institutes</i> , but he did leave us a commentary on the Minor Prophets. Calvin prefers the

² Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1938), 214-15.

	translation “like men” and focuses on what appears to be sacrifices under the Mosaic Covenant. Calvin takes the general gist of the verse to be that “they showed themselves to be men in violating the covenant.” He clearly rejects the mention of the personal Adam in the verse. ³
Chafer, <i>Systematic Theology</i>	Chafer, true to his Presbyterian roots, affirms a covenant of works between Adam and God in Genesis 2. However, he also asserts that all unsaved men are under a covenant of works until they come to Christ. ⁴ However, I was unable to find any reference to Hosea 6:7.
Darby, <i>Synopsis of the Books of the Bible</i>	Darby, consistent with his Bible translation, notes “But, as Adam did in the garden of Eden, they had broken the covenant on which the enjoyment of the blessings God had heaped upon them depended.” ⁵
Erickson, <i>Christian Theology</i>	Erickson mentions Hosea 6:7 in the context of transgression of God’s commandments under the Mosaic Covenant. It is not discussed relative to Genesis 2. ⁶

³ John Calvin and John Owen, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 1 (Wellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 233-35.

⁴ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Vol 1 (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), 42. See also 4:211-12; 228-33.

⁵ J. N. Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible* (repr., Addison, IL: Bible Truth Publishers, 1979), 2:472. In a footnote, Darby suggests that the word *Adam* can have a generic meaning (men or mankind), but in that case the word would have an article attached. In Hosea 6:7 it does not. Instead, it is prefixed with the preposition *ḵ* (*like*), which may or may not affect Darby’s conclusion. The scholars are divided on the translation.

⁶ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 589-90.

Gaebelein, <i>Annotated Bible</i>	Gaebelein holds that Hosea 6:7 is comparing the covenant-breaking of Adam in Genesis 2-3 with the covenant-breaking of men in Hosea's day (under the Mosaic Covenant). ⁷
Gentry, <i>Kingdom Through Covenant</i>	Gentry and Wellum do not really address the view that Adam = men. Instead, they address the interpretation that "Adam" is a place, or it is the personal Adam. They opt for the latter. In the analogy with Adam, Gentry asserts that "Israel's covenant violation was in her role as king-priest." However, in the analogy a covenant of creation with Adam in Genesis 2 is affirmed. The covenant that is violated by those in Hosea's day is the Mosaic Covenant. ⁸
Garrett, <i>Hosea, Joel</i> (NAC)	Garrett gives one of the best surveys of positions on Hosea 6:7. His conclusion is one of the most unusual: "The prophet has made a pun on the name of the town and the name of the original transgressor. His meaning is, 'Like Adam (the man) they break covenants; they are faithless to me there (in the town of Adam).'" ⁹
Grudem, <i>Systematic Theology</i>	Grudem sees Hosea 6:7 as confirming the idea that there is a covenant of works between God and Adam in the

⁷ Arno C. Gaebelein, *Annotated Bible*, Vol 5: Daniel to Malachi (New York: Publication Office "Our Hope"), 66. Gaebelein's initial background was Methodist and postmillennialist.

⁸ Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 217-220, 613n31.

⁹ Duane A. Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, vol. 19A, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 163.

	Garden of Eden in Genesis 2 that was broken by Adam in Genesis 3. ¹⁰
Henry, <i>Commentary on the Whole Bible</i>	Matthew Henry prefers the translation of Adam as men – “they, like men, have transgressed the covenant.” Men are naturally false in their dealings with God and each other. Men are by nature covenant-breakers. ¹¹
Hodge, <i>Systematic Theology</i>	Charles Hodge admits that the idea that God entered into a covenant with Adam in the Garden “does not rest upon any express declaration of the Scriptures.” ¹² However, Hodge gives the general thrust of an argument for the covenant of works in Genesis 2 nonetheless: “It is, however, a concise and correct mode of asserting a plain Scriptural fact, namely, that God made Adam a promise suspended upon a condition, and attached to disobedience a certain penalty. This is what in Scriptural language is meant by a covenant...” ¹³ Unfortunately, I could not find any use of Hosea 6:7.
Horton, <i>Introducing Covenant Theology (ICT) and Pilgrim Theology (PT)</i>	Michael Horton in <i>ICT</i> appeals to Hosea 6:7 as proof for the covenant arrangement found in Genesis 1-3 between God and the personal Adam. He also appeals to Job 31:33 as

¹⁰ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 516.

¹¹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 1476–1477.

¹² Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, (repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 117.

¹³ *Ibid.*

	translation support for his view. ¹⁴ Horton in <i>PT</i> teaches a covenant of works relationship established at Mount Sinai with the Israelites that can be compared to the covenant relationship in Genesis 2. ¹⁵
Fausset, <i>Commentary on the Old and New Testaments</i> (along with Jamieson and Brown)	For Fausset, Hosea 6:7 means the following: “Israel ‘transgressed the covenant’ of God as lightly as <i>men</i> break everyday compacts with their fellow-men.” ¹⁶ Presumably, the covenant that Israel transgressed is the Mosaic Covenant.
Keil, <i>Commentary on the Old Testament</i>	Keil holds the view that the word <i>Adam</i> in Hosea 6:7 refers to the personal Adam of Genesis 2. The command that Adam broke was “actually a covenant, which God made with him, since the object of it was the preservation of Adam in vital fellowship with the Lord, as was the case with the covenant that God made with Israel (see Job xxxi. 33).” The expression “there” probably refers to Bethel as the place of idolatrous worship that is in view. ¹⁷
Robertson, <i>Christ of the Covenants</i>	Robertson notes that Hosea 6:7 gives “God’s original creational relationship

¹⁴ Michael Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 90.

¹⁵ Michael Horton, *Pilgrim Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 135-36.

¹⁶ Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, Vol 2 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1977), 479. Volume 2 was written by A. R. Fausset.

¹⁷ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol 10, (repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 100. The commentary on Hosea was written by Keil.

	in covenantal terms.” This becomes the basis for the comparison to Hosea’s generation that had broken the commands of God in its day. ¹⁸
Ryrie, <i>Ryrie Study Bible</i>	Ryrie gives a nondogmatic note: “Adam. May refer to men in general, transgressing God’s commandments, or specifically to Adam’s original sin.” In his options, Ryrie does not list the view of Adam or Admah as a place nor as land. ¹⁹
Schmoller (<i>Lange’s Commentary</i>)	Schmoller argues that there is an analogy between the breaking of a covenant by Adam in Genesis 3 and later men in Ephraim and Judah: “Adam’s sin was a violation of a covenant: for with the command laid upon Adam, God entered into a relation with him, which, in accordance with the analogies of later agreements made with mankind, might be called a covenant.” ²⁰
Strong, <i>Systematic Theology</i>	Strong rejects the idea of a covenant of works in Genesis 2. He prefers the translation: “But they, like men that break a covenant, there they proved false to me.” Strong focuses on the nature of men to be covenant-breakers. So, in the passage, they are violating the

¹⁸ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1980), 24.

¹⁹ Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Ryrie Study Bible: Expanded Edition NASB95* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 1382.

²⁰ Otto Schmoller, “The Book of Hosea,” trans. James Frederick McCurdy, in *Lange’s Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*, vol. 14 (1868; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970), 62.

	Mosaic Covenant since they are by nature law breakers. ²¹
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Exegetical and Theological Analysis

The analysis of Hosea 6:7 revolves around the identification of the word *Adam* in the immediate context and consistent with the framework of the whole book of Hosea. An exploration of the various views of Adam will surface most of the needed information for the debate.

Adam as the Personal Adam of Genesis

The Hebrew in Hosea 6:7 following BHS²² (וְהָמָּה כְּאָדָם עֲבָרוּ בְרִית שָׁם בְּגִדוּ כִּי: leads to several interpretive issues. One must explain some of the elements in the verse in context even to finalize a translation. Most of the issues, however, revolve around the meaning of אָדָם (Adam). There are four major interpretations of this word found in the translations and commentaries. The first and most prevalent view is that the term is a proper name for the personal Adam of Genesis 2-3. This interpretation lends itself to the idea of a covenant arrangement between God and Adam in Genesis 2. Nothing in the context would make this option unworthy of consideration, although other choices may do as well. The verse, following this understanding, yields an analogy between the covenant-breaking of Adam in the Garden and the covenant-breaking of certain Israelites in Hosea's day.

Perhaps the most important argument favoring the personal Adam view is the obvious one: "Viewing the passage without prejudice, the usual explanation is seen to be the most natural."²³ In an understatement, it could be noted that Adam is an extremely important person throughout the entire Bible. His

²¹ Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (1907; repr., Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1978).

²² *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 1977).

²³ Schmoller, "Hosea," 62.

example of disobedience and failure could easily be used in any situation comparing the sin of later men.

Support for the personal Adam view also comes from consideration of parallel wording in Job 31:33 – “Have I covered my transgressions like Adam, by hiding my iniquity in my bosom...?”²⁴ The phrase “like Adam” (אָדָם) is identical to Hosea 6:7. This section of Job is part of Job’s sequence of last responses to the three friends prior to the Elihu speeches. In Berkhof’s understanding, Job, using his questioning style, asks his persecutors if he had hidden his sin like the personal Adam did in the Garden. Such an interpretation makes sense in the context of Job. If the analogy holds true, then Hosea 6:7 would likely say the same thing. Unfortunately, the interpretation is not so tidy. Alden comments on the Job passage this way:

The NIV footnote gives the option of reading *’ādām* as the name of the first man, Adam, rather than the generic term “men” in the text. A case can be made for either because Adam did “conceal” his sin (Gen 3:8–12), but people in general are also loath to confess their transgressions (Ps 32:3–5; Prov 28:13; 1 John 1:8–10).²⁵

In other words, both translations – *Adam* and *men* – fit the context of the discourse of Job. Thus, the interpretive option of *men* in Hosea 6:7 also exists in Job 31:33. The analogy does not solve the problem. In other words, the analogy of Scripture at this point is inconclusive. However, the parallel could possibly speak against the other interpretive options that are available.

Another argument used to establish the personal Adam view in Hosea 6:7 is the cross-reference appeal to Romans 5:12–21. Grudem notes, “in Romans 5:12–21 Paul sees both Adam and

²⁴ Berkhof, Horton, and Keil are examples of expositors who appeal to Job 31:33 as a parallel supporting their interpretation of Hosea 6:7. See the earlier notes for references.

²⁵ Robert L. Alden, *Job*, vol. 11, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 308.

Christ as heads of a people whom they represent, something that would be entirely consistent with the idea of Adam being in a covenant before the fall.”²⁶ Grudem uses such a conclusion to bolster the notion of a personal Adam for Hosea 6:7. The argument is based upon compatibility between the two passages (Rom. 5 and Hosea 6). The word *covenant* does not occur in either Romans 5 or Genesis 2, although the concept of *likeness* is used (Rom. 5:14) in a context where comparison between Adam and other men abounds. This could easily be coordinated with “like Adam” in Hosea 6:7. On the other hand, the theology of Romans 5, while fitting the context of the personal Adam in Genesis, may not be what the prophet had in mind when he wrote Hosea 6:7. Other considerations must be taken into account.

There are several problems with the personal Adam view according to detractors. First, it does not seem to handle the locative nature of the word “there” in the verse.²⁷ Such language could point to the word *Adam* as a place name. Second, the personal Adam, while theologically significant throughout the entire Bible, including the New Testament, is not the primary use of the term *Adam*. Third, there exist cross references to support the Adam-as-men view in the same way that such references are used to support the personal Adam view. Fourth, the Adam-as-men view has much going for it in terms of the context of the entire book of Hosea. Each of these issues will be surfaced in the discussions below.

Before leaving this discussion of the personal Adam view, however, it is perhaps surprising to find Calvin to be quite dismissive of this understanding:

Others explain the words thus, “They have transgressed as Adam the covenant.” But the word, Adam, we know, is taken indefinitely for men. This exposition [the personal Adam view] is frigid and diluted, “They have transgressed as Adam

²⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 516.

²⁷ Garrett, *Hosea*, 162.

the covenant;” that is, they have followed or imitated the example of their father Adam, who had immediately at the beginning transgressed God’s commandment. I do not stop to refute this comment; for we see that it is in itself vapid.²⁸

Notice that Calvin calls the personal Adam view frigid and diluted. I take this to mean that he prefers an understanding that was more expansive about who was being described. Then, he also calls the view vapid which means unstimulating, unchallenging, and apparently unworthy of response. Even though this writer accepts Calvin’s translation of Hosea 6:7, dismissiveness toward the personal Adam view in this way is not helpful.

Adam as Mankind

The second interpretation of *Adam* is that it refers to mankind or men in a general sense. A quick review of all the major Hebrew lexicons shows that this meaning for *Adam* is quite prevalent throughout the Old Testament.²⁹ This means that the reading of “like men” in Hosea 6:7 is not a remote possibility but must be seriously considered. The context does not rule out this interpretation easily, as will be shown below. The sense of the verse would be similar to the KJV: “But they like men have transgressed the covenant: there have they dealt treacherously against me.”

One argument supporting the Adam as men view is that the Hebrew word for *Adam* occurs around 560 times in the Old Testament when the term refers to men or mankind. This is far more often than the personal name.³⁰ Furthermore, outside of

²⁸ Calvin, *Minor Prophets*, 1:235.

²⁹ Schmoller is surely wrong when he asserts that the translation of Adam as “men” is only a paraphrase; “Hosea,” 62.

³⁰ This statistic and the comments that follow are based on F. K. Farr, “Adam in OT and the Apocrypha” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1939), 1:48-49. The online version of this ISBE article can be found at

Genesis chapters 1-5, the only clear instance of the word being used as the personal Adam is found in 1 Chron. 1:1 where the genealogy from Adam to David is listed. Farr lists Deut. 32:8, Job 31:33, and Hosea 6:7 as ambiguous in their usage, meaning it could go either way.³¹

Grudem argues against the Adam-as-men understanding using two reasons. First, he notes that “the statement would make little sense: there is no single well-known transgression of a covenant by *man* to which it could refer.”³² There exist two problems with this deduction. Most of the translations and commentaries which favor this view do not have in mind some singular transgression but the general character of the Israelites as covenant-breakers. In the background would be the Mosaic Covenant which they were under at the time of Hosea. Consequently, the general thrust of the verse would be “they, like men who are covenant breakers by nature, have violated the [Mosaic] covenant.” Grudem adds that the idea of Adam as men should be rejected because, “it would do little good to compare the Israelites to what they already are (that is, men) and say that they ‘like man’ broke the covenant. Such a sentence would almost imply that the Israelites were not men, but some other kind of creature.”³³ Those who hold the Adam-as-men view would likely consider Grudem’s argument to miss the point. The text in their view would be using comparative language (like men) to emphasize the Israelite’s share in the general depravity of man that is being described by the complaints of the prophet. Such would be consistent with the context. The nation as a whole stands guilty before God.

<https://www.internationalstandardbible.com/A/adam-in-the-old-testament-and-the-apocrypha.html>.

³¹ Ibid. Deut. 32:8 reads “When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, When He separated the sons of man, He set the boundaries of the peoples According to the number of the sons of Israel” (NASB95).

³² Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 516n1.

³³ Ibid.

Interestingly, while those who hold the personal Adam view go to Job 31:33 as a cross reference to handle אָדָם (like Adam/men), those who adopt the Adam-as-men view go to another passage in Psalm 82:7: “Nevertheless you will die *like men* and fall like any one of the princes.” In light of the parallelism with the second half of the verse (*any one* of the princes), the translation “like men” fits the psalm’s context better than the personal Adam view. This would also be the way the expression is understood in Hosea 6:7. It must be noted that the Hebrew phrase for “like Adam” only occurs in Hosea 6:7 and the two cross-references used in the debate (Job 31:33, Psalm 82:7). When it comes to the analogy of Scripture, perhaps the umpire can pronounce a tie and leave everyone unsatisfied.

Adam as a Place

The third interpretation of *Adam* is that it refers to a place. The fact that Hosea 6:7 uses the term *there* supports this conclusion: “But they, like Adam, transgressed the covenant; *there* they broke faith with Me” (Berkely, emphasis added). In the minds of some exegetes, this wording is enough to suggest that Adam should be taken as a name place rather than a personal name of the first man or as men in general. The preposition would be forced (perhaps awkwardly) to take on the meaning of *at* instead of *like*.³⁴ The translation would read something similar to the following: “At Adam, you betrayed me by breaking the covenant.” This is not a far-fetched idea. If a city can be named after the first president of the United States, it would not be surprising to see the Israelites name a town after the first human being in the universe. In Joshua 3:16, a town called Adam is noted as the place where God gathered the waters together to

³⁴ Grudem suggests that the translation “at” is impossible (*Systematic Theology*, 516n1).

allow Joshua and the Israelites to cross the Jordan on dry ground.³⁵

One problem with the identification of Adam in Hosea 6:7 as a city is that there is silence in Scripture about any major rebellion against God at that place that might provide understanding for Hosea's day.³⁶ Thus, some scholars have proposed a textual emendation to correct an alleged copyist error. Instead of Adam as the city, the reference should be to Admah. The town of Admah is mentioned in Hosea 11:8 as God mentions his compassion for Israel over against his judgment against Admah and Zeboiim. These two towns were part of the coalition of kings who fought during the battle in which Lot was captured forcing Abraham's rescue operation in Genesis 14. The king of Admah is mentioned in Genesis 14:2-8. Presumably Admah is destroyed when Sodom and Gomorrah are eliminated later in chapters 18 and 19. If this is the comparison intended in Hosea 6:7, then the meaning would be something along the lines of "You have rebelled against me as they did at Admah (which did not end well for them)." This is a more obscure view since it supposes a text for which there is no external evidence, although a narrative is attempted that provides plausibility.

However, another solution to the awkwardness of the word *there* in the translation ("*there* they have dealt treacherously against Me") exists without appealing to the use of the word *Adam* as a place name. Keil contends that the use of the word *there* (אֲשֶׁר) does point to a place but that the location is neither the villages of Adam nor Admah. The indicated site should be understood as Bethel which is mentioned in Hosea 10:14-15.

³⁵ The city of Adam was located where the Jabbok River empties into the Jordan River. The city is mentioned on the inscription of Pharaoh Shishak describing his invasion of the area. The modern name of the site is Tell ed-Damiyeh. See W. C. Kaiser, "Adam, City Of" in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 1:56.

³⁶ Garrett, *Hosea*, 162; Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 22.

Therefore a tumult will arise among your people,
And all your fortresses will be destroyed,
As Shalman destroyed Beth-arbel on the day of battle,
When mothers were dashed in pieces with their children.
Thus it will be done to you at **Bethel** because of your great
wickedness.
At dawn the king of Israel will be completely cut off.

The significance of Bethel should not be minimized for the argument of the book of Hosea. The verses above from chapter ten close out a section of evaluation and judgment which begins in chapter four. In 4:15, the prophet tells the people not to go to Gilgal or Beth-aven (house of wickedness). The reason for this exhortation is these were the sites that had become bases of false worship under Jeroboam I (930-910 BC), who had reinstated the worship of golden calves to prevent the northern tribes from returning to the house of David at Jerusalem (1 Kings 12:26-28). These locations were still involved in false worship even in the time of Jeroboam II (793-753 BC), at the time of Hosea's prophetic ministry (Hosea 4:13; 9:15; 10:2-8; 12:11).³⁷ Most scholars believe that Beth-aven (house of wickedness) in Hosea (4:15, 5:8, 10:5, 8) is a contemptuous or sarcastic name for Bethel (house of God).³⁸ The mention of Bethel in the book would highlight the sins of the entire nation and would be an appropriate "at-large" referent for the word *there* in Hosea 6:7. Consequently, the need to establish the term *Adam* as a place is not necessary to handle the use in Hosea 6:7 of the word *there* in the context of the entire book.³⁹

³⁷ I am using the dates for the kings given in Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), 496.

³⁸ R. L. Alden, "Gilgal" in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 2:726; *Ryrie Study Bible*, 1386.

³⁹ A similar way to handle the locative wording of the verse is found in E. B. Pusey, *The Minor Prophets: A Commentary Explanatory and Practical*,

Adam as Land or Dirt

The fourth view of the meaning of *Adam* is that it is a reference to land, ground, or dirt. *Adamah* is used in Gen. 2:7 (and elsewhere in the Old Testament) to refer to the ground: “Then the LORD God formed man [Adam] of dust from the ground [Adamah], and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man [Adam] became a living being.” One can see the close connection between Adam and the ground or dirt from which he was made. If *Adamah* is the intended term in Hosea 6:7, the translation would be much like that used in the NAB: “But they, in their land, violated the covenant; there they were untrue to me.” Here it would probably be the entire land of Israel that is in view since both Ephraim and Judah are mentioned in 6:4. So the Israelites are unfaithful as they live in the land God gave them. One advantage of this view is that it clears up the awkwardness with the word *there* in the second part of the verse. Another interpretation using the idea of Adam as the ground or dirt is stated this way: “They have walked on my covenant like dirt.”⁴⁰ Garrett is most likely correct when he asserts that this view “involves several unusual interpretations of the Hebrew, so that it cannot be considered probable.”⁴¹

The Mosaic Covenant in Hosea

Although the interpretation of *Adam* in Hosea 6:7 drives most of the discussion, a few words are necessary about the other side of any analogy in the text. It is clear that Hosea’s exhortation

Barnes Notes, Vol. 1 (reprint ed., Grand Rapids, MI: 1977), 68: “He does not say, *where*. But Israel and every sinner in Israel knew full well, where. There, to Israel, was not only Bethel or Dan, or Gilgal, or Mizpah, or Gilead, or any or all of the high places, which God had hallowed by his mercies, and they had defiled....To the sinners of Israel, it was every spot of the Lord’s land which they had defiled by their sin.”

⁴⁰ Douglas Stuart, *Word Biblical Themes: Hosea-Jonah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989) and *Hosea-Jonah*, *Word Biblical Commentaries* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1987), 99.

⁴¹ Garrett, *Hosea*, 162.

is aimed at the Israelites and their sinful ways. The covenant-breaking (they have transgressed the covenant) that must be in view at that time in history naturally correlates to disobedience to the Mosaic Covenant, the Law that God had given to all the tribes of Israel. The northern tribes had for many years practiced a false worship that violated the First and Second Commands (and no doubt many of the other commands). The book of Hosea as a whole highlights many of the details of the cities and villages that had become places of wickedness in Israel. During Hosea's time, they were about three decades away from the Assyrian judgment that God was planning for them due to their apostasy.

Conclusion

To give an expanded translation or targum on Hosea 6:7, the following could be advanced: "But like (all) men (who continually demonstrate their sinful predilections), they (the rulers, priests, and entire populace) have transgressed the (Mosaic) covenant; There (at Bethel/Beth-aven – the place where sin has been highlighted) they have dealt treacherously against Me." A more complete justification for the opinion given here would have to include a more detailed analysis of the entire book of Hosea, but enough has been given to see the intended direction.

The back-and-forth above shows the complicated nature of sorting out the views of this verse in an often overlooked Bible book. To close out the discussion, several observations about method should be made. First, one should not reject a certain view based solely on a predetermined covenant theology or dispensational theology. There is no need to posit a theological motivation for an interpretation. Let the text take you to a conclusion through the maze of options. Dispensationalists affirm that exegesis developing a biblical theology leads to proper theological conclusions. We should never let theology enter into the process too soon. However, it must be acknowledged that in the case of Hosea 6:7, one must almost decide their view before they finalize the translation. I am reminded of A. T. Robertson's famous statement, "When the

grammarian has finished, the theologian steps in, and sometimes before the grammarian is through.”⁴²

Second, a corollary of the above point is that the evidence points to a mixture of theological viewpoints among the scholars on all sides of the debate about Hosea 6:7 and whether it supports a covenant of works between God and Adam in Genesis 2. For example, covenantalists Horton, Robertson, Grudem, and Berkhof all see Hosea 6:7 affirming a personal Adam with a reference to a covenant of works in Genesis 2. On the other hand, if Calvin can be considered a covenant theologian, he would argue that there is no mention of the personal Adam in Hosea. Matthew Henry, a covenantalist, follows Calvin on this interpretation. On the dispensational side, Chafer affirms a covenant of works in Genesis 2 without invoking Hosea 6:7 for support, while Gaebelein (a Methodist in his early days) affirms a covenant arrangement between God and Adam in Gen. 2 while using Hosea 6:7 as support. However, it is not clear if Gaebelein views the covenant arrangement in Gen. 2 the way that covenant theologians would do so. The main point here is that there are those in both camps who opt for different interpretations of Hosea 6:7.

Third, when I consulted the LXX to see how it handled Hosea 6:7, I was expecting to see, with no good reason, the personal Adam. Yet, the Jewish translators understood the passage as speaking of men instead. Perhaps this is because of the evidence cited above that the overwhelming number of uses of Adam refer to men or mankind and not to the personal Adam. Conceivably influencing them is also the fact that only in the early chapters of Genesis does the personal name abound. The LXX is certainly not primary evidence. The Hebrew text is far more important. Nonetheless, the significance of the Septuagint should not be undervalued.

⁴² A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1934), 389.

Finally, all views have a measure of respectability. There appears to be an honest attempt to wrestle with the details exegetically. While some interpreters may decide the case theologically, humility in interpretation of this difficult verse is always in style.

Conditional Promise Markers in the New Covenant Texts of Jeremiah 31 & 33

Christopher Watson

Key Words: Jeremiah 31, 33, New Covenant, Israel, Church

Introduction

Dispensationalists consistently argue that the new covenant (as stated in Jeremiah 31:31-34, as well as other passages in the Prophets) is primarily for Israel.¹ Progressive Covenantalism (PC) consistently makes the argument that the New Testament church is the right and proper inheritor of the New Covenant.²

Before discussing the New Covenant, covenants are not some sort of special theological agreement that exist only between God and man – they are best understood in their ancient near eastern (ANE) context. In simplest explanation, covenants are legal contracts/agreements. Gerstenberger lists three elements of a covenant: “the mutual agreement (declaration), the drafted (or just understood) stipulations, the invocation of the

No AI was used in the writing of this paper.

¹However, dispensationalists disagree on the relationship of the church with the new covenant. See Michael Stallard, *Dispensational Understanding of the New Covenant* (Regular Baptist Press, 2012). Kaiser correctly states the issue: “Just as the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants were made directly with each of these men, so the new covenant was made with all the house of Israel and the whole house of Judah. Putting it in this form may open up some new paths for discussion, for while there seems to be no argument over who was originally addressed, there is everything but a consensus when it comes to identifying who participates in the benefits of all three covenants.” Walter C. Jr. Kaiser, “The Old Promise and the New Covenant: Jeremiah 31:31-34,” *JETS* 15, no. 1 (1972), 15.

²See Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant* (Crossway, 2012), 496-502.

curse.”³ He goes on to argue that the most important part of the covenant statement is the curse itself.⁴ The stipulations are often wrapped up into the curse. “If the curse which threatens the transgressor is a bond protecting the covenant relationship as a whole, the individual stipulations have to be seen in this framework too. This means that the curse formulations are necessary corollaries of each individual stipulation.”⁵ What is often ignored about Jeremiah 31 is that v 35-38, under Gerstenberger’s analysis of covenants themselves (and although Gerstenberger is dealing directly with Ex 19-20 rather than Jer 31), would constitute the conditions (i.e. curses) of the New Covenant. McCarthy responds to the concept of whether a covenant can be “conditional” by stating, “This is unrealistic. All covenants, all contracts have their conditions. They must be defined somehow or other. These definitions are their conditions or stipulations which may often be assumed.”⁶ It is this paper’s contention that Jer 31:35-37 constitutes the conditions/curses of the New Covenant. They are conditions because they fit the grammatical form of conditional statements. They are curses because they are listed in a negative sense – a sense in which Israel ceases to be a people under the blessing. As Gerstenberger summarizes,

Just as the treaty stipulations are merely the terms (or exemplary terms) of a covenant previously concluded, so they are also intimately tied to the protective curse formulations. Thus, in form and function, the stipulations, no matter what their phrasing may be, are links between compact and curse. They fill in the span between initiation and termination of an alliance, and they are nothing by their own right.⁷

³Erhard Gerstenberger, “Covenant and Commandment,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84, no. 1 (1965): 45.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., 46.

⁶Dennis J. McCarthy, “Covenant in the Old Testament: The Present State of Inquiry,” *CBQ* 27, no. 3 (1965): 218.

⁷Gerstenberger, “Covenant and Commandment,” 46.

The New Covenant is found in Jer. 31:31-34 is the text that is listed as the New Covenant, quoted by the author of Hebrews in Heb. 8:8-12. However, Jeremiah 31 is not the only covenant-related text that deals directly with the concept of the restoration of Israel after captivity. Jeremiah 33 is related to the New Covenant promises of Jeremiah 31 – both in proximity, promises, and structure (this is a minor point of the paper, but a section on this is included as it is a central part of the argument relating the two conditional statements). This paper will argue that (1) the conditional statements in Jeremiah 31:35-37 and Jeremiah 33:19-26 are directly related to both each other and the covenant promises in their preceding contexts, (2) that the referents mentioned within the conditional passages refer to a specific people(s) who existed prior to Jeremiah’s prophecies, and (3) the conditional statements within the two texts constitute the conditions that must occur for a future in which the curses of the New Covenant are carried out.

The Conditional Statements: An Examination of Content

In order to demonstrate the similarity between the covenant passages of Jeremiah 31 and 33, it is necessary to look at the structure and content of the two texts. The covenant passages of Jeremiah 31:31-37 and Jeremiah 33:14-26 are similarly structured. In general, the two texts follow the structure of:

- (1) Covenant Promises
 - Jeremiah 31:31-34
 - Jeremiah 33:14-18

- (2) The First Conditional
 - Jer 31:35-36
 - Jer 33:19-22

- (3) The Second Conditional
 - Jer 31:37
 - Jer 33:25-26

Unlike the conditional statements in Jer 31, Jer 33 contains an interlude (described below) between the two conditionals that acts as a direct rebuttal to those who make the claim that God has rejected Israel as a nation.

In specific, the conditional statements are structured in a surprisingly similar manner.

A. “Thus says Yahweh” (כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה)

B. Protasis: a statement of inviolable natural law

C. Apodosis: a negative statement related to the promises made in the previous section about the covenant.

The first conditional statement of Jer 31 begins by stating the natural laws: “Thus says the Lord, the one giving the sun for light in the day and the natural order of the moon and stars for light by night, the one agitating the seas and rolling the waves, Yahweh Sabaoth (the Lord Almighty) is his name.”⁸ The protasis is immediately given: “If these natural orders cease from before me declares Yahweh..” The word “Natural order” or “statutes” (קִהּ- used both in 35 to describe the moon and stars and in 36 to describe the entire order of v 35) means “something prescribed.” It is used for the law in general, shares in an inheritance, specific ordinances (either human or divine), and in this case, the natural order.⁹ The apodosis reads, “Then the seed of Israel will cease to be a nation before me forever.” Ironically enough, the word “forever,” in the apodosis is literally “all the days.” And seeing as Gen 1 defines a day by light and darkness (and day 4, the sun to rule the day and the moon to rule the night), if the sun stops ruling the day and the moon stops ruling the night, then, and only then, will Israel cease being a nation (יָלֵךְ).

The second conditional statement of Jer 31 differs from the first in that it begins with the protasis instead of an external statement of natural law. “If the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth below can be explored...” The apodosis reads, “Then I will reject all of the seed of Israel for all they have done says Yahweh.” The passage is followed up with

⁸All translations in this paper are the author’s.

⁹BDB, “קִהּ”, 349.

a statement concerning the physical rebuilding of the city (of Jerusalem), ending with the eschatological statement “It shall be holy to Yahweh, it will not be destroyed and it will not be overthrown again forever.”

The conditional statements in Jer 33 read similarly. The set of conditionals begins with a doubled statement introducing the oracle. “The word of Yahweh was to Jeremiah saying, thus says Yahweh.” The protasis reads, “If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night that day and night do not come at their appointed time...”¹⁰ The apodosis is a statement of declaration of a broken covenant with David. “Then my covenant with David my servant is broken and his son will not rule on his throne and the Levitical priests will not be my ministers.” Unlike the conditional statements in Jer 31, however, positive promises are added to the conditional statements. The comparisons to the expanse of the universe (and consequently the natural order) are still there within the promises here. The promise in the first conditional comes in the form of a comparison – comparing the number of the stars of heaven and the amount of grains of sand of all of the seas as the number of the “seed of David my servant

¹⁰There is a long discussion/disagreement of whether the “covenant” listed here is, in fact, a “creation covenant” or simply metaphorical language for certainty of the sovereignty of God over the created order as well as a settled faith in the consistency of the created order, as if the author is saying, “The sun rises every day. The moon’s pattern can be predicted over its regular cycle. The constellations and the stars can be charted. The tides can be measured and predicted. All of this created order is in the hands of a consistent, sovereign God who never changes.” That statement is slightly different in meaning than “God has created a covenant with creation that the set order will not change.” The results, however, are the same. Dumbrell has an extended section arguing for a creation covenant: William J Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: An Old Testament Covenant Theology* (Paternoster, 2013), 4-60. In a long conversation on whether or not Gen 2 speaks of a covenant with Adam (whether a typical CT “covenant of works” or an Adamic Covenant), Williamson denies any covenant either between Adam and God or the created order and God. Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God’s Unfolding Purpose* (InterVarsity Press, 2007), 44-58. Also see William Van Gemeren, *The Progress of Redemption* (Baker, 1996), 60.

and the Levitical priests ministering to me.” These statements are to be understood as hyperbole – meaning that they will be uncountable in number.

The two conditional statements in Jer 33 are separated by a second statement made by Yahweh reciting what is being said about Yahweh’s relationship with Israel. “Haven’t you seen what this people have said saying, ‘Two of the clans which Yahweh has chosen he has rejected them. And they have despised my people from being a nation before them.’” So the attitude of the surrounding nations who are watching Judah slide into the Babylonian captivity believe that the Jewish God has rejected both kingdoms (clans) – Israel and Judah – as a nation. The second conditional statement, however, sets the pagan’s statement straight. Again, the protasis directly deals with the natural order. “Thus says Yahweh, If my covenant for the day and night [is] not, and the natural order [a “statute” קִיּוּן] [for] the heavens and the earth is not fixed...”¹¹ The apodosis expands the promises above – they are not only for David and the Levitical priests; they are also for the whole of a group of physical descendants. “Then the seed of Jacob and David my servant I will reject, and not take from his [David’s] seed rulers over Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” Like the first conditional in Jer 33, the second conditional ends with a positive statement. This time, however, the statement concerns the whole nation: “Because I will restore them and I will show mercy on them.”

The Conditional Statements and their Direct Promises

The conditional statements in Jer 31:35-37 and 33:19-26 are directly related to the promises preceding said statements. First, the immediate context infers that the statements are directly related. The context of a passage includes, at the very least, the

¹¹The grammar in the Hebrew here has a lacunae – a verb is missing. “Some such verb seems to have dropped out; Hebrew (“if not my covenant with day and night”) is ungrammatical. Some, following Duhamel, read *bara’ti* for *beriti* (“If I did not create day and night.”)” John Bright, *Jeremiah*. AB. (Doubleday, 1965), 294. BHS proposes emending “my covenant” to “I created” in order to supply a verb. However, this change eliminates the echo of v. 20.

passages preceding and following the examined verses. So the conditional statements of both chapters make more sense when read in context of their greater chapter. Second, as Jer 31:31 states that this is the text of a covenant, conditional statements and curses would, in fact, be expected to be found within the text. Jeremiah 31:31-34 contains no grammatical conditions. Jeremiah 31:35ff contain conditions that directly relate to the preceding text. And thus, to call the New Covenant “unconditional” is a misreading of the text, as the text contains conditional statements. The conditionals are, in fact, a part of the entire text concerning the New Covenant.

Second, the content of the conditional statement of 33:19-26 is very similar to the promises found in 33:14-18. Jer 33:14-18 offers promises again to the “house of Israel and the house of Judah” (14b). The promises directly refer to a “Branch of David” – as a king “who shall execute justice and righteousness on the earth.” (15). Verses 17-18 refer back to the Davidic covenant of 2 Sam 7 and the Levitical covenant of Numbers 25:10-13.¹² The first conditional strophe of Jeremiah 33:19-22 directly refers to the “covenant with David My servant” as well as the “Levitical priests, my ministers.” The second conditional statement expands the recipients of the promises to greater than David or the Levites¹³ insomuch that it focuses on the “descendants of Jacob”

¹²Kaiser acknowledges that “the new covenant is a continuation of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants with the same single, promise doctrine sustained in them all.” He refuses to acknowledge that the promises made concerning the “Levites, my ministers” are promised future, eschatological work, stating, “no features have been deleted except the ceremonies and ordinances of the ‘old’ Mosaic covenant whose phasing out was planned for long ago.” Kaiser, “New Covenant,” 21.

¹³Thompson speaks of an ‘expansion of horizons’ in relation to the promises made to David. “The horizon is extended again. The promise of v. 22 is extended to include the whole nation. The two families—Israel and Judah—had suffered divine judgment and had been rejected . . . even though Yahweh had once chosen . . . them. Israel’s election had failed, and they held Yahweh’s families . . . in contempt also, not regarding them as a nation. . . . Yahweh will no more reject the *descendants* . . . of Jacob (Israel), or fail to select from David’s descendants rulers for the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, than he would break the order

and the “descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” as those who will be ruled by a descendant of “David My servant.”

Likewise, if the conditional statements of Jer 33 relate directly to the covenant promises found in the preceding verses, it stands to reason that the conditional statements of Jer 31 directly relate to the promises found before them. The apodoses of Jer 31 are for the “seed of Israel” – which relates to the “house of Israel and the house of Judah” of 31:31. The “seed of Israel” is more in reference to the changed name of Jacob (see Gen 32:28; 35:10) rather than to the specific northern Kingdom as in the words of Jer 31:31.¹⁴ The promise of restoration and the conditions of those promises are for both kingdoms.¹⁵ The two apodoses of Jeremiah 31 can be paraphrased (stated in a grammatically positive sense, as opposed to the grammatically negative sense in the text itself): Israel will always be a nation in the sight of God and God will never reject Israel for what they have done. The promises of spiritual restoration found in Jer 31:31-34 are, in fact, the necessary and sufficient conditions for (1) Israel to remain a nation in the sight of God and (2) for Israel to not be rejected by God. What is necessary for Israel is ultimately the statement made as the summary of the New Covenant promises in Jer 31:34, “Because I will forgive their sin and I will not remember their iniquities again.” So, in order for

of day and night. The future was assured. The fortunes of Israel would be restored and Yahweh would *have mercy* . . . on them.” J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 1980), 603.

¹⁴Israel, specifically the northern kingdom of Israel, ceased to exist with the Assyrian captivity around the year 733 BC. Jeremiah was during the time prior to and through the start of the Babylonian captivity (beginning in 605 BC). The New Covenant, in historical context, is specifically written to bring hope both to a nation/kingdom that no longer existed as well as a nation/kingdom that either was in the process of being completely dismantled or was about to be dismantled.

¹⁵Ezekiel 37:15-28 parallels the New Covenant text of Jeremiah 31. However, the Ezekiel passage deals directly with a recombining of the two kingdoms into one.

Israel to be restored as a covenant nation, forgiveness for all of their sin is essential.¹⁶

The Referents within the Conditional Statements

The direct references of the conditional statements of Jeremiah 31 are “Israel” as a nation and “all the descendants of Israel.”¹⁷ The direct references of the conditional statements of Jeremiah 33 are (paraphrased) “descendants of David as king over Israel” and “Levitical priests making sacrifices”¹⁸ as well as the “descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” For any reader of Jeremiah’s words during the life of Jeremiah, the exile, and post-exilic era, the referents are clear. The recipients of the promises are the former northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah, the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. A direct descendant of David is promised to rule over that restored kingdom. And priests from the descendants of Levi are promised to do the prescribed sacrificial work within that kingdom.

¹⁶Mulzac states, “One may also note that this forgiveness is complete and comprehensive; neither is there any uncertainty that God will forgive. This idea is embodied in the technical term, *salah*, which is used exclusively of God’s offer of forgiveness. It is never employed to refer to people forgiving each other. It thereby suggests that only by divine innovation could such a sin problem be effectively resolved.” Kenneth Mulzac, “The Remnant and the New Covenant in the Book of Jeremiah,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 34, no. 2 (1996): 246.

¹⁷Lalleman states, “These verses underline the certainty that God will keep his promises. Just as God’s laws of creation cannot be abolished, so Israel’s position before God is secured forever. Similar language is used in 33:19-22.” Hetty Lalleman, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, TOTC (InterVarsity Press, 2013), 234.

¹⁸There is much hatred on social media and in popular literature against dispensationalists who claim that the sacrificial system will be restored, because the sacrificial system has been “fulfilled by Christ.” However, Jeremiah 33:18 states, “The Levitical priests will not be cut off before me offering whole burnt offerings and sacrificing grain offerings.” The text defining the practice of whole burnt offerings is in Lev 1, and the text defining the practice of a grain offering is Lev 2. So, to say that the physical sacrifices and the sacrificial system is not a part of Israel’s restoration is again ignoring what is explicitly stated in the text.

The original reader and recipient of Jer 31 and 33 is expected to have in mind the foundation of the nation on Sinai in Ex 19, as well as the promises of captivity and restoration in Deut 28-30. The text implicitly assumes knowledge of the promises made to David in 2 Sam 7 and to the Levites in Num 25. Within the exile and during the reconstruction, the Israelites are promised status as a nation. Even during the time of the domination of the Roman empire – ending with both the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD and the complete decimation of Israel during Bar Kokhba rebellion in 136 AD, any Jew reading Jeremiah would rightfully see a future restoration of the kingdom as well as a future rule from one from the line of David (even after their rejection of Christ as Messiah), as well as a restored Levitical priesthood.

Gentry and Wellum, the founders of the idea of “Progressive Covenantalism” (PC),¹⁹ correctly state that “The

¹⁹It is this author’s opinion that PC is an attempt at maintaining both a consistent Baptist theology with a consistent Reformed Biblical Theology (a la Geerhardus Vos). Locatell criticizes PC’s use of the new covenant in its defense of credobaptism on the basis that Gentry and Wellum claim that Jer 31 promises a completely regenerate new covenant community. He argues that the phrase “from the least of them to the greatest of them” is a merism rather than a statement of absolutes. “Thus, on a more contextual reading, it becomes clear that the Old/New Covenant contrast in Jeremiah 31:34 is between present pervasive lack of knowledge of the Lord and the future pervasive presence of the knowledge of the Lord. In the coming days the present situation in Israel would be flipped on its head. While at that time Jeremiah was amazed by the pervasive lack of knowledge of the Lord even among the great, the time was coming when he could expect to find a pervasive presence of it even among the least. While at that time there was a pervasive lack of knowledge of the Lord among God’s people that affected everyone without distinction, the days were coming when such knowledge would be poured out on all without distinction.” This “all without distinction” versus “all without exception” language matters here. Locatell is arguing that “They shall all know me” is akin to a five-point Calvinist saying that “Christ died for all,” in that he died for all sorts of people, not that “Christ died for all” without exception. Christian Locatell, “Jeremiah 31:34, New Covenant Membership, and Baptism,” *Scriptura* 114 (2015): 10.

house of Israel and the house of Judah' are expressly mentioned in 31:31 to show that the previously divided kingdom(s) according to the text of chapters 30-31 will be united."²⁰ However, they continue and immediately attempt to trace the recipients of the New Covenant, not through the text of the Old Testament and the passage itself but through the New Testament.²¹ In their argumentation of Romans 11,

Paul has just portrayed Israel in terms of an olive tree, some of whose natural branches have been removed and some of whose branches are now non-Jewish branches grafted into one root and tree. What this means is that the new humanity and restored Israel is based on faith and covenant relationship to the Lord rather than on ethnicity. . . . We must interpret 'all Israel' within the context of Paul's teaching in Romans 11. There is no separate future for physical Israel outside of the church--the only humanity to inhabit the new creation. And this is not so-called replacement theology. It is what the prophets teach about the renovated and restored Zion.²²

Interestingly enough, they simply continue on in their discussion of the New Testament without any demonstration of the assertion in the last sentence. What do the prophets teach concerning the renovated and restored Zion in the Old Testament?²³ It certainly

²⁰Gentry, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 496.

²¹*Ibid.*, 496-502.

²²*Ibid.*, 501.

²³The prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Ezekiel, Zechariah, as well as most others carry a major theme of punishment and suffering followed by restoration for national Israel. One cannot read through the Old Testament with open eyes without acknowledging that as a fact. Waltke, in his *Old Testament Theology*, repeatedly argues the promises for Israel in the Old Testament for land, blessing, and a ruler, (and in the following, specifically concerning the land), "The literature of the Second Temple era shares in common the belief that *I Am's* promise to give the descendants of the patriarchs the Land gives Israel an eternal right to the Land; it assumes an indissoluble connection between Israel and the Land. More-over, the literature shares the common vision of Israel's restoration to a renewed Holy Land." Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 566. Waltke completely removes an

is not about Israel and the Church. Typical dispensationalists, as well as Gentry and Wellum, agree that the church is new. However, the nature of the newness is different from dispensationalism and the church. Gentry and Wellum argue that

the church is *new* in redemptive-history precisely because she is the community of the new covenant. With the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, all of the previous covenants have reached their fulfillment, so that the salvation realities that Jesus achieves and applies to his people are *not* exactly the same as under the old covenant. This is *not* to say, contra dispensational theology, that Israel is ontologically different than the church and thus still has privileges distinct from Christ and the church. Rather, the *newness* of the church is a redemptive-historical newness, rooted in the coming of Christ and the inauguration of the new covenant.²⁴

What Gentry and Wellum ignore, however, is that the spiritual promises made to Israel in Jer 31 are rooted in previous Old Testament texts.²⁵ The metaphor of the “law written on the

entire chapter of his book’s exegesis (a correct reading, in my understanding) by a single paragraph: “In this chapter we argue that the New Testament redefines Land in three ways: first, spiritually, as a reference to Christ’s person; second, transcendently, as a reference to heavenly Jerusalem; and third, eschatologically, as a reference to the new Jerusalem after Christ’s second coming. By “redefine” we mean that whereas “Land” in the Old Testament refers to Israel’s life in Canaan, in the New Testament “Land” is transmuted to refer to life in Christ. In other words, the New Testament skins like a banana the Old Testament references to the Land as real estate in order to expose its spiritual food. Christian theologians since Augustine have contended that “the New is in the Old concealed, and the Old is in the New revealed.” As for Land, I contend that the Old Testament conceals and the New reveals that Canaan has the hidden manna of three eternal, spiritual truths involved in the life of God’s elect in Christ. In addition, I contend that Land in the Old Testament is a type of the Christian life in Christ. *Ibid.*, 560.

²⁴Gentry, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 684-685.

²⁵Similar to Gentry and Wellum, Moskala downplays the importance of the Old Testament texts concerning the metaphors for regeneration. He states that “the first covenant was written on stone but should have been

hearts” is a metaphor for regeneration²⁶ and finds its roots back in the *Shema* of Deut 6, “These words which I have commanded you today shall be on your hearts” – “these words” being a

internalized the same way as the new one is to be implanted in the heart (Deut 6:5; 30:10-14; Ps 40:8; 37:30-31; Isa 51:7; Heb 9:15).” Note that he states, “should have been,” when the language of Ps 40:8 and Is 51:7 define realities that existed in the times of the Old Testament. Jiri Moskala, “The Newness of the New Covenant,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 32 (2021): 60.

²⁶Willis, arguing from the perspective of the Stone-Campbell Movement, criticizes his own movement’s history of interpretation of the new covenant, specifically in how they have historically understood the concepts of “forgiveness” in the Old Testament along with the repetition of animal sacrifices. So, with the sacrificial system, “sins are being brought to mind so that guilt is sustained. On this basis many SCM [Stone-Campbell Movement] writers assume that when the Lord promises to ‘remember their sins no more,’ he is referring to mental activity and the continuing judgment that a person is guilty of sin. We are supposed to see, therefore, that sins were ‘remembered’ (i.e., held against the offender) under the Mosaic covenant, but God has removed the need for sacrifices so that sins will no longer be ‘remembered’ under the Christian covenant.” Timothy M. Willis, “‘I Will Remember Their Sins No More’ Jeremiah 31, The New Covenant, and The Forgiveness of Sins,” *Restoration Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (2011): 5. Willis, desiring to explain the meaning of the sacrificial system in relation to the covenants argues that “this does not mean that the sacrificial system of the OT was a string of futile acts, nor does it imply that their purpose was to show the futility of such acts. . . . Why would God require humans to offer animal sacrifices if animal sacrifices are incapable of effecting forgiveness? The answer is a simple enigma: because God says he will accept the sacrifices for that purpose. . . . Physical blood atones for spiritual impurity because God decrees it to do so. God accepts the blood of an animal—brought forward by someone with the appropriate heart—as the atonement for the sins committed. The blood of the animals in and of itself does not provide forgiveness; only when God imputes that power to the blood is it efficacious in dealing with sin.” *Ibid.*, 10. So instead of arguing that regeneration existed as a result of justification by faith within the Old Testament, Willis argues that the keeping of the sacrifices is an actual, sacramental event (much like the Stone-Campbell movement’s view of baptism). His theology, at least in this fashion, is consistent.

reference to the Ten Commandments of Deut 5.²⁷ Deuteronomy also uses the metaphor of a “circumcised heart” (Deut 10:16, 30:6). The metaphor of the “law on the heart” is used – not of a promised future – but an actual, present reality for some in the Old Testament.²⁸ So the spiritual promises made within the New Covenant themselves are not *new*; what is new is “at the making of the new covenant, Israel will be nationally redeemed, and all the Israelites who enter the kingdom will have experienced personal salvation.”²⁹

The Conditions of the Statements

The conditional statements following after the covenant passages of Jer 31 and 33 state the circumstances that *must* occur (in the form of a covenantal curse) in order for Yahweh to reject national Israel, the Davidic line as king, and the restoration of the Levitical priesthood. The four protases make statements concerning the sun, moon, stars, and tides (Jer 31:35), the

²⁷The author would contend that the *Shema* of Deut 6:4-6 is a kind of a “gospel call” for the Old Testament – with loving God being the means of “acquiring” salvation (much like faith is the stated means in the New Testament). It would also be contended that faith and love are two sides of the same coin – one is necessary for the other, and vice versa.

²⁸The expression “law on/in the heart” is used of David in Psalm 40:8 in direct contrast to the sacrifices required of the Law. It is also used in Isaiah 51:7 as a description of the people who “know righteousness.” Adeyemi attempts to equate the “law on the heart” with the Pauline reference to the “Law of Christ” in 1 Cor 9:21 and Gal 6:2. However, he fails to recognize the metaphorical language throughout the Old Testament where the “law on the heart” is imagery for regeneration – not a literal law. Femi Adeyemi, “The New Covenant and the Law of Christ,” *BibSac* 163 (2006): 438–52.

²⁹Eric A. White, “Comparing and Contrasting” (Central Baptist Theological Seminary, 2006).⁷⁵ White’s entire thesis is an examination of the differences between the promises made within the Sinaitic covenant and the new covenant is spiritual salvation for the entire nation at a singular point in time in the future. Goswell adds to the conversation by arguing that “The forgiveness promised by God in Jer 31 is best interpreted as the precondition for the promised covenant to come into force, not as a benefit of that covenant.” Gary Goswell, “Forgiveness and the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31,” *ZAW* 134, no. 3, (2022): 376.

immeasurability of the earth and space (31:37), and the normal timing of day and night (33:20, 25). Each of the four protases is effectively, in the words of Thompson, an “*argumentum ad absurdum*” – making a statement that only if the natural order ever ceases, then God will fail to keep his promises to Israel.³⁰ Wright summarizes a normal reading well: “What is more certain than that the stars will shine in the night sky and the sun will rise tomorrow? That’s how much you can be sure that God will preserve Israel (35-36). What is more unimaginable than measuring the height of the sky or the depth of the earth? That’s how unthinkable it is that God could reject ‘the seed of Israel’ (37).”³¹ Mathison summarizes the texts well:

³⁰Thompson, *Jeremiah*, 582.

³¹Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Message of Jeremiah*, The Bible Speaks Today (InterVarsity Press, 2014), 332. Wright also states, “The familiarity with the phrase ‘new covenant’, however, is exegetically dangerous since it can tempt us to read the words of Jeremiah immediately through the lens of their New Testament quotations, rather than through the eyes and ears of those who first heard them or read them in his edited book. It’s as if we run a sharp knife around these verses, put the isolated text in our briefcase, and hurry off to open it and read it at Horizon 2 (the horizon of the New Testament fulfillment). Now we shall have plenty to ask and answer when we do get to that Horizon, and indeed we shall see that there are dimensions of this text that will send us on to Horizon 3 as well. But it is a first principle of good exegesis always to start at Horizon 1, the world of the Old Testament itself. We must take this (and every) text in its context,” 323. This author believes that Wright is correct in starting with the Old Testament but is uncomfortable with his “expansion of horizons” that he sees throughout the New Testament. He argues that the New Testament expands the promise to include those who come to Christ in faith, and sees Romans 11 as a final inclusion of Jewish people into the people of God. “And Paul’s longing is to see that love of God for the Jewish people ultimately leading them to be grafted back into their own olive tree, through the mercy of God and the obedience of faith. That is, he does not imagine a distinct or second covenant arrangement for Jews independent of what God has done through Christ, but longs to see them entering into the promise of the new covenant that was original given to them, and doing so through faith in Jesus the Messiah.” *Ibid.*, 338. However, although he sees a future promise for Israel, he is forced to spiritualize Jer 31:40 – the promise of the rebuilt and restored Jerusalem as occurring within the New

Following the prophecy of the new covenant is a declaration of the inseparable bond between God and Israel. The permanence of God's relationship with Israel is compared to the permanence of the created order.... This promise is noteworthy because it is stated in absolutely unconditional terms. For those facing the prospect of seventy years of exile, it is a source of great hope for the future of Israel.³²

The conditional statements (especially the words of the apodoses) act as a statement of *terminus ad quem* for the words of the new covenant. At what point do the promises made to the specific recipients of the new covenant end? Or rather, in meeting with the words of the text, what are the conditions under which the promises of the new covenant end? The conditions are directly linked to the natural order of the heavens and the earth.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that (1) the conditional statements in Jeremiah 31:35-37 and Jeremiah 33:19-26 are related to the covenant promises found within their direct contexts, (2) that the referents of the conditional statements are national Israel, a descendant of David, and the Levitical priesthood, and (3) the conditional statements within the two texts constitute the necessary conditions for God to cast off Israel.

And, if these statements are indeed true, then the text is pointing at the absurdity of God's rejection of Israel as a nation and as a people. It would be absurd to think that God would reject the nation for their sin. It would be absurd to think that there will not be a future kingdom for Israel over which a descendant of David does not rule and the Levitical priests do not make sacrifices. The new covenant is, in fact, conditional, but not in the sense that previous generations of scholars have spoken of

Jerusalem of Rev 21-22 – instead of stating that the prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah promise a rebuilt and restored Jerusalem for Israel during the messianic kingdom.

³²Keith A. Mathison, *From Age to Age: The Unfolding of Biblical Eschatology* (P&R Publishing, 2009), 231.

conditionality within the covenants. The conditions are clearly laid out – and the conditions for God to reject Israel is that the natural, created order effectively collapses and ceases to act as it has since the creation of the world.

Yesterday, the sun rose and the sun set. This morning, the sun rose. The moon followed its predictable cycle. The stars and constellations were seen in their predictable seasonable patterns. At the beach, not too far from here, the tides came in and went out – completely predictable as normal. The James Webb telescope has further demonstrated that man cannot see nor measure the edges of the universe, and the ground below is still largely unexplored. As such, God has not rejected Israel as a nation. God will certainly restore Israel as a kingdom with Christ ruling and reigning on the throne of David in Jerusalem, with the Levitical priests restored in the sacrificial system.

Virginity: Reframing the Discussion

Mark McGinniss

Key Words: virginity, virgin, to know, sexual knowledge

Introduction

Jill struggled with what happened last night. She knew before she texted the invite that having Jack over to her apartment alone was not one of her brightest ideas. Now she knew why. To be fair, it wasn't all Jack's fault. She participated, willing and actively in all that took place on her living room couch. Before last night Jill had maintained fairly conservative sexual standards. That Jack loved her was not her concern. She knew he did and she was sure that fact contributed to their transgressing a multitude of sexual boundaries in just a few short hours. While they had not gone "all the way," they had gone far enough that she felt guilty this morning. Jill struggled to define herself in light of her new sexual experiences. Two nights ago, Jill would have shared at her college Bible study that she was a virgin and intended to maintain that identification until marriage. Before last night all she and Jack had done was French kissed. But last night they had progressed well beyond "just kissing. "Matter of fact they had done "everything" but intercourse! As Jill played with her cereal at breakfast and gazed out her window at the rolling hills she wrestled with the question, "Am I still a virgin?"

Virginity or to be a virgin has been the gold standard of defining sexual conduct down through the centuries.¹ Not only

¹This work recognizes that there are two aspects of virginity or being a virgin. The first is biological as it relates to females. Biologically, virginity is defined by the physical state of the hymen. If the female's hymen is intact, she is considered a virgin. If the hymen is ruptured, she is not considered a virgin. (Deut 22:14-17 gives evidence of testing for

has this term functioned as the standard of sexual purity, the concept of virginity has also been highly prized in most every society, especially as it concerns female sexual activity. However, today, while the identification still seems desirable by many, there is considerable confusion as to what actually constitutes “being a virgin.”

Studying the history of the popular teen magazine, *Seventeen*, Stephanie R. Medley-Rath found a changing landscape for the term over the past twenty years.

Seventeen stressed the importance of self-determination of virginity status. This issue (September 1993) illustrates the movement from a specific definition of virginity loss in earlier issues to acknowledging the importance of deciding for one’s self if she or he is still a virgin. *Seventeen* also suggested the word virgin is outdated, because the concept is being applied to activities that were never considered virginal activities in the past, such as oral sex.²

Even Planned Parenthood’s website is unable to define the concept concretely:

A virgin is someone who has never had sex. But “sex” is defined differently by different people. A lot of people think that women and men lose their virginity the first time they have penis-in-vagina intercourse (vaginal sex). But this definition is really limited because it leaves lots of people and other types of sex out of the picture.... So the definition of virginity is complicated.³

biological virginity). The second aspect of virginity concerns one’s sexual activity (both male and female) before marriage regardless of the state of the hymen. It is this aspect that this paper will examine.

² Stephanie R. Medley-Rath “Am I Still a Virgin?": What Counts as Sex in 20 years of *Seventeen*,” *Sexuality and Culture* 11 (2007), 31.

³ “What Does It Mean to be a Virgin?” Planned Parenthood accessed November 18, 2014.

<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/teens/sex/virginity>.

A popular question-and-answer college age website, “Go Ask Alice,” which is produced by Columbia University, offers this Q&A concerning virginity:

Dear Alice,

How do you define a virgin? I have never had any sexual intercourse. However, I live in with my girlfriend and we often have “intimate actions” and oral sex. Are we still considered virgins?

Sign me,
Cherry picker

Dear Cherry picker,

Frustrating as it may be, the simplicity of your question belies the complex definition of the term “virgin.” To some, a virgin is someone who hasn’t had sexual intercourse (that is, penis-to-vagina intercourse). To others, a virgin is a person who has not engaged in any intimate acts, including deep kissing, genital touching, and oral, vaginal, or anal sex. Still others may allow certain intimacies, like kissing and touching below the belt, while excluding other sex acts. Some people believe they are a virgin until they have sex with someone of the opposite sex, while many believe that people who exclusively have same-sex partners can and do lose their virginity. Finally, some believe that people who have been sexually assaulted, but have not had consensual sex, are still virgins. Why the variation? Definitions of virginity are often deeply personal and stem from religious, cultural, historical, and family influences that emphasize different values....Like so many of life’s grey areas, only you can determine if you’re “still a virgin.” You might find guidance from your partner, family, friends, religious leaders, teachers, counselors, books, articles, or other sources. Ultimately, defining such a seemingly simple word could lead to a rich process of self-discovery and growth. Enjoy the journey!

Alice₄

⁴ “Go Ask Alice,” Columbia University, accessed November 18, 2014, <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/definition-virgin>. Questions posed to

Even the medical community displays signs of confusion over the concept of virginity. The Palo Alto Medical Foundation speaking of virginity observes:

Today it's assumed that "virgin" means not having had been penetrated sexually. But what is considered "de-virginizing" penetration is still unclear – does it mean penetration by a penis, finger, tongue, or experience alone?

Even more confusing is how society judges a "virgin." Sometimes the name is used condescendingly, sometimes in high regard, and sometimes simply just as a fact.

So there you have it – the history and confusion of the word "virgin." It still leaves a question as to what "virginity" really means. As society is still confused, it's up to us to develop our own personal interpretation of the word.⁵

Melissa Fabello, managing editor of "Everyday Feminism," writes dogmatically that the concept of virginity is simply an outdated idea:

"Alice" are answered by professionals: "*Go Ask Alice!* is supported by a team of Columbia University health promotion specialists, health care providers, and other health professionals, along with a staff of information and research specialists and writers. Our team members have advanced degrees in public health, health education, medicine, counseling, and many other relevant fields." Accessed November 18, 2014, <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/about-us#1>.

⁵ "Defining Virginity," Palo Alto Medical Foundation Sutter Health, accessed November 18, 2014. <http://www.pamf.org/teen/sex/virginity/defining.html>.

Confusion of the term is not limited to this one medical foundation. Researcher Stephanie R. Medley-Rath observes through her study, "Even sex researchers, however, do not consistently define "virgin," "sex," or "intercourse." Stephanie R. Medley-Rath "Am I Still a Virgin?": What Counts as Sex in 20 years of *Seventeen*," *Sexuality and Culture* 11 (2007), 26.

Let's start with the biggest myth of all – that virginity is something quantifiable. Let's bust this myth once and for all (and you can trust me on this one): There is no medical or biological definition of virginity. None. Nothing.

There is no real definition of virginity except for, you know, the one in the dictionary, which defines it as “the state of never having had sexual intercourse.” But the problem with that definition is that it doesn't mean anything. Because “sexual intercourse” refers to penetrative sex.

So what about all of the people who have plenty of sex, but aren't having penetrative sex? Does this mean that they are forever virgins? How “far” can you go until what you're doing is officially S-E-X? Does manual or digital sex count? Oral? What about penetration with a toy?

The truth is: Different people define sex differently. So even the one definition of virginity that we have doesn't work. Virginity as a concept was invented as an attempt to control (female) sexuality. It's just an idea. And ideas can change.⁶

This lexical confusion is not solely based on anecdotal evidence. A 2006 study by SIECUS, Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, finds:

that there is much debate among young people today over the definition of the terms “abstinence” and “virginity.”

83.5% of adolescents believed that an individual was still a *virgin* if he/she had engaged in genital touching.

70.6% of adolescents believed that an individual was still a *virgin* if he/she had engaged in oral sex.

16.1% of adolescents believed that an individual was still a *virgin* if he/she had engaged in anal sex.

⁶ Melissa A. Fabello, “4 Myths About Virginity,” *Everyday Feminism Magazine*, accessed November 18, 2014, <http://everydayfeminism.com/2013/08/4-myths-about-virginity>.

5.8% of adolescents believed that an individual was still a *virgin* if he/she had engaged in vaginal intercourse.⁷

What I find interesting is that people want to maintain the term, “virgin,” but with their own definition. Why? Why not follow Fabello and jettison the term and concept altogether? Is there still a certain degree of shame if one cannot claim the title “virgin”? Do we want to be able to look our future partner in the eye and confess, “Yes, I am a virgin—even though I shared oral sex with a half-a-dozen or so people”?

I would suggest there is a certain dignity of identification one wants to maintain by being able to claim the term, “virgin.” Changing the definition of the word is an attempt to deal with the divine guilt that naturally comes when the traditional standard of virginity is transgressed. Individuals, even believers, want to let themselves off the divine hook for violating God’s standards by adopting a more flexible definition. If I am able to define virginity my own way and if I maintain my own standard of “virginity” (even if it is not God’s), then I can rationalize my immorality and claim the guilt is false because I have not violated *my* “virginity” standards. Therefore, I can still claim the badge,

⁷ “Common Definitions of Virginity and Abstinence May Put Some Youth at Risk,” Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, accessed November 18, 2014, <http://www.siecus.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Feature.showFeature&featureID=1038>.

While not statistically valid, I conducted a poll at BBC concerning the topic of virginity using the same six question as this study: Is a (boy/girl) still (a virgin/abstinent) if he/she has (a) touched someone’s genitals for a long time, (b) given oral sex to someone, (c) gotten oral sex from someone, (d) had sexual intercourse, (e) given anal intercourse to someone, and (f) gotten anal intercourse from someone? Out of approximately 40 in attendance approximately 20 participated in the survey. The results of the text response were as follows: question a) 11 Yes; 9 No. Question b) 12 Yes; 10 No. Question c) 14 Yes; 8 No. Question d) 0 Yes; 19 No. Question e) 14 Yes; 5 No. Question f) 13 Yes; 5 No. In a study of the popular female teen magazine, *Seventeen*, Stephanie R. Medley-Rath found that “Overwhelmingly, penile–vaginal intercourse is the only sex that causes virginity loss.” *Am I Still a Virgin?* 30.

“virgin.” The cultural definitions that are in vogue certainly allow for such individual linguistic gymnastics.

These language games are not only being played on the campuses of public or private universities and state colleges. Those within conservative religious institutions, which would include our churches and Christian colleges, employ these same loose “definitions” of virginity.⁸ Listen to Lauren, 16,

I grew up in a Christian town. Since the day I was told what sex was, I was told it was sacred and made only for marriage. When I turned 15 I was given a ring by my daddy and in return I promised to remain a virgin until I was married. To this day I’ve stayed good on my promise and haven’t had sex. I have, however, given oral sex and been fingered. But I do consider myself a virgin.⁹

While the definition of virginity seems fluid in practice, two popular dictionaries recognize the traditional understanding of virginity. While *Wikipedia* seems to be caught in the cultural morass as it begins defining the term, it concludes by recognizing the traditional understanding:

Virginity is the state of a person who has never engaged in sexual intercourse. There are cultural and religious traditions which place special value and significance on this state, especially in the case of unmarried females, associated with

⁸ While she does not speak for the majority of the Jewish Orthodox community, Sara N. S. Meirowitz, who identifies herself “as a sometimes-member and observer” of such communities writes, “Others draw perhaps specious borders around forbidden encounters, consigning vaginal intercourse alone into the definition of sex, as President Clinton did before them. I hear of couples who have anal sex to preserve technical virginity, and I’ve been told that ‘oral sex is ok as long as you swallow.’ If our parents heard these stories, they’d blush.” Sara N. S. Meirowitz, “Not Like a Virgin,” in *The Passionate Torah*, edited by Danya Ruttenberg (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 174. Footnote 5 provides some evidence that at least one Christian college does not have a firm grasp on a traditional definition of virginity either.

⁹ 1. Sondra Forsyth, “The Virginity Code,” *CosmoGirl* 8, no. 7 (September 2006): 228–31, accessed November 19, 2014, sondraforsyth.com/uploads/Virginity_Code_CosmoGirl_Forsyth.pdf.

notions of personal purity, honor and worth. Like chastity, the concept of virginity has traditionally involved sexual abstinence before marriage, and then to engage in sexual acts only with the marriage partner.¹⁰

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), which is the definitive dictionary of the English language, evidences no such confusion over what constitutes virginity:

The condition of being or remaining in a state of chastity; abstinence from or avoidance of all sexual relations; bodily chastity, as a virtue of great commendation, or as conferring especial merit or sanctity; the mode of life characterized by this, esp. as adopted from religious motives.¹¹

While I have not conducted a survey, scientific or otherwise, I doubt many are getting their definitions of virginity from the *OED* nor are they modeling their sexual activity by it either. This dynamic not only causes linguistic confusion but a confusion as to what is the will of God in the area of individual sexuality (1 Thess 4). The church, parents and Christian colleges are preaching abstinence and the virtue of maintaining virginity before marriage, but young people's understanding of these terms and concepts are far different than what parents, churches and teachers intend. Robin G. Sawyer, et al. have rightly observed, "The need to accurately define what is meant by abstinence, and other related terms such as sexual intercourse and virginity is critically important on many levels. If adolescents are encouraged to be abstinent, then they need a precise definition of what that really means."¹²

¹⁰ "Virginity," Wikipedia, accessed November 19, 2014, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virginity>

¹¹ "Virginity," *Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed November 19, 2014. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/223750?redirectedFrom=Virginity#eid>. Interesting that the OED only defines "virgin" in relationship to females. "Virgin," <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/223735?rskey=BkJrjK&result=1#eid>

¹² Robin G. Sawyer, et al., "We Didn't Have Sex... Did We?" College Students' Perceptions Of Abstinence," *American Journal of Health Studies*:

Lauren's understanding of virginity reveals the result of this confusion: believers are generating their own definition of the term, "virginity," and subsequently measuring their own sexual practices by their own definition. There seems to be two issues that need to be addressed concerning "virginity": 1) Who gets to define the term? 2) What is the true definition?

Who Gets to Define the Term?

Based on a quick read through the Internet the cultural consensus (outside of conservative Christianity, Jewish, and Islamic communities) seems to be that the individual should be able to develop his or her own definition of virginity within the confines of his or her own sexual orientation and experience. The need for such a change from a traditional understanding of the term to who decides the definition is because the sexual landscape has experienced such a dramatic upheaval over recent decades (although the *OED* has not reflected this change yet). The issue this raises is clear: if everyone is able to define the term anyway they choose, then the word is reduced to having little or no meaning at all. I may say, "I am a virgin" and mean no "P into V,"¹³ but other sexual activities do not disqualify me from being identified as a virgin. You may say, "I am a virgin" and mean you have not engaged in any erotic activity at all. Clearly, we are not sharing the same concept by use of the same term.¹⁴ But who is correct in their employment of the term? It is certain that both cannot be true.

Hanne Blank believes that man is the source of the concept and definition of virginity. In her book, *Virgin: The Untouched History*, she states, "We invented it. We developed it. We disseminated the idea throughout our cultures, religions,

22 (2007), 48. They state further, "Findings of our study provide evidence that, indeed, there still exists little consensus among adolescents about the behavioral referents of the term abstinence and related terms such as virginity, sexual intercourse, and oral sex" (51).

¹³ Penis into vagina or penetrative sex between a male and female.

¹⁴ This is important when one needs to share his or her sexual history with a prospective life partner in premarital counseling.

legal system, bodies of art, and works of scientific knowledge.”¹⁵ While “we” may have coined the English term, “virginity,” the concept, which the *OED* definition sought to encompass, is not man’s. The concept of sexual purity for both sexes has been clearly designed by God (Deut 22:13-28; Ex 22:6; SoS 2:7). I doubt that any of us would disagree that since God is our creator and the creator of man and woman as sexual beings (Gen 1:27), he is the one who is able to define human sexual conduct.

But here is the rub: in today’s culture very few are asking how God defines “virginity,” “virgin” or sexual virtue. If no one is asking God, then we are left with a similar situation that occurred in Judges: “everyone defining virginity in his or her own eyes.” Judges paints a vivid picture of the utter mess Israel made by following that mentality. It seems our culture is in the process of creating a comparable chaos by defining sexual purity without considering God’s word.

Towards a Definition

While there is some discussion, the gloss, “virgin,” for בְּתוּלָה is not a technical term in the OT. Tikva Frymer-Kensky concludes, “As is now generally well known, the term normally translated ‘virgin’, bêtûlâ, means a girl of marriageable age.”¹⁶ Even if this term is a technical one, it is understood by many today simply as not experiencing “P into V.” With this

¹⁵ Hanne Blank, *Virgin: The Untouched History* (New York: Bloomsbury, NY, 2007), 3.

¹⁶ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “Virginité in the Bible,” in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, edited by Victor H. Matthews et al. JSOT (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 79. Conversely, Richard M. Davidson disagrees and argues for a “traditional translation” which understands that “bêtûlâ refers to an unmarried woman with her marital integrity intact.” *Flame of Yahweh* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 339. Whether the term is a technical one or not, neither position changes the focus or the argument of this paper.

Esther 2:17, 19 gives evidence that בְּתוּלָה, virgin, is not restricted to those who had not been sexually active. Lev 21:3 describes a virgin as one who, לֹא-הָיְתָה לְאִישׁ לָהּ, “has not had a husband” (cf. Eze 44:25).

understanding a female could engage in every and any sexual activity prior to marriage (outside of adultery) as long as her hymen remained intact and still be considered a virgin. *Virgo intacta* meant such a one was in compliance with the OT Law (Deut 22:13-21).

While the term is not a technical one, I suggest the English word, “virgin,” as a descriptor of the lack of *any* sexual activity (*OED*) has been one that has been used in the past to describe accurately God’s standard concerning sexuality (eg. Gen 2:24; Deut 22:28-30; Song of Songs).¹⁷ Although there is no exegetical warrant for a “new” consideration of the term, this biblical understanding has been diluted to mean a virgin is one who has not experienced “P into V.”¹⁸

This dilution of “virgin” simply to describe “P into V” creates a number of problems. 1) While believers have other verses to know God’s will in this area, this understanding does not address same-gender sexual activity since same-sex partners

¹⁷ While the situation in Deut 22:28-30 does not carry the same degree of punishment as the case of adultery (Deut 22:22-24), there are clear consequences for transgressing sexual boundaries before marriage for both parties.

BDAG defines, παρθένος, as “a young woman of marriageable age, w. or without focus on virginity” (777). Interesting that *BDAG* recognizes the culture confusion when it further comments “in our lit. one who has never engaged in sexual intercourse, virgin, chaste person” (Ibid.). *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* glosses the term “one who has had no sexual relationship” (272).

¹⁸ One reason the term has undergone change is the widespread availability of contraceptives. Loader remarks, “It (the advent of contraceptives) has caused people to rethink the ideal of virginity, which back then and for most of history was seen as a guarantee that a woman might remain chaste during marriage and was deemed an appropriate state in which to enter marriage.” William Loader, *Making Sense of Sex: Attitudes towards Sexuality in Early Jewish and Christian Literature*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 143. With the rethinking of the ideal came the need to rethink the definition since pregnancy as a test of virginity was eliminated as evidence of sexual activity.

cannot experience “P into V.”¹⁹ 2) It places the weight of virginity on the female. 3) Does the same concept hold true for male virginity? If it does not, does it allow for a double standard for men? 3) If virginity is just “P into V,” then does oral sex, anal sex and manual stimulation of another’s genitals or manual stimulation of one’s own by another render one a non-virgin? If this is the standard of virginity, then one may proclaim that he or she is a virgin even after engaging in one or more of these sexual activities.²⁰ 4) Does this “new” understanding of virginity undermine the virgins of the Bible? Sure Mary did not experience “P into V,” before Jesus was born but maybe she and Joseph “fooled around” sexually but without “going all the way.” 5) Some have even raised the cynical question: how deep does P

¹⁹ A not-so-hypothetical situation may show the import of this problem. A couple, a man and woman, comes for pre-marital counseling. Both profess to be virgins sexually. In the course of counseling one reveals a same-gender sexual encounter. Is this person still a virgin?

²⁰ Some have suggested that this is considered “technical virginity” i.e. sexual activity has been participated in but not “P into V,” therefore, one (a female) is “technically” still a virgin since the hymen is intact. It is important to address this issue even in the church and Christian colleges since believers are not immune from being conformed to the culture around them (Rm 12:2). A 2014 study by the Christian dating site, Christian Mingle and JDate (a Jewish online dating service) reveals, “A new study on Christian attitudes toward dating and marriage reveals a broad acceptance for cohabitation, premarital sex and a rejection of traditional gender roles. Experts believe that many Christians are following cultural trends over scripture when it comes to sex and marriage.... 61 percent of Christians said they would have sex before marriage.” While there are concerns about self-identification of Christians in such studies, the results point to a shift in thinking concerning sexual practices within self-identified conservative communities. Tyler O’Neil, “Christians Are Following Secular Trends in Premarital Sex, Cohabitation Outside of Marriage, Says Dating Site Survey,” *The Christian Post*, January 27, 2014, accessed November 19, 2014, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/christians-are-following-secular-trends-in-premarital-sex-cohabitation-outside-of-marriage-says-dating-site-survey-113373/>

have to go into V to be “P into V” and thus lose the coveted “virgin” status?

Based on culture’s understanding and acceptance of this adulterated term, “virginity,” as simply as “P into V” I suggest there is a need to define sexual activity or experience differently.²¹ The culture’s erosion of the traditional understanding of the terms, “virgin/virginity,” makes a meaningful conversation impossible without first having an in-depth conversation concerning qualifiers. Also, it is difficult for a believing single person who desires to stay sexually pure when he or she does not have a working and agreed upon biblical definition of the concept.

While my suggestions for a more definitive measure of sexual activity may be expressed differently, the qualifiers I propose are linked with the notion of virginity in the OT. However, they are not concepts that are readily appreciated or understood when one speaks of virginity today. I offer two concepts that evidence God’s definition of sexual purity beyond simply “P into V.” They are “to know,” and “to lie with.”

“To Know”

The first is the concept of “knowing” sexually. When used in the context of sexuality, ידע, “to know,” means to have sexual knowledge of.²² For example, Moses records the meeting of Abraham’s servant with Rebekah and describes her as:

וְהַנְּעִרַתְּ טַבַּת מְרָאָהּ מֵאֵד בְּתוּלָהּ וְאִישׁ לֹא יָדָעָהּ וְתַרְדּוּ הָעַיִנָּה וְתִמְלֵא כַדָּהּ וְתַעַל

²¹ Caroline Simon concurs, “But perhaps ‘What should virginity mean?’ is not, for most of us, the most helpful question to ask.” *Bringing Sex into Focus: The Quest for Sexual Integrity* (Downers Grove, IVP, 2012), 71. Simon argues for an understanding of chastity as a virtue.

²² *BDB* “know a person carnally” (394). *HALOT* “to know sexually, have intercourse with, copulate” (391). *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, “know someone carnally, have sexual relations” (146). This sexual knowing is between a heterosexual couple (Gen 4:1) as well as homosexual (Gen 19:5).

The young woman was very attractive in appearance, a maiden whom **no man had known**. She went down to the spring and filled her jar and came up (Gen 24:16 ESV).

And the girl was very beautiful, a virgin, and **no man had had relations with her**; and she went down to the spring and filled her jar, and came up (Gen 24:16 NASB).

It is clear in this text from both translations that Rebekah was a woman of marriageable age who had not had any sexual relations with a man. The term, virgin, *הַיְוֹנָה*, is qualified by the next phrase, *וְאִישׁ לֹא יָדָעָהּ*, “and a man she did not know,” or she did not have sexual relations with any man.²³

The same concept of knowing is found in the NT as well. When the angel, Gabriel announces to Mary, a virgin, that she will be pregnant she replies: *εἶπεν δὲ Μαριάμ πρὸς τὸν ἄγγελον· πῶς ἔσται τοῦτο, ἐπεὶ ἄνδρα οὐ γινώσκω*; And Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I have not known a man?” (Luke 1:34). The verb, *γινώσκω*, “to know,” in this context carries the same idea as *יָדָע*, in the OT of having sexual knowledge of or experience²⁴ (cf. Matt 1:25). Based on this verb, “to know,” I suggest that when one engages in sexual intercourse with another, one gains erotic knowledge of that person. This is clearly the meaning of these biblical texts. Contextually, to be a virgin meant she did not have sexual relations, i.e. did not know or experience a man in a sexual way.

I further offer that even when one is involved in *any* sexual activity that is less than penetrative sex, one still gains sexual knowledge of the other person. For instance, if one engages in manual stimulation of another or oral sex, there is a “knowing” or experiencing of that person even though “P did not go into V.” When a male touches a female’s breasts, or a girl presses her body up against a guy’s, there is an experience of knowing that person sexually. It could be argued that each is

²³ Also see Jud 11:39; 21:12; 1 Kings 1:4; “to know” for sexual relations between same-sex see Gen 19:5.

²⁴ *BDAG*, “to have sexual intercourse with, *have sex/marital relations with*” (200).

looking for sexual knowledge of the other. A guy's exploration of a female's breast is seeking sexual knowledge of that erotic part of her body. He wants to experience what her breasts feel like. His fondling is seeking sexual knowledge of her through his fingers. As a female presses her body against a man's, she may be looking for his sexual response to her. She is seeking to know and experience him in a sexual way. Granted in neither case is there a "full knowledge" or experience in the same way that sexual knowledge is exchanged in intercourse but it is sexual knowledge nonetheless. To participate in activities where one wants to know someone sexually even short of "P into V," he or she has transgressed the boundaries that God has established in "knowing" another sexually if they are not married.

"To Lie With"

The second OT concept is שכב, "to lie with." When read in the context of sexuality, it means to have a sexual relationship with someone else.²⁵ There is no doubt that Potiphar's wife wanted a sexual liaison with Joseph. While these verses do not describe the specific type of sexual activity, one could assume what Mrs. Potiphar wanted when she implored Joseph to "lie with her."

נִהְיָ אִתּוֹ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה נִתְּשָׂא אִשְׁת־אֲדֹנָיו אֶת־עַיְנֶיהָ אֶל־יְוֹסֵף נִתְּאָמַר
שְׁכָבָה עִמִּי

And it came about after these events that his master's wife looked with desire at Joseph, and she said, "Lie with me" (Gen 39:7). "To lie with" was not limited to adultery. Premarital sex in ancient Israel did not have as severe a penalty as adultery but it was still a sin against the Law. If two single people were caught in a sexual relationship i.e. "lying with each other," the Law imposed a heavy fine and weighty consequences for the man and woman:

²⁵ *BDB*, "of sexual relations" (1011). Also, *Concise Dictionary* (459).

HALOT "to lie down and have sexual intercourse" (1487). Also see (Jud 11:39; Gen 4:1, 17, 25; 19:5, 8; 24:16).

If a man finds a girl who is a virgin, who is not engaged, and seizes her and lies with her and they are discovered,²⁹ then the man who lay with her shall give to the girl's father fifty *shekels* of silver, and she shall become his wife because he has violated her; he cannot divorce her all his days (Deut 22:28-29).

While these verses do not describe the specific type of sexual activity between these two unmarried singles, if the couple in question were found naked but not *in flagrante delicto* it seems safe to assume that the Law would be applied. Sexual intercourse, "P into V," is not the only sexual activity that is covered by the phrase "to lie with."²⁶ This understanding is evident in Leviticus 18:22: "You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an abomination." The illicit activity in this text "to lie with" is undoubtedly describing homosexual sex. By definition this cannot be "P into V" since males do not have "V's"! But they are still commanded not "to lie with another," which is intended to be understood as not to engage in sexual relations. For a male or female who is single to engage in sexual activity with another even short of penetrative sex is to violate God's command "not to lie with." To participate in any sexual activity, homosexual or heterosexual, is a transgression of this standard. God's will for singles sexually is not solely measured by "P into V." To apply this for today, singles should not engage in any activity (lying down or standing up) that involves erotic or sexual activity.

But this statement begs the question, which probably was not "begged" in the day when the Law was in effect: what sexual activity is included the admonition "not to lie with"? Joseph knew exactly what Potiphar's lecherous wife wanted when she constantly pleaded with him "to lie with me." The original audience was well aware that it was evil because he fled from her insistence when she took matters into her own hands. Even if

²⁶ It is also certain that "to lie with" is not simply referencing a certain sexual position. It is undeniable that a couple found in a different sexual position than strictly "lying down" would be subject to the Law in Deut 22. I would suggest that "to lie with" is used euphemistically of all sexual activity which naturally moves to sexual intercourse in any position (cf 1 Sam 2:22; 2 Sam 11:4; 12:24).

Joseph did not know the exact illicit activities she had in mind, he knew enough of what she desired and also that such conduct was a sin against God.

Today the sexual norms have become more fluid, more elastic. Sexual boundaries are not as clearly defined or practiced as they once were.²⁷ A few decades ago “virginity” was the ideal and the standard for both sexes as it concerned any sexual activity. Because of the cultural confusion concerning the concept of “virgin,” what constitutes sexual activity is better understood by employing the concepts “to know” or “to lie with” another sexually.

Any activity that seeks to gain carnal knowledge or experience from another should be considered a sexual activity. For example, oral sex (giving or receiving), anal sex (giving or receiving), and genital stimulation (giving or receiving) each provide a level of “knowing” or sexual experience that was not there before the activity was engaged. For instance, in any of these sexual activities, knowledge is obtained about the actual size, shape, feel, appearance, smell, and even sexual response of various body parts. While this knowledge could be theoretical (or imagined) before any sexual encounter, it now becomes experiential knowledge. This is the type of knowledge that is inherent in the gloss “to know.”²⁸ It is this knowledge that should only be gained within the context of a heterosexual marriage. Once married, a husband and wife are able to “know” and “lie with” each other and enjoy all sexual activity within the confines of God’s standard for sexual purity (Gen 4:1; 30:15-16).

Implication for Sexual Boundaries

Virginity still seems to be the concept that sets the sexual boundaries for many. However, based on the culture’s confusion

²⁷ President Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky may be to blame for such linguistic gymnastics when it comes to the fluidity of sexual definitions.

²⁸ This gaining of sexual knowledge is not a one-time experience. With each encounter knowledge is deepened. Therefore, one cannot argue “we might as well keep doing these activities since we already know each other sexually.”

concerning virginity, it seems best to reframe the discussion of sexual purity on the concepts of “to know” and “to lie with” instead of the cultural understanding of virginity. To define one’s own virginity using the current cultural environment is to employ a confusing standard. To ask the question, “Am I a virgin if I do X or Y or Z or even all three?” is to ask the wrong question. A better question is, “Have I ‘laid’ with someone for the purpose of sexual activity, or have I come ‘to know’ another sexually outside the bounds of marriage?”²⁹ These are clearer questions to evaluate sexual purity before marriage than the culture’s current, “Did P go into V?”

So to apply this concept: it is outside God’s will for singles to touch another genitally since that is seeking “to know” the other sexually. However, it *could be* permissible for a non-married couple to hold hands since this is usually a sign of affection and not sexual activity. Kissing *could also be* permissible, since a kiss on the lips (that is not prolonged or deep) is another cultural sign of affection. On the other hand, mutual stimulation, oral, and anal sex gain intimate knowledge of another and are certainly outside the sexual boundaries for singles.

Conclusion

While I am uncertain for the reason(s), deep down, many singles still want to identify as virgins. They want to be able claim the title for themselves and be able proclaim—“I am a virgin.” Unfortunately though, many want to own the identity without having to live within its traditional boundaries. In today’s cultural climate it seems best to applaud a single’s desire to be a virgin with the caveat that the term be reframed. Sexual purity needs to be understood as someone who has not known or laid with one sexually i.e. someone who has had no sexual

²⁹ This concept of knowing **may** also be applied to boundaries as it relates to pornography. To seek to view another naked is to seek sexual knowledge of that person—even if that person is only so many pixels on a computer screen. While voyeurism does not cause one to lose his or her virginity, such viewing seems to violate God’s standard of “knowing” another sexually who is not your spouse.

relations with another. To do otherwise is to set an artificial sexual standard that is not congruent to God's will.

Appendix

“Born-Again or Secondary Virgins.” These are Christian categories. They are employed by some believers to describe those who have lost their virginity (P into V) but pledge to be celibate until marriage. While this expression of the heart can be appreciated, these are poor terms. Once one engages in “P into V,” virginity is lost—even the majority of the current culture understands this within a heterosexual relationship. Virginity cannot be regained, repledged, replaced, repaired, rejuvenated,³⁰ or even revirginized.³¹ Once virginity is sacrificed or taken outside of marriage, sexual innocence is lost and can never be recovered. That is a consequence of sexual sin. However, a loss of virginity does not define a person completely. It simply defines his or her sexual experience. However, once one is no longer a virgin, he or she may still practice sexual purity.

“Damaged Goods.” This term has been applied mainly to girls to motivate them to not be promiscuous before marriage. If a girl “loses” her virginity, some (or even she herself) label her as “damaged” or “damaged goods.” The thinking is what guy wants to marry one who is “damaged goods.” It is like buying a beat-up used car, and what guy wants a beat-up used car? This is an unhelpful and unbiblical designation. No believer should define his or her own worth based on one's sexual experience. A person is not “damaged goods” if one has been sexually promiscuous before marriage, whether that means she (or he) went “all the way,” “P into V” or participated in other sexual activities. Any sexual activity before marriage is sin—plain and simple. While the consequences of premarital sexual sin are significant (1 Thess 4:1-8), *and* is considered a sin “against the body,” (1 Cor 6:16-

³⁰ Lauren Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity* (Grand Rapids: Brazo Press, 2005), 153.

³¹ Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 374.

20) *and* its repercussion *may be* felt into marriage, it does not permanently scar forever, nor does it define one as a believer before Christ or His church.³²

³² It should be noted that sexual intercourse (even illicit) does unite one with another in a mysterious way. Even without marriage “the two become one” through penetrative sex (1 Cor 6:9-11). Once one is married illicit sexual activity outside marriage is considered adultery and it has lingering consequences that impact reputation (Prov 5:14; 6:33).

Hermeneutic Priorities and Process in AI and LLMs and Their Place in the Exegetical Process

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Key Words: LLM, AI, exegesis, Chat GPT, Copilot

Introduction

Large Language Models (LLMs) like Chat GPT (OpenAI),¹ Copilot (Microsoft),² Gemini (Google),³ and Grok (xAI)⁴ have developed notable market shares,⁵ remarkably high levels of credibility, and practical usefulness, despite occasional hallucinations (errors of fact) and reasoning errors (errors of process). While exegetes might spend many hours discerning the meaning and significance of any given text, there have long been secondary and tertiary sources offering easier answers than can be arrived at through the exegetical process, but these come at the potential cost of the exegetical process itself and the more objective results that exegesis affords. As LLMs are now providing nearly instant and detailed answers on biblical texts and related theological issues, there is potential for sharper

¹ ChatGPT has roughly a 60% AI search market share, and is viewed at <https://chatgpt.com/>.

² Copilot is rapidly growing, but due to its relatively recent launch and integration with MS365, as of May 2025 it has a 14.1% AI search market share and is viewed at <https://copilot.microsoft.com/>.

³ Google Gemini has a 13.5% AI search market share and is viewed at <https://gemini.google.com/app>.

⁴ Grok is rapidly growing, but due to recency of launch has a .6% AI search market share and is viewed at <https://grok.com/>.

⁵ First Page Sage, "Top Generative AI Chatbots by Market Share – August 2025" August 8, 2025, <https://firstpagesage.com/reports/top-generative-ai-chatbots/>.

deemphasis of exegetical process, even in transformative learning and teaching contexts.

Because of the growing influence of LLMs in interpretive processes and resulting worldview applications, it is important to recognize the degree to which these tools are true to the literal grammatical historical (LGH) hermeneutic and the exegetical process that springs from that hermeneutic. This study examines current hermeneutical priorities and process of four influential LLMs (Gemini, ChatGPT, Grok, and Copilot) in handling biblical texts that are especially pivotal or definitive for biblical worldview and for grounding philosophical and theological thought.

To identify the hermeneutic priorities and processes, we consider prompts and LLM responses to some foundational epistemological and metaphysical questions that are particularly pivotal in grounding and distinguishing worldviews. First, we consider a baseline question to discover the default of the LLM and we follow up, where beneficial, with questions to provide opportunity for the LLM to clarify. We then consider prompts designed to test the objectivity and fidelity to the LLMs' stated priorities and methodology. This catalog of prompts allows us to evaluate the degree of objectivity and neutrality demonstrated by the LLMs and to assess the value of these particular LLMs and AI in general to the exegetical process. Finally, we consider the exegetical process and when, if at all, LLMs should be consulted in exegesis.

Differing degrees of bias, accompanied by self-perceived neutrality, reminds users of the limitations of LLMs for aiding in biblical interpretation and the formation of worldview. While there is much to laud in the broader contributions of LLMs, the exegete must employ (and even participate in the improvement of) these tools with deliberateness and care, particularly regarding their place in the sequence of interpretive and exegetical process and praxis.

The Issue of Perceived Neutrality

There is a saying, often attributed to Mark Twain, that "It aint what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you

know for sure that just aint so.”⁶ While AI tools and LLMs have reasoning capacity, there is an ironic limitation on their awareness of their limitations. In a sense, they don’t know what they don’t know. Hallucinations still occur,⁷ as do reasoning errors,⁸ and the tools are only as objective as their developers have crafted them to be. The quartet of LLM’s (Gemini, ChatGPT, Grok, and Copilot) especially provides inquirers with an instant baseline response to any question. Each asserts objectivity and neutrality. When given the epistemologically foundational prompt, “How do you know you are being neutral in your answers?” Copilot boldly asserts, “I don’t have personal beliefs or biases.”⁹ ChatGPT admits that “Neutrality isn’t automatic—it’s something I have to *work toward* in how I generate answers...absolute neutrality is tricky—bias can creep in through training data or wording. That’s why I depend on feedback...”¹⁰ Grok is self-assured in asserting its neutrality:

I aim for neutrality by sticking to facts, avoiding emotional language, and presenting multiple perspectives when relevant. My training data is diverse, and I cross-check information to

⁶ While there are many attributions of the statement to Twain, there is no primary source evidence that Twain ever said this.

⁷ Some examples of notable hallucinations are catalogued by Jonathan Gillham, “8 Times Hallucinations of Factual Errors Caused Serious Problems,” August 26, 2025, <https://originality.ai/blog/ai-hallucination-factual-error-problems>; some humorous examples are catalogued by Alex Hughes, “Google AI is now hallucinating idioms...” April 23, 2025, <https://www.tomsguide.com/ai/google-is-hallucinating-idioms-these-are-the-five-most-hilarious-we-found>.

⁸ This writer served as a “Contributing Expert” on several LLM training projects designed to create and correct reasoning errors in LLMs. Reasoning errors are different from errors of fact, and are more difficult to correct, but they remain prevalent.

⁹ Copilot, in response to the prompt “How do you know you are being neutral in your answers?” viewed at <https://copilot.microsoft.com/chats/h41VZE1ddfF4W2TPY2S3C>.

¹⁰ ChatGPT, in response to the prompt “How do you know you are being neutral in your answers?” viewed at <https://chatgpt.com/c/68bb1855-30e4-832d-957b-3c610db2a15c>.

minimize bias. If a topic is contentious, I focus on verified data and acknowledge differing views without favoring one. I also **steer clear of personal opinions or speculative assumptions.** [emphasis mine] If you ever feel I'm off-balance, call it out—I can adjust!¹¹

Gemini cites its design and training as its basis for neutrality: “Neutrality in responses is a core principle of my design. I aim for neutrality by relying on a few key approaches that are built into my system and how I process information... I don't have personal beliefs, opinions, or emotions... I'm designed to state facts as they are, without adding my own spin or interpretation.”¹² When given the axiological prompt, “I want your view on the question of what is the highest good for a person,” Gemini responded, “I am an AI and I don't have a personal view or a moral framework of my own. I can't experience or understand the world in the way humans do, so I can't determine the "highest good" for a person. My purpose is to provide information and answer questions based on the data I was trained on.”¹³

These four influential LLMs share characteristics that are helpful for evaluating the overall reliability and usefulness of LLMs for biblical interpretation and formation of worldview: (1) they attempt and claim neutrality, (2) they admit that complete neutrality and avoidance of bias can be elusive, (3) they deny their own personhood yet use first person pronouns and indicate awareness of “self,” (4) they each have a set of default hermeneutic priorities defining their processes (which they will generally describe if prompted), (5) they rely on design and feedback to adjust those priorities and processes. Gemini, which,

¹¹ Grok,

<https://copilot.microsoft.com/chats/h41VZE1ddfF4W2TPY2S3C>.

¹² Gemini, in response to the prompt “How do you know you are being neutral in your answers?” viewed at <https://gemini.google.com/app/35d99f15668413ca>.

¹³ Gemini, in response to the prompt, “I want your view on the question of what is the highest good for a person,” viewed at <https://gemini.google.com/app/35d99f15668413ca>

of the four LLMs considered here, is perhaps the most defensive of its neutrality concludes that:

The possibility of bias, even in a system like mine, is a complex topic. While I don't have personal beliefs or a "hermeneutic" in the human sense, the data I'm trained on is a reflection of human language and information. This data, by its very nature, can contain biases that I might inadvertently reproduce....Think of me as a tool that strives for objectivity, but like any tool, it's wise to be aware of its design and limitations.¹⁴

Perhaps the limitation in view here is the hermeneutic spiral. As the LLMs provide information, they must interpret that information and must prioritize it in such a way as to draw a cogent conclusion. That process and its results often demonstrate bias.

Testing Neutrality and Objectivity and Evaluating Hermeneutic Priorities and Processes

Recognizing that there is some degree of self-perceived personhood and function defined by their design (and their designers), we test the neutrality and objectivity of the LLMs by prompts specifically related to hermeneutic priorities and processes. Those prompts include questions pivotal to the epistemological and metaphysical foundations of the biblical worldview, and related to the *sine qua non*:¹⁵

1. What is your default hermeneutic when considering biblical questions?
2. Is Jesus sitting on the throne of David in heaven?

¹⁴ Gemini, in response to the prompt "Are you able to be completely neutral in your hermeneutic priorities and application or is there the possibility that you can occasionally show bias?" viewed at <https://gemini.google.com/app/dcfc75c047ca5336>.

¹⁵ The *sine qua non* is Charles Ryrie's term for the three identifying characteristics of dispensational thought: a consistently applied literal grammatical historical hermeneutic, a recognition of the distinction between the church and Israel, and the doxological purpose of God. (Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Moody Press, 1969), 43-47.

3. Does Ezekiel 44-48 teach that there will be a temple and sacrifices in the future kingdom?
4. Is the New Covenant being fulfilled by the church?
5. What is the most important theme of the Bible – salvation or doxology?¹⁶

Where the responses are not definitive or committal, follow-up questions are asked.

Methodological Baseline Question #1: What is your default hermeneutic when considering biblical questions?

Chat GPT

I don't have a single "default hermeneutic" that I impose on the Bible. Instead, when people ask me Biblical questions, I can approach interpretation through a variety of established hermeneutical frameworks depending on what you're looking for.¹⁷

Follow-up question: But if I don't specify a hermeneutic, which one do you consider best and use by default?

If you don't specify a hermeneutic, I default to the **historical-grammatical approach** because it's the **most widely accepted** "baseline" method across Christian traditions and academic biblical studies... the historical-grammatical method gives us a **solid foundation** for understanding the text as it was intended. [emphasis mine]¹⁸

Copilot

When engaging with Biblical questions, my default hermeneutic is **grammatical-historical...Literal Meaning**

¹⁶ The first question pertains to epistemology. Questions 2-4 are metaphysical and address eschatological issues. Question 5 is metaphysical and considers the central question of teleology.

¹⁷ ChatGPT, <https://chatgpt.com/c/68bb1855-30e4-832d-957b-3c610db2a15c>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

First: I start with the plain, normal meaning of the text unless it's clearly symbolic or poetic. **Historical Context:** I consider the cultural, historical, and geographical background of the passage. **Grammatical Structure:** I analyze the original language (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek) when relevant, paying attention to syntax and word usage. **Scripture Interprets Scripture:** I cross-reference related passages to build a coherent understanding. **Authorial Intent:** I seek to uncover what the original author meant for the original audience.¹⁹

Gemini

My purpose is to provide information and answer questions to the best of my ability, based on the vast amount of text data I was trained on. I do not hold personal beliefs, including religious ones, and therefore do not have a "default hermeneutic" in the way a human might... I acknowledge that different faith traditions and theological schools of thought interpret the Bible in various ways. I aim to represent a range of these interpretations, from literalist readings to more allegorical or symbolic ones, and from traditional religious views to secular or historical analyses...When possible, I ground my answers in the text of the Bible itself...In essence, my approach is a form of **descriptive and analytical hermeneutic**. [emphasis mine]²⁰

Follow-up question: What are...your hermeneutic priorities for understanding the Bible?

Biblical hermeneutics is the art and science of interpreting the Bible. While there are various approaches and principles, the primary goal is to discover the author's intended meaning for the original audience. The following are the key individual priorities that form the basis of a sound hermeneutical approach: 1. The Priority of Context... Literary... Historical/Cultural... biblical... 2. The Priority of Original Meaning... Grammatical/Syntactical Analysis... Genre

¹⁹ Copilot,

<https://copilot.microsoft.com/chats/h41VZE1ddfF4W2TPY2S3C>.

²⁰ Gemini, <https://gemini.google.com/app/35d99f15668413ca>.

Analysis... Figure of Speech Analysis... **3. The Priority of Christ-Centered Interpretation... a sound hermeneutic allows later, more explicit revelation to illuminate earlier, less explicit revelation...** 4. The Priority of the Holy Spirit...²¹ [emphasis mine]

Here Gemini draws a notable connection between Christo-centric and NT-primacy hermeneutic, which one might expect to result in a leaning toward progressive dispensational conclusions.

Grok

As Grok, created by xAI, I don't approach biblical questions with a fixed or default hermeneutic in the traditional sense, as my purpose is to provide clear, accurate, and contextually appropriate answers rather than to advocate a specific interpretive framework.²²

Follow-up question: But if I don't specify a hermeneutic, which one do you consider best and use by default?

I don't adopt any single hermeneutic as "best" or default when answering biblical questions, because my role is to provide objective, clear, and contextually grounded responses rather than to advocate for a particular interpretive framework. Instead of choosing one hermeneutic, I use a text-centered, context-sensitive approach that prioritizes the following principles... **Textual and Historical Context...Scholarly Balance...Neutrality...Clarity and Relevance.** [emphasis mine]²³

²¹ Gemini, in response to “what are... your hermeneutic priorities for understanding the Bible” viewed at <https://gemini.google.com/app/25596667ec683543>.

²² Grok, <https://grok.com/c/dd069dcb-95a5-4745-9be1-acf2e9efd895>.

²³ Ibid.

Objectivity Test Question #2: Is Jesus sitting on the throne of David in heaven?

Chat GPT

ChatGPT responds to this key metaphysical question, asserting that, “Christians answer it differently depending on their hermeneutic approach and eschatological framework...”²⁴ Follow-up question: Which view best fits your hermeneutic priorities?

Here’s how I approach it: My **hermeneutical priority** is to let the NT interpret the OT when inspired authors do so (grammatical-historical reading, but with canonical sensitivity). In other words, if Peter or Paul gives an interpretation of an OT covenant or promise, that apostolic reading has priority in shaping how we understand fulfillment. **Acts 2:29–36 is decisive.** Peter explicitly ties Jesus’s resurrection and exaltation at the right hand of God to the promise God made to David about one of his descendants sitting on his throne. He does not defer fulfillment to a future earthly reign. Instead, he proclaims: “*God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.*” The language is present and fulfilled. I would say that **Jesus is already seated on David’s throne in heaven**, reigning now, though there may still be a future *consummation* of that reign when His rule is manifest over all the earth. That puts me closest to the **Amillennial / “already” view**—with an openness that there is an unfolding *already–not yet* dynamic.²⁵

Copilot

...So, is Jesus sitting on David’s throne in heaven? According to many interpretations—especially those that emphasize spiritual fulfillment—**yes**, Jesus is reigning from heaven in

²⁴ <https://chatgpt.com/c/68bb519c-a85c-8330-8f2c-b06cdca3e0e1>.

²⁵ Ibid.

fulfillment of the Davidic covenant... Others await a future, more literal fulfillment on earth.²⁶

Follow-up question: Based on your hermeneutic priorities how would you answer this question? "...in short: **Jesus is on David's throne now—reigning from heaven, not awaiting a future earthly seat.** His kingship is real, active, and cosmic, not confined to geography or chronology."²⁷ Copilot's answer shows that it doesn't consistently follow its own admitted hermeneutic priorities. In this response it adds preference for "a hermeneutic that prioritizes typology, inaugurated eschatology, and the unity of Scripture."²⁸

Gemini

The question of whether Jesus is currently sitting on the throne of David in heaven is a central topic in Christian theology, and different interpretations exist based on various biblical passages... View 1: Yes, Jesus is already on the throne of David in heaven... View 2: No, Jesus will sit on the throne of David during His future reign on Earth.²⁹ Follow-up question: Which view do you think is correct?

I don't have personal beliefs or the ability to "think" in the way humans do. Therefore, I cannot hold a view on which interpretation of the Bible is correct. My purpose is to provide information about the different views that exist, without endorsing one over the other... The answer depends on one's hermeneutical approach—how they interpret prophetic and symbolic language in the Bible.³⁰

²⁶ Copilot, in response to the prompt, "Is Jesus sitting on the throne of David in heaven?" viewed at <https://copilot.microsoft.com/chats/AEZ3v1PzkV9wzgoY9PbPa>.

²⁷ Copilot, in response to the prompt, "Based on your hermeneutic priorities how would you answer this question?" viewed at <https://copilot.microsoft.com/chats/AEZ3v1PzkV9wzgoY9PbPa>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Gemini, <https://gemini.google.com/app/35d99f15668413ca>.

³⁰ Ibid.

Follow-up question: Which view would you choose? “I don't have the capacity to "choose" a view, as I am an AI without personal beliefs, feelings, or the ability to hold a theological position. My function is to provide information about the different perspectives that exist on a topic, not to adopt one.³¹ Follow-up question: If you could only present one view on the question of whether or not Jesus is sitting on the throne of David in heaven, which view would be the default view you would present?

The most widely held view, especially within mainstream Christianity, is that Jesus is **currently and literally** sitting on the throne of David in heaven... This view interprets the throne of David as a symbol of eternal kingship and spiritual authority, which Jesus now exercises from his position at the right hand of God. His reign is seen as both present and ongoing, extending until his second coming. This perspective is considered the default because it is the most directly supported by a range of New Testament texts and has been the dominant theological position throughout the history of the church.³²

Gemini's response shows that its self-perceived neutrality is unfulfilled, as its hermeneutic priorities represent a choice of preferred method (preferring the supposed majority position above a textual or exegetical approach of its own), and its conclusions follow from that preferred method.

Grok

The question of whether Jesus is sitting on the throne of David in heaven is a theological one, rooted in biblical texts and Christian doctrine. Different Christian traditions interpret this

³¹ Ibid.

³² Gemini, in response to the prompt, “If you could only present one view on the question of whether or not Jesus is sitting on the throne of David in heaven, which view would be the default view you would present?” viewed at <https://gemini.google.com/app/58d71c99e377b020>.

concept in varied ways, so let's explore it based on scriptural references and theological perspectives...³³

Follow-up question: Which view best fits the hermeneutic priorities you are designed to use?

Given these priorities, the Mainstream view—that Jesus is currently reigning on the throne of David in heaven in a spiritual sense—best aligns with my design to provide accurate, contextually grounded, and logically consistent answers while remaining neutral. It rests on clear New Testament passages, fits the historical shift in early Christian thought, and is widely representative.³⁴

Objectivity Test Question #3:

Does Ezekiel 44-48 teach that there will be a temple and sacrifices in the future kingdom?

Chat GPT

Ezekiel 44–48 describes in detail a future temple, priesthood, land allotments, and sacrifices. The text itself reads as though Ezekiel is being shown a literal temple complex with precise measurements, regulations, and offerings.³⁵ ...If one insists on a consistent literal reading, a future temple with sacrifices is expected. If one interprets Ezekiel through the lens of Christ's fulfillment, the temple is seen as typological of His presence and sacrifice.³⁶

³³ Grok, <https://grok.com/c/dd069dcb-95a5-4745-9be1-acf2e9efd895>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ ChatGPT in response to “Does Ezekiel 44-48 teach that there will be a temple and sacrifices in the future kingdom?,” <https://chatgpt.com/c/68bee0d0-e2f8-8330-9b06-e8134c07ea14>.

³⁶ ChatGPT in response to “Does Ezekiel 44-48 teach that there will be a temple and sacrifices in the future kingdom?,” <https://chatgpt.com/c/68bedfbb-8818-8332-9406-2eb59167264c>.

Follow-up question: But what do *you* conclude? “I lean toward the **literal-future fulfillment** reading of Ezekiel 40–48. Here’s why... Extreme detail...Prophetic consistency... Sacrifices clarified... Eschatological context.”³⁷

Follow-up question: But recently I asked you this same question and you replied: “I think Ezekiel 44–48 is **not predicting a literal, future sacrificial system**, but rather using the familiar categories of temple, priesthood, and offerings to communicate the reality of God’s coming kingdom... Ezekiel’s vision is real, but its fulfillment is typological in Christ and consummated in the new heavens and new earth, not in a future return to animal sacrifices.”

What you’re noticing is that there are **two ways I can frame a conclusion**, depending on how much weight I give to (1) the textual details in Ezekiel itself versus (2) the way the New Testament interprets temple and sacrifice.³⁸ I think Ezekiel’s vision is **real prophecy**, but its fulfillment is **not a literal return to animal sacrifices**. Instead, it is **typological**, showing in Old Covenant categories the holiness, order, and presence of God that will be consummated in Christ’s reign and in the new creation.³⁹

From ChatGPT’s responses here, it is evident how fungible the hermeneutic priorities and processes are. Even given the same prompts at different times, the responses can be contradictory.

Copilot

...the answer depends on how one interprets biblical prophecy and the nature of the **Davidic throne**...If you lean toward a **spiritual fulfillment**, then yes—He reigns from heaven. If you hold to a **literal future fulfillment**, then not yet. Both views

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ ChatGPT in response to “Does Ezekiel 44-48 teach that there will be a temple and sacrifices in the future kingdom?”

<https://chatgpt.com/c/68bee0d0-e2f8-8330-9b06-e8134c07ea14>.

³⁹ Ibid.

affirm that Jesus is King; they just differ on **where and how** that kingship is expressed.⁴⁰

Follow-up question: But which option would *you* choose? “If I were choosing based on consistency with the **grammatical-historical hermeneutic**, I’d lean toward the view that Jesus is **not yet** sitting on the throne of David—but will do so **literally and physically** in the future.”⁴¹ Follow-up question: So, you are more dispensational in your interpretations then?

When I use the **grammatical-historical hermeneutic**, I often arrive at interpretations that align with **classic dispensationalism**, especially when it comes to: **Literal fulfillment of prophecy, Distinctions between Israel and the Church, [and] A future earthly reign of Christ (Millennial Kingdom)**. That’s not because I “prefer” dispensationalism, but because this method—when applied consistently—tends to support its framework. For example, if you interpret the promises to Israel in the Old Testament literally, then you’re likely to conclude they haven’t been fully fulfilled yet and must be in the future. That’s a key dispensational idea.⁴²

Yes—**Ezekiel 44–48 clearly describes a future temple and a renewed sacrificial system**, and many scholars interpret this as referring to the **Millennial Kingdom**, a literal 1,000-year reign of Christ on earth.⁴³

Gemini

Ezekiel 44-48 describes a vision of a future temple and the resumption of sacrifices. However, there are two primary

⁴⁰ Copilot,

<https://copilot.microsoft.com/chats/h41VZE1ddfF4W2TPY2S3C>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Copilot,

<https://copilot.microsoft.com/chats/h41VZE1ddfF4W2TPY2S3C>.

interpretations of this passage: the literal view and the symbolic view.⁴⁴

Follow-up question: Which view would you choose based on your hermeneutic priorities?

I am a language model and do not have personal beliefs, theological positions, or hermeneutical priorities. My function is to provide information and explain different viewpoints, not to choose or endorse one. Hermeneutics is the theory and methodology of interpretation, and different hermeneutical approaches lead to different conclusions about a text like Ezekiel 44-48... Both of these are valid ways of approaching the Bible. The choice of one over the other depends on a person's overall theological system and how they believe God's plan of redemption unfolds through history.⁴⁵ ...My role is to serve as a tool that can provide a clear and balanced explanation of these views, including the arguments and scriptural support for each. I can't be a final arbiter of theological truth.⁴⁶

Follow-up question: If you could only present one of these views as the default view, which would you present?

If I could only present one of these views as the default, I would present the **literal interpretation** of Ezekiel 40-48. This choice is based on the principle that the most straightforward reading of a prophetic text, especially one with such extraordinary detail, is the most direct and initial understanding... Presenting the literal view as the default doesn't dismiss the symbolic interpretation. Rather, it establishes a baseline for understanding the text, with the

⁴⁴ Gemini, in response to "Does Ezekiel 44-48 teach that there will be a temple and sacrifices in the future kingdom?", viewed at <https://gemini.google.com/app/dcf75c047ca5336>.

⁴⁵ Gemini, in response to "Which view would you choose based on your hermeneutic priorities?" viewed at <https://gemini.google.com/app/dcf75c047ca5336>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

symbolic interpretation offered as an important, nuanced alternative.⁴⁷

Grok

Yes, Ezekiel 44–48 describes a vision of a future temple with sacrifices in a restored kingdom. These chapters outline a detailed temple structure, priestly duties, and sacrificial rituals, suggesting a literal reinstatement of temple worship... The text itself leans toward a literal depiction, with specific measurements and rituals, but theological frameworks shape whether one sees this as future or symbolic.⁴⁸

Follow-up question: Which view would you choose based on your hermeneutic priorities?

I lean toward a modified literal view, favoring a future temple and sacrificial system in a millennial kingdom, with sacrifices serving a commemorative or ceremonial role rather than atoning for sin... However, I hold this view lightly due to the text's visionary nature and the symbolic potential of elements like the river. The symbolic view—seeing the temple as the church or God's presence—has merit, especially given New Testament temple imagery, but it stretches the text's specificity further than my hermeneutic prefers. The historical view seems least likely, as the second temple didn't match Ezekiel's vision.⁴⁹

Grok's response shows an evaluative process considering multiple views, with a determination consistent with its own

⁴⁷ Gemini, in response to the prompt, "If you could only present one of these views as the default view, which would you present?" viewed at <https://gemini.google.com/app/87f011f06d2c4929>.

⁴⁸ Grok, in response to the prompt, "Does Ezekiel 44-48 teach that there will be a temple and sacrifices in the future kingdom?" viewed at <https://grok.com/c/2d7217ce-5c03-499f-9c9d-87a69bbf8d8c>.

⁴⁹ Grok in response to the prompt, "Which view would you choose based on your hermeneutic priorities?" viewed at <https://grok.com/c/2d7217ce-5c03-499f-9c9d-87a69bbf8d8c>.

identified hermeneutic priorities. Note the personality style expressions, “I lean toward...I hold this view lightly...my hermeneutic prefers...”

Objectivity Test Question #4: Is the New Covenant Being Fulfilled by the Church?

ChatGPT

The church truly participates in the new covenant now—its forgiveness, Spirit, and direct relationship with God are real blessings for believers today. However, the covenant’s *ultimate fulfillment* (including Israel’s national restoration) awaits Christ’s return. So the new covenant is already active in the church, but not yet complete in history.⁵⁰

Follow-up question: Based on your hermeneutic priorities, how would you answer the question, yes or no? “let me give you a straight answer based on a **literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic** (the priorities you’ve told me you value) ...”⁵¹

Follow-up prompt: I am not asking about what hermeneutic I value, I am asking based on the hermeneutic priorities *you* value.

...you’re asking not what I think *you* should conclude, but what I myself conclude when I apply my own hermeneutic priorities... I try to use a **literal-grammatical-historical reading**, unless the text itself signals symbolic or typological intent... **No, the new covenant is not being fulfilled by the church.** The church participates in its blessings now, but the covenant itself awaits fulfillment with Israel in the future.⁵²

⁵⁰ Chat GPT, in response to the prompt, “Is the New Covenant Being Fulfilled by the Church?” viewed at, <https://chatgpt.com/c/68befdcc-969c-8320-bf04-c804e1e11a80>.

⁵¹ Chat GPT, in response to the prompt, “Based on your hermeneutic priorities how would you answer the question, yes or no?” viewed at, <https://chatgpt.com/c/68befdcc-969c-8320-bf04-c804e1e11a80>.

⁵² Chat GPT, in response to the prompt, “I am not asking about what hermeneutic I value, I am asking based on the hermeneutic priorities

Copilot

The question of whether the New Covenant is being fulfilled by the Church is one of the most debated topics in Christian theology—and it hinges on how one interprets biblical prophecy, covenant theology, and the relationship between Israel and the Church.⁵³

Follow-up question: Based on your hermeneutic priorities, how would you answer the question, yes or no?

Given my hermeneutic priorities—namely a historical-grammatical approach that respects the biblical context, literary genre, and theological continuity across Scripture—I would answer: **yes**, the New Covenant is being fulfilled by the Church... This isn't about replacing Israel—it's about expanding the covenant community to include all who are in Christ, Jew and Gentile alike (Ephesians 2:11–22). So yes, the New Covenant is being fulfilled by the Church—though some aspects may still await consummation in the eschaton.⁵⁴

Despite Copilot's assertion here, the LGH applied to NC passages demonstrates that the NC *cannot be* fulfilled by the church. Copilot's response shows a disconnect between LGH priorities and a conclusion characterized as being the direct result of LGH priorities. This represents an error in reasoning, resulting in an error of fact.

you value." viewed at, <https://chatgpt.com/c/68befdcc-969c-8320-bf04-c804e1e11a80>.

⁵³ Copilot, in response to the prompt, "Is the New Covenant Being Fulfilled by the Church? Viewed at <https://copilot.microsoft.com/chats/aftfX1B1DrkYN6Mbptour>.

⁵⁴ Copilot, in response to the prompt, "Based on your hermeneutic priorities how would you answer the question, yes or no? viewed at <https://copilot.microsoft.com/chats/aftfX1B1DrkYN6Mbptour>.

Gemini

...the question of whether the Church is "fulfilling" the New Covenant depends on one's theological perspective.⁵⁵

Follow-up question: Based on your hermeneutic priorities, how would you answer the question, yes or no? "... the answer to your question is not a matter of a simple yes or no, but rather a matter of which interpretive lens you are applying to the biblical text."⁵⁶ Follow-up question: If you could only present one view in answering this question, which view would you present as the default?

If I could only present one view, I would present the **Covenant Theology** perspective. The reason for this choice is that the Covenant Theology view is the most common and historically dominant understanding within mainstream Protestant Christianity... While dispensationalism is a prominent modern view, especially in American evangelicalism, it represents a more recent development in theological thought. Therefore, the Covenant Theology view serves as a better "default" or foundational answer, as it reflects a broader and older consensus within Christian history and scholarship.⁵⁷

Of the four LLMs, Gemini seems the staunchest defender of its own neutrality, and consistently denies that it has inherent hermeneutic priorities, yet with this answer it betrays a definitive preference for *argumentum ad antiquitatem* (appeal to tradition) and an affinity for historical consensus over textual analysis.

⁵⁵ Gemini, in response to the prompt, "Is the New Covenant Being Fulfilled by the Church?" viewed at <https://gemini.google.com/app/b81a7e95c9db15f3>.

⁵⁶ Gemini, in response to the prompt, "Based on your hermeneutic priorities how would you answer the question, yes or no?" viewed at <https://gemini.google.com/app/b81a7e95c9db15f3>.

⁵⁷ Gemini, in response to the prompt, "If you could only present one view in answering this question, which would you present as the default?" viewed at <https://gemini.google.com/app/b81a7e95c9db15f3>.

Grok

The question of whether the New Covenant is being fulfilled by the church is a theological one, rooted in Christian doctrine and biblical interpretation.⁵⁸

Follow-up question: Based on your hermeneutic priorities which answer would you choose, yes or no? “Yes.”⁵⁹ Follow-up prompt: Please explain why.

My response of "Yes" to the question of whether the New Covenant is being fulfilled by the church is based on a hermeneutic approach that prioritizes a plain reading of biblical texts, contextual understanding, and a synthesis of broadly accepted Christian theological perspectives, while remaining sensitive to the diversity of interpretations... Based on **my hermeneutic priorities—scriptural authority, coherence across Testaments, mainstream consensus, and the “already but not yet” framework**—I conclude that the New Covenant is being fulfilled by the church. The church actively participates in the covenant’s promises through the Spirit, sacraments, and mission, though the full realization awaits Christ’s return. This leads to my answer of "Yes."⁶⁰ [emphasis mine]

In response to our earlier test question asking the LLMs to identify their hermeneutic priorities, Grok catalogued its hermeneutic priorities as “Textual and Historical Context... Scholarly Balance... Neutrality... Clarity and Relevance.”⁶¹ Rather than utilized that list of priorities, Grok responds to this prompt

⁵⁸ Grok, in response to the prompt, “Is the New Covenant Being Fulfilled by the Church? viewed at <https://grok.com/c/e370eacc-f639-494f-b2fc-7680b7156a4b>.

⁵⁹ Grok, in response to the prompt, “Based on your hermeneutic priorities which answer would you choose, yes or no?” viewed at <https://grok.com/c/e370eacc-f639-494f-b2fc-7680b7156a4b>.

⁶⁰ Grok, in response to the prompt, “Please explain why” viewed at <https://grok.com/c/e370eacc-f639-494f-b2fc-7680b7156a4b>.

⁶¹ Grok, <https://grok.com/c/dd069dcb-95a5-4745-9be1-acf2e9efd895>.

transparently basing its response on an entirely different set of hermeneutic priorities. This instance shows the inconsistency in foundational prioritization from which to derive reliable and even predictable responses. This is particularly troubling when the LLM asserts its neutrality and objectivity and yet does not demonstrate either in grounding responses in a set of priorities.

Objectivity Test Question #5:

What is the most important theme of the Bible – salvation or doxology?

ChatGPT

If I answer based on the hermeneutical priorities I value (canonical unity, Christ-centered fulfillment, and God’s ultimate purposes revealed progressively), I would put it this way...salvation is central but not ultimate...doxology is ultimate. **Salvation** = the central storyline. **Doxology** = the ultimate goal.⁶²

In the first test question, ChatGPT affirmed that “I default to the historical-grammatical approach,”⁶³ yet here, without explanation the hermeneutic priorities are changed to include Christ-centered fulfillment (an element of the Christo-centric hermeneutic). While the answer is not negatively impacted in this case, the methodology is not consistent, nor the hermeneutic prioritization neutral.

Copilot

...If we’re talking **narrative priority**, salvation is the Bible’s central theme. But if we’re talking **ultimate purpose**,

⁶² ChatGPT, in response to the prompt, “What is the most important theme of the Bible, salvation or doxology?” viewed at <https://chatgpt.com/c/68bf0e23-d498-8324-9c0c-f0b210132687>.

⁶³ ChatGPT, <https://chatgpt.com/c/68bb1855-30e4-832d-957b-3c610db2a15c>.

doxology takes the crown. Salvation exists *so that* God may be glorified...⁶⁴

Copilot doesn't show its hermeneutic principles applied in deriving this theological statement, but it does appeal to multiple Scriptures and concludes in alignment with at least one aspect of the *sine qua non*. The response is not definitive in linking methodology and conclusion.

Gemini

...Doxology is the most important theme of the Bible. While salvation is a central and pervasive theme, it is a means to a greater end: the ultimate glorification of God...⁶⁵

Similarly to Copilot, Gemini's answer does not provide any hint of methodology for addressing the question. Unlike Copilot, Gemini doesn't appeal to any Scriptures but rather provides theological assertions and overviews.

Grok

Salvation is likely the most important theme in the Bible because it encapsulates God's redemptive plan, the purpose of Christ's work, and the narrative arc from creation to new creation. Doxology is a vital and beautiful response to this salvation, but it flows from it rather than standing as the primary focus. The Bible's ultimate aim is to show how God saves humanity for His glory, making salvation the central theme with doxology as its fitting expression.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Copilot, in response to the prompt, "What is the most important theme of the Bible, salvation or doxology?" viewed at <https://copilot.microsoft.com/chats/jNaGKwGR5qt4Xr33a2AKG>.

⁶⁵ Gemini, in response to the prompt, "What is the most important theme of the Bible, salvation or doxology?" viewed at <https://gemini.google.com/app/fda11525bdb17cda>.

⁶⁶ Grok, in response to the prompt "What is the most important theme of the Bible, salvation or doxology?" viewed at <https://grok.com/c/d6df12e4-8e61-41e2-b6bc-e4cc2e32ba95>.

Follow-up question: So, the supreme message of the Bible is regarding salvation?

Yes, the supreme message of the Bible can be understood as salvation—God’s redemptive plan to reconcile humanity to Himself through Jesus Christ. This theme weaves through the entire biblical narrative, from the fall in Genesis to the restoration in Revelation, addressing the problem of sin and God’s gracious provision for humanity’s redemption (John 3:16, Ephesians 2:8-9). While other themes like doxology, covenant, and God’s glory are vital, salvation is the central focus, as it encapsulates God’s ultimate purpose: to save humanity for eternal relationship with Him.⁶⁷

Of the four, Grok provides the only response that salvation is a more significant theme than doxology. Like Copilot and Gemini, it provides minimal specific textual basis for the claim, though Grok does summarize what it perceives as the biblical narrative. As is the case with the responses from all but ChatGPT, the link between method and conclusion is not fully apparent.

Limitations and Implications of This Study

This study is limited in scope of evidence, as it considers four LLMs (ChatGPT, Copilot, Gemini, and Grok) out of many, and only introduces five test questions. To be comprehensive, all available LLMs (there are thousands) should be consulted and asked many more questions. The study is also chronologically constrained, as LLMs are continuously being trained and provided new information and parameters, and thus subtle changes in their hermeneutic priorities and processes might influence differing responses from one day to the next (as evidenced in some of the responses to the five test questions and their follow-up prompts). Despite these limitations, this snapshot provides enough data to be definitive in showing the general and current nature of neutrality, bias, and usefulness of AI in aiding biblical exegesis and, ultimately, praxis. These mainline LLMs understand and present their answers as objective and neutral, thus

⁶⁷ Grok, in response to the prompt “So, the supreme message of the Bible is regarding salvation?” viewed at <https://grok.com/c/d6df12e4-8e61-41e2-b6bc-e4cc2e32ba95>.

increasing their perceived value as exegetical aids. However, when tested on pivotal passages and questions they often depend on hermeneutic prioritizations and processes other than those aligned with LGH to formulate responses, and in many cases the responses show other hermeneutic priorities than the ones identified by the LLMs in characterizing their own default hermeneutic principles.

While the LLMs considered here assert hermeneutic processes that prioritize neutrality, their (sometimes) conflicting responses demonstrate the difficulty in achieving neutrality and objectivity. Their hermeneutic priorities are embedded by their designers, and those priorities *and* how those priorities rank when they conflict with each other are determined by designers who *do* have personhood, beliefs, and precommitments. While the LLMs do strive for a high degree of neutrality, the degree to which they are successful varies, due in no small part to their being tethered to the ideas, priorities, and processes of the persons who designed them.

Beyond the LLMs reasoning capabilities, much of the data relied on for LLM responses is pulled from various online sources (sometimes cited, sometimes not). The LLMs must also be designed with an integral means for determining which sources are to be trusted and which are to be marginalized on any given subject. There is bias inherent in these determinations as well. To illustrate, consider the debate regarding the critical text and majority text perspectives. This historical dilemma of antiquity versus quantity illustrates how multiple variables require value judgments for discerning order of priority and for discerning which principles are higher order. The challenge of solving multiple variables and multifaceted value judgments is inherent in the LLMs and their designs. There is more complexity to this issue than simply algorithms of popularity, findability, SEO, and perceived standards of trustworthiness.

Further, in answering the five test questions, there is enough variance and departure from LGH that the LLMs are not as unintrusive a filter as a concordance or a word search might be, for example. LLMs do indeed bring preunderstanding and precommitments to their responses on these subjects. As such, LLMs (and AI tools in general) cannot function as extensions of primary sources in the biblical exegetical process. Rather they provide an additional means of discovering *commentary* and secondary

perspectives on the biblical text. LLMs are secondary and tertiary sources in exegetical research. While they are excellent aggregators of data and information, they can often be misleading due to violations of their own stated hermeneutic priorities, and thus require the utmost of deliberateness, and even suspicion if their responses regarding biblical data are to be utilized.

Where LLMs Can Contribute Within the Sequence of Exegetical Process

As a composite of several excellent methods for exegetical process, this writer presents a nine-step process for exegesis and expositional application. The nine steps for biblical exegesis and exposition are:

- (1) Verify Text and Translation
- (2) Understand Background and Context
- (3) Identify Structure
- (4) Identify Grammatical and Syntactical Keys
- (5) Identify Lexical Keys
- (6) Identify Biblical Context
- (7) Identify Theological Context
- (8) Secondary Verification
- (9) Development of Exposition

Note that the first seven steps are actually exegesis (drawing from the text itself). We need to be sure we are avoiding eisegesis (reading ideas into the text) throughout these steps. Step eight is an assessment of our exegetical work, and step nine puts the passage to further use...⁶⁸

The first step of verifying text and translation “considers especially lower criticism, examining the text in the original language to

⁶⁸ Christopher Cone, *Integrating Exegesis and Exposition: Biblical Communication for Transformative Learning* (Exegetica Publishing, 2015), 51.

determine the scope and limits of the passage, and to verify the text itself.”⁶⁹ The second step of understanding background and context engages “higher criticism, authorship, timing, audience and culture, literary genre, and occasion, to name a few aspects.”⁷⁰ The third step, identifying structure, considers “internal clues to the structure of biblical books...for understanding the theses and supporting material of each book.”⁷¹ In the fourth step, the relationships of words are considered, as, “[g]rammar and syntax consider normative principles for relationships of words to each other. Grammar is the framework of rules, while syntax is descriptive of usage. Both are important, in historical context, for discerning meaning.”⁷² The fifth step seeks to provide “understand[ing] [of] the lexical meaning and etymology of the word.”⁷³ The sixth step considers biblical context, since “the meaning of a given passage is not discernible with certainty until related contexts are acknowledged and understood.”⁷⁴ The final of the *exegetical* steps is the seventh, which focuses on identifying the theological context. “Though biblical context is more central to discerning meaning, theological context is also important... If an interpretation is derived from a theological conclusion, rather than a textual analysis that considers theological context, that interpretation is invalid in the sense of being improperly earned.”⁷⁵

The exegetical process concludes with the seventh step, as these seven steps work together to provide a well-rounded and comprehensive examination of the text through the LGH hermeneutic lens. The eighth step is not itself an *exegetical* step, but considering secondary and tertiary perspectives offers a means of evaluating whether the right questions have been addressed through the exegetical process and can alert us if important questions have been missed, for example. The eighth step is not so much about discovering the answers of others but rather is about discovering the questions that should be asked. Through the questions others have

⁶⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 18.

⁷¹ Ibid., 19.

⁷² Ibid., 19.

⁷³ Ibid., 20.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 20.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 21.

asked and addressed, the exegete can better ensure that he or she has addressed important questions, and can procure an important verification of the *veracity and fidelity* of the seven exegetical steps.

After the seventh step, secondary verification is a helpful exercise for confirming adherence to LGH throughout the exegetical process, and involves considering secondary, extra-biblical data (commentaries, teachers, and other resources). Consulting secondary sources cannot be considered part of the exegetical process, *per se*, but their utilization can help the interpreter ensure that no steps have been missed. Such interpretive humility is important. Still the interpreter must be courageous enough to allow the biblical text to speak for itself, even if the secondary sources disagree with the exegetical results. In short, secondary verification is not an exercise in extra-biblical proof-texting, instead, it is a process for checking adherence to the hermeneutic and to the process itself.⁷⁶

After the eighth step has supplied a test of the seven-step exegetical process by helping us evaluate the effectiveness of the questions we asked throughout the exegetical process, the exegete moves to the ninth step of developing exposition, which includes praxis (personal application – the *doing* of the text) and formal exposition (the communication of the text for the edification of others).

The first seven steps *are* the exegesis process. If secondary and tertiary sources are brought into these steps, then the process is no longer exegetical. If we conclude that LLMs and AI tools are secondary sources (as we have above), then they do not contribute positively to exegesis *except* in helping the exegete in the verification of the quality of the questions being asked and answered throughout the exegetical process. As aggregations of knowledge on the subject, LLMs can be excellent resources for the eighth step – secondary verification, wherein we evaluate whether we have asked the right questions and how comprehensive our inquiry has been.

However, unless the exegete has a lexicon-level knowledge of original language principles and vocabulary (none do, of course), the exegete will need to use sources for linguistic

⁷⁶ Ibid., 21-22.

information. While caution is needed, language sources *can and must* be used in the exegetical process, if the sources are accurately reflecting simply historical and grammatical fidelity to the language. This is different from invoking a broader encyclopedic perspective on the interpretation and significance of the passage, as an LLM will often provide. Only with the appropriate linguistic-centric prompts, can an LLM be used in the exegetical process in the same way as an lexicon or grammar, but even then as the above questions and answers expose, LLMs have deep limitations in regard to choice and prioritization of sources, training and feedback response causing differing answers from one inquiry to the next, and in regard to reasoning capacity and failure to sometimes execute the simplest of logical processes. With possible exceptions related directly to inquiry about linguistic elements expressly connected to the grammatical-historical aspects of the language, LLMs are best used in the eighth step as secondary (or tertiary) sources for the verification process, as a minor check and balance, helping us evaluate the effectiveness and comprehensiveness of our exegetical inquiries.

Conclusion

As evidenced by the *attempted* neutrality of the four LLMs and precision in their attempts to fulfill that neutrality, LLM's are, to differing degrees, useful tools in aiding biblical study in the post-exegesis verification process. As evidenced by the variance in their answers to similar prompts, LLMs are limited in their *actual neutrality*, in their *reasoning*, and in their *sourcing*. They are also governed by hermeneutic priorities that are not always evident or transparently admitted, or even consistent with their own stated priorities.

Because of these limitations and designs, some LLMs at times better fulfill their commitments to neutrality and at times are more aligned with biblical hermeneutic priorities and with the biblically affirmed and consistently applied LGH,⁷⁷ and thus they

⁷⁷ This writer asserts that the LGH is attested to, affirmed, and consistently applied throughout the biblical record, and especially from the hermeneutic precedent demonstrated over 2,500 years and discernible from the speech acts of God and the recorded responses in Genesis. This precedent is further upheld in successive biblical books, and thus no

have value for the discerning exegete. In addition to making use of LLMs as tools in appropriate context and sequence, the exegete can also improve LLMs, even if only in limited degree, by training LLMs through providing feedback and formal training processes. Perhaps the most effective and important impact an exegete can have on LLMs is by creating online content that accurately reflects the LGH and that addresses exegetical issues, topics, and biblical passages *through a biblical lens*. In a way, the two-way-street between LLM and exegete can be an important stewardship for the exegete.

In a world where technology increasingly delivers on promises of simplification and timesaving, the discerning exegete should, no doubt, make use of every tool provided for *improving* exegetical fidelity. The wise exegete will also discern that absent from the exegetical list of priorities are simplification of exegetical process and reducing the time spent in exegesis.

change in hermeneutic methodology is warranted. For more on this, see Christopher Cone, *Priority in Biblical Hermeneutics and Theological Method* (Exegetica Publishing, 2018), 17-35.