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Being, Existence, and the Intrinsic Goodness of Life

Jeremy Wallace, DMin¹

Introduction

I have had the great blessing of traversing the world, traveling to eighteen countries. The diversity of cultures, climates, topographies and landscapes reminds me of just how beautiful God's creation is. There are few places in the world, however, that are as beautiful to me as is Sunriver, Oregon. Sunriver is a resort just south of Bend, Oregon, and it is here where some of my fondest childhood and young adult memories were formed. I recall one summer day hanging out at the Sunriver Village center and there it was—a retail clothing store whose brand name was “Life is Good.” I found myself doing a doubletake when I saw their sign for it deeply resonated with me. I thought to myself, “Indeed, life *is* good. What a cool branding concept.” This certainly is a truth claim we can get on board with as it affirms something we all too often take for granted. As Christians, we can rightly claim not only that life is good, but we can claim to know both implicitly and explicitly *why* life is good.

The Goodness of Life

I have found that one of the great joys in the life of an educator is the discovery of an enthralling piece of scholarship, especially when it was unforeseen and previously unknown to me. This happened to me a couple of years ago. One of my areas of research interest is apologetics, and my attention was brought to the person and work of Theodore Abu Qurrah. He was an eighth century Christian theologian whose works have largely been unknown to the Western world until recently. Born in Syria, he is known for his efforts to build bridges with rulers during the ‘Abbasid Caliphate and dedicated much of his

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life to translating Christian works into Arabic in order to make Christian beliefs intelligible within an increasingly hostile Islamic context. In such a milieu, Abu Qurrah wrote *The Treatise on the Existence of the Creator and the True Religion*, his primary apologetic work known to us today. In it, Abu Qurrah makes some remarkable claims about the existence of God, the nature of virtues, and humanity's ability to reason. According to Byard Bennett, Abu Qurrah argued that

since human beings are created in the likeness of God, the mind must reason from what is highest and best in human nature to understand the character of God, who is the source of our life and our reason. As the mind contemplates all that is virtuous in human life and finds the source of these virtues in different aspects of God's own goodness (God's attributes), one also gains a sense of what is truly good (and ought to be done) or evil (and ought to be avoided).²

Equipped with an understanding of various "grades of goodness," humans can apprehend the character of God, in whom are grounded being and rationality. Stated succinctly, "since we are created in the likeness of God, our minds are capable of recognizing what is truly good; in the same way, we also have an instinctive sense of what is right and ought not to be done."³ By way of direct appeal to the doctrine of *imago Dei*, Abu Qurrah contends that humans can, by means of right reason, rightly claim to have legitimate knowledge of God, virtues, and moral understanding. But what is the greatest of the virtues? Interpreting Abu Qurrah, Byard Bennett writes, "The greatest

² Byard Bennett, "Theodore Abu Qurrah: Defending Christian Doctrines During the Rise of Islam," in *The History of Apologetics: A Biographical and Methodological Introduction*, Eds. Benjamin K. Forrest, Joshua D. Chatraw, Alister E. McGrath (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 185-186.

³ *Ibid.*, 186.

virtue, Theodore argues, is to give the best things one has to another so that the other can share in them and enjoy them. The most important thing one can give to another is life itself, since, without life, virtuous activity is not possible; the virtues can be realized only in one who is living, not in one who is dead.”⁴ In other words, the precondition for the goodness of virtue-recognition is the goodness of existence itself, for one cannot do the former without the latter.

Abu Qurrah gives voice to what many of us instinctively affirm. God is the ground of all goodness, rationality, beauty, and life. Moreover, there’s something about the goodness of “life” itself that stands out from the rest. Perhaps this is because we speak of “goodness” primarily in one of two ways: as *instrumental* goods and as *intrinsic* goods. Moral philosophers have long acknowledged that certain “goods” are good because they serve a purpose or utility, and yet some “goods” appear to be good in and of themselves. Indeed, this can be traced to Book I of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. In his words, “It is manifest then the goods may be so called in two senses, the one class for their own sake, the other because of these.” In truth, for Aristotle, these two “goods” are only intelligible because there are comparatives of a third kind of good: the *ultimate* good. God, as we both know and affirm, is the ultimate Good by which all is measured. Life is not merely an instrumental good but is intrinsically good.⁵ To recall Abu Qurrah’s claim, it is a precondition for other goods. Thus, when we affirm that “life is good,” we are, at least in one sense, affirming that of all the “good” gifts God has given to us, there is one that is central to having all the others. We must *be*, to be blessed. And it is here that James 1:17 so vividly comes to mind: “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (ESV).

⁴ Ibid., 186.

⁵ Additional intrinsic goods have been suggested throughout the history of moral philosophy, such as health, contentment, pleasure, knowledge, beauty, justice, and love, among others.

Quadrum 7.1

While previous volumes of *Quadrum* have centered on a primary theme, (most notably aimed at Foursquare's annual Connection gatherings), some have not. This issue of *Quadrum* is technically comprised of "open" articles, but both are linked in one way or another to the value of human life. Part of the uniqueness of this issue is found both in the increase of book reviews, as well as one topic (suicide) addressed in two distinct articles through the lens of the Old and New Testaments. Jim W. Adams' two articles on suicide and Scripture examine how Scripture addresses suicide and each present a challenge to the widespread assumption that the act of suicide constitutes an unforgivable sin. Joshua Edward's article explores how the economic systems in 1850s America played a significant role in producing the divisions that led to the Civil War, and he concludes by offering a Pentecostal theological reflection on modern polarization and Christian unity. Finally, the reader will notice that Gino Curcuruto, Jim T. Cooper, Jr., and Clayton D. Robinson have composed some helpful book reviews. We trust these insightful scholarly offerings will not only be an interesting read, but helpful to you as you seek to know, love, and serve Jesus.

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Suicide and Scripture:

Part I—Introduction, Suicide and the Old Testament¹

Jim W. Adams, PhD²

How fragile we are, how fragile we are

Sting, “Fragile”

ABSTRACT:

Suicide is frequently shrouded in silence, shame, and theological uncertainty within Christian communities, despite its deep connections with human suffering, mental illness, trauma, and grief. Although suicide brings an end to an individual’s earthly anguish, it leaves profound emotional, spiritual, and existential wounds among those left behind. For Christians in particular, suicide raises pressing questions about sin, forgiveness, and eternal destiny—questions that have historically contributed to the Church’s harsh stance and enduring stigma. This two-part work examines how Scripture addresses suicide, challenging the wide-spread assumption that it constitutes an unforgivable sin. While Scripture neither explicitly condemns nor endorses suicide, the biblical witness nevertheless reveals a theological tension: God appears opposed to the act, yet suicide is never clearly named as sin. This tension frames this study’s three central questions concerning the biblical stance on suicide, the nature of God’s response, and Scripture’s vision for faithfully navigating suffering and suicidal ideation.

¹ A large portion of my two-part work reflects what I submitted to the Foursquare Global Doctrine Committee in 2024. I want to thank Jake Evers and Eric Lopez as well as the anonymous reviewers at *Quadrum* for their careful critique and helpful suggestions of earlier versions of this essay. I also want to thank Jeremy Wallace for his supportive guidance toward the publication of my work.

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So many of us suffer silently from loneliness, chronic pain, a sense of helplessness, mental health issues, anxiety, feelings of hopelessness, depression, discrimination, all types of abuse, loss, and/or grief brought about by manifold of reasons. Far too often individuals choose to end such suffering once-and-for all by taking their own life. Such a definitive act does end a person's anguish on this earth, but the torment for those left behind only begins. The victim's loved ones not only grieve the absence of their daughter, son, wife, husband, sister, brother, friend, but are also left with haunting, unanswerable questions such as Why? How did we not see this coming? What could we have done to prevent this? How can we possibly continue to live without her or him? For Christ-followers, there is additional pressing question: What are the eternal consequences for a person who commits suicide? Lurking behind this question is the assumption that suicide is a grave—and because of its finality—an unforgiveable sin. Thus, believers who take their life are thought to be forever banned from the kingdom of God. Such an interpretive conclusion is obviously quite ominous, which is perhaps one of the main reasons why the Church has stigmatized suicide. Alongside the firm stance frequently taken by the Church, however, lies the less direct testimony of the biblical text. Indeed, it has long been observed by scholars that the act of taking one's own life is never explicitly condemned within the pages of Scripture.³ Regardless of the absence of explicit prohibition in the scriptures, believers may question whether suicide feels right or seems like something God would condone. In this two-part work, I examine the biblical texts explicitly depicting suicide as well as the relative texts involving murder, death, and martyrdom. In this first Part, I introduce the topic of suicide, present a selective overview on how suicide was viewed during church history, then I examine the relevant texts in the Old Testament (OT) followed by my conclusions.

³ Scripture for my study here is confined to the Protestant canon that includes the 39 books composing the Old Testament (OT) and the 27 books of the New Testament (NT).

In Part II, I turn to the New Testament (NT) followed by my conclusions concerning suicide and the NT. At the end of this section, I present my final reflections concerning suicide and Scripture.

My research is guided by three questions, which are prompted by both how Church tradition has predominantly viewed suicide along with how Scripture addresses the topic. My first question is: *What stance do the biblical writers take on the act of suicide?* The way in which Scripture provides an answer to this question, however, leaves us with a tension. This tension is not due to the diverse thematic perspectives within the Testaments (as is the case with poverty, suffering, the monarchy, etc.), but due to the fact that suicide is neither explicitly condemned nor advocated. Within this tension, though, the trajectory of particular texts points me to the conclusion that God is not pleased with a person taking her/his life, and that God in fact opposes such an act. All this leads to my second question: *How can it be that the God of Scripture is not pleased with, and even opposes suicide, and simultaneously does not consider it a sin?* My final question also arises from this tension: *How does Scripture envision the faithful navigation of suffering and in particular suicidal ideation?* I will sparingly touch upon these questions throughout my work, but I will primarily address them in my conclusions and final reflections.

Introduction

Suicide can be defined as “the act or an instance of taking one’s own life voluntarily and intentionally” (Merriam-Webster); it “is the voluntary and intentional killing of oneself.”⁴ The English noun “suicide” is a compound noun comprised of “self” and “killing.” It is a modern term with the noun first appearing in the middle of the seventeenth century along with the German compound noun *Selbstmord*, “self” and “murder.” Before the use of the English noun, more

⁴ Allen Verhey, “Suicide,” *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics* (ed. J. B. Green; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 758.

judgmental phrases were employed in Old English: “to murder oneself, “to destroy oneself, “to slaughter oneself,” and “to assassinate oneself.”⁵ In fact, the term “‘suicide’ came about in the wake of a move to get away from accusing references to ‘murder.’”⁶ The noun also gives “the impression of coming directly from Latin; but there was no Latin *suicidium*, and indeed the formation is contrary to Latin grammar.”⁷ The earliest Latin noun phrase for suicide, though, is *mors voluntaria* “voluntary death” and possibly the invention of Cicero (ca. 106-43 BCE).⁸ This phrase is obviously more morally neutral, which was the original intent of the term “suicide”; however, the English noun is typically associated with sin, a crime, irrationality, weakness, and/or a symptom of psychological and social disorders.⁹ As for Scripture, the terminology is scant. There is no expression “to kill oneself” or “to die by one’s hand” found in the OT. In the NT, the verb ἀποκτείνω (*apokteinō*) “to kill” occurs once with the reflexive pronoun ἑαυτὸν (*heauton*) “himself” (Jn 8:22a) and the verb ἀναιρέω (*anairēō*) “to kill” also occurs singularly with the same pronoun (Acts

⁵ See David Daube, “The Linguistics of Suicide,” *PPA* 1 (1972): 413-16, 421-23.

⁶ Daube, “Linguistics of Suicide,” 415.

⁷ Daube, “Linguistics of Suicide,” 422.

⁸ Daube, “Linguistics of Suicide,” 412. For a helpful succinct summary on the history of the terminology for suicide see Arthur J. Droge and James D. Tabor, *A Noble Death* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 6-8.

⁹ Droge and Tabor, *Noble Death*, 4; see further Andreas Bähr, “Between ‘Self-Murder’ and ‘Suicide’: The Modern Etymology of Self-Killing,” *JSH* 46 (2013): 620-32. Stanislaw Adamiak and Jan Dohnalik conclude that the current position of the Roman Catholic view suicide as mostly “resulting from psychological difficulties, which strongly limit moral accountability” (“The Prohibition of Suicide and Its Theological Rationale in Catholic Moral and Canonical Tradition: Origins and Developments,” *JRH* 62 [2023]: 3828).

16:27). There is no Hebrew,¹⁰ Aramaic,¹¹ or Greek¹² term found in the entirety of Scripture equivalent to the English noun “suicide” or verb “commit suicide.” Rather, what the biblical writers do is present concrete descriptions of individuals taking their own life—an approach consistent with the way people groups throughout history typically report such acts.¹³ There are seven clear depictions of suicide found in Scripture; six in the OT and one in the NT. That said, other instances could be included if the interpreter blends death by

¹⁰ Modern Hebrew uses the biblical Hebrew root אבד (ʾbd) “to perish, destroy” to create a noun meaning “suicide.” A typical noun מִתְאַבֵּד (*mit’abbēd*) “suicide” occurs while the verb אבד (ʾbd) occurs in the Piel stem (with this root probably a Factitive nuance expressing the intransitive result of the stated action) and Hithpael stem (expresses a reflexive nuance whereby the subject of the verb performs the stated action to or for her/himself) with the infinitive typically formed as לְהִתְאַבֵּד (*l’hit’abbēd*) “to commit suicide.” In biblical Hebrew, מִתְאַבֵּד (*mit’abbēd*) does not appear while the verb אבד (ʾbd) only occurs in the Qal, Piel, and Hiphil stems and never to express “to commit suicide” (see *HALOT* 2-3). According to Leon Nemoy, the Talmud contains the first Hebrew expression using the same verb: מְאַבֵּד אֶת עַצְמוֹ לְדַעַת (*m’abbad ’āt ’ašmō lāda ’at*) “one destroying one’s own self knowingly” (“A Tenth Century Disquisition on Suicide According to Old Testament Law,” *JBL* 57 [1938]: 412; see also Daube, “Linguistics of Suicide,” 397). For descriptions of suicide in the Talmud see Fred Rosner, “Suicide in Biblical, Talmudic, and Rabbinic Writings,” *Tradition: JOT* 11 (1970): 30-34.

¹¹ Aramaic occurs in Gen 31:47, Jer 10:11, Ezra 4:8-6:18, and Dan 2:4b-7:28, but these sections do not include any reference to a person taking her/his own life.

¹² Modern Greek has several nouns for the term “suicide” (cf. αυτοκτονία [*autoktonia*]) as well as uses the verb αυτοκτονώ (*autoktonō*) “commit suicide,” but no such terms occur in the NT. The LXX does not employ either of these terms. Manifold descriptions of the act of taking one’s own life, though, occur in Greek literature (see Daube, “Linguistics of Suicide,” 399-400). According to John M. Cooper, neither ancient Greek nor Latin has a word that can be translated “suicide.” Cooper does observe, though, that there existed a late usage in classical Greek “an adjective (and noun) *biaiothanatos* (or *biothanatos*) meaning ‘dying a violent death’ that was applied especially to suicides in particular” (“Greek Philosophers on Euthanasia and Suicide” in *Suicide and Euthanasia*, Philosophy and Medicine 35 [ed. B. A. Brody; Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989], 10). For the history of the development of terminology for suicide in Greek see Daube, “Linguistics of Suicide,” 399-405.

¹³ See Daube, “Linguistics of Suicide,” 394.

one's own hand and death resulting from religious and/or political opposition.

I see a difference between suicide and martyrdom while these two types of death are not easily distinguished. According to Marianne Blickenstaff, a “martyr is someone who gives witness to the strength of his or her convictions by dying rather than recanting religious or political beliefs. A martyr’s death often is the result of persecution and torture.” As the English noun *martyr* derives from the Greek term μαρτυρία (*marturia*), her/his death becomes a “witness” and/or “testimony” that inspires others to loyalty and faithfulness in the face of persecution and death.¹⁴ A martyr’s death, then, is voluntary, not a self-killing. But, as James D. Tabor observes, “not wholly so, since some element of compulsion exists, and some noble cause . . . is at stake.” Further, with martyrdom there typically exists the possibility of escaping death. So, both a martyr and one who commits suicide, voluntarily choose death over life. Consequently, as Tabor asks: “Is there a difference between taking one’s life directly and allowing one’s life to be taken?”¹⁵ One difference lies in the general, societal outlook, with suicide predominantly viewed negatively whereas martyrdom is lauded as *noble*. Considering the evidence in ancient materials, though, Tabor argues “that one person’s suicide is another’s martyr and vice versa.”¹⁶

Despite the seemingly thin difference between suicide and martyrdom, I still maintain that that these two types of death can and should be distinguished. Although not ending in actual death, a salient example in Scripture of voluntary death in the sense of martyrdom occurs with the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abendego (Dan 3). In brief, king Nebuchadnezzar commissions the crafting a golden image, mandating that everyone in Babylonia and beyond to prostrate

¹⁴ Blickenstaff, “Martyr,” *NIBD* 3: 822.

¹⁵ Tabor, “Martyr, Martyrdom,” *ABD* IV: 574.

¹⁶ Tabor, *ABD* IV: 575.

before and worship the image under the threat of being cast into a blazing furnace (vv 1-7). Soon it is reported that the three friends refuse to comply with the command. When confronted, the Israelites assert their commitment to their God and his ability to rescue them, then defiantly state: “O king, we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up” (vv 17-18).¹⁷ As the story unfolds, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are supernaturally rescued from the fiery furnace with the king quickly acknowledging their deity is the “most high God” (vv 19-30). These three friends do in fact voluntarily choose to die, but their decision is a covenantal one, between the command to serve and worship Yahweh alone or the Babylonian image and gods (e.g., Exod 20:3-6). Theirs was a choice between disobeying Yahweh resulting in continuing to live or disobeying Nebuchadnezzar resulting in possible death.¹⁸ Others who actually died because of their faith within Scripture include Zechariah (2 Chr 24:20-22; see also Matt 23:35; Luke 11:51), John the Baptist (Matt 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29; Luke 9:7-9), Stephen (Acts 7:54-60), James (Acts 12:1-2), and Antipas (Rev 2:13).¹⁹ So, in response to Tabor’s question and as I will discuss in more detail below, I distinguish between one killing her/himself for whatever reason (suicide)

¹⁷ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine. I include the original language with my translations in particular instances I consider interpretively important. For my citations of the biblical text, I follow the Hebrew and Greek versification and so in certain instances, especially with the Psalms, the verse numerals in the English Bible do not correspond. When this occurs, I will cite the Hebrew verse number followed by the English verse number (e.g., Ps 3:2 [Eng v 1]).

¹⁸ The book of Daniel contains one of the few references to eternal life in OT (12:1-3; also Isa 25:8; 26:19; Hos 13:14; perhaps also Ezek 37:11-14), but this hope does not appear to be a factor with the three Judeans choice to defy the mandate of the Babylonian king. This promise of vindication for the righteous at the final judgment would, though, become a factor for readers of Daniel (see further Tabor, *ABD* IV: 575).

¹⁹ See further Darrel W. Amundsen, “Suicide and Early Christian Values,” in *Suicide and Euthanasia*, Philosophy and Medicine 35 (ed. B. A. Brody; Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), 77-83; Tabor, *ABD* IV: 574-79.

and one's voluntary death for religious convictions and/or opposition (martyrdom).

Throughout church history, suicide has been predominantly condemned; however, differences of opinion arise as to the consequence of the act, which varies in degrees from forgivable to unforgivable. Augustine of Hippo (ca. 354-430) is the first Christian theologian to engage with the topic in a thorough manner and consequently is often identified as the inventor of suicide as a crime and sin.²⁰ However, as Darrel W. Amundsen has demonstrated, Augustine's view would not have been unique to his contemporaries as it stands in the tradition of Justin Martyr (ca. 100-65), Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-215), Tertullian (ca. 160-240), Lactantius (ca. 240-320), Ambrose (ca. 339-97), and John Chrysostom (ca. 349-407) among others.²¹ What Augustine did, though, was solidify that "the voluntary taking of one's own life in any circumstances was an evil: an horrific crime and an unforgiveable sin."²²

When early Christians began to address suicide directly,²³ some sought to recast what was commonly considered honorable suicides, in contrast to Greco-Roman society and literature, as morally impermissible. However, one of the earliest references within

²⁰ So e.g., Margaret P. Battin, *Ethical Issues in Suicide* (Englewood Cliffs, 1995), 64; Arthur J. Droge, "Suicide," *ABD* VI: 225; Droge and Tabor, *Noble Death*, 5, 125, 167-83.

²¹ Amundsen, "Christian Values," 116-41. In Augustine's *De civitate Dei* (*City of God*), Amundsen identifies a fourfold defense of the traditional condemnation of suicide by addressing possible objections, which is where Augustine differs from his predecessors: "1. Scripture neither commands it [suicide] nor expressly permits it, either as a means of attaining immortality or as a way to avoid or escape any evil. 2. It must be understood to be forbidden by the sixth commandment. 3. If no one on his own authority has a right to kill even a guilty man, then one who kills himself is a homicide. 4. The act of suicide allows no opportunity for repentance" ("Christian Values," 139).

²² Brent D. Shaw, *Sacred Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 728.

²³ Much of the following description of suicide and martyrdom within Church history derives from the personal research of Eric Lopez.

Christian literature also highlighted the importance of supporting those discouraged and contemplating suicide, urging fellow Christians to come alongside and dissuade them from committing it or be at risk of sinning themselves.²⁴

The discussion of suicide in Christian writings took place in several particular contexts, the most common of which was in relation to acceptable and unacceptable actions during persecution. Unacceptable actions included the failure to resist a persecutor's command to worship idols (e.g., statues of emperors, other gods), handing over Scripture for destruction or the betrayal of other Christians. Each of these was seen as equivalents to denying Christ and thus deemed apostasy. Early Christian communities judged other responses to persecution in various ways. Fleeing persecution (citing Matt 10:23) was considered a viable option but required formal acceptance by local councils, a fact that suggests some in the Christian community thought it was unworthy of true Christians.²⁵ Still, martyrdom was unquestionably the most honorable response when persecution was unavoidable.

The act of committing suicide during persecution yielded mixed reactions,²⁶ with leaders expressing concern that some Christians were overly eager to seek out martyrdom either because of impulsive devotion or to hasten their way into Christ's presence.

²⁴ See e.g., *Shepherd of Hermas*, Παραβολή ι §10.4.

²⁵ An early witness is Tertullian (ca. 160-225), who initially argues that the community ought to be patient with those fleeing persecution (*On Patience* 13.6; *To his Wife* 1.3.4), then argues Christians are obliged to be martyrs (*Scorpion* 8), and finally condemns fleeing as cowardice (*On Flight in Persecution*). See Ruth Sutcliffe, "To Flee or Not to Flee? Matthew 10:23 and Third Century Flight in Persecution," *Scrinium* 14 (2018): 136-144.

²⁶ Debates arose between some confessors (those who had survived persecution) and Church leaders like Cyprian the bishop of Carthage (died 258), who fled under the Decian persecution during the third century. On Cyprian's thoughts on suicide see Amundsen, "Christian Values," 109-12; "Cyprian of Carthage," in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2014), 1: 646-49.

Consequently, they sought to discourage rash and excessively eager attitudes to die a martyr's death. Instead, Christians highlighted God's desire for a *life* of obedience while nevertheless honoring those martyred. If one could flee persecution (citing again Matt 10:23), that was preferable to committing one of the acts of apostasy above or recklessly and unnecessarily seeking out paths to a martyr's death.²⁷ Moreover, intentionally casting one's suicide, in the vein of some examples in Greco-Roman literature, as an imitation-worthy and noble act especially when done out of spitefulness against God/gods or the world (e.g., neighbor, friends, family, community) was considered especially odious.

Although Augustine asserts that suicide is a "detestable crime and a damnable wickedness"²⁸ and since his perspective played such a central role in subsequent history, it is important to highlight that several early Christian scholars have suggested that his views on suicide have been misunderstood and sometimes grossly misrepresented by modern critics.²⁹ Such work also suggests that later Christian decisions that utilized Augustine were not always in agreement with him, nor were they consistent in their understanding of his arguments. Additionally, later decisions sometimes addressed scenarios his writings did not. His most concerted writings on suicide focused on addressing Roman Christian women who had been under the threat of rape and death from persecutors. In response to this threat, some chose to commit suicide to maintain their piety, chastity, or both. Questions arose in Christian communities regarding whether these women should be honored as imitation-worthy examples, like

²⁷ For example, see Clement of Alexandria (*ca.* 150-215) and his discussion in *Stromateis* Book 4 Chapter 10.76; see further Amundsen, "Christian Values," 113-16.

²⁸ Augustine, *Civ.* I.25.

²⁹ See e.g., Amundsen, "Christian Values," 77-153; Melanie Webb, "Chapter 10: Abraham, Samson, and 'Certain Holy Women': Suicide and Exemplarity in Augustine's *De ciuitate dei* 1.26," in *Sacred Scripture and Secular Struggles* (ed. David Vicent Meconi; Boston: Brill, 2015), 201-34.

some of the noble suicides of Roman literature, or shamed as negative examples. Augustine's response also covers ground beyond this specific situation, citing other reasons one might commit suicide (e.g., past sins, attaining a better life with God after death).³⁰

Augustine's most lengthy treatment of this situation is in his *De civitate Dei* (*City of God*) Book I and Chapters 16-28 while he also discusses suicide in his *Contra Gaudentium Donatistarum episcopum* (*Against Gaudentius the Donatist Bishop*). Augustine correctly observes how Scripture does not directly affirm or condemn suicide. However, based on the Gospels' various reports of Jesus' statements concerning love, he infers that successful love of God and love of neighbor are linked to self-love (not selfishness). In addition to arguing against the human inclination of self-preservation, he eventually connects suicide with the sixth commandment: "You shall not kill" (Exod 20:13). For Augustine, suicide is included in this commandment as it does not add the phrase "your neighbor" as with the ninth commandment (v 16). Further, the sixth commandment can only plausibly apply to human beings, not to any other created thing. Thus, "You shall not kill" applies solely to humanity and prohibits murdering "neither another nor yourself. For one who kills her/himself kills nothing other than a human."³¹

While Augustine seeks to cast suicide as morally impermissible in every case, other Christian writers saw suicide as heroic or honorable in circumstances where a persecutor might force Christians to commit acts of idolatry or subject them to someone else's sin (rape). For instance, Ambrose, the bishop of Milan under whom Augustine converted and was mentored, cast Pelagia as a martyr. Pelagia (ca. late 3rd century) was a Christian virgin who, during the Diocletian persecution, was commanded to participate in pagan sacrifices and

³⁰ See Augustine, *Civ.* I.26-27.

³¹ Augustine, *Civ.* I.20; see further I.26. Fred Rosner concludes that "Judaism regards suicide as a criminal act and strictly forbidden by Jewish law" ("Suicide," 38-39).

faced rape. After gaining permission to change clothes before going with her persecutors, she went to the roof of her house and cast herself into the sea. While Ambrose assumes suicide in cases of persecution in general are unacceptable, this specific scenario which again included the likelihood of rape seemed to him acceptable, even praiseworthy.³² Augustine discourages suicide even in these kinds of situations, stating it is better to endure hardship than to commit sin (self-murder) in order to avoid another sin. Due to its finality, suicide is the one sin that leaves no opportunity to repent.³³ Additionally, no sin (like rape) committed against someone defiles them if they are not complicit with it.³⁴ Therefore, barring a divine directive, which he states is difficult to confirm (citing 1 Cor 2:11), suicide is a grave sin when driven by: (1) a desire to avoid temporary afflictions; (2) a desire to avoid other people's sins or potential sin against one's person; (3) discouragement from one's own sin; or (4) a longing to hasten one's death in order to be in Christ's presence.³⁵ Augustine would go on to classify as unacceptable the actions of Christians who incite persecution through violence or rebellion; the "heroic" deaths of Christians that resulted from these actions were not to be understood in terms of martyrdom because such tactics lacked love (citing 1 Cor 13) and committed acts of unrighteousness (citing Matt 5:10).³⁶ Augustine, though, does not address issues like insanity or demon possession nor does he advocate for desecration of the body or denial of Christian burial and funeral rites.

During the Late Middle Ages and Reformation era in the European context, these various views continued but an intersection

³² This view, which condemned suicide during persecution except to preserve chastity, was also held by Jerome and Eusebius (see Amundsen, "Christian Values," 119-23).

³³ Augustine, *Civ.* I.25.

³⁴ See Augustine, *Civ.* I.25-28.

³⁵ Augustine, *Civ.* I.26.

³⁶ Augustine, *Letter* 173 and *Letter* 185.

of criminalization and suicide also took place. In this context, if someone attempted suicide but failed, the person could nevertheless be convicted of a crime and put to death. Often, the bodies of those who had committed suicide were not only denied burial but were also subject to various types of desecration. Early Protestant communities continued the same practices and, in some cases, also imposed penalties on the deceased's property. John Calvin does not discuss suicide in any of the versions of his *Institutes*, but in his sermons he sparingly engages on the topic and specifically references Saul and his armor-bearer and Ahithophel. As with Augustine, self-murder is never acceptable in any circumstance. Suicide is the worst crime as well as detestable and unnatural. As became widely accepted in the late Middle Ages, Calvin also viewed individuals taking their own lives as the result of being possessed by the devil.³⁷ Martin Luther was uncertain of the eternal destiny of those who kill themselves, but held that anyone who commits such an act would not normally wish to do so; rather, in line with Calvin, Luther saw suicide as the result of being overcome by the devil.³⁸

Augustine's view represents the dominant, traditional Christian view on suicide and many Christ-followers today would readily agree with the Bishop and others that suicide is an un-pardonable sin. Further, the finality of the act does not allow any opportunity for repentance. As Augustine exhorts: "Let no one [kill her/himself] out of a desire for a better life, which is hoped for after death, because a better life after death does not receive those guilty of their own death!"³⁹ Thus, suicide is the severest of sins and cannot be justified in any circumstance.⁴⁰ Yet to reiterate, as Augustine also observed

³⁷ See Jeffrey R. Watt, "Calvin on Suicide," *CH* 66 (1997): 463-76; *idem*, *Choosing Death* (Kirkville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2001).

³⁸ Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, No. 222, April 7, 1532.

³⁹ Augustine, *Civ.* I.26.

⁴⁰ Roman Catholic Catechism still places suicide as a sub-topic of the sixth commandment but lists the following exceptions: "Grave psychological distur-

and most modern interpreters concur, no explicit condemnation of suicide occurs in Scripture nor is the act categorized as a sin. Further, no biblical writer ever describes any consequences for taking one's own life. Thus, the biblical writers remain silent on the morality of suicide. Arthur J. Droge and Tabor⁴¹ capitalize on this silence in their treatment of the topic. Coupled with their analysis of ancient witnesses and other instances of voluntary death they consider any type of self-killing as *noble deaths*.⁴² Still, as I will attempt to demonstrate, no biblical writer endorses suicide as a viable or justifiable means to escape any source of pain and suffering. In contrast to Droge and Tabor, numerous contemporary interpreters follow Augustine's lead and infer that the sixth commandment as well as other texts condemn suicide⁴³ or that the overwhelmingly scriptural witness presents a view antithetical to the act.⁴⁴

To arrive at my own conclusions, I engage in an analysis of the biblical text that is mainly exegetical and considers historical, semantic, grammatical, literary, genre, and cultural (social-scientific) aspects. As for the depictions of suicide, each instance is found within narrative and thus I will also utilize the techniques and strategies identified by narrative critics. Further, I read the narrative depictions

bances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1997) §2282).

⁴¹ Droge and Tabor, *Noble Death*. So also Droge in his work, cited elsewhere.

⁴² It is important to highlight that along with their work *Noble Death*, Droge and Tabor produced separate essays entitled "Suicide" and "Martyr, Martyrdom" respectively in the *ABD*. In these essays, the authors sometimes diverge from each other as well as from their co-authored work.

⁴³ E.g., Archie T. Wright, "Suicide," *NIDB* 4: 395; F. W. Young, "Suicide," *IDB* 4: 454.

⁴⁴ E.g., Amundsen, "Christian Values," 77-153, cf. 80-96; Allen Verhey, "Judas, Jesus, and Physician Assisted Suicide," in *Reading the Bible in the Strange World of Medicine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 304-44; *idem*, "Suicide," 758-60.

in their final form and “with the grain” or follow the lead of the text in contrast to reading the narratives with suspicion and/or in a subversive way. That said, as with any text, androcentric (male-centered), patriarchal, ideological, etc. biases are displayed throughout Scripture, but due to my focus here such self-interested perspectives do not readily play much of a factor, if at all, for my interpretive analysis.⁴⁵ From my examination in the Testaments, I draw direct conclusions from what I understand the biblical writers to be presenting, but I also draw inferential and theological conclusions that will culminate in my final reflections. Yet my goal with these reflections is to avoid more speculative conclusions by remaining within the scope of Scripture as much as possible.

Suicide in the Old Testament

Laws and Instructions Concerning Murder

Obviously there is the sixth commandment, which occurs in the two versions of the Decalogue (Exod 20:13; Deut 5:17). Along with this commandment, there are other prohibitions against murder that also include the consequential death penalty for the one who takes the life of another human being (e.g., Exod 21:12; Lev 24:17; Deut 27:24). Nevertheless, nowhere in these laws or any other related instruction is there an explicit condemnation or prohibition of the act of taking one’s own life and/or a categorization of the act as a sin against Yahweh. Conversely, there is no law allowing for and/or prescribing suicide as, for example, the law authorizing divorce (Deut 24:1-3).

The central interpretive issue with the sixth commandment is its terseness as well as the meaning of the verb רצח (*rāṣḥ*) “to kill, murder,” which occurs in both versions of the Decalogue. More

⁴⁵ For introductions on various critical approaches see Gale A. Yee, ed., *Judges & Method*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007); Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore, eds., *Mark & Method*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

specifically, it is semantically unclear as to exactly what type of killing the verb prohibits with this command. Within the OT, the verb is used in contexts of both intentional killing, i.e., “murder, homicide” (e.g., Num 35:20, 21; 1 Kgs 21:19; Ps 94:6b) and unintentional, non-premeditated killing, i.e., “(hu)manslaughter” (e.g., Num 4:41-42; 35:11; Deut 19:3, 4, 6; Josh 20:3). Its “basic prohibition was against killing, for whatever cause, under whatever circumstances, and by whatever method, a fellow-member of the covenant community.”⁴⁶ Importantly, the object of the verb is always another human being, never oneself or an animal.⁴⁷ Thus, evidenced by the use of רצח (*ršḥ*) in the sixth commandment, this prohibition does not explicitly include self-murder. In line with its terseness, the sixth commandment, like those that follow, is not accompanied with any purpose statement and/or reason to incentivize the addressee. Apparently and unlike some of the previous commands, the prohibition was easily understood and did not need any further elaboration or justification. Also, Augustine is correct that the command does not include “your neighbor” (actually the Masoretic Text [MT] has בִּרְעָךְ (*birē ‘ākā*) “against your neighbor” in the ninth commandment), but neither does the seventh or eighth commandments, which would naturally imply that the act is “against your neighbor.”

In Exodus, the Decalogue occurs within the larger literary context of chapters 19-24, often identified as the “Book of the Covenant” (cf. 24:7). The Decalogue functions as part of the stipulations of the Sinai covenant which defines the parameters and expectations of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel. Yet, within the literary setting of Yahweh’s first covenant with all of creation, there occurs another text that is relevant to the matter of suicide because it offers a description of homicide and its consequence.

⁴⁶ John I. Durham, *Exodus*, WBC 3 (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 393.

⁴⁷ See further W. R. Dörmers, “רצח,” *NIDOTTE* 3: 1188-90; F.-L. Hossfeld, “רצח,” *TDOT* XIII: 630-40.

Genesis 9:6 presents the taking of a life in relation to human beings created בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים (*bēṣelem ’ēlōhîm*) “in the image of God.” Such language harkens back to the opening creation account (Gen 1:1-2:4a), which culminates with the creation of humanity in God’s image (1:27aβ). No other created being in the entirety of the Bible is identified with such a description. Thus, there is something unique about humanity in relation to God and his creation (cf. Ps 8). Within the immediate context of Gen 1, the description of humans in the image of God conveys the expectation that human beings represent God and function as his royal vice-regents to subdue and rule over creation. The explicit way human beings accomplish this transpires through Yahweh’s blessing and his command: “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth!” (v 28).⁴⁸ The final instance of the phrase בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים (*bēṣelem ’ēlōhîm*) in Scripture occurs with the first instructions concerning homicide:

שֹׁפֵךְ דַּם הָאָדָם בָּאָדָם דָּמוֹ יִשְׁפֹּךְ

(*šōpek dam hā’ ādām bā’ ādām dāmō yišāpēk*)

Whoever pours out the blood of a human being by/for
a human being her/his blood will be poured out

כִּי בְצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים עָשָׂה אֶת־הָאָדָם

(*kî bēṣelem ’ēlōhîm ‘āsâ ’et hā’ ādām*)

because in the image of God he made humanity.

This verse is full of ambiguities⁴⁹ and in contrast to the Decalogue where the sixth commandment occurs in a list of prohibitions, here

⁴⁸ There is a massive amount of research on the meaning of humanity created “in the image of God.” For a helpful introductory discussion on the history of interpretation of this phrase see J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 17-29.

⁴⁹ See John Goldingay, *Genesis*, BCOTP (Grands Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 162-63.

“murder is something utterly on its own; nothing can be compared with it.”⁵⁰ Also, the first line is not a second person prohibition against murder, only a brief statement of the violent act accompanied with the consequence. The first two clauses occur in a concentric poetic structure that *centers* the reader’s focus on humanity (pours out, blood, human/human, blood, pours out). The prepositional phrase **בְּאָדָם** (*bā’ādām*) readily appears to identify by whom the murderer is punished, i.e., “by the human being,” which is how most translators understand the function of the preposition **ב** (*b*).⁵¹ This first line, though, parallels expressions such as “a life for a life” (Deut 19:21; cf. 2 Sam 3:27; 14:7) with **בְּאָדָם** (*bā’ādām*) then read as “for the human,”⁵² which the LXX makes explicit.⁵³ So, both readings are possible here as translated above. The final clause provides the reason

⁵⁰ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, CC (trans. J. J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 468.

⁵¹ Understanding the Niphal verb **יִשָּׁפֵק** (*yišāpēk*) in a passive sense with the murderer’s blood as its subject points to the instrumental function of the preposition **ב** (*b*).

⁵² Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, JPSTC (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society), 357.

⁵³ LXX reads: ὁ ἐκχέων αἷμα ἀνθρώπου ἀντὶ τοῦ αἵματος αὐτοῦ ἐκχυθήσεται, ὅτι ἐν εἰκόνι θεοῦ ἐποίησα τὸν ἄνθρωπον (*ho ekcheōn haima anthrōpou anti tou haimatos autou ekchuthēsetai, hoti en eikoni theou epoiēsa ton anthrōpon*) “the one who pours out the blood of a human being, for his blood [the victim] it [the blood of the murderer] will be poured out, because in the image of God he made humanity.” The Vulgate also does not include **בְּאָדָם** (*bā’ādām*). Johan Lust follows the LXX and reads the prepositional phrase **בְּאָדָם** (*bā’ādām*) as “for the human.” Specifically, Lust understands the **ב** (*b*) as a **ב-pretii** indicating “because of,” “on account of” corresponding to the LXX use of ἀντὶ (*anti*) apparently translated for the **ב** (*b*) in the second half of the first line (“‘For Man Shall His Blood Be Shed’: Gen 9:6 in Hebrew and in Greek,” *Tradition of the Text*, OBO 109 (FS D. Barthélemy; ed. G. J. Norton and S. Pisano; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 91-102. Thus, the first line “simply states that the punishment of the murderer will be exactly equal to her/his crime” (101 [pronouns revised])).

for the retribution: because humanity is made in the image of God. Yet, this line also presents at least two equally plausible reasons.⁵⁴

First, a murderer is equivalently punished *because* the victim is created in God's image.⁵⁵ Within the immediate context, this reason implies that each human being has an inherent value within the economy of the created order in distinction to other created beings (cf. Gen 9:2-3). Another reason arises from within the section of 9:1-7 with God's command to multiply and fill the earth forming an *inclusio* or bracket around this literary unit. Apart from subduing and ruling over the earth, the command in Gen 1:28 is repeated verbatim in 9:1 where Yahweh now blesses and commands Noah and his children. God issues the essence of the command again to them in v 7 with some slight differences: "be fruitful and multiply, spread out on the earth and multiply on it!" These two parallel commands surrounding the phrase בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים (*bēṣelem 'ēlōhīm*) undoubtedly points the reader back to its use at the opening page of the Bible. God in Gen 1 defines הָאָדָם (*hā'ādām*) "the human" as זָכָר (*zākār*) "male" and נִקְבָּה (*nēqēbā*) "female" (v 27) while neither of these solely biological terms (see cf. 6:19; 7:9) are used for any other created being.⁵⁶ The selective

⁵⁴ So, Terence E. Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis," *NIBC* I: 399.

⁵⁵ So e.g., Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis*, NCBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 110; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, WBC 1 (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 193-94. For the first line, Markus Zehnder also argues that the Genesis narrator purposely uses the ב (*b*) ambiguously to simultaneously express both an instrument/cause (i.e., agency) and ב-pretii reading, but interprets the latter use to include the value of the victim: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, *by* man and *for the value of* man shall his blood be shed" ("Cause or Value? Problems in the Understanding of Gen 9,6a," *ZAW* 122 [2010]: 81-89). The כִּי (*kī*) in the second line most assuredly introduces a causal clause here providing the reason for the first line (Ulrich Wöller argues improbably כִּי (*kī*) expresses a concessive ["although, even though"] here in his essay "Zur Übersetzung von *kī* in Gen 8 21 und 9 6," *ZAW* 94 [1982]: 637-38) and thus interpreting the ב (*b*) to convey the value of the human being, at least in part, makes the final line redundant.

⁵⁶ These two biological nouns are not relational terms as with אִישׁ (*'iš*) "man" and אִשָּׁה (*'išā*) "woman," which first occur in Gen 2:22-24 wherein the man first describes the woman's origin and correspondence with him and then the relational union between the two. In fact, אִישׁ (*'iš*) and אִשָּׁה (*'išā*) are never

use of these terms corresponds to the immediate context of Gen 1 as human beings are commanded to procreate and fill the earth (v 28).⁵⁷ So within the Genesis narrative, the idea that human beings are created in the image of God directly relates to the biological nature of humanity and its ability to procreate and thereby fulfill its divine purpose.

The terms **שֵׁלֶם** (*selem*) “image” along with **דְּמוּת** (*dēmût*) “likeness” additionally convey that human beings uniquely represent and are like God in distinction to all other creatures. From a semantic perspective, **שֵׁלֶם** (*selem*) is often used for three-dimensional images of a deity (e.g., Num 33:52; 2 Kgs 11:18; 2 Chr 23:17; Ezek 7:20; 16:17; Amos 5:26) and the exact physical replica of what the image represents (e.g., 1 Sam 6:5, 11; Ezek 16:17; 23:14). The Genesis narrative likewise reports that Adam bore a son **בְּדְמוּתוֹ כְּצִלְמוֹ** (*bidmûtô kēšalmô*) “in his [Adam’s] likeness, according to his [Adam’s] image” (5:3).⁵⁸ In light of all this, human beings are the image of God and physically represent him on earth, just as three-dimensional anthropomorphic images were fashioned to represent a deity in the Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) world. In this cultural setting, the “deity’s presence was marked by the image of the deity.”⁵⁹ Accordingly, to a certain degree the very essence of God is embodied

associated with the terms **שֵׁלֶם** (*selem*) or **דְּמוּת** (*dēmût*) (v 26). Only **אָדָם** (*’ādām*), **זָכָר** (*zākār*), and **נְקֵבָה** (*nēqēbā*) occur with **שֵׁלֶם** (*selem*) and **דְּמוּת** (*dēmût*) in Genesis.

⁵⁷ The next time the terms **שֵׁלֶם** (*selem*) and **דְּמוּת** (*dēmût*) occur is in 5:1-3. This section closely corresponds to Gen 1, particularly in respect to the overall theme of procreation while again including the terms **אָדָם** (*’ādām*), **זָכָר** (*zākār*), and **נְקֵבָה** (*nēqēbā*).

⁵⁸ The noun **שֵׁלֶם** (*selem*) occurs a total of 17 times in the OT and two other times in the Psalms to describe the transience and fragility of humanity (39:7a [Eng v 6a]; 73:20). The Aramaic term **שֵׁלֶם** (*selem*) “statue, image” (a cognate of **שֵׁלֶם** [*selem*]) occurs 17 times in Daniel and in each instance, it refers to an Anthropomorphic statue seen by king Nebuchadnezzar in a dream (2:31, 34, 35) and a gold statue built by the same Babylonian ruler (3:1-18).

⁵⁹ John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 74, see further pages 74-79.

in his human image-bearers. “Humanity is not only the representation of God on earth; the human person is the living representation pointing to a living and real God, perhaps unlike the lifeless images of other deities made by human hands.”⁶⁰ In the OT, תַּמֻּת (d^emût) is used to compare two entities in the sense of “likeness” or “resemblance”; e.g., one thing has the “appearance, resemblance of” or is “like, similar to” something else (see Ps 58:5 [Eng v 4]; Isa 13:4; 40:18; Ezek 1:5, 10, 13, 22, 26; 10:1, 10, 21, 22; 23:13). Twice תַּמֻּת (d^emût) refers to an “image” or “shape” (2 Kgs 16:10; 2 Chr 4:3). The noun תַּמֻּת (d^emût) is sometimes used to describe Yahweh appearing “something like” a human or with comparable human body parts (Ezek 1:26, 27, 28; 8:2; see also Dan 10:16). As with שְׁלֵמָה (šelem), תַּמֻּת (d^emût) is used to compare humanity to God only in Genesis (1:26; 5:1). Thus, human beings resemble God in some way while at the same time God resembles human beings. From all this, the creation of human beings in the image and likeness of God indicates that they uniquely represent and resemble him. Thus, humanity alone is God-like and thereby of supreme value. Specifically, within Genesis human beings fulfill their image function to procreate and fill the earth. To end a person’s life, then, violates God’s very image on earth as well as forever prohibits the victim from fulfilling her/his God-given role to create human life. As God’s image, humanity represents the Creator of life and killing another human being misrepresents him, violates his created design and purpose, and is tantamount to attacking God himself.⁶¹ “Every murderer confronts God; murder is direct and unbridled revolt against God.”⁶²

Second, it is a human being who takes the life of the murderer *because* the human executioner is created in God’s image. In other

⁶⁰ Mark S. Smith, *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 101.

⁶¹ Similarly, John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology Volume One: Israel’s Gospel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 181.

⁶² Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 468.

words, a human being fulfills the prescribed retribution *because* she/he bears such responsibility as God's representative vice-regent on earth. God authorizes his image-bearers to execute violence with violence as he did with the flood (cf. 6:11-13).⁶³ This parallel alleviates to a certain degree the ironic tension⁶⁴ of God sanctioning a human to kill another image-bearer.⁶⁵ In a way, though, this tension highlights the seriousness of homicide to God. At the same time, what motivates Yahweh to bring about the flood is his "grief" and "distress" over humanity, not his anger or an obligation to punish (Gen 6:6, 7). Thus, in this instance God reluctantly uses violence and death in the face of the wickedness and violence of humanity (vv 5, 13). Drawing a parallel here, as the image of God human beings should operate with the same restraint to violence!

The text of Gen 9:6, and particularly the two rationales for the retribution prescribed in the text, pertain to the matter of suicide in a few keyways. First and most obvious, there is nothing in the text directly prohibiting homicide, let alone suicide. Yet the taking of a person's life is depicted as a violation of humanity's status as God's image. Relatedly, this text makes clear that no negative change to humanity's status as the image of God has occurred in contrast to the view held throughout much of Church history (e.g., Augustine, Luther, Calvin) and erroneously maintained by a number of modern systematic theologians.⁶⁶ No biblical writer ever explicitly states that

⁶³ So e.g., Stephen M. Wilson, "Blood Vengeance and the Imago Dei in the Flood Narrative (Genesis 9:6)," *Int* 71 (2017): 263-73; Jozef Jancovic, "Blood Revenge in Light of the Imago Dei in Genesis 9:6. Its Semantics and Pragmatics," *BibAn* 10 (2020): 191-206; similarly Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, OTL, revised ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 133.

⁶⁴ Von Rad remarks that these two fundamental statements "are in strange tension with each other: (1) the inviolable holiness of human life (murder is punished by death) *and* (2) man's responsibility for the punishment of this crime" (*Genesis*, 132-33).

⁶⁵ So, Wilson, "Blood Vengeance," 271.

⁶⁶ E.g., Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 179; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand

the image is distorted, marred, corrupted, cracked, etc. Rather, the exact opposite is presented! The Gen 3 narrative does not include any description of the couple causing damage to the image through their disobedience in the garden nor does the narrative describe the image becoming impaired because of Yahweh's judgment. Rather, the biblical writers only ever reiterate the fact that despite being sinful, human beings remain created in the image and likeness of God without any qualifications.⁶⁷

Second, the God-issued consequence for homicide provides an implied disincentive to prevent the taking of human life. Furthermore, although authorizing violence, the consequence also restricts violence. The blood-for-blood prescription limits potential additional retributive acts, such as the killing of family members for revenge; it prevents bloodlust.⁶⁸ In some respects, this concern to prevent bloodlust may not apply directly to suicide. Suicide is a violent act, but it is upon oneself; it is not the taking of another person's life against her/his will. At the same time, the evident divine concern to limit or restrict as well as restrain from violence does yield implications for suicide. Since each person exists in the image and likeness of God, her/his life has life-giving purpose and is of supreme value. To extinguish one's own life precludes her/him from fulfilling God's divine mandate. Each person also uniquely represents and is like God

Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 444. Michael E. Bird in the first edition of his systematic theology adopted this line of thinking (*Evangelical Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2013], 661), but in his second edition Bird has revised his view (*Evangelical Theology*, 2d ed. [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020], 745).

⁶⁷ LXX uses the terms εἰκών (*eikōn*) "image" and ὁμοίωσιν (*homoiōsin*) "likeness" to translate the Hebrew terms שְׁלֵמָה (*śelem*) and דְּמוּת (*d'mût*) respectively (Gen 1:26, 27). These two Greek terms each occur once in the NT in relation to Gen 1:26 and 27. Paul uses the term εἰκών (*eikōn*) (1 Cor 11:7) while James uses ὁμοίωσιν (*homoiōsin*) (3:9) confirming the fact that nothing negative has happened to the image and likeness of God in respect to human beings.

⁶⁸ So e.g., Jancovic, "Blood Revenge," 203; Wilson, "Blood Vengeance," 271-72.

and thereby of significant worth among all creation. Human life is a gift from God and thus the individual's life belongs to God.⁶⁹ To end one's own life is a rejection of God's gift of life itself.

Drawing all this together, we are left with the question of whether there is justification for incorporating suicide within the scope of the laws and instructions concerning murder. As I have attempted to show, suicide is not explicitly in view with the sixth commandment nor Gen 9:6. Still, taking one's own life certainly violates the reason "blood for blood": *because* she/he is created in the image of God and thus of unique value and purpose. Yet, a murderer could conceivably apply the prescribed consequence and thereby justifiably kill her/himself as an expression of contrition. The question is, though, do the biblical writers implicitly or explicitly prescribe and/or describe suicide as a fulfillment of this precept? Similarly, with respect to the prohibition of murder in the Decalogue, one way to determine if the sixth commandment includes the prohibition for suicide would be to examine if the biblical writers appeal to and/or apply it when describing acts of suicide. Of course, though, this exploration strongly depends upon the availability and actual contents of the Torah at the time of the narratives production as well as the narrators intended concern with their depictions. To this end, I will examine the relevant texts in the following section.

Defining Suicide

The six narrative descriptions of individuals taking their own life in the OT include: Abimelek, Samson, Saul, Saul's unnamed armor-bearer, Ahithophel, and Zimri. For a number of interpreters, Jonah also attempts to kill himself while Judas is the sole instance in the NT.

⁶⁹ Terrence E. Fretheim is correct that human beings created in the image of God is "a gift of God; that is, image of God is what human beings are by virtue of a divine decision, quite apart from anything they have done or will do. Nor can human beings decide that they will no longer be in the image of God; image of God is who they are" ("Image of God," *NIBD* 3: 19).

Apart from the book of Jonah, each of the OT depictions are found in the Former Prophetic literature (Joshua-Kings) while the cases of Saul and his armor-bearer are similarly described in Chronicles. Before looking at each of these instances, it is important to highlight that a number of these depictions do not use language that explicitly describes the taking of one's own life nor do they readily fit the typical definition of suicide as a "self-killing." Consequently, Joseph Blenkinsopp, for instance, does not consider the death of Samson as suicide because "it was not an act aimed at taking his own life." In fact, for Blenkinsopp, only Ahithophel can properly be counted as suicide, as other deaths occur in battle and therefore cannot be categorized accordingly.⁷⁰ For these and other reasons, Droge and Tabor suggest using the definition "voluntary death," which for them more appropriately describes how those in antiquity evaluated the various ways individuals chose to die. By this phrase the authors mean "the act resulting from an individual's intentional decision to die, either by his own agency, by another's, or by contriving the circumstances in which death is the known, ineluctable result."⁷¹ For these two interpreters and as discussed above, this definition attempts to be more morally neutral to avoid the negative connotations accompanied with the term "suicide" as well as to challenge the positive distinction of martyrdom. While I acknowledge the sometimes-narrow difference between suicide and martyrdom, the phrase "voluntary death" in-and-of-itself tends to convey a passivity on the part of the victim rather than the intentionality of a person killing her/himself signified by the term suicide. As Daube observes, the Latin *mors voluntaria* "voluntary death" stresses the voluntary nature of a person's death whereas *suicide* "self-killing" indicates that oneself is the object of the act.⁷²

⁷⁰ In a letter to the editor (*Bible Review* 6 [1990]: 7), Blenkinsopp here responds to Arthur J. Droge's article "Did Paul Commit Suicide?," *Bible Review* 5 (1989): 14-21, 42.

⁷¹ Droge and Tabor, *Noble Death*, 4.

⁷² Daube, "Linguistics of Suicide," 390.

In contrast to Blenkinsopp, Droge and Tabor consider all of the depictions of an individual taking his own life as voluntary death.⁷³ Although I agree with this conclusion in general and appreciate the authors' broader definition along with their attempt to disassociate the pejorative connotations of the term suicide,⁷⁴ again this phrase for me does not adequately distinguish between killing oneself and martyrdom. To categorize each of the deaths in both Testaments as acts of suicide, James T. Clemons offers the following definition: "*Suicide is the choice and the successful completion of the act to end one's life regardless of motive, circumstance, or method.*"⁷⁵ This definition does adequately apply to the biblical depictions, but as it stands it can plausibly include martyrdom. To be more precise I define suicide as:

The voluntarily and intentional killing of oneself by whatever means and in whatever circumstance, without any religious and/or political compulsion or threat.

Before moving forward, I want to highlight that my definition does not derive from the biblical text itself, but from how I understand the nature of suicide and in distinction to martyrdom. As I will discuss below, the biblical writers do not attempt to define or categorize the act of taking one's own life in an ethical sense. Also, the narrated instances of suicide are confined to a select few within Scripture, and I think it is safe to assume that many more individuals in ancient Israel and in the first century took their own lives. Further, the biblical

⁷³ Droge and Tabor, *Noble Death*, 58.

⁷⁴ In his essay entitled "Suicide," Droge consistently classifies five of the deaths including Samson's as "suicide" (*ABD* VI: 227-28) whereas Tabor in his essay "Martyr, Martyrdom" classifies all six "as cases of voluntary death," but Samson's death "might well be classed as a proto-martyrdom account" (*ABD* IV: 575).

⁷⁵ Clemons, "Interpreting Biblical Texts on Suicide," *QRev* 14 (1994): 20 (*italics his*). Clemons slightly sharpens his definition from his essay "Suicide," in *ISBE* 4: 652.

writers do not focus on the act of suicide but rather on how the individual victims illustrate and/or relate to what God was doing among the people of God at various points. Consequently, the interpreter should be extremely cautious about using such texts in ethical and theological demarcations. All this said, I will attempt to show that within Scripture the narrators depict an intentionality as each individual decides on his own to purposefully take his life by his own hand or by another's, while there is no religious or political threat to denounce one's beliefs nor are any of the deaths accomplished in devotion to God.

Narrative Depictions of Suicide

Abimelek

The first depiction of suicide is found in Judges 9. The narrator reports how Abimelek captured Thebez and came upon its central tower (vv 50-52) at which point an unnamed woman throws a rock from the tower, crushing the savior's skull (v 53). Recognizing the severity of his injury, Gideon's son commands his anonymous armor-bearer to kill him, so as to apparently prevent a shameful memorial of the fact that a woman had been the one to kill Abimelek (ironically, within Israelite tradition Abimelek is remembered for just that [2 Sam 11:21]).⁷⁶ The narrator, then, reports that the attendant obeyed the command resulting in Abimelek's death (v 54). Following the report of the men of Israel learning of their leader's demise (v 55), the narrator *explicitly comments*: "and God returned the evil of Abimelek which he did to his father killing his seventy brothers" (v 56).⁷⁷ No

⁷⁶ In my Conclusion below I discuss in more detail the cultural relevancy of honor and shame in relation to the depictions of suicide.

⁷⁷ Interpreters have long observed biblical narrators employing literary techniques to convey meaning and one of those strategies is *commentary*. With this technique, the narrator steps into the story and offers various types of explicit commentary. For example, the narrator explains or clarifies something (e.g., 1 Sam 9:9; John 7:39; 10:6) or offers a reliable value judgement either by her/himself (e.g., Gen 13:13; Judg 9:56) or by a character, especially by God (e.g., 2 Sam 11:27b).

commentary is offered, however, on the morality of Abimelek orchestrating his own death. The narrator only makes clear that Abimelek's defeat and death was the result of God's punishment. We should also observe that the shameful end of Abimelek is emphasized by the narrator. In addition to reporting that Abimelek was struck by a woman, the narrator omits a burial report (as with Abimelek's father in Judges 8:32; see also 10:2, 5; 12:10, 12, 15; 16:31), records no expressions of grief (as for Saul and his son Jonathan in 1 Sam 31:13; 2 Sam 21:10-14), nor any offering of lament (2 Sam 1:17-27; see also 3:33-34). The people simply return home after hearing of his death (Judg 9:55).

Samson

The second instance of suicide occurs with Israel's final savior in Judg 16. The narrative depiction of the life and death of Samson is complex and saturated with irony. In the culminating episode, having both of his eyes gouged out by the Philistines, Samson calls out to Yahweh and selfishly pleads to his Lord to remember and strengthen him "so that I may avenge myself with one avenging blow for my two eyes, because of the Philistines" (v 28). Samson then extends each of his arms to reach two foundational pillars and then exhortatively implores Yahweh: תָּמוּת נַפְשִׁי עִם־פְּלִשְׁתִּים (*tāmôt napšî 'am p'lištîm*) "let me die with the Philistines" (v 30aα). With an exertion of effort, the judge successfully collapses the Gaza temple onto the Philistines and himself (v 30). The narrative culminates with a report of Samson's family retrieving him from the rubble and burying him in the tomb of his father Manoah (v 31a); no description of emotion accompanies the report. The narrator finalizes the Samson narrative with a formulaic retrospect summary (v 31b) and then quickly moves to the next story.

For different types of commentary see in particular Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 121-22.

What type of death was Samson's? Voluntary, martyrdom, suicide? Just before ending Samson's story, the narrator offers an explicit comment on Samson's death: "and the dead whom he killed with his death were more than those whom he killed during his life" (vv 30b). For Droge and Tabor, this statement is a "positive evaluation of Samson's act."⁷⁸ As partially noted above, Tabor concurs that "16:31 is wholly positive." He goes on and claims that given "his hopeless circumstances in the hands of the Philistines, his [Samson's] death becomes an act of self-sacrifice for the cause of Israel. This text might well be classed as a proto-martyrdom account."⁷⁹ Droge and Tabor are correct that the narrator offers a positive evaluation of Samson's death, but I would argue it is positive only in the sense of the significance for Israel.⁸⁰ Ironically, it is only in death that Samson begins to accomplish the deliverance of Israel from the Philistines, their lords, and their god Dagon (vv 23-24). And while Samson at the end, he does so without any sense of repentance, and solely for his own self-centered agenda. Neither in his death, nor in his life, exemplifies the self-sacrifice characteristics of a martyr or even a proto-martyr. The savior's hunger for revenge impels "him to trust in God as the last resort."⁸¹ Samson's plea for death is entirely driven by his own selfish desire for revenge.⁸² Further, Samson expresses no thought of the nation Israel nor of Yahweh. The only cause Samson

⁷⁸ Droge and Tabor, *Noble Death*, 55.

⁷⁹ Tabor, *ABD* IV: 575. Droge in his essay adds Samson as an example of suicide (*ABD* VI: 228).

⁸⁰ Barry G. Webb claims that it "was not Samson's finest hour in a moral or spiritual sense; it was too clouded with bitter self-interest for that. But it was certainly his greatest achievement. That is the implication of the narrator's grim summary at the end of verse 30" (*The Book of Judges*, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012], 414).

⁸¹ Trent Butler, *Judges*, WBC 8 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson 2009), 354.

⁸² In his prayer to Yahweh (vv 28, 30aα), the narrator highlights Samson's self-absorbedness with 5 occurrences of "me" and "I," which stand in direct contrast to 8 uses of "our" by the Philistine in their praise to Dagon (vv 23b, 24b).

dies for is himself.⁸³ Yet and ironically, Samson and Yahweh have the same goal: the defeat of the Philistines.⁸⁴ In this way, Samson dies with some dignity, but not as a hero.

Israel's final judge does not express any desire or even an expectation to be delivered or to escape; rather, he only wishes and prays to die, but not in a passive voluntary way. Samson does not pray to be delivered "*from* death, but for power to deliver him *to* death."⁸⁵ Samson intentionally collapses the temple with the sole purpose of killing himself and his enemy, apparently with no regard to the deliverance this might achieve for Israel. Although Samson intends to die to kill others (similar to Japanese Kamikazes or modern-day suicide bombers),⁸⁶ the savior commits suicide.⁸⁷ The narrator, though, offers no condemnation of Samson's chosen way of death, but does imply ironically the positive outcome of his death for Israel. It is important to note that the writer to the Hebrews includes Samson as part of "the great cloud of witnesses" (12:1), identifying him as a person of faith alongside Gideon, Barak, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets (11:32-34). Thus, corresponding with the OT, the author offers no condemnation for Samson's suicide.

⁸³ See further Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, NAC 6 (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 1999), 467-68.

⁸⁴ Butler observes that Samson's "prayer's selfish motivation coupled with its revenge factor may blind us so that we do not comprehend the import of his prayer: Yahweh is still his God, and his appeal is ultimately what God desires—the death of the Philistines—even if their reasons for desiring this common goal are not the same" (*Judges*, 354).

⁸⁵ Butler, *Judges*, 353.

⁸⁶ Yael Shemesh, "Suicide in the Bible," *JBQ* 37 (2009): 159.

⁸⁷ Others who classify Samson's death as a suicide include e.g., Clemons, "Biblical Texts on Suicide," 23; Philip S. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2002), 38; Rosner, "Suicide in Biblical," 26; Shemesh, "Suicide in the Bible," 159; Wright, *NIBD* 5: 395.

King Saul and his Armor-Bearer

Saul and his anonymous armor-bearer are the third and fourth canonical instances of suicide. How exactly Saul died remains somewhat perplexing due to the diverse narrative accounts. Similar accounts of Saul and his armor-bearer taking their own lives are found in 1 Sam 31 and 1 Chr 10. A differing account, at least on the surface, of Saul's death alone occurs in 2 Sam 1:1-16. I will examine the former parallel narratives first. In both these accounts, the Philistines have overtaken Israel and killed Saul's three sons (31:2//10:2) while the Philistinian archers mortally strike Saul at Mt. Gilboa (31:3//10:3). Realizing the seriousness of his wounds, Saul commands his armor-bearer to kill him to apparently escape being further shamed, mocked, and potentially tortured (31:4aα//10:4aα). Unlike Abimelek's armor-bearer, Saul's companion refuses and consequently Saul takes matters into his own hands and falls upon his own sword (31:4aβ-b//10:4aβ-b). Seeing that his king is now dead, the armor-bearer likewise falls upon his sword and dies (31:5//10:5). Then the narrator reiterates the death of Israel's king, his armor-bearer, Saul's three sons, and all his army (31:6), which the Chronicler similarly reports (10:6). The Samuel narrative follows this with a description of the responses of the Israelites and Philistines to Saul's death (31:7-13), which again the Chronicler closely follows (10:7-12). The Chronicler, though, uniquely comments at this point, providing the explicit reason for Saul's death: "because of his disloyalty which he committed against Yahweh" (v 13aα). This general value judgement is further elaborated with two specific reasons (vv 13aβ-14aα). Then the narrator states "and thus he [Yahweh] killed him [Saul]" (v 14aβ).⁸⁸ As with the parallel Abimelek narrative, neither in the Samuel nor in the Chronicle account does the narrators offer any moral evaluation concerning the self-executing deaths of Saul and his armor-bearer.

⁸⁸ The verb *יָמַתְהוּ* (*yēmitēhū*) a Hiphil Imperfect 3ms with a 3ms suffix operating as the direct object. The logical and obvious antecedental subject of the verb is Yahweh while the antecedent of the 3ms suffix would naturally be Saul.

Rather, the Chronicler wants to make clear that Yahweh is ultimately responsible for Saul's death.

Immediately following the Samuel narrative account of Saul's death, an anonymous Amalekite contradictorily boasts that he ended Saul's life (2 Sam 1:1-16).⁸⁹ Importantly the first description represents the point of view of the narrator whereas the second is a first-person account offered by the Amalekite within the narrative. As the second episode begins, the Amalekite's report does not appear fabricated and essentially corresponds with the previous account. However, certain specifics about his role in Saul's death (cf. vv 6-10) diverge from the narrator's depiction in the previous chapter. The foreign soldier begins his report by claiming that "I just happened to be on Mount Gilboa" (v 6a). Then, as Adele Berlin observes, he immediately uses two consecutive הִנֵּה (*hinēh* is a demonstrative interjection "there") clauses that typify dream reports (see e.g., Gen 37:7, 9; 41:1-3, 5-6, 17-19, 22-23), which alerts the reader here that a fictional tale is forthcoming.⁹⁰ Further, the Amalekite's portrayal of a civil and polite dialogue between himself and Saul figures quite suspicious.⁹¹ In short, the Amalekite embellishes his role and lies

⁸⁹ Because of these differing accounts, scholars typically either conclude that the 2 Samuel version is a variant tradition of Saul's death (so e.g., David Daube, "Death as a Release in the Bible," *NovT* 5 [1962]: 85-86; Droge and Tabor, *Noble Death*, 54) while others attempt to harmonize the two narratives (see famously Josephus's conflated reconstruction in his *Antiquities of the Jews* 6.14§7). The latter approach does not adequately deal with the material while the former concludes that the final compiler of the Samuel narrative included both sources despite their conflicting accounts (see e.g., Peter R. Ackroyd, *The Second Book of Samuel*, CBC [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977], 19-20; John Mauchline, *I and II Samuel*, NCB [London: Oliphanta, 1971], 197).

⁹⁰ Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 80-81.

⁹¹ The narrator also surrounds the Amalekite's report with the explicit description that Saul died by a חֶרֶב (*hereb*) "sword" (1 Sam 31:4 [2x]; 2 Sam 1:12b; the noun occurs twice in 1 Chr 10:4) whereas the foreign soldier claims that Saul was alive while leaning on his חֲנִית (*hānîṭ*) "spear" (v 6b). Further, the Amalekite does not report anything about Saul's armor-bearer who previously reported by the narrator have killed himself with his own חֶרֶב (*hereb*) (1 Sam 31:5; so also 1 Chron

about killing Saul with the apparent goal of receiving a reward for slaying David's rival and for returning the Israelite royal crown and armlet (v 10; cf. 4:4).⁹² David, lacking any other information takes the Amalekite at his word, and pronounces ironically: "your mouth has testified against you" (v 16). Taking all of the above together, the Amalekite does not ultimately kill Saul, but the king of Israel takes his own life with his sword.

Following this episode and in the Samuel narrative, David issues a funeral dirge for Saul and his son Jonathan. Therein David laments over the loss of these two as well as celebrates their military exploits (2 Sam 1:17-27). David, though, never mentions Saul's suicide; rather, he honors Saul and Jonathan with the words: "Saul and Jonathan, beloved and pleasant in their lives and in their death they were not separated" (v 23a). In each of these descriptions of Saul's death and that of his armor-bearers, neither the narrators nor characters condemn them for their suicides nor classify the act as a sin. Lastly, in a speech in Acts, Paul briefly mentions the story of Saul. While he recounts Israel's request for a king, along with both Yahweh's giving and removal of Saul, the apostle does not include the king's suicide (13:21-22a).⁹³

10:5). Finally, the foreign soldier does not explain how he knows of Jonathan's death (v 4b).

⁹² So also e.g., A. A. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, WBC 11 (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 5-10; Bill T. Arnold, "The Amalekite's Report of Saul's Death: Political Intrigue or Incompatible Sources?," *JETS* 32 (1989): 289-98; Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 80-81; Mary J. Evans, *1 and 2 Samuel*, NIBC (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2000), 139; Robert P. Gordon, *I & II Samuel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 208; Hans W. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, OTL (trans. J. S. Bowden; London: SCM Press, 1964), 236-37; P. Kyle McCarter, *II Samuel*, AB 9 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1984), 63.

⁹³ Significantly, the apostle was more than likely named after Israel's first monarch as Luke includes Paul verbally called with the transliteration Σαούλ (*Saoul*) for king שָׁאֻל (*Šā'ul*) (e.g., Acts 9:4, 17; 13:21; 22:7, 13; 26:14). Paul also locates the birth of both himself and the ruler from "the tribe of Benjamin" (Acts 13:21; Rom 11:1; Phil 3:5); see further Craig S. Keener, *Acts. Volume 2: 3:1-14:28* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 1444-45.

Ahithophel

In 2 Sam 17 the fifth and clearest depiction of suicide occurs. Ahithophel was an advisor to both David and Absalom, and one whose counsel the narrator underscores by explicitly commenting that asking for Ahithophel's advice was tantamount to inquiring the word of God (16:23). Ahithophel was originally an advisor to king David (15:12), but acted treacherously by becoming a counselor to Absalom (v 31a). When advising Absalom concerning David, Ahithophel proposes a plan of attack (17:1-3). The narrator reports that Ahithophel's counsel pleased Absalom and the elders of Israel (v 4), but the king's son decides to also inquire the counsel of Hushai the Archite (v 6). Hushai disagrees with Ahithophel's suggestion and offers a counter plot (vv 6-13), which Absalom and his army consider the better plan (v 14a). The narrator explicitly explains, however, that the reason for this decision is "because Yahweh decided to invalidate the good counsel of Ahithophel" in order to bring calamity upon Absalom (v 14b), which was also notably an answer to David's prayer (15:31b). The narrator soon reports that, upon learning of Absalom's decision, Ahithophel went to his home *וַיִּהָנֶה* *wayyēhānaq wayyāmāt* "and hung himself and died" (17:23).⁹⁴ Without any evaluative commentary or summary of Ahithophel's life and death, the narrator continues straightaway with the story of Absalom and David.

Zimri

The sixth instance of suicide occurs in the account of Zimri, who treasonously murders king Elah and thus proclaims himself as the king over Israel (1 Kgs 16:9-10). Refusing to recognize Zimri as king, the Israelite army instead enthroned Omri and soon laid siege on the

⁹⁴ The verb *וַיִּהָנֶה* (*yēhānaq*) is in the Niphal stem and here, due to its syntactical context, conveys a reflexive nuance indicating that Ahithophel hung or strangled himself; it does not express a passive nuance as to convey that someone else killed Ahithophel.

capitol city Tirzah (v 16). When Zimri saw that the city was conquered, he went into the royal house to set fire to it and himself, resulting in his death (v 18). The narrator, then, offers a value judgment that also explains the reason for Zimri's death: "because of his sins which he committed doing evil in the eyes of Yahweh" (v 19a).⁹⁵ Following an elaboration of this reason (v 19b), the narrator draws to a close Zimri's story with a formulaic reign resumé (v 20). As with each of the previous cases considered above, the narrator does not offer any evaluative commentary on Zimri taking his own life but does make plain that Zimri's death is ultimately the result of his sin against Yahweh.

Jonah

In the book of Jonah, the prophet is commissioned by Yahweh to go to Israel's enemy Ninevah and report to the nation that its wickedness has come to Yahweh's attention (1:1-2). Instead of following Yahweh's instructions, Jonah boards a ship heading in the opposite direction (v 3). In response, Yahweh hurls a storm upon the sea that causes great fear to those on board (v 5). Jonah eventually discloses that he is responsible for the storm (vv 5-9) and instructs the sailors to hurl him overboard (vv 10-12), which could be considered a suicidal request. The narrative here creates a permanent gap⁹⁶ that is quite difficult for the reader to fill.⁹⁷ Because of this ambiguity, a host

⁹⁵ I am reading the plural *Qere* חַטָּאתָיו (*ḥaṭṭō 'tāyw*) "his sins" here instead of the singular *Kethib* חַטָּאתו (*ḥṭ 'tō*) "his sin."

⁹⁶ Sternberg identifies two main omissions: "gaps" and "blanks." Blank omissions regard irrelevancies whereas gaps regard relevancies. With blanks, information is omitted due the lack of interest whereas gaps omit information for the sake of interest. Sternberg further identifies "temporary" and "permanent" gaps. With the latter gap the narrative permanently omits information whereas with the former information is delayed (*Biblical Narrative*, 236-40).

⁹⁷ All narratives contain "gaps" or "blanks," such that certain details in a story are missing, provoking a reader to "fill" or negotiate them in some way. In certain instances, narrators intentionally use a gap-filling technique and additionally provide literary clues to assist readers to properly fill a gap. However, for various

of possibilities arise.⁹⁸ For my purposes, the central questions include: Does Jonah desire to die, intend to kill himself? If so, why does he desire to die? Leslie C. Allen suggests that the storm constitutes Yahweh's wrathful judgment upon Jonah, which the prophet acknowledges, and he thus willingly embraces the just deserts for his sin.⁹⁹ The narrator, however, never depicts the storm as the result of God's anger nor includes Jonah acknowledging his disobedience at any point in the narrative or in his psalm. In fact, Jonah ultimately justifies his disobedience following Yahweh's turning from his judgement (4:2). In contrast to readings in which Jonah accepts his wrongdoing and Yahweh's judgment, a number of interpreters view Jonah as intending to kill himself in order to definitively rule out the possibility of extending Yahweh's merciful warning to Ninevah.¹⁰⁰ Yet, Jonah clearly acknowledges that he is to blame for the storm and thus being

reasons other gaps naturally occur in the telling of a story. Sternberg defines a gap as "a lack of information about the world—an event, motive, causal link, character trait, plot structure, law of probability—contrived by a temporal displacement. Like the objects displaced, the forms of displacement vary. What happened (or existed) at a certain temporal point in the world may be communicated in the discourse at a point earlier or later, or for that matter not at all." Gap-filling, then, "consists exactly in restoring the continuity that the narrator broke. For all our attempts at restoration, however, the breaches remain ambiguous—and hypotheses multiply—as long as the narrator has not authoritatively closed them. The storyteller's withholding of information opens gaps, gaps produce discontinuity, and discontinuity breeds ambiguity" (*Biblical Narrative*, 235, 236). See further Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1978), 165-72; see also Robert M. Fowler, "Reader-Response Criticism: *Figuring Mark's Reader*," in *Mark & Method*, 2d ed. (eds., J. C. Anderson and S. D. Moore; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 70-74; Sternberg, *Biblical Narrative*, 186-260.

⁹⁸ See John Goldingay, *Hosea-Micah*, BCOT:PB (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 384.

⁹⁹ Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 210-11.

¹⁰⁰ So e.g., Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, WBC 31 (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 462, 466; Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets: Volume One*, BO (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 314-15, 316; Hans W. Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah* (trans. M. Kohl; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 118.

hurled into the sea will still it and thereby save the sailors (1:12). Accordingly, James D. Smart concludes that in “order to save the lives of the heathen sailors and passengers on board the ship, Jonah commanded them to throw him overboard. This act was the natural consequence of all that Jonah had learned from the prophetic faith; both justice and mercy demanded of him this sacrifice of himself.”¹⁰¹ Droge and Tabor similarly claim that Jonah’s “willingness to be thrown off the ship raises the issue of heroic self-sacrifice, since his voluntary submission to death results in saving others.”¹⁰² Phyllis Tribble conversely argues it only *appears* that Jonah acknowledges “his own culpability” and thus “seems willing to pay the price. He offers himself as sacrifice to save the sailors.”¹⁰³ “To save the lives of the sailors,” though, “is to confirm himself. Death by drowning will secure for Jonah what he wants: flight from Yahweh. Thus, his seeming concern for the sailors camouflages self-concern. His seeming altruism masks egotism.”¹⁰⁴

I agree with Tribble that the narrative description of Jonah is one of selfishness and hatred for his enemies; the narrative depicts Jonah anything but a self-sacrificial hero. Jonah’s self-centeredness is highlighted when he requests for the sailors to throw him over-board. Why did he not just jump himself? In further support of Tribble and others, right from the opening scene Jonah does not want anything to do with Yahweh’s mission to Nineveh (1:3). Also, the prophet is

¹⁰¹ Smart, “The Book of Jonah,” in *IB* 6: 883-84. George M. Landes follows along similar lines as Smart (“The Kerygma of the Book of Jonah,” *Int* 21 [1967]: 22-23).

¹⁰² Droge and Tabor, *Noble Death*, 61. Kenneth M. Craig Jr. identifies these two categorical understandings of Jonah’s thinking in 1:12 as either a “death wish” or act of “compassion,” which he sees interpreters generally aligning with one or the other (*A Poetics of Jonah* [Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993], 132-33).

¹⁰³ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah*, GBS:OTS (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 146, 147.

¹⁰⁴ Tribble, “The Book of Jonah,” *NIB* VII: 499.

vehemently disgusted (4:1) when Yahweh “changes his mind” about his judgment (3:10) and thus requests Yahweh to kill him (4:3). Despite all this, in the belly of the fish Jonah utters a model Thanksgiving Psalm¹⁰⁵ wherein he recalls his appeal for Yahweh to rescue him (2:3, 8 [Eng vv 2, 7]), his hope to live (v 5b [Eng v 4b]),¹⁰⁶ and Yahweh’s act of saving his life (v 7b [Eng v 6b]); he further vows to thankfully praise God, and ends by proclaiming Yahweh as savior (v 10 [Eng v 9]).¹⁰⁷ In light of his prayer, Jonah does not appear to actually desire to die but rather prays to be rescued and responds appropriately when Yahweh does just that through the fish (2:1, 11 [Eng 1:17; 2:10]).

¹⁰⁵ The overwhelming majority of interpreters identify Jonah’s prayer as a classic example of a Thanksgiving Psalm; see in particular Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 472. On the content, structure, and function of Thanksgiving Psalms see e.g., Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms: Part I with an Introduction to Cultic Poetry*, FOTL XIV (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 14-16; Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (trans. K. R. Crim and R. N. Soulen; Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 85-86, 102-12.

¹⁰⁶ I read the MT particle אַךְ (‘ak) in v 5b and here expresses an emphatic adversative, i.e., “nevertheless” (see *CHALOT* 14; *HALOT* 45). In contrast to most interpreters and Translations, Stuart follows Theodotian (Θ’) and his unique translation of πῶς (pōs) thus he emends אַךְ (‘ak) to אֵךְ (‘ek) “how” taking it as introducing an interrogative: “How can I again look upon your holy temple?” (*Hosea-Jonah*, 468-69).

¹⁰⁷ For several reasons and centrally because of the dissonance between the character of Jonah depicted in the narrative versus in the psalm, numerous scholars over a century now have argued that a later redactor inserted the psalm into the scroll (see e.g., Tribble, “Jonah,” 505; Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 128-32, 140-42). A more profitable way to deal with such dissonance is how narrators depict characters as either flat or round or somewhere in-between. Flat characters are predictable and depicted with a single trait whereas round characters “are much more complex, manifesting a multitude of traits, and appearing as ‘real people’” (Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 23). The narrator obviously presents Jonah as a round character, which then accounts for the complex and diverse depictions of the prophet. On characters and characterization in biblical narrative see e.g., Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, JSOTSup 70 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 47-92; Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 23-42; Sternberg, *Biblical Narrative*, 321-41.

T. A. Perry, though, detects two different prayers in Jonah's psalm. "Prayer one and God's response. Jonah asks God to die and is taken all the way down" (2:3a, 4, 6, 7a [Eng vv 2a, 3, 5, 6a]). "Prayer two and God's salvation. Jonah, having changed his mind, screams for life and God 'hears'" (2:3b, 7b, 8 [Eng vv 2b, 6b, 7]). For Perry this interpretive angle "helps us understand that Jonah's first of two prayers is but a piece with his suicide or ongoing wish to die. In his 'trouble' with this life or with God or whatever, he asks to be relieved of living and God obliges by casting him further into the depths into which he had already asked the sailors to lower him."¹⁰⁸ Thus, the fish for Perry is God's answer for Jonah's prayer for death. "Jonah's descent into the fish, at least during the three days and nights, is received not as punishment or even a torment but rather as a desired and comforting response to a pleading 'come, sweet death!'"¹⁰⁹ With this response to Jonah's death wish (with Part one), "God calls his bluff" which in turn causes Jonah to change his mind, such that he "ends up thanking God for *not* answering his prayer to die" (with Part two).¹¹⁰

Within Jonah's prayer, he never mentions the fish while conversely, he identifies only the ocean, its waves, seaweed, and ground floor as the threat to his life. Jonah's distress is that he is drowning and consequently on the brink of death.¹¹¹ As Steven T. Mann observes, if "Jonah begins by wishing to die, then he would need to

¹⁰⁸ Perry, *The Honeymoon Is Over* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 23-24.

¹⁰⁹ Perry, *Honeymoon is Over*, 27.

¹¹⁰ Perry, *Honeymoon is Over*, 24, 29.

¹¹¹ Most all interpreters recognize the fish as the vehicle for Jonah's salvation whereas a select few see the sea and the fish as representative of Jonah's distress (cf. André Lacocque and Pierre-Emmanuel Lacocque, *The Jonah Complex* [Atlanta: John Knox, 1981], 53). Tribble accentuates the dissonance within the narrative as well as the psalm and concludes that while in the fish Jonah expresses his ambivalent struggle between death and life ("Jonah," 508; *Rhetorical Criticism*, 160-73). Sweeney similarly concludes that "Jonah is not delivered; he is still in the belly of the fish and presumably faces death if he does not get out" (*Twelve Prophets*, 318-19).

change his mind during the prayer, an act that is not made conspicuous in the prayer itself.”¹¹² Thus, it does not appear that Jonah intends to commit suicide nobly or to thwart participating in Yahweh’s mission. So why does Jonah want to be thrown over-board? I think the answer lies somewhere between the above suggestions: Jonah recognizes that Yahweh will not relent in his pursuit of the prophet to carry out his command to warn Nineveh. Thus, Jonah enters the raging sea in prayerful anticipation and hope that his God will rescue him despite the fact that his salvation comes with the objectionable-expectation that Jonah go on to fulfill his prophetic call.¹¹³ In sum, the prophet’s act is not a suicide attempt, but a reluctant return to the path Yahweh has set for him. Setting my conclusion here aside, what if Jonah intended to commit suicide for whatever reason? Yahweh still chooses to save the prophet and, as was the case with the other six suicide episodes the act is not condemned nor categorized as a sin anywhere inside or outside the narrative. Nor does the narrator laud Jonah’s entrance into the ocean as a noble, self-sacrificial act. Jonah apparently understands that he cannot escape fulfilling Yahweh’s mission to Nineveh. As I will discuss in the following section, a similar recognition is evident among those whose requests to be killed by Yahweh are recorded in Scripture.

Individual Requests for and Musings about Death in the OT

There are several instances of individuals who request Yahweh kill them. First, Moses complains to Yahweh about the overwhelming burden Israel has become to him (Num 11:10-14) and then exhorts Yahweh: הָרַגְנִי נָא הָרַגְנִי (*hārgēnî nā’ hārōg*) “kill me now!” (v 15). Instead of complying with Moses’ request, Yahweh provides a so-

¹¹² Mann, “Performative Prayers of a Prophet: Investigating the Prayers of Jonah as Speech Acts” *CBQ* 79 (2017): 28.

¹¹³ My suggestion here is similar to Goldingay’s final possibility (*Hosea-Micah*, 384).

lution to the problem (vv 16-30). Elijah makes a similar request out of fear for his life, as well as despair over not making any real difference in turning Israel back to its God. The narrator reports that the prophet asks “with his soul to die” and then pleads to Yahweh: קַח נַפְשִׁי (*qah napšî*) “take my life!” (1 Kgs 19:4). Again, Yahweh does not answer Elijah as he requests, but rather one of Yahweh’s messengers visits the prophet twice and provides him food (vv 5-8). Then the word of Yahweh comes to him twice (vv 9-14), and finally Yahweh himself directs Elijah to return and continue his role as a prophet (vv 15-16). In the case of Jonah, it is following Yahweh’s decision to turn from his judgment that we find the prophet exhorting Yahweh: קַח נַפְשִׁי מִמֶּנִּי (*qah nā’ ’et napšî mim-ennî*) “take my life from me!” and providing his reason: “because my death is better than life” (4:3). Later, the narrator tells the reader that, because of the scorching heat, Jonah asks exactly as Elijah “with his soul to die” and then reiterates: “my death is better than life” (v 8). As with the others, Yahweh does not kill Jonah but goes on to question him regarding the reason-ableness of his anger to the point of desiring death (vv 4, 9).

While Jeremiah does not request that Yahweh kill him, his suffering as Yahweh’s prophet does lead him to offer a complaint in which he concludes that he should have never been born, but rather died in his mother’s womb (20:14-18). Yahweh does not respond to the prophet’s specific complaint; instead, the scroll immediately moves onto a narrative about the word of Yahweh coming to the prophet concerning Zedekiah (21:1-10). Job too expresses his desperation to die throughout the scroll as a result of his agonizing and inexplicable pain and trauma. Like Jeremiah, Job even wishes that he was never born (3:1-26). As with those above, Job desires that Yahweh take his life (6:8-13). But, in one isolated instance, Job takes a step further by contemplating suicide: וַתִּבְחַר מְהַנֵּק נַפְשִׁי מוֹת (*wattibḥar maḥānāq napšî māwet mē’asḡōtāy*) “therefore my throat chooses strangulation, my bones death” (7:15). This brief deliberation occurs in his second speech (6:1-7:21), preceded by Job’s protests against God’s relentless and unjust pursuit of him (7:11-14),

and followed by his crying out for God: “leave me alone!” (v 16b). Despite the appeal of death, Job does not kill himself nor does he entertain the thought again.¹¹⁴ As the story unfolds, God does not condemn Job for considering suicide nor does he comply with the innocent sufferer’s desire to die.

As presented, each of these individuals honestly and freely express their deep despair to God in line with many of the psalmists (e.g., 6; 22; 88), while some are even so bold as to request that God kill them. Yahweh never expresses disappointment or condemnation for such death requests. In distinction to Job, none of these Israelites consider taking their own life. Nor do any of them express a fear of death; *Sheol*, it should be noted, is simply the destiny of all who die (see e.g., Isa 38:10-11; Pss 18:5-6 [Eng vv 4-5]; 116:3; Eccl 9:3-10), not a place of punishment. Unlike the case of Samson, Yahweh does not fulfill any of their requests, but rather engages with them, provides solutions, and/or directs them to continue in their service of him.¹¹⁵ Apparently, Yahweh does not consider suffering in any capacity a justifiable reason for him to end a person’s life.

Conclusions

What stance do the OT writers take on the act of suicide?

As I have attempted to demonstrate, the biblical writers do not condemn nor advocate suicide. Regarding the former, no law occurs in

¹¹⁴ Another possible instance of Job considering suicide occurs in 13:14 (Eng v 15) as the second colon וְנָפְשִׁי בְּכַפְפִּי (w^enapšî ‘āšîm b^ekappî) could be translated “and I set my hands on my throat.” Although the term נֶפֶשׁ (*nepeš*) can sometimes refer to a person’s “throat” as I translate the noun in 7:15a (also e.g., Jonah 2:6a [Eng v 5a]; so John Hartley, *The Book of Job*, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988], 148, 150), the context points to understanding the noun here to mean “life, soul.” With this expression, Job is prepared to risk everything by *taking his life into his own hands* when he confronts and challenges God (so e.g., David J. A. Clines, *Job 1-20*, WBC 17 [Dallas: Word Books, 1989], 311; Hartley, *Book of Job*, 222).

¹¹⁵ Similarly, Dennis T. Olson, “The Book of Judges,” *NIB* 2: 860.

the entirety of the OT condemning suicide and/or categorizing the act as a sin. And in each of the six instances of suicide reported in narrative, there are no appeals to and/or applications of the sixth commandment or any other prohibition, as we might expect if it were the narrator's objective to categorize such an act as a sin. No narrator or character explicitly or implicitly condemns suicide in any of the instances. Nor do the narratives ever present the consequences of such an act for the individual's status before God. In fact, the narrators' depictions of suicide are quite terse and do not provide any substantial details. They quickly continue with their main focus of the story or move to the next episode.

The only explicit commentary offered is that by the Judges narrator with Abimelek, the Chronicler with Saul, and the Kings narrator with Zimri. In each of these instances, the narrator provides the cause and/or reason for the individual's ultimate demise. Nevertheless, the narrators do not offer any explicit commentary on the morality of the act of suicide, nor do they lead the reader to draw any inferential conclusion that the act itself is a sin. In fact, the narratives point to the involvement of God to a certain degree in the suicides of Abimelek, Saul, and Zimri. It should be noted, however, that God's judgment in these cases is not depicted as a response to the men's taking of their own lives, but is rather due to the violent abuse of power (Abimelek) or rebellion against Yahweh (Saul and Zimri) that also culminated in their suicides.

In the case of Israel's final judge, the narrator's outlook on God's involvement is shrouded by the intentional omission of information—namely, whether Yahweh answered Samson's prayer. This omission also qualifies as a permanent gap, not explicitly filled by the narrator. However, the narrative leads the reader *to fill* this gap along the lines of the depicted outcome of the episode (v 29b), since the events correspond with Samson's request. As Daniel I. Block concludes, the "outcome of the drama . . . makes it difficult to believe

that God did not answer Samson's prayer."¹¹⁶ Even so, the narrative focuses solely on Samson, while the narrator and God remain silent throughout the episode. While the narrator has previously mentioned that Samson's hair has grown back (v 22), possibly indicating also the return of his strength, the narrator does not report that the Spirit of Yahweh has returned after the earlier notice that the judge did not know "that Yahweh had departed from upon him" (v 20b). In the end, God empowers Samson to kill himself along with the Philistines, but neither the narrator nor God condemn the judge for his suicide.

Concerning any advocacy of suicide, no law or any other text allows for and/or condones suicide. Neither are there any indications in the narratives that those committing suiciding do so to fulfill the "blood for blood" principle (Gen 9:6), out of contribution for their involvement in violence or murder. Furthermore, in depicting instances of suicide, the narrators do indicate intentionality by presenting each individual as deciding on his own to purposefully take his life by his own hand or by another's. None of the deaths are accomplished in devotion to God, or in response to religious or political threats to denounce his beliefs.

The biblical writers do report several Israelites requesting Yahweh to take their life for various reasons, but Yahweh never complies. Samson is the only exception in the entirety of the OT. Thus, on the one hand, Samson's divinely assisted suicide is an anomaly. On the other hand, Samson's death ironically fulfills his role as a savior for the deliverance of Israel, which was to be the very purpose for which he was born (13:5b). The reason Yahweh answers Samson's prayer is not for the judge, but for Israel.¹¹⁷ Given all this, the purpose of the episodic depiction of Samson's death is not to endorse

¹¹⁶ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 469.

¹¹⁷ Webb concludes: "All Samson wants is vengeance for the personal wrongs he has suffered. God wants something more, but at least there is a confluence of their two desires: what Samson wants for his own reasons, God wants for other, greater reasons. So Samson's prayer is answered" (*Judges*, 414).

suicide. Neither does it convey that Yahweh himself approves of suicide, or that Yahweh will assist in an individual's choice to kill her/himself.¹¹⁸

Regarding characterization, the narrators *tell* and *show* some of the men's motives for committing suicide.¹¹⁹ For the Judges narrator, Samson's plea to die is in service of his selfish desire for revenge. As depicted in the larger narrative, Samson was an extremely strong individual in both power and will. But due to his own arrogance, Samson loses his strength, his autonomy, his eyesight, and thus any last vestige of honor. Although not stated, the reader can readily infer from the narrative and the cultural setting of Israel that, just before his death, Samson was experiencing severe shame. Within the ANE world, as well as the Mediterranean lands during the time of the NT, a pivotal social currency or commodity was *honor* and *shame*.

¹¹⁸ Olson suggests two reasons for the uniqueness of Samson's death. First, "Samson represents the end of the line of the judges. He is more than just another judge. He embodies the office of the judge, which comes to an end with him. Thus, God's allowing Samson to die is God's allowing the office or system of judge as a means of leading and serving Israel to die." Second, Samson "embodies Israel as a nation. The shaved head, the forced grinding at the mill, and the binding and captivity of Samson are all images of exile and captivity. They prefigure the exile Israel will later experience under kingship. . . . The exile will be a kind of death for Israel" ("Judges," 860). The story of Samson works to convey something about Israel's experience as a nation, not as a template for God's dealings with those contemplating suicide.

¹¹⁹ Using techniques closely associated with Commentary and specifically related to characterization, narrators describe the characters by either *telling* readers about them or by *showing* their nature (cf. Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2d ed. [Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983], 3-20). *Showing* is often the preferred technique employed by narrators whereby they display the nature and/or motive of characters through their own depictions or from the point of view of other characters. As with Implicit Commentary, these techniques require that the reader analyze the narrative more carefully and evaluate the reliability of such statements (e.g., Herod in Matt 2:8, 16). With *Telling*, and similar to Explicit Commentary, evaluative judgments about the characters are explicitly presented by narrators (e.g., 1 Sam 15:35b; Mark 6:52) or from the characters' point of view, especially God's (e.g., 2 Sam 11:27b). The reader is more passive with *Telling*, accepting the statements of the narrator as reliable and trustworthy (see further Mark A. Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?*, GBS:NTS [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990], 52-53).

The opposite of honor is shame; shame is the partial or complete loss of honor.¹²⁰ Honor was supremely valued, but there was only a limited supply to go around.¹²¹ “Men,” in particular, “will do everything to avoid shame, the loss of honor, or its increase (a gain being open to men only).”¹²² One way a person gains honor is through successful warfare (see 2 Kgs 14:10), whereas defeat brings shame. In fact, physical “assaults, such as the slap to the face, spitting in the face or beating or mutilating the body, were ways in which to enact dishonor and ascribe disgrace.”¹²³ Death, then, is a logical way to escape shame, potential and/or additional dishonor. Again, without using the exact terminology, the Judges and Samuel narrators tell the reader that both Abimelek (9:54) and Saul (31:4) appear to choose suicide in order to avoid further and/or potential shame. One can infer that such concern over shame is at play with the other characters as well: the armor-bearer’s sharing in the defeat of Israel along with his failure to protect its king; Ahithophel’s betrayal of David and the rejection of his counsel by his co-conspirators; Zimri’s rejection as king and his imminent defeat. Each of these men are experiencing both the emotional trauma of shame, and the psychological toll of ever-present violence and/or warfare. Some of them are suffering physically and are at the brink of death. Because of all this, it makes sense that they take matters into their own hands to salvage some sense of dignity as well as end their pain. So, in addition to God’s sovereign orchestrations, each of these men driven to take their own lives are navigating the cultural norms of their context and experiencing physical and emotional trauma to one degree to another. While the OT does not condone or endorse the decision to commit suicide, it does render that decision understandable.

¹²⁰ A. C. Hagedorn, “Honor and Shame,” *DOTHB* 498.

¹²¹ See B. J. Malina, *The New Testament World*, 3d ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 81-105.

¹²² F. Gerald Downing, “Shame,” *NIDB* 5: 212.

¹²³ D. A. deSilva, “Honor and Shame,” *DOTP* 432.

How can it be that the God of Scripture is not pleased with, and even opposes suicide, and simultaneously does not consider it a sin?

I am only able to answer this question in part here, but to begin Yahweh rejects those who request that he kill them. Except for Samson, God rather engages with those requesting death, provides solutions, and/or directs them to continue in his service of him. Thus, it appears that Yahweh does not consider any type of suffering as a legitimate reason for him to take a person's life. The cases of those who appeal directly to Yahweh when desiring death therefore stand in contrast to the cases of those who ultimately commit suicide. Of those who appeal to Yahweh, none go on to take matters into their own hands. Job alone contemplates taking his own life, but then only for a brief moment. And, on the other hand, the suicide victims differ from those who appeal to Yahweh in that none of them demonstrate any genuine devotion to Yahweh (apart from Saul in some instances, and perhaps Ahithopel). One final observation, without discounting the reality of physical and emotional trauma, is that the suicide victims reported in the biblical narrative display a certain amount of self-centeredness, some more than others. Obviously, Samson is unabashedly self-absorbed in his life and death. However, each to various degrees are singularly concerned with their own personal honor, reputation. The narrators, intentionally or unintentionally, do not include in their depictions of the death of the characters any thought of family, friends, comrades, or God. Conversely, in certain instances the narrators report family and friends burying and lamenting over them. So, while not speaking to the sinfulness of the act of suicide itself, Scripture is concerned with the self-centeredness that might lead one to undertake such an act.

Finally, never do the OT or NT writers deviate from the fact that despite being sinful, human beings remain created in the image and likeness of God without any qualifications. Because of this fact, and in light of my discussion of Gen 9:6, each person's life has life-

giving purpose and is of supreme value. To take one's own life prohibits her/him from fulfilling God's divine mandate. Each person also uniquely represents and is like God, and thereby of unique worth among all creation. Human life is a gift from God and thus the individual's life belongs to God. To end one's own life is a rejection of God's gift.

How does Scripture envision the faithful navigation of suffering and in particular suicidal ideation?

As with my previous question, I can only provide a partial answer here. In relation to those who request death from Yahweh, they feel free to voice their despair, disappointment, frustration, and anger directly to God and in some cases because of God. In each instance, Yahweh does not rebuke or condemn such requests but rather engages with them. This frank honesty corresponds with many of the Protest/Complaint psalms (e.g., 6; 13; 22; 35; 42; 74; 79; 86; 88; 109) spread throughout the Psalter. I will discuss these types of psalms, and specifically Psalm 22, in Part II of this work, but at this point we can begin to see the following. The OT writers present an authentic spirituality in which the faithful honestly face and verbalize forthrightly about various sufferings in this life, simultaneously expressing their trust and confidence in the faithful character of God to act.

My analysis of suicide in general, as viewed by the early church, and within the OT is now complete. In Part II of my research, I examine the single instance of suicide found in the NT: Judas hanging himself. Some interpreters also argue that Jesus Christ committed suicide and that Paul seriously desired to do the same and eventually follows through with the act. Because of these two instances, these same interpreters describe suicide in a positive light. I examine the relevant texts identified as suicidal descriptions of Jesus and Paul while critically interacting with these interpretive conclusions. Following my analysis, I draw specific conclusions concerning suicide

and the NT and then present my final reflections on suicide and Scripture.

Suicide and Scripture:

Part II—Suicide and the New Testament and Final Reflections¹

Jim W. Adams, PhD²

ABSTRACT

Suicide is frequently shrouded in silence, shame, and theological uncertainty within Christian communities, despite its deep connections with human suffering, mental illness, trauma, and grief. Although suicide brings an end to an individual's earthly anguish, it leaves profound emotional, spiritual, and existential wounds among those left behind. For Christians in particular, suicide raises pressing questions about sin, forgiveness, and eternal destiny—questions that have historically contributed to the Church's harsh stance and enduring stigma. This two-part work examines how Scripture addresses suicide, challenging the widespread assumption that it constitutes an unforgivable sin. While Scripture neither explicitly condemns nor endorses suicide, the biblical witness nevertheless reveals a theological tension: God appears opposed to the act, yet suicide is never clearly named as sin. This tension frames this study's three central questions concerning the biblical stance on suicide, the nature of God's response, and Scripture's vision for faithfully navigating suffering and suicidal ideation.

In Part I of my research I introduced the topic of suicide and, provided a selective overview on how suicide was viewed during church history, I then examined the relevant texts in the Old Testament (OT) before offering the conclusions arising from my analysis of this

¹ A large portion of my two-part work reflects what I submitted to the Foursquare Global Doctrine Committee in 2024. I want to thank Jake Evers and Eric Lopez as well as the anonymous reviewers at *Quadrant* for their careful critique and helpful suggestions of earlier versions of this essay. I also want to thank Jeremy Wallace for his supportive guidance towards the publication of my work.

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portion of Scripture.³ In this second Part, I examine New Testament (NT) texts germane to the topic of suicide, and then present my conclusions concerning suicide and the NT. As presented in Part I, I define suicide as follows:

The voluntarily and intentional killing of oneself by whatever means and in whatever circumstance, without any religious and/or political compulsion or threat.

Accordingly, my research focuses on the narrative depictions of the seven self-killings in Scripture, each of which are free of any religious or political threat against the victim to denounce his beliefs. Neither are the deaths in these cases accomplished in devotion to God. Rather, the narrators indicate intentionality by presenting each individual deciding on his own to purposefully take his life by his own hand or by another's.

My research is guided by three questions, each prompted by both how Church tradition has predominantly viewed suicide along with how Scripture addresses the topic. My first question is: *What stance do the biblical writers take on the act of suicide?* The way in which Scripture provides an answer to this question, however, leaves us with a tension. This tension is not due to the diverse thematic perspectives within the Testaments (as is the case with poverty, suffering, the monarchy, etc.), but due to the fact that suicide is neither explicitly condemned nor advocated. Within this tension, though, the trajectory of particular texts point me to the conclusion that God is not pleased with a person taking her/his life, and that God in fact opposes such an act. All this leads to my second question: *How can it be that the God of Scripture is not pleased with, and even opposes suicide, and simultaneously does not consider it a sin?* My final question also arises

³ Scripture for my study here on suicide is confined to the Protestant canon that includes the 39 books composing the Old Testament (OT) and the 27 books of the New Testament (NT).

from this tension: *How does Scripture envision the faithful navigation of suffering and in particular suicidal ideation?* I will sparingly touch upon these three questions throughout my essay here, but I will primarily address them in my conclusion and final reflections.

Suicide in the New Testament

Judas

Judas' death is the only explicit instance of suicide found in the NT. The episode occurs only in the Gospel of Matthew, which closely parallels Ahithophel's suicidal hanging (2 Sam 17).⁴ Matthew prefaces his description of Judas's suicide with a succinct description of the chief priests and elders conspiring to kill Jesus Christ, and then quickly moves to the leaders binding and delivering him to Pilate (27:1-2). Matthew narrates in some detail Judas's involvement (vv 3-5), and in particular the price of the betrayal along with the use to which the money was put (vv 6-10). Within this episode, Matthew highlights the innocence of Jesus Christ (cf. v 4 and v 6), in contrast to Judas. At the very end of his description of Judas, Matthew simply reports that ἀπήγξατο (*apēgxato*) "he hanged himself" (v 5b).⁵ Within this episode, Matthew does not indicate the presence of external pressure or threat to Judas as a cause for him to take his own life. Further, Matthew does not offer any explicit commentary con-

⁴ Luke includes a speech of Peter to those in an upper room (Acts 1:12-26) in which he describes Judas' death this way: "falling forward he burst in the middle and all his entrails were spilled out" (v 18b). The death of Judas is described in three other instances outside of the NT. Two are found in the preserved quotes of Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis (ca. 60-130 CE), which are embedded in the writings of Apollinaris of Laodicea (see Fragments of Papias 18 in Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 3d ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007], 754-57). The third description is reported in the *Gospel of Judas* (44-45). See further B. J. Oropeza, "Judas' Death and Final Destiny in the Gospels and Earliest Christian Writings," *Neotestamentica* 44 (2010): 342-61.

⁵ The verb ἀπάγχω (*apagchō*) can mean "to strangle," but in the middle voice, as it is here, it means "to hang oneself" (BDAG 95).

demning Judas' killing himself. The Gospel writer does not classify the suicide as a sin, nor does the narrative lead the reader to draw different conclusions.

Earlier in his Gospel, Matthew previously shows and tells the reader that, by his betrayal, Judas is guilty of sin and apostasy (26:14-16, 23-24, 47-50). So, it is in chapter 27 that Matthew tells the reader that Judas, seeing Jesus as condemned, "regretted, repented" (μεταμέλομαι [*metamelomai*]) and returned the 30 pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders (v 3). Then Matthew quotes Judas' confession: ἡμάρτον παραδούς αἷμα ἀθῶον (*hēmarton paradous haima athōon*) "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood" (v 4a).⁶ From these words, one can infer that Judas regretted and was ashamed of his betrayal. Matthew leaves the reader to draw the possible conclusion that Judas truthfully repented, and that his suicide was the result of his remorse.⁷ In this sense, Judas' suicide becomes the closest biblical instance of applying the "blood for blood" precept of Gen 9:6. Perhaps due to his remorse in assisting in the death of Christ he takes his own life as just retribution?⁸ Still, Matthew alludes to Deut 27:25

⁶ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine. I include the original language with my translations in particular instances I consider interpretively important. For my citations of the biblical text, I follow the Hebrew and Greek versification and so in certain instances, especially with the Psalms, the verse numerals in the English Bible do not correspond. When this occurs, I will cite the Hebrew verse number followed by the English verse number (e.g., Ps 3:2 [Eng v 1]).

⁷ So Arthur J. Droge, "Suicide," *ABD* IV: 228; Arthur J. Droge and James D. Tabor, *A Noble Death* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 113-14.

⁸ Droge and Tabor point in this direction as they claim that "Judas was his own judge and executioner" and his "act of self-destruction was a result of his remorse and not an additional crime" (*Noble Death*, 113). In a more negative sense, and perhaps with Deut 27:5 also in view, Allen Verhey concludes that "even in his repentance, Judas rejected the gracious sovereignty of God, the sovereign graciousness of God. He would be his own judge; he would take even his own judgment into his own hands. Death is due, for innocent blood has been spilled, but Judas is unwilling to let God be the judge, to wait patiently for the judgment. In his choice to kill himself he continues the same impatient refusal to live in the confidence of God's sovereignty that led to his betrayal" ("Judas, Jesus, and

with Judas' confession: "Cursed be anyone who takes a bribe to slay a person (shedding) innocent blood" with the LXX similarly translating the phrase דָּם נָקִי (*dām nāqī*) "innocent blood" with αἵματος ἁθῶου (*haimatos athōou*). By doing so, the Gospel writer may intend for the reader to infer that Judas deserves a cursed, dishonorable death for his false, malicious testimony (see also Deut 19:16-21).⁹ Augustine follows this line of thought as he concludes: "When Judas killed himself, he killed a wicked man, and yet he ended his life guilty not only of Christ's death, but also his own, because, although he was killed by his own transgression, it still was a transgression."¹⁰ Thus for Augustine, Judas is doubly guilty, first for his betrayal and second for his suicide. In the end, though, Matthew does not condemn the disciple for hanging himself, and also leaves the reason for Judas' suicide ambiguous—perhaps suggesting for his audience "that Judas' final destiny is best left in God's hands."¹¹ It is important to note that Luke and John describe Satan or the devil entering Judas in relation to his betrayal (Luke 22:3; John 6:70; 13:2, 27) whereas Matthew and Mark do not include such information. Matthew, therefore, does not appeal to demonic influence as a reason for why Judas betrayed Jesus or committed suicide. Considering all this, paralleling the OT depictions of suicide Matthew does not provide any critique that Judas' self-killing was a sin against God and remains silent on the morality of suicide.

Physician Assisted Suicide," in *Reading the Bible in the Strange World of Medicine* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 315).

⁹ Matthew employs his final "fulfillment quotation formula" here that Judas' betrayal and his place of burial (vv 9-10) fulfilled a prophecy of Jeremiah, but the actual quote derives from Zech 11:13. By explicitly naming Jeremiah, the Gospel writer may have intended this quote to be read in parallel with Jeremiah 18:1-12 and 19:1-15 as well as 32:6-9? See further Catherine Sider Hamilton, "The Death of Judas in Matthew: Matthew 27:9 Reconsidered," *JBL* 137 (2018): 419-37.

¹⁰ Augustine, *Civ.* I.17.

¹¹ Oropeza, "Judas' Death," 351-52.

Allen Verhey initially confirms this silence within Scripture when he centers his contemporary conclusions on suicide with Judas' self-killing and correctly observes that "Matthew does not pause to provide a moral judgment about the suicide of Judas." But then Verhey goes on to claim that Matthew "does not have to. The Jewish tradition he cherishes would leave little doubt about the appropriate judgment on the act."¹² As per Verhey's wider discussion, it appears safe to assume that he considers Matthew's Jewish tradition to refer to the Hebrew Bible or the OT. Also, from the way Verhey constructs his argument in these few lines it appears that he assumes that the OT writers condemn suicide. However, earlier in his essay Verhey asserts: "Those who expect to find in it [Scripture] a moral rule that articulates and substantiates a conviction that suicide is a sin prohibited by Scripture . . . will be disappointed. Such a moral rule is not there, not here in Matthew 27, not anywhere."¹³ Yet with a contemporary application in view, Verhey claims with his quote of Peter DeVries: "Suicide is not a viable alternative."¹⁴ According to Verhey, to see this in Scripture involves reading it faithfully which requires discernment. He explains his method as follows:

Discernment is the virtue of being able to recognize "fittingness." In reading Scripture, discernment is the ability to recognize the plot of the whole story, to see the wholeness of Scripture, and to order the interpretation of any part toward that whole. And in reading Scripture as "useful . . . for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16), discernment is

¹² Verhey, "Judas," 312.

¹³ Verhey, "Judas," 306.

¹⁴ Verhey, "Judas," 305, 315. Verhey's quote is from DeVries' book *The Glory of the Hummingbird* (New York: Popular Library, 1976), 261.

the ability to plot our lives to “fit” the whole of Scripture, to order every part of our lives—including the endings of them—toward that whole.¹⁵

With this interpretive strategy, Verhey claims that although “there is no explicit condemnation of suicide in Scripture, there does not have to be, for it states, if indirectly, much more powerfully than simple prohibition, why suicide, assisted suicide, and euthanasia are forbidden.”¹⁶ Therefore, it appears for Verhey that the reason for the lack of moral judgment on behalf of Matthew is because his audience would already have known from Scripture itself that such an act is ethically condemned. As I understand him, Verhey’s prescribed method is allusive and consequently his final interpretive conclusions are not explicitly grounded in the biblical text itself. As a result, it is quite difficult for me to see how Matthew and his audience would unequivocally consider suicide as morally condemned and forbidden from the pages of the OT?

In contrast to Verhey, Arthur J. Droge and James D. Tabor rightly observe that “Judas was condemned for betraying the messiah, not for killing himself.” They go on to assert: “According to Matthew, Judas’s act of self-destruction was the measure of his remorse and repentance.” Yet again Matthew does not make this point entirely clear, nor does he explicitly interpret Judas’s suicide as an act of repentance. Droge and Tabor further argue that “to say only that the writers of the New Testament did not condemn voluntary death is to miss the *positive* significance they attached to the act.”¹⁷ For them, the paradigmatic example of such positively construed voluntary death is Jesus Christ, to whom I now turn.

¹⁵ Verhey, “Judas,” 309; see also *idem*, “Suicide,” *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics* (ed. J. B. Green; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 758-60.

¹⁶ Verhey, “Judas,” 315.

¹⁷ Droge and Tabor, *Noble Death*, 125 (italics mine).

Jesus Christ

Jesus and his Exhortations to Lay Down One's Life

Corresponding to the OT, the Gospel writers do not include in Jesus' teachings any condemnation of suicide and/or a categorization of it as sin. This is also true of all the NT writers. Jesus partially quotes the Decalogue—including the sixth commandment (Matt 19:18)—as does Paul (Rom 13:9), but neither of them add any hint that the command also prohibits suicide. As with the OT writers, neither Jesus nor any NT writer prescribes and/or justifies suicide in any circumstance. That said, Jesus does challenge the would-be disciples to take up their cross and lose their own life. For example, following his description of his death and resurrection and rebuke of Peter (Matt 16:21-23), Jesus says:

If anyone wishes to come after me, let her/him deny her/himself and take up one's cross and follow me for whoever wishes to save her/his life shall lose it, but whoever loses her/his life on account of me will find it (vv 24-25).

Jesus follows these challenges by quoting Ps 62:13 (Eng v 12; see also Prov 24:12) about rewarding a person's deeds done in her/his life while on earth (Matt 16:27). He also says that some of those listening to him "will never taste death" (v 28). In his Gospel, Luke includes the expression "daily" following the exhortation "let one take up one's cross" (9:23; see also 14:27), clarifying that taking up one's cross does not mean death in a literal sense. Along with this, no NT writer describes any convert to Jesus Christ being crucified voluntarily or against her/his will. Similarly, Jesus challenges his disciples: "No one has greater love than this that one lays down her/his life on behalf of her/his friends" (John 15:13). Jesus prefaces this saying with

a command to love one another.¹⁸ Correlated to Jesus' saying here, John explains:

By this we know love: that that one [Jesus Christ] laid down his life on behalf of us and thus we ourselves ought to lay down (our) lives on behalf of others (1 John 3:16).

John precedes his description of love with the assertion that anyone who hates his sister/brother is a murderer (v 15). John follows this with an interrogative exhortation to love one another in practical ways (vv 17-18). Both sayings clearly equate Jesus' laying down of his life with his death. However, Jesus' death now also operates as an example for how converts *live* their lives on behalf of others in practical ways of love—not by actually dying as Jesus did or for a similar purpose (see also John 13:1-17).

In sum, the phrases “take up one’s cross,” “lose one’s life,” and “lay down one’s life” illustratively challenge how converts are to sacrificially *live* their earthly life unto Jesus Christ and on behalf of others. As Paul exhorts the Romans: “present your bodies as a living and holy sacrifice” acceptable to God (12:1). Jesus’ life and death function as an example for how to *live* selflessly (Phil 2:6-11) and in the face of opposition (see 1 Pet 2:21-25). In certain circumstances, though, a convert may face persecution accompanied with the threat of martyrdom, in which case Jesus’ challenge of losing one’s life literally applies. Clearly, following Christ involves suffering to one degree or another, but none of these sayings exhort disciples to commit suicide as I have defined the act.

¹⁸According to Craig S. Keener, friendship in the Greco-Roman world was expressed in absolute loyalty to suffer with and/or on behalf of one another, even unto death (see Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary Volume Two* [Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003], 1004-15).

Jesus Christ and his Descriptions about Laying Down his Own Life

As depicted in the Gospels, Jesus willingly dies upon a cross for the forgiveness of humanity's sin. Jesus' *voluntary death* has led some scholars to conclude that he committed suicide. In support of this conclusion, interpreters appeal primarily to John's Gospel, specifically to Jesus' own sayings about his death. For instance, at the close of a "figure of speech" wherein Jesus depicts himself as the good Shepherd in contrast to false shepherds (10:1-17) he asserts: "No one takes this [my life] from me, but I myself lay it down by myself" (10:18a). Jesus does not mince words here with his assertion that he alone determines if and when he will die and that his death is a voluntary act (v 18b), which some church fathers have highlighted (see below). As presented in the Gospels, Jesus clearly knows the importance and necessity of his death (e.g., Matt 16:21-23) which he does willingly and voluntarily embrace (26:36-44; Mark 10:45). Coupled with this saying, Jesus describes his death in terms of a *going away*, e.g., καὶ ὅπου εἰμὶ ἐγὼ ὑμεῖς οὐ δύνασθε ἐλθεῖν (*kai hopou eimi egō humeis ou dunasthe elthein*) "and where I myself [go] you are not able to come" (John 7:34b; see also 13:33). Another instance occurs within an interrogative that also includes the unique phrase ἀποκτενεῖ ἑαυτόν (*apoktenei heauton*) (8:22a). Significantly, the interrogative is not voiced by Jesus himself, but rather by his Judean opponents:

μήτι ἀποκτενεῖ ἑαυτόν ὅτι λέγει, "Ὅπου ἐγὼ ὑπάγω ὑμεῖς οὐ δύνασθε ἐλθεῖν (*mēti apoktenei heauton hoti legei, Hopou egō hupagō humeis ou dunasthe elthein*)

The first clause μήτι ἀποκτενεῖ ἑαυτόν (*mēti apoktenei heauton*) is variously rendered by English translations and most often as: "Will he kill himself?" (ASV; ESV; KJV; NKJV; MEV; NCV; RSV;

NIV).¹⁹ The interrogative marker μήτι (*mēti*) is formed from the negative μή (*mē*) with the addition of τι (*ti*), which is typically thought to convey an emphatic nuance. The NASB attempts to capture the emphatic and negative aspects with: “Surely He will not kill himself, will He?”²⁰

Apparently following the typical English translations, Droge claims that the Judean opponents “understood Jesus’ repeated sayings about his ‘going away’ as a suicide threat. As is often the case in John, they may have spoken more wisely than they knew.” Droge, in correspondence with his coauthored work with Tabor, concludes that the

death of Jesus, at least as we have it in the canonical gospels, is ambiguous. Is it the execution of a criminal, an example of heroic martyrdom, or a case of suicide? . . . If it is not always easy to distinguish between suicide and martyrdom, between killing oneself and allowing oneself to be killed for a cause, a principle, or belief, then Tertullian [*Apology* 21.19] and Origen [*Against Celsus* 2.11, 22] (even the ‘Jews’ in the Fourth Gospel) were not wrong in describing Jesus ‘going away’ as a form of suicide. How else can we make sense of the provocative statement of the Johannine Jesus: ‘No one takes my life; I lay it down of my own free will’ (John 10:18)?²¹

¹⁹ Similar translations include: “Is he going to kill himself?” (CPDV; NRSV); “Does he intend to kill himself?” (CEV); “Is he planning to commit suicide?” (NLT); “Perhaps he is going to kill himself” (NET); “He won’t kill himself, will he?” (EHV); “So, is he going to kill himself?” (MSG).

²⁰ This translation is rendered in both the NASB 1995 and NASB 2020 versions.

²¹ Droge, *ABD* VI: 228. According to Droge, this ambiguity partly derives from the fact that “in strictly historical terms Jesus of Nazareth never expected to give his life ‘as a ransom for many.’ Rather, his intention was to bring about the restoration of Israel and to usher in the kingdom of God, an eschatological revolution which would be accomplished miraculously through Jesus himself acting

The interrogative in John 8:22 is properly categorized as a confirming conducive question and with this specific type does not share in the reversal of polarity characteristic of rhetorical questions.²² With the use of the μήτι (*mēti*) marker the interrogative regularly implies a negative response, which is sometimes difficult to include when translating into an English interrogative.²³ In distinction to rhetorical questions, conducive questions remain as interrogatives and do not transform into assertions or statements. Yet like rhetorical questions and in contrast to genuine questions, these interrogatives express a low degree of elicitive force. In other words, conducive questions do not seek for unknown information from an addressee.²⁴ Correspondingly, the negative marker μήτι (*mēti*) occurs 17 times in the NT and in each instance expresses little to no elicitive force (Matt 7:16;

as God's messianic agent. So conceived, his death was a tragic failure. By the time we reach the gospel accounts, however, a transformation has occurred: Jesus' death was not a mistake; his was not the execution of a failed apocalyptic prophet. On the contrary, it was precisely for this reason that Jesus came: to redeem the world from sin through his sacrificial death. Hence the emphasis in all the gospels on Jesus' prior knowledge of his fate and on his willing and voluntary acceptance of that fate" (Droge, *ABD* VI: 228; see also Droge and Tabor, *Noble Death*, 114-19).

²² Characteristically an affirmative or positive rhetorical question implies a negative response such as *Is it necessary to shout like that?* with the intended answer of *No!* A negated rhetorical question implies an affirmative answer as *Isn't the answer obvious?* with the intended answer of *Yes!* Particular retort type rhetorical questions used in specific linguistic contexts do not reverse in polarity (see Deborah Schaffer, "Can Rhetorical Questions Function as Retorts? Is the Pope Catholic? *JP* 37 [2005]: 433-60).

²³ See BDAG 649.

²⁴ On conducive questions see further Jim W. Adams, *The Performative Dimensions of Rhetorical Questions in the Hebrew Bible*, LHBOTS 622 (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 133-41; Adina Moshavi, "Is that Your Voice, My Son David? Conducive Questions in Biblical Hebrew," *JNSL* 36 (2010): 65-81; *idem*, "Can a Positive Rhetorical Question have a Positive Answer in the Bible?," *JSS* 56 (2011): 253-73.

12:23; 26:22, 25; Mark 4:21; 14:19; Luke 6:39; 9:13; John 4:29; 8:22; 18:35; Acts 10:47; 1 Cor 7:5; 2 Cor 1:17; 12:18; 13:5; Jas 3:11).²⁵

When employing this specific type of conducive question, the addresser intends for the addressee to confirm the implied answer to establish a state of agreement between the two communicative participants such as with the interrogative: *She was pushed, wasn't she?* In light of this, the Judean opponents discuss among themselves:

“Certainly not intending to kill himself when he says, ‘Where I myself go you are not able to go?’” (8:22).

With this conducive question, the Judeans intend to confirm the implied negative answer that they believe to be true—“No, definitely he will not kill himself”—in order to establish a state of agreement among themselves.

But do the NT references to Jesus’ death leave room for the possibility of Jesus’ involvement in his own death? John includes the

²⁵ For example, Paul denounces any accusations against him and his companions by asking the Corinthians: μήτι ἐπλεονέκτησεν ὑμᾶς Τίτος (*mēti epleonektēsēn humas Titos*?) “Did Titus in fact defraud you?” Paul clearly intends a negative response to further ensure the intended answers to his two-follow-up negative rhetorical questions in defense of his own integrity (2 Cor 12:18). Looking at the instances of μήτι (*mēti*) in John, the first occurs during Jesus’ interaction with a Samaritan woman (4:7-42). In brief, the woman discloses her limited criteria for identifying the Messiah (v 25) followed immediately by Jesus confirming his identity as the Messiah (v 26). Following her discussion with Jesus, she exhorts some Samaritan men to come and see this man and poses μήτι οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ χριστός (*mēti houtos estin ho chistos*?) “Is this not the Christ?” (4:29). Due to the overarching context, the woman expresses a degree of interrogativity with this question. In other words, the intended and expected answer is “No!” (cf. Elizabeth Danna, “A Note on John 4:29,” *RB* 106 [1999]: 219-23), but at the same time expresses a sense of plausibility (similarly e.g., BDAG 649; BDF §427 [2]; Louw/Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon* [2d ed.], §69.16; Keener, *Gospel of John: Volume Two*, 622; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, NICNT, Rev. ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995], 243-44). The final instance occurs in 18:35 where Pilate responds to Jesus’ question about his identity: μήτι ἐγὼ Ἰουδαῖός εἰμι (*mēti egō Ioudaios eimi*?) “I am certainly not Judean, am I? Pilate’s interrogative unquestionably implies a confirming answer that he is not Judean.

verb ἀποκτείνω (*apokteinō*) “to kill” 12 times in his Gospel with 8 of those instances used to explain how Jesus’ enemies plan ἀποκτεῖναι (*apokteinai*) “to kill” him (5:18; 7:1, 19, 20, 25; 8:37, 40)²⁶ or so that ἀποκτείνωσιν αὐτόν (*apokteinōsin auton*) “they may kill him” (11:53).²⁷ When referring to the death of Christ, the Synoptic writers and Paul essentially use this verb in the exact same way.²⁸ There are no other expressions used comparatively to ἀποκτενεῖ ἑαυτόν (*apoktenei heauton*) as descriptions of the death of Christ in the NT. Further, nowhere in the Gospels does Jesus himself ever assert: I plan ἀποκτενεῖ ἑμαυτόν (*apoktenei emauton*) “to kill myself” or σταυρεῖν ἑμαυτόν (*staurein emauton*) “to crucify myself”; the latter is of course impossible to physically accomplish or to attempt within the societal setting of Roman rule. Thus, the Gospel writers never depict Jesus contemplating suicide in terms of killing himself nor even preferring death. In fact, Jesus implores the Father to decide against death, at least by crucifixion (Mark 14:32-39). As for the interrogative uttered by the Judeans, it does not convey any expectation that Jesus plans to take his own life²⁹ nor any negative view of such an act.³⁰ Yet, the

²⁶ Of these 8 occurrences, Jesus uses ἀποκτείνω (*apokteinō*) 3 times (7:19; 8:37, 40).

²⁷ The other 3 uses of the verb ἀποκτείνω (*apokteinō*) in John’s Gospel include: the chief priests desire to also kill Lazarus (12:10); Jesus warns his disciples of those who think they are serving God by killing them (16:2); and the Judeans before Pilate stating that they are not allowed to put anyone to death (18:31).

²⁸ Matthew employs ἀποκτείνω (*apokteinō*) 13 times (for its parallel use see 16:21; 17:23; 26:4), Mark uses it 11 times (see 8:31; 9:31; 10:34; 14:1), and Luke uses it 12 times in his first volume (see 9:22; 13:31; 18:33) and 6 times in his second (see 3:15). Paul uses the verb 5 times and once in reference to Christ’s death (1 Thess 2:15). The verb occurs in Revelation 15 times, but never in reference to Christ.

²⁹ Droge nor Droge and Tabor include the interpretive implications of this type of interrogative in Jn 8:22.

³⁰ For Stanislaw Adamiak and Jan Dohnalik, John 8:22 can “be treated as proof that the idea of suicide, imputed here to Jesus by a group of Jews, was looked at by the Jews *with horror*” (“The Prohibition of Suicide and Its Theological

interrogative remains open to a possibility as Jesus' *going away* expressions could signify suicide.³¹ Thus, ironically the Judeans correctly decipher that Jesus will in some way be involved in his own death, but it is not ultimately the case that Jesus' involvement includes killing himself in the sense of suicide.³²

When depicting Jesus' death, the Gospel writers present an unresolved tension between the divine will and independent human decisions that corresponds and cooperates with God's purposes. The will of God is clearly that Jesus should die on behalf of humanity (e.g., John 3:16), but this divine will is accomplished through human beings who oppose him and thus God. Yet, human cooperation with God's purposes does not exonerate human beings for betraying (Matt 26:24; Mark 14:21; Luke 22:22) or crucifying Jesus (e.g., Acts 2:23). Thus, while Christ does in fact lay down his own life and willingly dies, the Gospel writers are careful to give an account of the part played by human beings: Judas betraying Jesus into the hands of his Judean enemies (Matt 26:47-56), these same opponents condemning Jesus for blasphemy (vv 57-68), and finally the Roman government executing him (27:11-66). Despite his absolute innocence, Jesus never offers a counter argument or actively opposes the injustices he experiences. Rather, Jesus submits to the will of his Father and cooperatively allows himself to be crucified because of human decisions and

Rationale in Catholic Moral and Canonical Tradition: Origins and Developments," *JRH* 62 [2023]: 3822 [italics mine]). However, this type of interrogative along with the literary context does not readily imply such an emotive reaction.

³¹ See Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary Volume One* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003), 743; Morris, *Gospel According to John*, 396.

³² David Daube concludes that "John, in his well-known ironical manner, makes the Jews come fairly near the truth—that Jesus would give his life. This view is probably correct, though in Jewish thinking at least the gulf between suicide and action which will result in being put to death by others is so enormous that the phrase 'to kill oneself'—used by the Jews—would not, in general, allude to what Jesus ultimately did. It could not be said of a martyr burned at the stake, even metaphorically, that 'he killed himself'" ("Death as a Release in the Bible," *NovT* 5 [1962]: 87).

at the hands of human beings. With all this, Jesus clearly embraces crucifixion willingly and voluntarily, but no NT writer ever offers any explicit commentary, or otherwise describes, claims, or depicts Jesus intentionally killing himself. Thus, Jesus Christ does not commit suicide as Droge claims, but I agree that his crucifixion is a *voluntary death*. More specifically, Jesus' death best falls within the category of a martyr.³³ In Revelation, in fact, Jesus is entitled ὁ μάρτυς ὁ πιστός (*ho martus ho pistos*) "the faithful martyr/witness" (1:5) and Jesus identifies himself as ὁ μάρτυς ὁ πιστὸς καὶ ἀληθινός (*ho martus ho pistos kai alēthinos*) "the faithful and true martyr/witness" (3:14).

According to Droge and Tabor, the "writers of the Gospels created a Jesus who became the prototype of the Christian martyr." They also observe that in early church history some Christians interpreted Christ's example along with his challenge to deny oneself, take up a cross, and follow him to entail a *vicarious* reenactment of Jesus's death and resurrection during water baptism. Others, though, understood such following more literally. "They believed that salvation could only be *guaranteed* by actually reenacting the death of Jesus—that is, by voluntarily offering themselves up to death as he had done."³⁴ To whatever extent this may be true, the NT writers consistently argue for the absolute sufficiency and finality of the Christ event—his death, resurrection, and exaltation—and thus nothing needs to be added for a convert's eternal salvation (e.g., Rom 5:6-10; 10:9-10; Heb 7:25-27; 10:19-22). Thus, the NT writers never exhort their addressees to reenact the death of Christ via suicide to achieve deliverance unto the age to come.

³³ It is important to note that while Droge claims that Jesus committed suicide (*ABD* VI: 228), James D. Tabor states that of "course Jesus himself is the preeminent model of the faithful martyr in the NT" ("Martyr, Martyrdom," *ABD* IV: 577).

³⁴ Droge and Tabor, *Noble Death*, 126.

Jesus and Psalm 22

Upon the cross Jesus cries out in Aramaic *Ελωι ελωι λεμα σαβαχ-θανι* (*Elōi elōi lema sabachthani*) which Mark transliterates and then translates as *Ὁ θεός μου ὁ θεός μου εἰς τί ἐγκατέλιπές* (*Ho theos mou ho theos mou eis ti egkatelipes*) “My God my God for why have you forsaken me? (15:34; see also Matt 27:46). Jesus voices this question from Ps 22:2a (Eng v 1a) which begins a lengthy protest of an innocent sufferer.³⁵ In such Protest/Complaint psalms (e.g., 6; 13; 22; 35; 42; 74; 79; 86; 88; 109)³⁶ and specifically those that include *לָמָּה* (*lāmā*) “why” (Pss 10:1; 22:2 [Eng v 1]; 42:10 [Eng v 9; 2x]; 43:2 [2x]; 44:24, 25 [Eng vv 23, 24]; 74:1, 11a; 79:10; 80:13a [Eng v 12a]; 88:15 [Eng v 14]; see also Job 13:24), supplicants question *why* Yahweh has negligently and often inexplicably abandoned her/him/ them. The protesters’ question simultaneously functions indirectly as an accusatory protest addressing the perplexing disconnect between the current experience of suffering and characteristic nature of “my God,” who has acted quite differently in the past (e.g., Pss 22:4-6 [Eng vv 3-5]; 44:2-4 [Eng vv 1-3]; 74:12-17; 80:9-12 [Eng vv 8-11]). Because Yahweh has forsaken the supplicant, she/he/they hold him responsible and accountable for her/his/their current circumstances (e.g., 22:10-11 [Eng vv 9-10]; 42:3-4, 11 [Eng vv 2-3, 10]; 44:10-17, 20, 23 [Eng vv 9-16, 19, 22]; 88:7-9, 16-19 [Eng vv 6-8, 15-18]). The intent, then, of this type of challenging question, along with explicit pleas (e.g., 10:12, 15; 22:12a, 20-22 [Eng vv 11a, 19-21]; 43:1, 3;

³⁵ Mark and Matthew’s Greek transliteration matches the MT: *עֲלֵי עֲלֵי לָמָּה* (*’ēlī ’ēlī lāmā ’āzabtānī*) “My God my God why have you forsaken me? In the LXX, Ps 21 contains this Protest psalm and translates the opening line as *Ὁ θεός ὁ θεός μου πρόσχες μοι ἵνα τί ἐγκατέλιπές με* (*Ho theos ho theos mou prosches moi hina ti egkatelipes me*) “God my God attend to me (that): why have you forsaken me?”

³⁶ These types of psalms have been traditionally classified as Laments, but they are more accurately identified as Protests or Complaints (see Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms: Part 1 with an Introduction to Cultic Poetry*, FOTL XIV [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988], 11-14; John Goldingay, *Psalms Volume 1: Psalms 1-41*, BCOTWP [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006], 60-64).

44:24, 27 [Eng vv 23, 26]; 79:8-9), is for Yahweh to act and deliver. Accordingly, the questions and pleas are often followed by praise in anticipation of his response (e.g., 10:16-18; 22:23-32 [vv 22-31]; 42:6, 12 [vv 5, 11]).³⁷

For my focus here, it is worth noting that on the cross Jesus expressed his deep anguish as he endured the excruciating experience of crucifixion and particularly felt the absence of God in this moment. Drawing on Ps 22, Jesus unapologetically voiced his protest of God's absence. Yet at the same time, and in light of the entire psalm, Jesus completely entrusted himself to the Father, from whom he expected deliverance (vv 23-32 [Eng vv 22-31]). Jesus, then, does not pretend that he is not suffering, which would be virtually impossible on a cross, but rather verbalizes his pain, isolation, disappointment as well as his confidence in the faithfulness of God.

Jesus and the Torah

Within Scripture there are numerous instances where God compromises or makes allowances for the reality of the human experience. Deuteronomy especially displays such compromises.³⁸ For example, the law of release in 15:1-11³⁹ presents such a compromise evidenced with an intentional contradiction. In sum, vv 1-3 present the essential law of release that is formed in a concentric structure, at the center of which is "the proclamation of the release of Yahweh" (v 2bβ).⁴⁰ The law institutes the cancelation of the remaining debt of a poor Israelite

³⁷ See above and also Craig C. Broyles, *The Conflict of Faith and Experience in the Psalms*, JSOTSup 52 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988); Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (trans. K R. Crim and R. N. Soulen; Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 52-81.

³⁸ See John Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 153-66.

³⁹ This law develops a humanitarian dimension from the original law instituting a seven-year rest for the land in Exod 23:10-12.

⁴⁰ See Jefferies M. Hamilton, *Social Justice and Deuteronomy*, SBLDS 136 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 17.

every seven years. In vv 4-6, though, an abrupt assertion occurs: “However there will be no poor among you” (v 4a), because Yahweh will bless Israel (vv 4b, 6). Yet, such blessing is predicated upon obedience to Yahweh’s covenantal commands (v 5). Following this promise of blessing, the text describes various scenarios to exhort and warn the addressee about caring for those in need (vv 7-10). The text goes on to provide a reason: “because the poor will not cease from within the land” (v 11a). The law, then, presents a contradiction: there will not be any poor Israelites (v 4a), while at the same time poor Israelites will always exist (v 11a). This pericope depicts Israel adhering to its covenant obligations, while the law institutes a compromise in recognition of the fact that Israel will inevitably fail in its obedience. Although never explicitly stated, the law of release presents an intentional tension between the ideal of obedience (“no poor among you”) and the reality of sinful humanity (“the poor will not cease”).⁴¹

Deuteronomy also includes the compromise of the law of divorce (24:1, 3), which represents a divergence from the vision of a sacred union between a female and male in Gen 2:23-24. This law of divorce also stands in opposition to the prophet Malachi’s third of his six disputation speeches (2:10-16), wherein Yahweh concludes that *נָשִׁי אֶתְנָה* (*šānē’ šallah*) “he hates divorce” (v 16).⁴² Jesus himself

⁴¹ See Christopher Wright, *Deuteronomy*, NIBC (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), 187-92.

⁴² Apparently because of the concluding speech formula “says Yahweh the God of Israel,” BHS proposes to emend the verb *נָשִׁי* (*šānē’*) from a Qal perfect 3ms to a 1cs *שָׁנַתִּי* (*šn’ī*), which is adopted by a number of interpreters (e.g., Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, WBC 32 [Waco: Word Books, 1989], 319, 20; Peter A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 278) and modern English translations (e.g., NASB; NLT; RSV; NRSV). The LXX translates the opening clause as ἀλλὰ ἐὰν μισήσας ἐξαποστείλῃς (*alla ean misēsas exaposteilēs*) “but if because of hate he [a Judean male] divorces,” which the NIV appears to follow with “The man who hates and divorces his wife.” The BHS suggestion ends up unnecessary, as Malachi speaks in the third person throughout his third disputation, following the opening interrogatives (v 10). Further, when a prophet or any other messenger speaks on behalf of Yahweh, there is often fluctuation between the first and third person forms, including singular and

takes up the issue of diverse perspectives on divorce in his response to the Pharisees testing him. With his answer, Jesus presents both an ideal and an accommodation that can be found within the pages of the Torah (Mark 10:1-12). The ideal is reflected in Gen 2:24 that the husband “shall cleave to his wife and they shall become one flesh.” Jesus adds to the last clause as well as exhorts: “therefore whom God has joined together, let no person separate” (Mark 10:9).⁴³ The accommodation is reflected in Deut 24; thus, for Jesus, the law of divorce was instituted because people are σκληροκαρδία (*sklērokardia*) “hard hearted” (v 5). “Jesus as Matthew presents him is condescending to the realities of human sin, failure, and suffering. Jesus accepts that divorce sometimes happens and sets an example for his followers in the way they handle real life within the people of God still living East of Eden.”⁴⁴ Thus, for the OT, God hates divorce, but he institutes a law of divorce; God hates divorce, but it is not a sin. As I stated before, Scripture presents a similar tension in that suicide is never explicitly condemned nor condoned. Within this tension, though, and as I will expand below, God is not pleased with suicide, and even opposes suicide.

Apostle Paul

Paul and His Desire for Death

In two instances and in different letters, Paul transparently expresses his deep desire for death. In Phil 1, Paul writes:

plural (see e.g., Gen 22:12; Isa 7:10-17; 42:24). Thus, I read the MT נִשְׂאֵ (śānē) “he hates” with Yahweh as the antecedent of the 3ms (so e.g., KJV; NKJV). Andrew E. Hill also reads the MT, but understands the term יֶהוָה (‘ehād) “One” in v 15 to refer to Yahweh and to also function as the implied subject of נִשְׂאֵ (śānē): “Indeed, [the One] hates divorce” (*Malachi*, AB 25D [New York: Doubleday, 1998], 221, 249-50).

⁴³ Apart from the additions in vv 8b-9, Jesus’ quote of Gen 2:24 matches the LXX.

⁴⁴ John Goldingay, *Models for Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 102.

²¹For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. ²²But if to live on in the flesh this for me is fruitful labor and what I prefer I do not know. ²³But I am tormented from the two, having the strong desire to die and to be with Christ, for that is far better, ²⁴but to remain in the flesh is necessary because of you ²⁵and convinced of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith ²⁶in order that your boasting in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my returning to you again.

Paul similarly writes in 2 Cor 5:1-8:

¹For we know that if our earthly home which is a tent is being torn down, we have a building from God, a house made without hands, eternal in the heavens. ²For indeed in this [home] we groan longing to put on our dwelling which is from heaven ³if indeed having put it on, we shall not be found naked. ⁴For also the ones being in the tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be undressed, but clothed, in order that the mortal may be swallowed up by the life. ⁵And the one who prepared us for this same reason is God who gave to us the down payment of the Spirit. ⁶Therefore always confident and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord—⁷for we walk through faith, not through sight—⁸and we are confident and we prefer rather to be away from the body and to be at home with the Lord.

As expressed in both letters, Paul clearly prefers death over his current life because in a negative sense the consequence of living in his mortal body is to be away from the Lord. In a positive sense, to die results in being with Christ, being home with the Lord, and acquiring immortality. Importantly and in contrast to the OT individuals requesting to

die, Paul does not prefer death to escape from any of his hardships or suffering.

It is in Paul's letter of friendship to the Philippians where he discloses τὴν ἐπιθυμίαν ἔχων εἰς τὸ ἀναλῦσαι (*tēn epithumian echōn eis to analusai*) "having the strong desire to die" (Phil 1:23).⁴⁵ J. B. Lightfoot captures Paul's innermost feelings with his observations that the "grammar of the passage reflects the conflict of feeling in the Apostle's mind. He is tossed to and fro between the desire to labour for Christ in life, and the desire to be united with Christ by death. The abrupt and disjointed sentences express this hesitation."⁴⁶ The alternating phraseology and assonance in 1:21-24 underscore "the inner turmoil of the apostle as he wrestles with these ultimate issues, leaning now in favor of one, now in favor of the other."⁴⁷ Paul emphatically prefaces his discourse here with ἐμοὶ (*emoi*) "to me" indicating that these are his own reflections. Following this pronoun, Paul expresses a type of maxim or life motto: τὸ ζῆν Χριστὸς καὶ τὸ ἀποθανεῖν κέρδος (*to zēn Christos kai to apothanein kerdos*) "living is Christ and dying is gain" (Phil 1:21).⁴⁸ It is not entirely clear what

⁴⁵ Philippians is best understood as a "hortatory letter of friendship" (see Stanley K. Stowers, "Friends and Enemies in the Politics of Heaven: Reading Theology in Philippians," in *Pauline Theology Volume I: Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, Philemon* [ed. J. M. Bassler; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991], 105-21 [see 107-14]; see also Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995], 2-14). On friendship letters in general see Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, LEC 5 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 58-70.

⁴⁶ Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1953 [reprint of 1913 edition]), 92.

⁴⁷ Ralph P. Martin and Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, WBC 43, Revised (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 54.

⁴⁸ N. Clayton Croy observes a rhetorical device in this section known as ἀπορία (*aporia*) or διαπόρησις (*diaporēsis*) "feigned perplexity," which "involves a rhetorical pretense of uncertainty and the posing of a question as a way of strengthening or dramatizing an argument" ("To Die is Gain' [Philippians 1:19-26]: Does Paul Contemplate Suicide?," *JBL* 122 [2003]: 525, see 525-31).

Paul means by τὸ ζῆν Χριστὸς (*to zēn Christos*),⁴⁹ but with the following clause Paul clearly states that death is not a loss, but a gain, profit. Also, as he progresses Paul states that he has the “choice” (αἰρέω [*haireō*]) between life or death (v 22). Thus, Droge concludes that if “it is a matter of Paul’s own choosing, then it seems clear that his internal struggle concerns the possibility of suicide.”⁵⁰ Paul, though, does not clarify the nature of this decision. To complicate matters, in neither letter does Paul indicate that he is under any imminent threat of execution, even while in jail (Phil 1:13-14).⁵¹

Paul does not explain why he contemplates about death at this point in his life. Paul does state that he is in prison (1:7, 13-14). He also reminds his addressees that they have been granted to suffer for Christ, which corresponds with his own struggles (vv 29-30). Outside of this letter, Paul as well as Luke discloses the demanding emotional and physical toll of his apostolic career. Paul had a near-death experience in Asia (2 Cor 1:8-9), endured manifold instances of suffering as a δοῦλος (*doulos*) “slave” of Christ (2 Cor 6:4-5; 11:23-27), bore the persistent burden for the churches he birthed and cared for (11:28-29), and persevered despite relentless pursuits of his Judean opponents along with his lengthy and arduous trials and incarcerations (Acts 21:27-28:31).

Consistent with Paul’s experiences of hardship, the latter part of his maxim τὸ ἀποθανεῖν κέρδος (*to apothanein kerdos*) “dying is gain” has numerous Greek and Latin parallels spread over several centuries that describe the common belief that death is a gain for those overwhelmed with life’s troubles. For instance, a tormented cowgirl named Io cries out: “τί δῆτ’ ἐμοί ζῆν κέρδος (*ti dēt’ emoi zēn kerdos*)

⁴⁹ See Martin and Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 54-56; Peter T. O’Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 118-22.

⁵⁰ Droge, *ABD* VI: 228; see also *idem*, “*Mori Lucrum*: Paul and Ancient Theories of Suicide,” *NovT* 30 (1988): 263-86; *idem*, “Did Paul Commit Suicide?” *Biblical Review* 5 (1989): 14-21, 42.

⁵¹ *Contra* Fee, *Philippians*, 139-40.

‘What gain is life to me?’ Why didn’t I quickly throw myself from this rugged rock? . . . For its better to die once for all than every day to suffer terribly” (Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 747-51). Socrates prefers death as it compares to dreamless sleep: “So if that is the sort of thing death is, I count it κέρδος (*kerdos*) ‘a gain’” (Plato, *Apology* 40E).⁵² Based on these texts and many others, D. W. Palmer concludes that for Paul death is a gain “not because of any closer union with Christ,” since living is already Christ, but “because it brings release from earthly troubles.”⁵³ Droge and Tabor similarly conclude that death “is a gain for Paul not only because it means union with Christ but also because it brings deliverance from life’s miseries.”⁵⁴ As evidenced in the ancient literature presented above, these interpreters conclude that voluntary death can be viewed as a joyous release as well as a haven and refuge from the cares and torments of life.⁵⁵ Such voluntary death can be justifiably and reasonably accomplished via suicide. So, for Droge and Tabor, in the case of someone like Paul (and assuming God’s permission) it becomes conceivable that “an individual could kill her/himself and be ‘glorifying God with her/his body’ by doing so.”⁵⁶

Paul’s friends in Philippi and elsewhere would have been readily familiar with his language describing death as a gain; however, this motto by itself would not have communicated a desire to take his own life. Moreover, suicide was not universally accepted among Paul’s contemporaries. Paul also differs from those who express a wish to escape earthly troubles through death, for in his view life “in Christ is not destroyed by death; it is only increased and

⁵² These texts and others are found in D. W. Palmer, “‘To Die Is Gain’ (Philippians i 21),” *NovT* 17 (1975): 203-18.

⁵³ Palmer, “‘To Die Is Gain,’” 218.

⁵⁴ Droge and Tabor, *Noble Death*, 122.

⁵⁵ See Droge and Tabor, *Noble Death*, 17-51; see also Droge, “*Mori Lucrum*,” 263-74.

⁵⁶ Droge and Tabor, *Noble Death*, 124 (pronouns revised).

enriched by death.”⁵⁷ Notably, Paul does not employ the explicitly suicidal language often found in Hellenistic parallels. Further, the dominant theme of joy that permeates the letter (1:14–17, 25; 2:1–2, 17–18, 29; 3:1; 4:1, 4, 10) militates against the notion that Paul was seriously contemplating taking his own life. Additionally, Paul anticipates visiting the Philippians again after his release from prison (1:22–26; 2:24). It is only in his second letter to Timothy that he appears to sense that his death is imminent (2 Tim 4:6). Although Paul catalogs numerous hardships, he never expresses a desire to be released from his divine mission;⁵⁸ on the contrary, he wears his apostolic sufferings as a badge of honor (cf. 2 Cor 11:21–30). These difficulties directly reflect his identity as a δοῦλος (*doulos*) “slave” of Christ (Phil 1:1; Rom 1:1; Gal 1:10), whose lordship defines his existence.⁵⁹ As will be discussed in greater detail below, Paul also understands the bodies of believers—including his own—as temples of the Holy Spirit; he is not his own, having been bought with a price (1 Cor 6:19–20). Consequently, Paul lives entirely under the lordship of Jesus Christ. In contrast to figures who petition Yahweh for death, Paul never makes such a request, nor does he imply—explicitly or implicitly—that Jesus Christ has ever permitted him to take his own life. Indeed, neither the NT nor subsequent Christian tradition suggests that Paul committed suicide.⁶⁰ As with God’s refusal to grant death-requests and his insistence that petitioners continue in service, Paul ultimately chooses “to live in order to serve” (1:24–26).⁶¹ Thus,

⁵⁷ Martin and Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 56.

⁵⁸ See Fee, *Philippians*, 140 note 7.

⁵⁹ Although in the Greco-Roman culture a δοῦλος (*doulos*) “slave” experienced a certain number of rights and privileges, ultimately, she/he was considered a tool devoid of basic human rights who was owned by and must comply with the wishes and whims of her/his master. See S. Scott Bartchy, “Slavery (Greco-Roman),” *ABD* VI: 65-73; A. A. Rupprecht, “Slave, Slavery,” *DPL*¹, 881-83.

⁶⁰ *Contra* Droge, *ABD* VI: 229.

⁶¹ Martin and Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 54.

in contrast to Palmer, Droge and Tabor, I argue that while Paul's apostolic hardships prompted his reflections on death, death is not a gain because it offers escape from life's troubles; rather, death is a gain because it promises the fuller enrichment of Paul's relationship with Christ.⁶²

In any of his letters, and again against Droge and Tabor, Paul does not endorse or permit suicide as an appropriate option at any time for himself or anyone else.⁶³ In fact, Luke reports Paul preventing his jailor from committing suicide (Acts 16:27-28). As introduced in Part I, the verb ἀναιρέω (*anairēō*) "kill" occurs once with the reflexive pronoun ἑαυτὸν (*heauton*) "himself" (v 27) in the NT.⁶⁴ In this episode, Luke describes an earthquake causing the doors of the jail imprisoning Paul and Silas and others to swing open as well as their chains unfastened (v 26). The jailor assumes the prisoners had escaped and thus ἤμελλεν ἑαυτὸν ἀναιρεῖν (*ēmellen heauton anairein*) "was about to kill himself" with a sword (v 27). Paul impedes the jailor's intent to kill himself (v 28), perhaps anticipating his conversion to Christ (vv 30-33). Importantly, though, neither Paul nor Luke expresses any thought here that suicide is a sin.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul's decision to live and serve matches the mind of Christ (2:5) and exemplifies what a δοῦλος

⁶² So O'Brien, *Philippians*, 122-23. My conclusion here also appears to be that of Martin and Hawthorne's, but they do not precisely differentiate between Paul's musings about death and his reason death is a gain (*Philippians*, 54, 56).

⁶³ Droge succinctly asserts the coauthors' position by stating: "While [for Paul] the option of death was considered and, indeed, personally desirable, it was ultimately rejected because it contravened his understanding of the *present* will of God, namely, that Paul continues his earthly mission. It is not the case, however, that Paul rejected suicide *per se*, only that it was not *yet* the appropriate time for such an act" (*ABD* VI: 229; see also Droge, "Mori Lucrum," 278-86; Droge and Tabor, *Noble Death*, 122-25).

⁶⁴ The verb ἀναιρέω (*anairēō*) occurs 24 times in the NT. The verb is specifically used in reference to the death of Christ (Luke 22:2; 23:32; Acts 2:23; 10:39; 13:28), the attempts to kill Paul (Acts 9:23, 24, 29; 23:15, 21, 27; 25:3) and the killing of James (12:2) and Stephen (22:20).

(*doulos*) of Christ looks like. As his master, who did not exploit his equality with God (v 6), selflessly took on the form of a δοῦλος (*doulos*) (v 7) and humbly obeyed the Father (v 8), Paul selflessly and humbly embraces living for and serving his friends. Thus, Paul embraces Jesus' challenge: "No one has greater love than this that one lays down her/his life on behalf of her/his friends" (John 15:13). Jesus fulfills his own challenge by truly dying on behalf of humanity and going away to heaven whereas Paul fulfills it by living on behalf of and remaining with the Philippians and the messianic community beyond.⁶⁵

Paul and the Temple of God

In his first letter to the Corinthians and in two separate, but related, instances Paul describes the community of believers (3:16-17) and individual converts (6:19) as the ναὸν τοῦ θεοῦ (*naon tou theou*) "temple of God." In his first description, Paul asks: "Do you not know that you are the temple of God and the Spirit of God dwells in you?" (3:16). The intended implied answer to this negative rhetorical question is "Of course we know!" In this instance, Paul asks this question to and identifies the collective community of Corinth, and inferentially the entire body of Christ, as the temple of God, the dwelling place of the Spirit (see also Eph 2:19-22). Paul also warns his addressees of the dire consequences for φθείρω (*phtheirō*) "destroying" τὸν ναὸν τοῦ θεοῦ (*ton naon tou theou*) "the temple of God" (v 17aβ). The apostle, though, does not use his first instance of φθείρω (*phtheirō*) in the sense of "destroy" (v 17aα), but more so as "corrupting, defiling" the temple through the Corinthians' jealousy

⁶⁵ Although J. L. Jaquette attempts to sharpen Droge's interpretation of Phil 1:21-26 (see footnotes 49 and 62), Jaquette's analysis of Paul's discourse and decision in light of the Greco-Roman concept of friendship remain insightful ("A Not-So-Noble Death: Figured Speech, Friendship and Suicide in Philippians 1:21-26," *Neotestamentica* 28 [1994]: 177-92).

and divisions (1:10-13; 3:3-15) as well as their worldly wisdom and arrogance (1:18-2:16; 3:18-23).⁶⁶

Not much later in his letter (6:12-20), in a diatribe style (a constructed dialogue with an imaginary opponent) Paul challenges the Corinthians' slogan or maxim: πάντα μοι ἔξεστιν (*panta moi exestin*) "all things are permissible for me" (v 12); put another way: "I am free to do anything" (NEB) or "I have the right to do anything" (NIV).⁶⁷ In v 12 and throughout this section Paul "attacks the roots of their community-destroying insistence upon autonomy."⁶⁸ In v 18,⁶⁹ the apostle culminates his diatribe as follows:

⁶⁶ Paul follows his warning with punishing consequences: φθερεῖ τοῦτον ὁ θεός (*phtherei touton ho theos*) "God will destroy this one" (v 16). Paul uses the verb φθείρω (*phtheirō*) four other times and in the sense of "to corrupt, ruin, defile" (1 Cor 15:33; 2 Cor 7:2; 11:3; Eph 4:22). Paul's use of φθείρω (*phtheirō*) in 2 Cor 11:3 is often translated as "be led astray," which makes sense in this particular context. The other NT writers use the verb as "to destroy" (2 Pet 2:12; Jude 1:10) and "to corrupt" (Rev 19:2). See further BDAG 1054; *NIDNTTE* 4: 597-602.

⁶⁷ Paul uses the phrase πάντα μοι ἔξεστιν (*panta moi exestin*) twice in 6:12, after each instance of which he promptly disputes. Paul essentially repeats this phrase in 10:23 and likewise negates in v 24. Paul's use of this phrase points the interpreter to understand it as a Corinthian slogan or maxim (so e.g., Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 251; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], 460-61).

⁶⁸ Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1997), 101.

⁶⁹ Verse 18 has proven extremely difficult to interpret (for the various interpretive proposals see Thiselton, *Corinthians*, 470-74). However, due to the clear repeated slogans in v 12 and Paul's diatribe style in 6:12-20, a number of scholars have identified a sequential pattern consisting of a Corinthian objecting slogan followed by Paul's rebuttal. Thus, although not syntactically identifiable, v 18b most plausibly functions as the final slogan in this section; see in particular Denny Burk, "Discerning Corinthian Slogans through Paul's Use of the Diatribe in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20," *BBR* 18 (2008): 99-121; Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "Corinthian Slogans in 1 Cor 6:12-20," *CBQ* 40 (1978): 391-96; Andrew David Naselli, "Is Every Sin Outside the Body Except Immoral Sex? Weighing Whether 1 Corinthians 6:18b is Paul's Statement or a Corinthian Slogan," *JBL* 136 (2017): 969-87; Stanley K. Stowers, "A 'Debate' Over Freedom: 1 Corinthians 6:12-20," in *Christian Teaching* (FS L. G. Lewis; ed. E. Ferguson; Abilene: Abilene Christian University Book Store, 1981), 59-71; see further Paul A. Holloway, "Religious

Paul's exhortation: "Flee sexual immorality!" (v 18a)

Corinthian objecting slogan: "every sin which a person commits is outside of the body" (v 18b).⁷⁰

Paul's refutation: "but the one who sins sexually sins against one's own body" (v 18c).⁷¹

Paul, then, continues by substantiating his refutation with a similar rhetorical question as above, but addresses individual converts who simultaneously constitute the communal temple of God: "or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God and you are not your own?" (6:19). This rhetorical question implies the same exclusive answer as above. Paul immediately follows this interrogative with a grounding assertion followed by an inferred exhortation: "for you were bought with a price. Therefore, glorify God in your bodies!" (v 20).

'Slogans' in 1 Corinthians: Wit, Wisdom, and the Quest for Status in a Roman Colony," *JTS* 72 (2021): 125-54; Jay E. Smith, "The Roots of a 'Libertine' Slogan in 1 Corinthians 6:18," *JTS* 59 (2008): 63-95; *idem*, "Slogans in 1 Corinthians," *BibSac* 167 (2010): 68-88.

⁷⁰ Apparently for clarification purposes, numerous English translations add the term "other" to v 18b to interpret that only sins categorized as πορνεία (*porneia*) negatively affect a person's body or person: "Every *other* sin that a person commits is outside the body" (NASB2020; also GNT; NASB; NCV; NEB; NIV; REB). Certain translations make such an interpretation even more explicit: "Every sin that a man doeth is without the body" (KJV); "No *other* sin so clearly affects the body as this one does" (NLT). Fee improbably sees the conjunction δέ (*de*) in v 18c functioning in an exceptive sense to qualify the previous clause of v 18b: "every *other* sin" (*Corinthians*, 262 [italics mine]). To interpret v 18b in such a way obviously necessitates adding the term "other" as well as ignores the probable slogan function of the clause.

⁷¹ Similarly, e.g., Burk, "Discerning Corinthian Slogans," 111; Hays, *First Corinthians*, 105; C. F. D. Moule, *Idiom Book of the New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 196-97; Naselli, "Corinthian Slogan" 984; Smith, "'Libertine' Slogan," 63-64; Stowers, "'Debate' Over Freedom," 68-69.

Most recently, and without much discussion, Archie T. Wright initially asserts that although “the biblical text does not explicitly prohibit suicide, several references suggest that suicide is against God’s will and purpose for one’s life.” Following a brief reference to the sixth commandment and its prohibition against “killing in general,” Wright appeals to Paul’s two temple descriptions to further support his claim. Accordingly, “in the NT Paul teaches that it is wrong to *destroy* one’s *body*, which is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:17; 6:19).”⁷² Wright, however, unjustifiably conflates Paul’s two distinct discussions in 1 Cor 3:16-17 and 6:18-20. Paul does not use the verb φθείρω (*phtheirō*) “to *destroy*, corrupt, defile” in the latter passage nor the noun σῶμα (*sōma*) “*body*” in the former. Moreover, Paul’s initial use of φθείρω (*phtheirō*) in 3:17 does not denote “murder.” While in 6:18a Paul explicitly condemns πορνεία (*porneia*) “unlawful sexual intercourse, fornication,” particularly sexual relations with a πόρνη (*pornē*) “prostitute, harlot” (vv 15-16).⁷³ Paul’s concern in this context is illicit sexual behavior, not homicide, and certainly not suicide. It is also crucial to recognize that Paul’s first description of God’s temple is communal in nature. His use of σῶμα (*sōma*), together with other ecclesial metaphors, underscores that individual acts of πορνεία (*porneia*) profoundly affect not only one’s own σῶμα (*sōma*), but also the σῶμα (*sōma*) of Christ as a whole.⁷⁴ In v18b, Paul further refutes the Corinthian slogan that bodily actions are morally neutral or irrelevant.⁷⁵ While Paul’s focus on πορνεία (*porneia*) does not exclude the possibility that other actions—such as suicide—might be construed as acts committed εἰς τὸ ἴδιον σῶμα (*eis to idiom sōma*)

⁷² Wright, *NIBD* 395 (italics mine).

⁷³ See BDAG 854.

⁷⁴ See in particular John R. Levison, “The Spirit and the Temple in Paul’s Letters to the Corinthians,” in *Paul and His Theology* (ed. S. E. Porter; Leiden: Brill, 2006], 205); see also Hays, *First Corinthians*, 106-07.

⁷⁵ Murphy-O’Connor, “Corinthian Slogans,” 393.

“against one’s own body,”⁷⁶ such applications extend beyond Paul’s immediate argument. As Anthony C. Thiselton observes, v 18 “is notoriously difficult, except perhaps with reference to its most immediate rhetorical context.” But then he poses: “Is it not such a sin as drunkenness and drug addiction a sin against his or her own body, let alone suicide?”⁷⁷ From the foregoing analysis, it is evident that Paul neither addresses nor explicitly condemns suicide in this passage. Nevertheless, he does directly challenge the notion that believers in Christ possess unrestricted freedom over their physical bodies. In this sense, and as Thiselton suggests, suicide can rightly be understood as a violent act against one’s own person. Thus, while Wright’s exegetical support is flawed, his broader conclusion—that suicide stands in opposition to God’s will and purpose for human life—remains persuasive.

Conclusions

What stance do the NT writers take on the act of suicide?

Corresponding with the OT, the NT writers do not condemn nor advocate suicide. Regarding the former, neither Jesus nor any NT writer condemns suicide and/or categorizes it as a sin. There is no instruction or exhortation condemning suicide and/or casting it as a sin. When the sixth commandment is quoted within the NT (Matt

⁷⁶ Although Fee interprets 1 Cor 6:18b in an exceptive sense (see footnote 69) and not as a slogan, he still concludes that Paul’s “concern is not with what affects and does not affect the body per se, but with the special character of sexual immortality and how that sin is directed especially against the body as ‘for the Lord’” (*Corinthians*, 262).

⁷⁷ Thiselton, *Corinthians*, 470. Quite confusingly, Thiselton initially identifies 1 Cor 6:18b as a slogan (*Corinthians*, 459) and acknowledges that adding the term *other* “remains an interpretive gloss” (*Corinthians*, 470). Yet, he translates v 18b as “Every other sin which a person may commit is done outside the body” and apparently does not view the slogan interpretation for this clause as the best solution (*Corinthians*, 470-74). Yet, Thiselton’s question here suggests that he does not consider the clause excluding other sins or acts negatively effecting the body and thus it would function as a slogan.

19:18; Rom 13:9), it does not explicitly or implicitly include suicide. The NT writers likewise never advocate for, endorse, and/or permit suicide. The only instance of suicide in the NT is that of Judas, but he is solely condemned for his betrayal of Jesus Christ, not for taking his own life.

Concerning advocacy, Jesus does not commit suicide, nor does he command or endorse such an act. Rather, his end is that of a martyr whose death provides an example for how to live sacrificially or embrace martyrdom. The NT writers never prescribe, instruct, or direct any converts of Christ to reenact Jesus's death to acquire eternal salvation. In contrast to the OT, death and the afterlife are realities everyone must concern themselves with, as all of humanity will face the judgment seat of God/Christ (Rom 14:10, 12; 2 Cor 5:10). But the way to escape death is solely provided by the death, resurrection, and exaltation of Christ!

As for Paul, he does not entertain suicide like Job does, nor does he advocate for taking one's life as a justifiable way to gain Christ and become immortal. In correlation with Yahweh's response to those desiring death, Paul chooses to continue to serve the messianic community despite, and in the apostle's case, because of any hardships he may endure. In contrast to Moses, Elijah, and others, Jesus does not ask the Father to die; rather, Christ beseeches the Father that he might not die by means of the cross. Yet, Christ voluntarily embraces the agony and shame of crucifixion to provide salvation for the world. In the cases of the other biblical figures who ask God to take their lives, and likewise in Paul's case, each faithfully continues in God's calling despite the suffering and hardships they experience.

How can it be that the God of Scripture is not pleased with, and even opposes suicide, and simultaneously does not consider it a sin?

First, and in correlation with the witness of Scripture that human beings are created in the image of God, converts to Christ house the very

presence of God. The person of the Holy Spirit dwells in believers, both collectively as the messianic community as well as in their individual bodies. Followers of Christ are not their own, they belong to God! Consequently, a believer is not free to do with one's body as she/he pleases. To commit suicide is take one's own life into her/his own hands and thereby deny that she/he owes her/his very existence to God.

Second, as displayed throughout Scripture, God clearly knows and considers the sinfulness of humanity as well as its fragility and limitations. Because of this the OT presents God making concessions, which I illustrated with marriage and divorce. The diversity on this theme presents an ideal/reality tension: God hates divorce, but he institutes a law of divorce; God hates divorce, but it is not a sin. In his discussion on divorce, Jesus does not claim that Gen 2:24 is more authoritative than Deut 24:1, 3; rather he maintains this ideal/reality tension. As God makes compromises in the OT, Jesus confirms the reality of human sin and its limitations and thus the inevitability of divorce. Regarding suicide, I think a parallel can be drawn from this ideal/reality paradigm. Nowhere in Scripture is suicide condemned, but clearly taking one's own life violates the gift of life provided by the Holy Spirit (e.g., John 3:6; 7:37-39) whom she/he now houses as his temple. Thus, I suggest God opposes suicide, but he considers the fragility and limitations of humanity; God opposes and perhaps even hates suicide, but it is not an unforgivable sin.

How does Scripture envision the faithful navigation of suffering and in particular suicidal ideation?

Jesus Christ and Paul provide two examples of life lived in sacrificial devotion to God. Neither committed suicide nor do they endorse the act for any reason. Jesus Christ's death functions as an example of how one entrusts her/himself unto God in the face of opposition and the threat of death. Along the lines of the OT examples, Paul transparently expresses the appeal of death and to be with Christ. Paul,

though, does not desire to die to escape hardship, nor does he advocate for suicide as a means to achieve such release. Rather, Paul decides that his apostolic mission offsets his own desire to be home with the Lord.

Jesus also provides for us how to honestly verbalize our sufferings and protests to God for his absence and for not answering our prayers. Psalm 22 particularly displays “a mature spirituality” and encourages people to own their experience of suffering “and not to hide from it. It thus questions the common Christian way of encouraging people to cope with suffering by reassuring them that God is present with them in their suffering. God was not present with this supplicant and does not expect us to pretend that this is so when it is not.”⁷⁸ Thus, following the lead of Jesus, we too can assume the identity of the ambiguous “I/me/my” in the Protest/Complaint psalms to express honestly, forthrightly, and without fear or shame to God our frustrations, fears, pain, anxiety, loneliness, desperation, misery, sorrow, sadness, hopes, desires, trust etc.⁷⁹ Specifically with Psalm 22,⁸⁰ we too can utter the question “My God my God why have you forsaken me!” (v 2a [Eng v 1a]) in protest to his inexplicable absence and not acting accordingly as “my God” (22:2b-3, 12, 20-22 [Eng vv 1b-2, 11, 19-21]). Also, to express our suffering and sense of utter isolation and that the end appears near (vv 13-19 [Eng vv 12-18]). Further, to challenge God to act and provide the necessary inter-

⁷⁸ Goldingay, *Psalms 1-41*, 340, 341.

⁷⁹ On the hermeneutic of self-involvement of the ancient and contemporary reader see e.g., Jim W. Adams, *The Performative Nature and Function of Isaiah 40-55*, LHBOTS 448 (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 18-63; Richard S. Briggs, *Words in Action* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 2001).

⁸⁰ Although Jesus verbalizes the opening line of Ps 22 and the Gospel writers offer numerous allusions to this psalm (see e.g., Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* [Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016], 78, 83-85, 161-62, 326), it is not a messianic prophecy.

vention (vv 20-22 [Eng vv 19-21]) along with offering him praise in anticipation of his response (vv 23-32 [Eng vv 22-31]).⁸¹

Final Reflections

The biblical writers do not attempt to define or categorize the act of taking one's own life in an ethical sense. Also, the narrated instances of suicide are confined to a select few within Scripture. In their depictions, the biblical writers do not focus on the act of suicide, but rather on how the individual victims illustrate and/or relate to what God was doing among the people of God at various points. From my analysis, the narrators within Scripture depict an intentionality as each individual decides on his own to purposefully take his life by his own hand or by another's while there is no religious or political threat to denounce one's beliefs nor are any of the deaths accomplished in devotion to God. As such, these descriptions correspond with how I define suicide: *The voluntarily and intentional killing of oneself by whatever means and in whatever circumstance, without any religious and/or political compulsion or threat.*

Within Scripture, there is no law or teaching that prohibits or condemns suicide and/or categorizes the act as a sin. Suicide is not in view with the sixth commandment in either version of the Decalogue, nor when the command is quoted and/or referred to in the NT. In the seven suicide episodes, the narrators never explicitly or implicitly condemn suicide or classify the act as a sin, and nor do they apply the sixth commandment as an instance of violating the prohibition. Further, the biblical writers never explicitly indicate that God condemns suicide or considers it a sinful act; nor does God condone or endorse suicide as I have discussed with the law of divorce (Deut 24:1, 3). Thus, and as I stated several times, the biblical writers leave us with

⁸¹ For their original and contemporary function of these types of psalms see e.g., Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 51-121; John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology Volume Three: Israel's Life* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009), 209-53; *idem*, *Psalms 1-41*, 58-69.

a tension: suicide is never explicitly condemned or categorized as a sin, nor is it endorsed, advocated, or permitted as a viable way to escape the sufferings of this life. At the same time, the trajectory of particular biblical texts point to the conclusion that God is not pleased with a person taking her/his life, and that God in fact opposes such an act. What is clear and most egregious to the biblical writers and God, though, is when a person violently takes the life of another innocent human being.

It is important to highlight that each of the episodic suicide depictions occurs in contexts of warfare and violence. No other person within Scripture is described in such suicidal terms. Thus, at least within the biblical text, suicide does not appear as a typical and/or common practice to escape life's inherent hardships. Still, the scarcity of the suicidal depictions does not necessarily correlate to the prevalence of suicide.⁸² Rather, the biblical writers focus on how the individual victims illustrate and/or relate to what God was doing among his people throughout history instead of the suicidal act itself. Additionally, each of the seven instances of suicide occur in extreme and volatile circumstances in which men take matters into their own hands and do not involve God in any way. Further, none of these individuals are depicted as expressing any genuine devotion to God, except perhaps for Saul in selective instances, Ahithophel, and Judas with his final expression of contrition. These instances stand in contrast to the individuals who request that Yahweh take their life, each of whom (apart from Samson) are devoted to God to one degree or another. Yahweh consistently rejects such requests, and these individuals do not take their own life, except Jonah for some interpreters. Only Job contemplates suicide, but just for a moment. God, though, never rebukes or condemns any death request or contemplation

⁸² Philip A. Johnston claims that within the OT the "small number of reported suicides in contexts of strife, and their complete absence in other circumstances, suggests . . . that suicide was abnormal" (*Shades of Sheol* [Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2002], 38).

thereof, but rather directs each individual to continue in their service to him. Considering all this, the possibility of taking one's life is clearly on the radar of the biblical writers, leaving them every opportunity to categorize suicide as a sin or to endorse the act. But for whatever reason these writers remain silent on the morality of suicide.

Due to this silence, most recently Verhey asserts that Scripture overarchingly prohibits suicide that corresponds to the stance taken throughout Church history whereas Droge and Tabor find no such prohibition or condemnation but in fact see the Bible depicting voluntary deaths and suicides as noble acts. Against this latter position, taking one's own life for whatever reason is never lauded, endorsed, or advocated anywhere in either Testament. Yahweh's involvement in Samson's death does not validate suicide. Neither does it convey that Yahweh himself approves of suicide, or that Yahweh will assist in an individual's choice to kill her/himself. In connection to this, I see both Gen 9:6 and Paul's temple descriptions as strongly suggesting that, as the image and temple of God, our lives belong to the Giver of life. The "blood for blood" principle as described in the Genesis narrative may apply here, in so far as one must account for taking another person's life. So likewise, those who decide to commit suicide are accountable to God.⁸³ This is equally true for converts of Christ who constitute the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Taking Gen 9:6 and Paul's temple imagery together, because each human being is created in the image and likeness of God, each person's life is of supreme value and has life-giving purpose. Human life is a gift from God and thus our life belongs to God. To end our own life is a rejection of God's gift as well as God himself, the giver

⁸³ Fred Rosner observes how Rabbi Eleazer interpreted the phrase "'And surely your own blood of your souls will I require' (Genesis 9:5)" in the Tractate *Baba Kamma* 91b to mean "that I will require your blood if shed by the hands or yourselves (i.e., suicide)." Rosner goes on to say that "Rashi interprets this scriptural verse to mean that even though one strangles oneself so that no blood flows, still I will require it" ("Suicide in Biblical, Talmudic and Rabbinic Writings," *Tradition: JOT* 11 [1970]: 33).

of life. As Christ followers we house the very presence of God, the person of the Holy Spirit in our bodies and “you are not your own.” We belong to God! We are not free to do with our bodies as we please. As Paul identifies himself, each one of us who is called “is a *slave* of Christ” (7:22b). Why? Because we were bought with the price of Christ’s death (see also v 23). “Therefore, glorify God in your bodies!” To commit suicide is take our lives into our own hands and thereby deny that we owe our very existence to God.

Jesus Christ and Paul provide two examples of life lived in sacrificial devotion to God. Neither committed suicide, nor do they endorse the act for any reason. Jesus and Paul exhibit the opposite of selfishness and thus stand in contrast to all those who committed suicide in Scripture. Speaking in generalities, when a person commits suicide, she/he is not necessarily considering the severe impact such an act will have upon loved ones as well as on those in their community—some of whom may also look to her/him as an example of a disciple. Jesus Christ and Paul provide examples as well as inspiration for us to look beyond ourselves; they model how to endure suffering in service to Christ and his people.

Jesus does voluntarily die, but not in a suicidal sense as I define the act. Nor does Jesus or any NT writer exhort converts to literally reenact the death of Christ to thereby secure their salvation as Droge and Tabor argue. That said, Jesus does call his disciples to “take up one’s cross,” “lose one’s life,” and “lay down one’s life” to illustratively challenge how converts are to sacrificially *live* their earthly life unto Jesus Christ and on behalf of others. For Christians throughout church history, though, these same sayings exhorted them to resist external pressures to compromise their faith. Thus, to persevere against the temptation of apostasy and/or because of persecution, Christ-followers would have understood the death of Christ as one to be imitated in their own death, but again not in a salvific sense.

So again, in answer to my first guiding question suicide is never explicitly condemned or categorized as a sin, nor is it endorsed or advocated as a viable way to escape the sufferings of this life. Thus,

on the one hand, I cannot agree with Augustine and others throughout church history that suicide is an unforgiveable sin definitively separating a convert of Christ from God and his eternal kingdom. At the same time, the biblical writers do not condone and/or endorse suicide. On the other hand, then, I disagree with Droge and Tabor that voluntary death in the sense of suicide is a noble death. Herein lies the tension that suicide is not explicitly condemned or advocated within Scripture. Yet, the fact that God rejects any death requests, the status of human beings as created in the image of God, along with Paul's temple of God imagery point me to conclude that God is not pleased with and even opposes suicide. Therefore, I concur specifically with Verhey that suicide is not a viable or justifiable option for anyone, in any circumstance, and by any means; however, my conclusion here are inferred from the facts that human beings are created in the image of God and believers constitute the temple of the Holy Spirit. I also agree with Wright that suicide is against God's will and purpose for any individual, but my conclusions are not based on the sixth commandment nor how Wright interprets Paul's temple descriptions.

With all this and in answer to my second guiding question, I draw a parallel with the ideal/reality concerning divorce. Nowhere in Scripture is suicide condemned, but clearly taking one's own life violates the gift of life provided by Holy Spirit (e.g., John 3:6; 7:37-39) whom she/he now houses as his temple. Thus, God opposes suicide, but he considers the fragility and limitations of humanity; God opposes and perhaps even hates suicide, but it is not an unforgivable sin.

Where does this leave us? For me, we should vigorously reject and counsel against any person contemplating suicide, while at the same time we should compassionately recognize how life on this earth includes all types of sufferings, which can lead anyone of us to either consider and/or commit suicide. *How fragile we are, how fragile we are* (Sting, "Fragile"). We should also encourage those suffering in any capacity to turn to God, just as modeled by those who requested death. We should also draw on the resources provided to us in

Scripture by spending time in and following the lead of the numerous Protest/Complaint psalms. Further, as the temple(s) of the Holy Spirit we should direct individuals to request for supernatural empowerment from the Triune God. Specifically for the Spirit to empower us with the ability to endure, and even thrive as Paul, suffering of various kinds as well as to live sacrificially unto God and others. If a person does tragically take her/his own life, this should lead us all to deeply grieve over the victim as well as suffer alongside those closest to their loved ones. But our response should never include condemnation, accusation, and/or hopelessness. Rather we should choose to celebrate the totality of her/his life (one act does not define the whole of our life before God) while eagerly anticipating our reunion with her/him in God's eternal kingdom.

Garland's Civil War as a Cautionary Tale: How Class and Economics Bred America's Historic Divide and Why It Matters for Pentecostals Today

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ABSTRACT:

This article uses Alex Garland's *Civil War* as a contemporary lens to introduce America's recurring tendency toward "us versus them" identity formation. It then turns to the historical American Civil War, examining how divergent economic systems and class structures between the North and South contributed to the development of competing national identities. Through this economic lens, the article argues that material conditions played a significant role in shaping the cultural divide between Yankee and Dixie. These divisions demonstrate how economic structures can reinforce polarization and produce opposing visions of belonging and identity. Finally, the article offers a Pentecostal theological reflection, urging critical engagement with economic systems to resist division and pursue unity grounded in Christian identity.

In Alex Garland's recent film *Civil War*, the question "what kind of American are you?" is posed as an in-group/out-group identifier, and "Wrong" answers are met with violence. In this paper, I consider how these types of us vs. them framings have been historically present, and present within contemporary society.

The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, Alex Garland's film *Civil War* will be explored, noting the underlying cause of the civil war in his film and its relevance presently. Second, a class survey of the historic civil war will highlight how economics was a significant factor in creating a divided America in late Antebellum. Third, combining findings from Garland's *Civil War*, and the His-

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toric Civil War, the paper will make a brief Pentecostal consideration to the matter.

I want to establish some critical constraints before continuing. First, while I consider some economic influences in the years preceding the American Civil War, I do not hold economics to be the only source or cause of that conflict. I think there is much to be gleaned from the influence of race, culture, religion, and other factors. I am focusing here specifically on certain economic factors that might help in evaluating the tensions within the Historic Civil War, within Garland's film, and perhaps insight to the tension present in America today. Furthermore, I also want to make clear that while I am currently speaking about economics, I do believe that the American Civil War was fundamentally waged over the issue of slavery. Further, I understand economics as well is not a factor by itself, rather economics intersects with the other factors mentioned as well. However, the aim of this paper is to focus on a specific lens, and in hope, find something within this scope.

Summary of Garland's *Civil War*

Civil War is an anti-war film, and explores a civil-war torn America, following a group of war photojournalist, and how they document the end of the conflict. Garland is intentionally vague on what leads to the Civil War, as he produces films which facilitate a conversation, not trying to highlight one side or another, rather a dialogue between polarizing ideals. In light of this conversation, Garland is concerned to show how polarization is the cause of this civil war, and the evils of how fast the other side might become silent from polarization.² The inciting incident however within the film was the election of a third term president, an authoritarian figure compared to Mussolini and Kaddafi within the film. Garland does not provide a roadmap on how his America got to the point of electing a president for a third term,

² Ellen Jones, "Civil War Film-Maker Alex Garland: 'In the US and UK There's a Lot to Be Very Concerned About,'" *The Guardian*, March 30, 2024.

rather the purpose of his film is to explore how the question “what kind of American are you,” can become so polarizing and disintegrates society.

There is no North or South, rather the sides for the conflict are the Loyalist States (aligned with the third termed president), and the Secessionist, which is comprised by the Western Forces, New People’s Army, and the Florida Alliance. These three Secessionist groups have differing ideals, yet they are still united against the Loyalist as the greater evil. It is hinted quite heavily that the three Secessionists will most likely have conflict amongst themselves when the war ends, since their ideals contain stark differences. Thus, the context one finds in Garland’s film showcases multiple popular movements promoting their ‘ideal’ America. There is little dialogue that shows the ideals of each side, but visually, one can gleam insight into the Loyalist and Secessionist ideologies from their troop composition. The Loyalist soldiers are mainly white males, while the secessionists are a combination of male and female, and a mixture of ethnicities, especially in command positions. The Loyalists are always seen in proper attire, and collectively more physically fit overall in comparison. The Secessionist are typically in an assortment of different camouflage uniforms and civilian wear, in contrast to a standardized uniform for the Loyalist. Visually, by the composition of the two armies, differences can be outlined. Loyalists seem to be more white-male dominant, while the secessionist are more diverse in terms of gender and ethnicity.³ However, given the three secessionist factions having differing ideologies, there is probably a fragmented spectrum between the Secessionist, rather than a uniformed ideal. However coy Garland might be in guiding the conversation around his film, the famous scene with the Red-Glasses character directly thrusts the question, “What kind of American are you?” into the conversation with the audience.

³ Alex Garland, *Civil War*, directed by Alex Garland (New York: A24, 2024), film.

Jesse Plemons plays the infamous militiaman with red glasses, coined Red-Glasses guy. The scene starts with Joel, one of the main characters, having a tense interaction with Plemons' character. Joel is attempting to find common ground between him and Red-Glasses, to hopefully negotiate the release of two hostages (Joel's colleagues) being held by the militiamen. Joel makes a few attempts to find common ground, but finds no success, resulting in his Asian colleague, Bohai, getting shot and killed by Red-Glasses. In a final attempt to find commonality, Joel appeals to Red-Glasses, stating they are both Americans, and ultimately are on the same side. Red-Glasses responds back, "What kind of American are you?"⁴ Garland's question is delivered perfectly, given the context of two people negotiating in a tense scene of a hostage exchange, one of the hostages has been killed already, and this whole interaction is happening right next to a mass grave filled with people presumably shot by the militiamen. Red-Glasses eases the tension when he finds out Joel is from Central Florida. Plemons' character precedes to ask the two white women in the group, Jesse and Lee, where they are from. Jesse announces she is from Missouri. Red-Glasses seems joyed by her answer, and asked if Jesse knew why it was called the Show-Me state, which she did not.⁵

"Show-Me" is a reference to the type of characteristics of Missourians, where they are considered "stalwart, conservative, non-credulous character[s]", and those who would rather be shown evidence of conduct and intentions, rather than lavish words and rhetoric.⁶ This subtle dialogue might be Garland's intention of presenting what the ideology of the militiamen was. Red-Glasses proceeds to ask Lee where she is from, and states Colorado. Plemons' character is elated and expresses that Missouri and Colorado are both

⁴ Alex Garland, *Civil War*, directed by Alex Garland (New York: A24, 2024), film.

⁵ *Civil War*, directed by Garland.

⁶ Phyllis Rossiter, "I'm from Missouri—You'll Have to Show Me," *Rural Missouri* 42, no. 3 (March 1989): 16

undoubtedly American. To reinforce his point and twisted mission, he approaches the other colleague, an Asian immigrant named Tony. Tony is asked where he is from, and states from Hong Kong, which Plemons' character immediately shoots and kills Tony after finding out he was an immigrant. The scene ends with Sammy, an elderly man, running over most of the militiamen with an SUV, and escaping with who was left alive.⁷

As iconic as these seven minutes are, they speak of the dark reality people are willing to go to in a deeply polarized state, and how a question of categorization can turn deadly.

Economics of the American Civil War

By 1861, the categories which defined Americans were North and South, Union and Confederate, and Yankee and Dixie. While Garland's *Civil War* does not explain the mechanisms that led to such extreme polarization, the American Civil War provides some answers, with economics playing a crucial role in that polarization.

E.B. Thompson defines class as a relationship that is developed, rather than a structure.⁸ However, as Northern and Southern economies developed along divergent paths, their class structures evolved in parallel with these divergent systems. From these class structures, class as a relationship developed *within* the class structures of the North and South, and as well, *between* the class structures of the North and South. Over time, two American subcultures would emerge, Yankee and Dixie. However, the two were not compatible in nature, and rather developed ideals which were in opposition toward one another.⁹ Ultimately, this led both Yankee and Dixie to answer

⁷ Alex Garland, *Civil War*, directed by Alex Garland (New York: A24, 2024), film.

⁸ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 205-207.

⁹ William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 95-98, 225-230.

Garland's question, "What kind of American are you?" in different ways, and each with a definition they were willing to die for.

By the war's start in 1861, the Union's economic power was significantly superior to the Confederacy's economy. For instance, for every 100 firearms the Confederacy could produce, the Union could produce about 3,200. Likewise, the Union could produce 30 times more leather goods, 20 times more pig iron, and even 17 times more cotton and textile.¹⁰ Regarding population, the Union also had the advantage. Investments in technology and labor-saving machinery allowed Northern agriculture to flourish, outproducing even large Southern plantations.¹¹ Likewise, the Union had more access to manpower, due to their large, sustained population and allowance for "diversity" in their ranks (in comparison to the Confederates) with foreign born immigrants and minority groups. With a free-market approach, larger population, and ability for more social mobility in comparison to the Confederacy, the Union in contrast was an extremely different America than the Confederate states, and culturally speaking, different as well. When comparing the Yankee and Dixie, the Yankee kept White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) ethics and allowed their values to be shaped by the free-market. Yankee's focus was on a culture of growth, modernist ideas and science, innovation, and efficiency as a good.¹² In contrast, the Dixie's culture was controlled and developed by the Planter, where key free-market principles were rejected for traditional principles and ethics, especially in keeping to the status quo. Further, the Dixie valued colonial ethics and power structures and had a resentment toward the incessant

¹⁰ Benjamin T. Arrington, "Industry and Economy during the Civil War," *National Parks Service*, U.S. Department of the Interior, 2017.

¹¹ Elizabeth A. Laughlin, "The Rise in American Industrial and Financial Corporations," *Gettysburg Economic Review* 6 (2012): 42–57.

¹² Joel Mokyr, *The Culture of Growth: The Origins of the Modern Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

nature of industrial progress their Northern kin advocated.¹³ However, these stark cultural differences were developed by the North's industrialization and the lack thereof of the South's industrialization.

During Antebellum, the Northern states followed a similar path of industrialization like the European continent.¹⁴ Over time, the class structures in the Northern states shifted from agrarian elites to industrial titans, transforming the economy to focus on urban centers, manufacturing, and constant efforts to increase output.¹⁵ Additionally, this emphasis on efficiency enabled the Northern states to surpass the South in agricultural production, outproducing Southern plantations and farms. By the 1850s, a collection of smaller Northern farms could outproduce larger established plantations of the South.¹⁶ This shifted the economic and political power away from the Southern planters to the North. Moreover, a natural effect of this agricultural boom resulted in larger Northern populations, as well as a dwindling dependency on Southern agriculture. This hurt the Southern market drastically.

As the Northern economy industrialized and modernized, its traditional class structure evolved into one more aligned with industrialized societies. Primarily, the Northern class structure was unskilled labor, skilled labor, and capitalist. Skilled labor was mostly White Anglo-Saxon Protestant males, while unskilled labor was almost anyone who was not a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant male.¹⁷

¹³ Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South*, 180-182.

¹⁴ Cain, Louis P. *American Economic History*. 6th ed. New York: Pearson Education, 2001, 215, 234.

¹⁵ Melvyn Dubofsky and Joseph A. McCartin, *Labor in America: A History* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2017).

¹⁶ Elizabeth A. Laughlin, "The Rise in American Industrial and Financial Corporations," *Gettysburg Economic Review* 6 (2012): 42-57.

¹⁷ Mark A. Lause, *Free Labor: The Civil War and the Making of an American Working Class* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

This skilled labor class participated heavily in the market-place, formed unions, and gained significant political power in the age of Jackson Democracy.¹⁸ These unions formed in response to being overworked and exploited by capitalists, a common outcome of industrialization and the “iron cage” of rationalization it creates.¹⁹ Capitalists were people who controlled the means of production, or who amassed considerable wealth through industry, business, trade, or other free-market activities. These capitalists had significant power and influence due to their finances.²⁰ As the North developed, it became increasingly dependent on skilled labor as a key economic feature. This labor force played a critical role in the region’s industrialization, unionization efforts, and active participation in the expanding market economy. These skilled workers often earned higher wages and possessing more stable employment and were more likely to pay taxes consistently. As the population and financial power of skilled laborers grew, their tax contributions significantly bolstered the federal budget, helping to fund further national development and infrastructure.²¹

The skilled labor unions were not effective in the 1850s, but starting in the 1860s, they were increasingly successful. Dubofsky and McCartin state these unions saw their movements as a good, where “inasmuch wealth of the masses improves the value of real estate, increase the demand for goods, [and] promotes the moral wealth and intellectual growth of society.”²² Likewise, these unions were

¹⁸ Manisha Sinha, “Afterword: The History and Legacy of Jacksonian Democracy,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 39, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 145–48.

¹⁹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Routledge, 2002), 184–186.

²⁰ Melvyn Dubofsky and Joseph A. McCartin, *Labor in America: A History* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 24–28.

²¹ Paul Moreno, “Unions and Discrimination,” *The Cato Journal: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Public Policy Analysis* 30, no. 1 (2010): 67–85.

²² Melvyn Dubofsky and Joseph A. McCartin, *Labor in America: A History* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 68.

focused on preserving national unity, and were quite vocal on petitioning politicians for compromise or resolution with Southern statesmen.²³ Capitalists did not do great in quelling the self-righteousness of the unions, as the cost of living rose by 76 percent during the Civil War, while wages only grew 50 percent. Likewise, capitalists were able to buy out of conscription, dodge taxes, and in turn, the burden for manpower and financial support for the Civil War fell on the unskilled and skilled labor classes. This class strife became major fuel for union support, and as the war progressed, these unions gained significant power.²⁴ This newfound power would become a key factor in elevating their political and economic influence during the Reconstruction and Gilded Age. Unions and Labor classes within the Northern economic system played a crucial role in its stability, as class tensions between skilled labor and capitalist acted as a corrective mechanism, creating checks and balances between the two. However, political power was more “evenly” distributed between capitalists and skilled labor, unskilled labor did not share in this political influence or distribution.

In comparison to the North’s class structure and economy, the Southern states had a unique existence in a modern, industrial Western world. The South had an agrarian and slave-based colonial economy, which attempted to ineffectively graft modern economics and industrial complexes into an antiquated system. If the North was an elated explorer discovering a new dawn in the modern free-market, the South was a crazed scientist trying to alchemize slavery and the modern free-market into gold. However, instead of gold, the South created a concoction as compatible as oil and water.

The Southern class structure consisted of planters, industrialists, poor whites, and the subaltern (freed slaves and slaves). The

²³ Mark A. Lause, *Free Labor: The Civil War and the Making of an American Working Class* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

²⁴ Melvyn Dubofsky and Joseph A. McCartin, *Labor in America: A History* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 77-82.

structure is hierarchical in nature, with most of the power resting with the planters, minimal influence with the industrialist, a negligible amount of influence with poor whites, and next to no influence for the subaltern. Most of the Southern economy revolved around the plantation, and the market demands of the planters.²⁵

Slaves labored for the planter class and worked in agrarian production on the plantations. The planters had implored themselves with expanding their production not with industrial machinery, but through sheer number of laborers and slaves.²⁶ This resulted in major inefficiencies in production, since planters shied away from investing in labor-saving technology, and cut costs upkeeping slave labor. In turn, this caused many of the slaves to not produce efficiently, consequently creating deficiency in output.²⁷ Genovese highlights that many planters complained of how slaves would not maintain the plantation's equipment, however slaves were never trained properly, as planters feared training would motivate the slaves' desire for freedom. As a result, planters resisted investing in quality equipment, believing it would not be used properly. However, this created a cycle of inefficiency and siphoned any need for high quality goods and tools from the Southern market. Any sort of skilled labor job (tailor, blacksmiths, carpenters, etc.) would be outsourced off the plantation, and at times, outsourced to Northern skilled laborers. As Genovese states, there were many purchase orders made by planters for simple repairs, fixes, and tools. This made plantations the main hubs for skilled labor services, which planters exploited to control the mar-

²⁵ Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 150–157.

²⁶ Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South*, 43–49.

²⁷ Michael Honey, "Anti-Racism, Black Workers, and Southern Labor Organizing: Historical Notes on a Continuing Struggle," *Labor Studies Journal* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 10.

ket.²⁸ Plantations, the economic hubs of the Southern economy, gave planters tremendous influence over their society and classes within. Thus, the planters' agricultural and economic myopia was to their benefit, by preserving their power, however to the detriment of everyone else.

To the Planters, this Plantation based economy had worked since colonial times and was effective in maintaining the power of planter aristocracy. Here, the divergence between Northern and Southern economies is apparent, one industrializing, and the other keeping to their traditional colonial, agrarian roots. However as Southern fervor for secession rose in the 1850s, so did their awareness of their economic dependence on the North.²⁹ Planters recognized that industrialization would weaken their influence, ultimately causing them to lose their dominance to industrialists, as had happened in the North. Despite this, they viewed sharing power with industrialists as the lesser evil, where a greater evil would be an economy depended on Union goods, finances, labor, and services.

For the industrialists of the South, there were two political ideologies within the class. First, anti-slavery industrialist aimed to eliminate slavery, because of the economic and technological stagnation this system brought.³⁰ Anti-slavery industrialists realized the irrational logic of slavery with a free-market, since a large portion of the market is unable to participate in it.³¹ With the slave population

²⁸ Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 85-87, 156.

²⁹Joan Thompson, "The Emperor Has No Clothes: How Hubris, Economics, Bad Timing, and Slavery Sank King Cotton Diplomacy with England," Ohio State University, 2016, 5-6.

³⁰ Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 85-87, 180-182.

³¹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Routledge, 2002), 190-194.

being roughly 30 percent of the total population of the Southern states, this meant 30 percent of the market could not participate.³² Anti-slave industrialists believed that freeing slaves and allowing them to participate in the free-market would be the best path for industrialization. Similarly, these anti-slavery industrialists also wanted to bring slave labor into factories and provide training for said labor. The elevation of slaves and the provision for training made the proposal of the anti-slavery industrialist unpopular with planters, as planters still relied on slave labor, and still held that training slaves would have them desire more freedoms and elevation.³³

Pro-slavery industrialization was the other path of industrialization. Pro-slavery industrialist held to the planters' social order, and instead of transforming it and elevating slaves, they decided to use poor whites as their labor force. This proposal was accepted by many planters, as it kept the standing order. Likewise, planters and pro-slavery industrialist believed this path of industrialization would benefit their fellow white man, thus in their perspective, the better ethical choice of industrialization. However, come war's start in 1861, their labor force of poor whites had joined or been conscripted as soldiers, leaving little to participate in the industrial labor pool, and killing any plan on industrializing at mass scale.³⁴ Jefferson Davis would take the dream however and reinterpret it. Davis envisioned a Slave Empire, spanning from sea to shining sea.³⁵ In the spirit of Southern Manifest Destiny, Davis wanted to expand into the American West, and use slave labor to extract gold, silver, copper, and other

³² Scott Lash and Sam Whimster, *Max Weber, Rationality and Modernity* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987).

³³ Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 85-87, 180-184.

³⁴ Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South*, 184-190.

³⁵ Kevin Waite, "Jefferson Davis and Proslavery Visions of Empire in the Far West," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 6, no. 4 (2016): 536-65

minerals. Additional materials with his Cotton Diplomacy in theory would help stave Northern market dominance, and as well, more materials to trade with Asian and European markets would be economically beneficial.³⁶ Fortunately, this dream never came to fruition.

In summary, the Southern economy and class structure had three distinct features compared to the Northern economy: an economic development in contrast to the development of North and Western European economies, an aristocratic colonial economy controlled by planters rather than industrial capitalists, and a rejection of efficiency and output as inherent goals, rather in favor of preserving the traditional Southern social order.

Comparing the Northern and Southern economies and class structure, it is hard to envision a united America. The Northern economy was an economic powerhouse, producing base materials and goods. However, the South kept its colonial era economics and wanted to preserve planter dominance. These two economies developed classes and cultures within their respective systems. The Northern economy developed unskilled labor, skilled labor, and capitalist classes, following a typical class structure within a modern industrial country. Within the Southern economy, the want to preserve a colonial, slave-agrarian economy kept planters as the dominant power. They were able to control both goods and services, as well as the unskilled and skilled labor markets. Consequently, planters controlled the opportunities for social mobility for most groups, even the industrialists of the South.

These two divergent economies developed two distinct class structures, which in turn developed distinct cultural identities, Yankee and Dixie. As discussed previously, these two cultures developed different ethics and values which formed from their economic systems and class structures. What I hope is apparent is how the divergence of

³⁶ Joan Thompson, "The Emperor Has No Clothes: How Hubris, Economics, Bad Timing, and Slavery Sank King Cotton Diplomacy with England," Ohio State University, 2016.

economic systems, and the resulting class structures which formed afterwards, were significant in shaping polarized cultural identities in the 1850s and 1860s. Here, cultures are the result of a cause, not the causes themselves. The cause of these cultural ends is the divergence of economic systems and the resulting formation of class structures within those differing economic systems. As a result, economics becomes a major factor in Garland's question of "What kind of American are you?". Rather than a citizenry having a unified understanding of what their citizenship is composed of, economics splinters this composition into values which are polarized. This leads citizens to form their own values and realign their sense of belonging and group identity to those who share their polarized ideals, rather than to the whole of a national identity. One of the ends to this polarization is civil war.

Pentecostal Considerations

As Pentecostals, we must consider how we engage with the question, "What kind of American are you?" and critically reflect on our engagement with economics and culture.

To the question, it would be disingenuous to say "neither." Culture has played a part in our formation, but it would be a mistake to make our identity fundamentally about a cultural narrative. Rather, as cultural beings, our identity in Christ should be our primary identification, and through this identity, it should shape our cultural existence and practices. However, what are some practical considerations for economic and cultural engagement? I would like to offer four.

First, we should reflect on the vision of America and the cultural narratives that have shaped us, then acknowledge that, as Americans, we are committed to repenting of those influences in order to live with greater faithfulness to Jesus. Second, as the church, we should pursue unity, motivated by love and reconciliation. In his recent book, *The Problem and Promise of Freedom*, Steven Felix-

Jager writes, “The state is a political kingdom, and the church is a holistic kingdom. While the state is motivated by justice and correction, the church is motivated by love and reconciliation.”³⁷ This motivation of love and reconciliation should produce unity, not division amongst the church, and benefit the church’s local contexts. Pentecostals should pursue unity almost as a sacrament, as St. Cyprian speaks of, where he believes unity preserves the health of the church and her witness.³⁸ A natural byproduct of this witness would allow a divided people to glean the wisdom of the church³⁹ and in turn, as Social Learning Theory notes, allow people to learn new behaviors, patterns of conduct, and social scripts.⁴⁰

Third, Pentecostals should self-assess their engagement and beliefs about the market because “the church’s uncritical adoption of free-market reasoning” leads to syncretic idolatry.⁴¹ There seems to be two forms of this syncretic idolatry: “(1) the church limits God’s governance to spiritual matters, allowing the market to govern all material aspects of Christian life, and (2) the church fully embraces market reasoning in its financial operations, allowing the market to distort biblical principles of stewardship.”⁴² Allowing earthly economics to govern the church will lead her down a path of division, where scarcity becomes an idol. Instead, Pentecostals should live from a theology of abundance and understand God’s provision within one’s

³⁷ Steven Félix-Jäger, *The Problem and Promise of Freedom* (Michigan: Baker Publishing, 2025), 90.

³⁸ St. Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Church*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo: Christian Literature Company, 1885; revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight), section 11-13.

³⁹ Ephesians 3:9-11, New International Version.

⁴⁰ Albert Bandura, *The Social Origins of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 2001).

⁴¹ Steven Félix-Jäger, *The Problem and Promise of Freedom* (Michigan: Baker Publishing, 2025), 52.

⁴² Ibid

life. Here, scarcity does not become the drive for making decisions, rather from abundance, Christ's generosity and kindness is exhibited, and becomes the more kingdom-minded matrix of decision making. Finally, Pentecostals' radical openness to God should encourage them to critically consider how to engage with economics, class distinctions, and social needs.⁴³ This critical self-reflection should inform one on how to engage with economics motivated by love, reconciliation, and sustainability, and not align themselves with patterns which divide, exploit, and dehumanize. As well, the church should not be a space where societal barriers and hierarchies shape one's interactions, rather Christ's love, wisdom, the outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh, and the doctrine of the *imago Dei* should shape Pentecostals' worldview and guide their interactions. As a result, this critical self-examination should affect the conduct of Pentecostals in the market and local context. The results of the examination should inform Pentecostals on how to engage with their contexts holistically, with compassion, and a fervor for the individual and the community.⁴⁴ In this way, Pentecostals engage with society with an eschatological significance, making the "not yet," closer to the "here."

⁴³ James K. A. Smith, *Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal Contributions to Christian Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010) 37-38.

⁴⁴ Miguel Alvarez, "Theological Foundation for Pentecostal Holistic Mission," *Pentecostal Education Journal* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2021): 115-118.

BOOK REVIEWS

Stanley Hauerwas. *Jesus Changes Everything: A New World Made Possible*. Edited by Charles E. Moore. Walden, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2025. 168 pages.

Reviewed by Gino Curcuruto, MA, DC

Jesus Changes Everything (JCE) is Stanley Hauerwas's forty-ninth book, and like the volumes that preceded it, this one focuses on Hauerwas's conviction that obedience to Jesus is expressed through embodied participation in the life of the church. In this volume, readers are given an accessible work by the renowned—and often controversial—theologian Stanley Hauerwas. While Hauerwas has authored dozens of books, hundreds of essays, and countless personal letters, the thrust of his work consistently emphasizes what it means to follow Jesus today. Yet to say that following Jesus is his “main emphasis” is to understate Hauerwas's theological vision. For Hauerwas, following Jesus entails living in a community that cultivates the virtues such that Christian existence becomes unintelligible apart from Jesus. It is this shared life as the church that constitutes our distinct witness to the world.

Although JCE does not feature Hauerwas's usual references to Alasdair MacIntyre and Ludwig Wittgenstein, the instincts shaped by those conversations remain fully intact. The final result is vintage Hauerwas, presented with striking clarity. The book opens with a tone-setting claim that frames the entire monograph: “The theologian's task is to make it difficult to be a Christian. It is also to make it equally difficult to be a non-Christian, that is, to present an account of Christianity that shows the difference that being a Christian makes and how that difference may intrigue and challenge those who are not Christian” (vii).

Across twenty-five chapters, arranged into six thematic movements, Hauerwas describes the difference that obedience to Jesus makes, rendering it both “more difficult to be a Christian” and equally challenging not to respond in faith. The structure matters because the content is not new but rather a carefully edited collection of Hauerwas’s essays, arranged to focus on discipleship and what it means to follow Jesus today.

The opening chapters frame discipleship as a summons to follow Jesus into a new society already present within the world. The kingdom is made known in a person—Jesus—and following that person is the center of our call. Therefore, following Jesus is not an abstract call to love but a lived response to being loved by God in Jesus and learning to do the same.

From this foundation, Hauerwas turns in the second group of chapters to the good news that in the kingdom made known in a person, the seemingly impossible way of the Sermon on the Mount is rendered possible. Following Jesus is a call into a new social order, not merely an improvement of the current one. This new social order subverts the world through peace, reconciliation, and forgiveness.

In the third part of the book, Hauerwas locates this new social order concretely within the life of the church. At Pentecost, God created a new society out of people from every language. We call this new social order the church. The church is a community of charity and truthfulness with radical implications for all our relationships.

The economic implications receive sustained attention in the fourth part of the book as Hauerwas addresses the problem of wealth in America, and specifically within the American church. He clearly calls us to the ways of Jesus, examining how our possessions often possess us. Hauerwas notes that the church has often been complicit in accommodating the economics of the world rather than those of the new social order revealed in Jesus.

A hallmark of Hauerwas’s theological vision—and the fifth movement of this book, though not unique to him—is that the way of

Jesus is fundamentally the way of peace. Obedience to Jesus is both costly and good. As Hauerwas reminds us:

To follow Jesus, to love Jesus, may mean that we and those we love cannot be spared death—a harsh and dreadful love, but a love disciplined by the love of the one who makes life itself possible. To be sure, if the Father is not the Father of Jesus, then to contemplate the death of those we love is immoral. But the Father is the Father of Jesus, and Jesus is the Son of the Father. And this Son never kills, but dies and rises again (100).

In the sixth section, Hauerwas insists that the church constitutes a political reality, both among and a part of the world. The church is a community of peace and truth, distinct from the world. As such, the first task of the church is to be this distinct community so that, in contrast to the violence and lies of the world, the world might come to see itself as the world. In this sense, the church exists as the church for the world, bearing witness to the kingdom as a displayed people who show what following Jesus is about and how it makes all the difference in this life and for eternity. As Hauerwas simply says, “The world needs the church, but not to help it run more smoothly or make it a better and safer place for Christians to live. Rather, the world needs the church because without the church the world does not know what it is nor who God is” (115).

While this book is highly accessible, make no mistake—it still carries the theological force for which Hauerwas is known, perhaps even more so because the language is less academically referential. For example, in a chapter entitled “The First Task of the Church,” Hauerwas states, without reference to MacIntyre or Yoder, “The church is where the stories of Israel and Jesus are told, enacted, and heard, and as a Christian people there is literally nothing more important we can do” (113–114).

The relative absence of references to Catholic theologians, ancient philosophers, or modern political theorists is a particular strength of this book. The editing out of Hauerwas's typically citation-heavy writing offers greater accessibility and a smoother reading experience. Yet the reduction of academic citations by no means diminishes the impact of Hauerwas's theological insights.

Hauerwas's claim that the church is a distinct politic—a social witness that is both among and yet apart from the world—is often misunderstood or co-opted. His ecclesiological vision has been blamed for Christian nationalism by some and dismissed as irrelevant to American politics by others. While this review is not intended to summarize Hauerwas's political theology or Christian ethics in full, readers will be introduced to the complexities made clear in this book and gain a greater appreciation for its value.

Ultimately, *Jesus Changes Everything* does not present everything of value in Hauerwas's body of work, which would require far more than 133 pages. Yet the book impressively distills what Hauerwas considers essential to following Jesus today, inviting readers into the new world Jesus makes possible. In this sense, it serves as an excellent entry point for those not yet acquainted with Hauerwasian theology.

Some critiques should be noted. As a collection of essays, the book can at times lack the cohesion of a unified project. However, this fragmentation is mitigated by a clear six-part framework and Charles E. Moore's editorial work.

In summary, the book's distinct focus on Jesus makes it a valuable resource for pastor-theologians considering how to lead the church today. Its accessibility also makes it suitable for small-group study. *Jesus Changes Everything* is therefore a work appropriate for a wide audience—from lay readers to church leaders, and especially for pastor-theologians seeking a concise introduction to the Hauerwas corpus.

Bo H. Lim. *Contextual Theological Interpretation: An Integrated Model for Reading the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018. 168 pages.

Reviewed by Jim Cooper Jr., MA

Bo H. Lim is an Old Testament scholar who has made significant contributions in biblical theology, contextual hermeneutics, and more specifically in ethno-hermeneutic contributions to Asian and Asian American biblical interpretation—work reminiscent of scholars such as Jonathan Tran. Like Tran, Lim has much more to offer than simply providing an “Asian perspective.” In *Contextual Theological Interpretation* (CTI), Lim proposes an integrated model for reading Scripture that recognizes the inevitability of contextual interpretation while seeking to weave together the historical, literary, theological, and communal dimensions of biblical reading.

Lim’s work in CTI highlights the reality that all theological interpretation is, in fact, contextual. In this sense his work resonates with the insights of social philosopher Michel Foucault, whose work reminds us that every person is a subject embedded within networks of power and knowledge. Because interpreters themselves are socially located subjects, the possibility of complete objectivity becomes illusory. Similarly, Lim argues that every reader approaches the biblical text shaped by culture, history, theological commitments, and social location. In short, interpretation is never neutral; it is always situated and therefore contextual.

Yet Lim does not surrender hermeneutics to pure relativism. Instead, he makes a compelling case that contextual interpretation is not a problem to be solved but the very condition through which trustworthy interpretation emerges. As Lim himself writes, “The kind of ecclesial reading I am interested in does not call for fewer voices at the table but more” (6). If interpretation is inevitably contextual, then responsible hermeneutics must occur through the interaction of multiple contexts in conversation with one another. Through this dia-

logical process—where differing perspectives test, challenge, and refine one another—a form of symbolic convergence emerges. What emerges is not detached objectivity, which is rather impossible, but a trustworthy contextual reading forged through the faithful interaction of multiple communities—diverse across time and place, culture and ethnicity, gender and social location—converging on biblical interpretation together for the specific context.

In the first part of the book: preface and chapters one and two, Lim does an excellent job of situating *Contextual Theological Interpretation* within the broader landscape of biblical interpretive methods, and more specifically in relation to the predominant historical-critical methods that have shaped modern biblical studies. Lim makes a case that these methods themselves emerged from the contextual imagination of the Enlightenment. In other words, what many have treated as neutral or objective methods of interpretation are, in fact, deeply shaped by the intellectual assumptions, ideologies, and cultural conditions of Enlightenment Europe. For Lim, biblical studies—particularly historical-critical methods—are therefore not contextless but reflect a distinctly Eurocentric interpretive framework that, while valuable, has been overly centered and disproportionately shaped by the assumptions of Enlightenment rationalism, modernity, and Euro-cultural perspectives.

Additionally, Lim notes that a dynamic shift in biblical interpretation methods has happened and is still unfolding, highlighting the resistance of the well-established historical-critical method to other global interpretive approaches—such as inter-disciplinary and ethnically diverse readings—that are having a significant impact on the church. Lim suggests that this shift is, in part, the result of the “charismatic century,” stating, “Pentecostalism was the main contributor to the reshaping of Christianity from a predominantly Western to a non-Western phenomenon in the twentieth century” (9). Interestingly, some European observers have jokingly referred to this reversal as “the empire striking back,” a tongue-in-cheek way of de-

scribing the growing influence of the Global South and East on Christian theology and biblical interpretation.

Against this backdrop, chapters three and four Lim emphasize that Scripture must be interpreted theologically, not simply historically. He argues that Scripture is a living theology, stating, “I believe the Bible is to be interpreted as a sacred text for the global church to commune with God and live out its redemptive witness in the world. I believe the Bible is to be interpreted theologically” (43).

Lim highlights in chapter four how scholars were shaped by their spatial and temporal contexts within modernity. Because of the Enlightenment, scholars were often relegated to addressing historical critiques alone, frequently neglecting moral and ethical—or tropological—interpretations. Ultimately, Lim suggests that interpretation should arise from the gestalt of the biblical text, the historical context of the text, and the present context of the interpreter, interacting in a kind of convergence through mutual illumination.

Building on this foundation, in part two Lim moves the reader from theory to practice. He begins in chapter five by presenting two non-Western, postcolonial theologians—Kwame Bediako and Renie Choy—as examples of much-needed voices from the global church. Lim demonstrates how engaging these global interpretations critiques the Western “global” interpretation, revealing that what is often labeled “global” in academic settings is not much more than a Western interpretation of the formerly colonized world within a postcolonial reality.

In chapter six, Lim provides example methods of CTI. These include Bediako’s *Bible as Contextual Interpretation*, Yeo’s *Cross-Cultural Interpretation*, Gutierrez’s *Theological and Contextual Commentary*, and Sechrest’s *Methodology for Multicultural Interpretation*. These examples prioritize not just right interpretation, but right transformation, highlighting the dynamic ways culture and theology illuminate one another in the reading of Scripture. This reciprocal illumination by the Spirit appears to be the transformative dimension of Scripture reading within CTI.

In chapter seven of *Contextual Theological Interpretation*, Bo H. Lim extends his integrated model by making a compelling case for ethnography and the social sciences as essential conversation partners in contextual theology. Importantly, Lim does not elevate these disciplines to the level of theology itself. Rather, he frames them as a kind of feedback loop for theological interpretation—tools that help the church more clearly perceive what is taking place within its communal life.

In this way, ethnography does not replace theological interpretation but deepens it. It invites interpreters to slow down and attend to lived realities, communal practices, and the embodied expressions of Scripture within contexts. Interpretation, therefore, is no longer confined to the biblical text in abstraction but extends into the life of the community, where theology is practiced, negotiated, and revealed in real time.

Lim is careful to situate this move not as innovation but as retrieval. What is often described today as “lived theology” resonates deeply with the early church’s practice of figural reading. Scripture, for the patristic tradition, was never reduced to a singular historical meaning but was engaged as a living word speaking across time, circumstance, and community. In continuity with this tradition, Lim presents interpretation as inherently multilayered holding together tropological (moral), Christological and allegorical, and ecclesial dimensions. These modes do not displace the historical-critical method but expand beyond its limits, recovering a fuller, more theologically rich engagement with Scripture.

Within this framework, the social sciences function as disciplines of contextual attentiveness. They help name what is often obscured—unseen power dynamics, cultural assumptions, and communal patterns—thereby enabling a more honest and grounded theological discernment. The insights gleaned from these disciplines are then brought back into conversation with Scripture, forming a reflexive interpretive process in which theology remains both faithful to the text and responsive to lived reality.

Taken together, Lim's argument in this chapter reinforces his broader project: that faithful biblical interpretation in a global church requires not less context, but more—more voices, more attentiveness, and more integration between text, tradition, and lived experience. More global communal discernment.

For this reason, I especially recommend this book to academics seeking to make sense of the academy's diminishing influence, particularly as its implicit bias toward critical methodologies continues to be questioned as having been too central. At the same time, one potential critique, especially from pastors and lay leaders, is that the work can feel overly academic. While this may be true, it appears to be a strategic choice on Lim's part, offering a comprehensive and necessary argument directed toward the academy itself. Personally, it took time to develop a mental map of the theories and terminology Lim engaged before I could fully appreciate the strength of his argument.

Even so, this work is equally valuable for church leaders and pastors navigating the complexity of competing hermeneutical approaches while seeking to remain faithful to Scripture. Lim's interdisciplinary engagement offers a compelling case for contextual theological interpretation as both faithful and necessary in our present moment. A final critique, however, is that the integration of theology and social theory can at times feel uneven or disorienting. Yet this may reflect my own Western ecclesial context—which often privileges theology while remaining overly skeptical of social theory—as much as it does any limitation in Lim's work. Indeed, Lim's careful distinction between what social theory does well and what theology does uniquely may, in the end, be one of the book's most important contributions.

Jim Cooper, Jr. *Drowning in Drama: Jonah and the Drama Triangle*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2025. 146 pages.

Reviewed by Clayton D. Robinson, DMin., PhD

Drowning in Drama: Jonah and the Drama Triangle offers a creative and pastorally rich rereading of the book of Jonah through the lens of relational psychology. Drawing on Stephen Karpman’s Drama Triangle (1968) and Acey Choy’s later development of the Winner’s Triangle (1990), the author presents Jonah as a paradigmatic figure caught in cycles of victimhood, persecution, and rescue—cycles that mirror unhealthy relational dynamics in contemporary life. The book functions as both a theological reflection and a practical treatise, aiming to guide readers from a “victim mentality” toward what the author describes as a “winner’s mentality,” marked by agency, vulnerability, and surrender to God.

At its core, the work argues that the drama triangle—comprised of Victim, Persecutor, and Rescuer roles—offers a compelling interpretive framework for understanding Jonah’s resistance to God and his conflicted relationships with God, the Ninevites, and even the sailors. Importantly, the author resists flattening these roles into fixed identities. Instead, he emphasizes their fluidity: victims can become persecutors, rescuers can enable harm, and all participants in complex relationships may rotate through these postures. Jonah exemplifies this instability. Though genuinely wounded, he increasingly interprets God’s mercy toward Nineveh as persecution against himself, ultimately framing God as his personal adversary.

A central theological claim of the book is that God is not the author of pain but rather an “alchemist of the soul,” one who refuses to waste suffering. Pain becomes part of a refining process through which God works transformation, not as an act of cruelty but as an expression of redemptive love. This conviction grounds the author’s pastoral sensitivity throughout the text, especially in his repeated insistence that acknowledging God’s redemptive use of suffering

does not imply that abuse, injustice, or victimization are divinely willed. Such clarification is essential given the book's engagement with psychological categories that can, if mishandled, risk minimizing real harm.

The author contrasts the drama triangle with Choy's Winner's Triangle, which reframes unhealthy roles into healthier alternatives: the Victim becomes the Vulnerable Creator, the Rescuer becomes the Caring Coach, and the Persecutor becomes the Assertive Challenger. These categories are applied carefully to Jonah's narrative. The Vulnerable Creator names a posture of honesty about need without surrendering agency; the Caring Coach supports without controlling; and the Assertive Challenger communicates boundaries without aggression. Through this framework, the book offers readers a constructive vision for relational maturity that is both psychologically informed and theologically grounded.

Several chapters stand out for their interpretive insight. The discussion of Jonah's pursuit of peace is particularly compelling. The author distinguishes between temporal peace—derived from controlling or exploiting others—and lasting peace rooted in surrender to God's purposes. Jonah's attempt to secure peace by fleeing, withdrawing, and ultimately demanding death reveals what the author memorably describes as a “parasitic” peace that cannot endure. This reading illuminates Jonah's moral psychology while offering a sharp critique of contemporary strategies for conflict avoidance and self-protection.

Equally strong is the analysis of the sailors, who initially appear as moral exemplars. Their refusal to throw Jonah overboard seems virtuous, yet the author reframes their actions as a form of rescuing that assumes responsibility for what is not theirs to carry. In attempting to save Jonah through their own effort, the sailors delay obedience to God and prolong the storm. Only when they relinquish control—entrusting Jonah to God—does peace come. The book insightfully notes that true surrender often involves releasing situations without witnessing their resolution. The sailors likely never knew of

Jonah's deliverance; their faithfulness consisted not in seeing redemption but in trusting God enough to step aside. This theme powerfully challenges ministry contexts in which success is measured by visible outcomes rather than faithful obedience.

The book's engagement with the transtheoretical model of behavioral change further enriches its theological anthropology. By framing transformation as a journey rather than a singular event, the author resists simplistic notions of repentance and surrender. Jonah's repeated resistance and partial obedience mirror the non-linear reality of spiritual growth. This insight invites readers to steward pain intentionally through vulnerability, persistence, and grace—both toward themselves and others.

The treatment of Nineveh's repentance in later chapters is another strength. The author highlights the subtractive nature of Nineveh's response—fasting, silence, renunciation of violence, and waiting on God—as a spiritually formative posture that creates space for attentiveness and humility. Repentance is portrayed not merely as behavioral modification but as a communal reorientation marked by corporate responsibility, especially among the powerful. God's separation of Nineveh's "greatness" from its morality underscores a recurring biblical theme: power divorced from righteousness invites judgment, while surrender opens the way to mercy.

Theologically, the book culminates in a Christological reading of Jonah. Jonah functions as both antitype and archetype, pointing beyond himself to Christ, who succeeds where Jonah fails. Unlike Jonah, Jesus does not perpetuate the cycle of drama; instead, through vulnerable self-giving, he reveals God's reconciling purpose. This Christ-centered conclusion integrates the psychological framework into a broader redemptive narrative, ensuring that the book does not devolve into therapeutic moralism. Transformation ultimately flows not from technique but from participation in Christ's surrender and peace.

While the book's insights are largely persuasive, some analogies at times feel slightly forced, particularly when modern psy-

chological categories are pressed tightly onto the ancient text. These moments, however, do not undermine the validity of the principles being explored. Rather, they reflect the inherent tension of interdisciplinary work that seeks to bridge biblical exegesis and contemporary psychology. Readers grounded in historical-critical methods may wish for deeper engagement with the text's ancient Near Eastern context, though such an expansion may lie beyond the book's pastoral aims.

In sum, *Drowning in Drama* offers a thoughtful, accessible, and theologically responsible exploration of Jonah that speaks compellingly to modern relational dynamics. Its integration of psychology, pastoral theology, and biblical reflection makes it especially valuable for pastors, counselors, and theologians concerned with spiritual formation and relational health. By inviting readers to move from drama-driven living to Christ-centered surrender, the book contributes meaningfully to contemporary conversations about pain, responsibility, and redemption.