

The Inclusive Vision of Isaiah 56 and Contested Ethical Practices in Scripture and the Church: Toward a Canonical Hermeneutic of Discernment¹

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Abstract

The inclusive vision of Isa 56 may be understood as addressing (and critiquing) certain practices of exclusion in postexilic Yehud mentioned in Ezra and Nehemiah. While both Isa 56 and Neh 13 seem to interact with the same Mosaic legislation concerning the exclusion of certain categories of people from full participation in the community of Israel (Deut 23), their response to this legislation is widely divergent. This divergence is simply one example of diverse ethical perspectives evident in both Old and New Testaments. Given a commitment to the Bible as authoritative Scripture meant to guide faithful living in a complex world, this essay will explore a hermeneutical framework for understanding the ethical diversity of the Bible, without acquiescing in relativism. Beginning and ending with the case study of Isa 56, the essay draws on Jesus's teaching on divorce in contradiction to Old Testament legislation, the complex issue of the status of women in the Ephesian household code, as well as the rescinding of Kosher food laws (from Leviticus) in the New Testament, in order to develop a hermeneutical approach to Scripture that can guide the church in developing an authentically biblical vision of social justice for the contemporary world.

1 This essay is an expansion of a presentation given at the conference on "Biblical Interpretation for Caribbean Renewal," at the Jamaica Theological Seminary, Kingston, Jamaica, September 9, 2017. My work on this topic had its origins in an informal guest lecture on the Bible as a guide for living in the twenty-first century developed for a course at Northeastern Seminary in 2003 taught by Wayne McCown (then Dean of the Seminary). Later versions of this material were presented at a conference called "After Worldview" at Cornerstone University, Grand Rapids, MI (2004); at the Israelite Prophetic Literature program unit of the Society of Biblical Literature, Philadelphia, PA (2005); and as a two-part keynote talk for a series of conferences sponsored by the Institute for Christian Studies, in Toronto (2006), then in Vancouver, Edmonton, Ottawa, and Chicago (2007).

The Christian church confesses that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the primary written witness to the revelation of God. Hence the Scriptures have, since the beginning of the church, been read in public worship, studied in private devotion, and employed as the final authority in theological debate. The church also uses the Scriptures as a guide for living, which is appropriate since the Bible itself proclaims its own normativity.² Thus, in reference to the Torah or laws of the Old Testament, the psalmist affirms that God's "word is a lamp to my feet / and a light to my path (Ps 119:105).³

Granted that the entire Bible—both Old and New Testaments—is meant to provide ethical guidance for the life of God's people, the problem is that it is not always easy to apply Scripture to our lives in the contemporary world. Even if we limit ourselves to biblical laws or exhortations (which explicitly enjoin or prohibit particular behavior), it is not always clear what bearing these have on our lives today.

This essay addresses the question of how the Scriptures are able to function as ethically normative for the church despite the great historical gap between when the Scriptures were written and our contemporary situation, and especially in light of what seem like contradictory ethical directives within the Bible itself.

A case in point of contradictory ethical directives is the dispute evidenced in Isa 56 and Neh 13 regarding the inclusion or exclusion of foreigners in postexilic Israel.

Isaiah 56 in Its Historical and Canonical Context

Isa 56 begins that section of the book of Isaiah usually understood as addressing a postexilic (fifth century) context, specifically Judeans who have returned from Babylonian exile and are attempting to rebuild their society in the context of the Persian empire. This context is relevant to the situation of Christians in the Caribbean after slavery and colonialism. Given this checkered history, with the brokenness we have experienced, how do the Scriptures provide guidance for contributing to the flourishing of Caribbean society today?⁴

I am concerned here with the oracle found in Isa 56:1–8, which takes the form of direct speech from YHWH. Right after an introductory ethical exhortation to do justice and righteousness, with a blessing pronounced on those who keep the Sabbath and refrain from evil (Isa 56:1–2), we find a summarizing statement (Isa

2 Although the term "normative" is sometimes used in sociology to refer to typical patterns of human behavior, I am drawing on its ethical sense, which has to do with how things *ought* to be.

3 Unless otherwise noted, all translations of the Bible are from the NRSV. All emphases in biblical quotations are (or course) my own.

4 Of course, the relevance of this context is not limited to the Caribbean. Not only is the message of Scripture applicable to multiple contexts, but Christians everywhere are searching for a way forward in our conflictual postmodern global context.

56:3) addressing two specific categories of people—the foreigner [*ben-hannēkār*] and the eunuch [*hassārīs*]. The oracle then addresses these two groups in more detail, first eunuchs (Isa 56:4–5), then foreigners (Isa 56:6–7).

In the initial address to these two groups (Isa 56:3), YHWH tells foreigners who are “joined to YHWH” that they should not think that it is YHWH himself who is excluding them from the congregation of Israel. This suggests they were, indeed, experiencing such exclusion. Then YHWH tells eunuchs not to denigrate their identity as just a “dry tree.” Again, the suggestion is that they were, in fact, being denigrated.

Then, the oracle proclaims that as long as eunuchs and foreigners bind themselves to YHWH in covenant faithfulness and keep the Sabbath, doing what is right, YHWH will accept their worship and give them an important place in the heritage of Israel (Isa 56:6–7). The oracle ends with a declaration that YHWH is not yet finished gathering outcasts (Isa 56:8).⁵

Isaiah 56 as Counterpoint to Nehemiah 13 and Deuteronomy 23

Isa 56 has an important connection with another postexilic text, namely, Neh 13:1–3. This Nehemiah text recounts that a portion of the Book of Moses was read in the hearing of the people who had returned to the land; this Mosaic instruction was then applied to the contemporaneous postexilic situation of the hearers.

The Mosaic instruction quoted in Neh 13 is an abridged form of Deut 23:3–6 (MT 23:4–7), which is a portion of the Torah that addresses the exclusion of certain categories of foreigners (Ammonites and Moabites) from Israel, with a historical rationale (they had opposed Israel on their way to the promised land, in the time of Moses). It is clear that Neh 13, in quoting this text from Deuteronomy, is itself focused on the exclusion of foreigners from the congregation of postexilic Israel. The paradox is that Isa 56 (also postexilic) addresses not the exclusion, but the *inclusion* of foreigners. In this it seems to stand in contradiction both to Deut 23 and to Neh 13.

That Isa 56 is responding to Deut 23 is suggested by the fact that it addresses the inclusion of *eunuchs* (which is not mentioned in Neh 13). When we turn to the beginning of Deut 23 (just two verses earlier than the portion on the exclusion of foreigners), we find a reference to the exclusion of men with damaged sexual organs (Deut 23:1 [MT 23:2]), which is one way to describe eunuchs. Isa 56 thus seems to be drawing both on Deut 23:3–6 and Deut 23:1, and yet contradicting both texts.

5 Most modern Bibles and commentators treat Isa 56:1–8 as a literary unit, with verse 9 beginning the next unit. However, the Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT) divides the text between v. 9 and v. 10. This division suggests that we are to take v. 9 as a concluding invitation to the beasts of the field and forest to come and participate in YHWH’s banquet (along with foreigners, eunuchs, and other outcasts).

The Conundrum of Ethical Contradiction within Scripture

This concatenation of biblical texts presents an interesting (and stimulating) conundrum for those who take the Bible as an ethical authority, for here we have two biblical texts (in Isaiah and Nehemiah) that respond to Mosaic Torah in vastly differing ways. Indeed, *neither* text is strictly faithful to the Torah of Deut 23.

Isa 56 clearly *contravenes* Deut 23. But Neh 13 *expands* the original prohibition against two categories of foreigners (Ammonites and Moabites) to include *all* foreigners (with no distinctions made) and *reverses the direction* of the mandate—from *preventing* their inclusion to *expelling* those already included (Neh 13:3). When we consider that Ruth, the ancestor of David (and Jesus), was a Moabite (Ruth 1:4; 4:18–21; Matt 1:5), this simply compounds the interpretive conundrum.

Now, it is not my purpose *ultimately* to confound anyone looking to Scripture for ethical guidance, although *initial* confusion is a most helpful pedagogical method. Nor it is my purpose to force anyone to decide which text (Nehemiah or Isaiah) they think is normative based either on a knee-jerk response or even on their current theological preference. Rather, I want to use this interpretive conundrum to open up critical thinking on the matter of how Scripture functions as a norm for us. That is, how do we apply Scripture to our lives today?

I fully affirm the words of Ps 119:105, which describes the Torah as “a lamp to my feet” and “a light to my path.” The problem is that Neh 13 and Isa 56 use the light of Deut 23 to illumine quite *different* paths. I also affirm the New Testament claim in 2 Tim 3:16–17, that “all scripture” (which certainly includes our three texts) “is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”⁶ But this actually makes the contradiction between Deut 23, Isa 56, and Neh 13 *more* complicated, since it requires us to nuance the doctrine of inspiration beyond simplistic understandings.

Before we can get to the important question of how to apply the ethical instructions of these (or any) biblical texts normatively in our contemporary context, we need to address the question: *Why* do Neh 13 and Isa 56 interpret Deut 23 so dif-

6 What is said in 2 Timothy explicitly of the Old Testament (which is likely the referent of “all scripture”) is true by implication of the New Testament, writings that were only just beginning to receive canonical status. Indeed, in one of the later New Testament epistles, we find mention of the writings of “our beloved brother Paul” (2 Pet 3:15) in connection with “the *other* scriptures” (2 Pet 3:16), which suggests that Paul’s writings were beginning to be regarded as authoritative for the church. It should be noted that it is entirely possible that “all scripture” in 2 Timothy 3 included not just what Protestants call the “Old Testament” (the name came later), but also various Jewish texts that did not end up being included, such as books from what we call the Apocrypha and the pseudepigrapha. This is because the Jewish and Christian canons were not yet clearly delimited in the first century. For example, we know that *1 Enoch* and *Jubilees* were treated as authoritative Scripture by the Jewish community at Qumran. And *1 En.* 1:9 is quoted in the New Testament (Jude 14–15) as prophecy, which means that *1 Enoch* may have been treated as Scripture in some first-century Christian circles.

ferently? What is the *basis* for the divergence? And to do that we first need to think about the larger canonical context and how an understanding of the implicit macro-narrative of Scripture already points us toward a vision of what God intends for human life.

I will begin with a series of four proposals about the contextual nature of the Bible's ethical guidance, with a focus on discerning the contours of the larger biblical story in which any particular biblical text is placed. Without a clear understanding of the canonical narrative as that which reveals God's overarching purposes, it is only too easy to misread—and thus misuse—biblical texts from which we seek ethical guidance in the present.

The upshot of these proposals will be my claim that biblical texts are not always directly and immediately normative but require critical appraisal of the role of the text in its larger (canonical and historical) context. Given the controversial nature of this claim for some readers of Scripture, this essay will explore four case studies from the Bible that illustrate—and validate—this claim. The tension between Isa 65 and Neh 13 will constitute the final case study.

Each of these case studies will focus on what seem to be significant contradictions between different ethical directives in Scripture. But this does not mean that we are left with an undecidable relativism. Indeed, it is my thesis that by plunging boldly into these contradictions, rather than avoiding them—guided fundamentally by a hermeneutic of trust—we may gain valuable insights into a canonical approach to reading Scripture as a guide for ethical living today.

PROPOSAL #1: Old Testament laws and exhortations are not free-standing directives (all Scripture must be interpreted in context)

My first proposal is that the Bible does not contain any free-standing directives. This applies even to explicit biblical laws or exhortations that enjoin specific behavior.

A prime example is the Decalogue or Ten Commandments. These core instructions for Israel's communal life do not simply fall from the sky as contextless "absolutes," but are grounded in Israel's exodus experience. Thus the commandments are prefaced by the statement: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exod 20:2). The commandments that follow (Exod 20:3–17) are linked to this opening statement by an implied *therefore*. It is precisely *because* YHWH is Israel's deliverer that the people are enjoined to respond in obedience. Torah is thus grounded in God's prior gracious act on behalf of Israel.

**PROPOSAL #2: Old Testament laws and exhortations
are ultimately related to God's deliverance of Israel and
grounded in the exodus story (story as context for Torah)**

This leads to my second proposal, namely that Old Testament laws and exhortations are, in one way or another, rooted in the exodus story. Thus, peppered throughout the Torah (in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy) are motive clauses, many of which ground specific moral instruction in the exodus story.

Typical is Exod 22:21–23, which states, “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, *for you were aliens in the land of Egypt*. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, *when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry*.” This text explicitly appeals to the exodus narrative, evoking Israel’s prior experience of bondage (their memory of being aliens in a foreign land) and their experience of deliverance (God’s response to their cry for help).⁷

We may distinguish at least three ways that the exodus from Egypt is connected to Israel’s Torah obedience. Perhaps most basically, obedience to the Torah is motivated by gratitude for YHWH’s prior action of deliverance and is a sign of allegiance to this God. Second, Torah obedience constitutes the completion of the salvation that began with the deliverance from bondage. Salvation is never just *from* an impediment but also *towards* the goal of the restoration of flourishing, which includes the moral restoration of the people.⁸ Thus without a transformed people, shaped by Torah obedience, the exodus deliverance would be incomplete. And, third, Torah obedience is often equivalent to *imitatio Dei*, embodying God’s saving character and action (exhibited at the exodus) in our corresponding human acts of compassion and justice on behalf of others.⁹

Indeed, the very structure of the book of Exodus grounds the giving of the law at Sinai (Exod 19–24) squarely in the prior narrative of bondage and redemption (Exod 1–18). Without the exodus, the Torah simply would not make sense.

**PROPOSAL #3: The overarching biblical story provides a normative
framework for reading Scripture (the larger canonical context)**

However, it is crucial to note that the exodus is itself only a sub-plot in a larger canonical story that stretches from creation to eschaton. This leads to my third

7 Other Torah texts that explicitly appeal to the exodus in their motive clauses include Exod 22:27; 23:9; Lev 19:33–34; 25:35–43; Deut 5:15; 10:17–19; 16:12; 24:17–18; 24:21–22.

8 For further discussion of restoration to flourishing as a crucial aspect of salvation, see J. Richard Middleton and Michael J. Gorman, “Salvation,” in the *New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 5, ed. by Katharine Doob Sakenfeld et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 45–61.

9 The links between the exodus and Torah obedience are explored in greater detail in J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), chap. 4: “The Exodus as Paradigm of Salvation.”

proposal, namely that the overarching biblical story provides a normative framework for reading Scripture.¹⁰

The Exodus in the Context of the Story of Israel

To gain a sense of the contours this larger canonical story, it is helpful to see the exodus (which is itself a complex story of Israel's deliverance from Egypt, the giving of the Torah at Sinai, and the journey through the wilderness to the Promised land) in the context of the larger story of Israel. Whereas the exodus constitutes the narrative framework of most of the Pentateuch (Exodus–Deuteronomy), the story of Israel starts with the call of Abraham and his family in Gen 12, and continues through the entire Old Testament, stretching even into the New Testament (Jesus and the initial disciples were all Jewish).

Whereas the calling of Abraham (whether articulated originally in Gen 12:1–3 or later in Exod 19:3–6 vis-à-vis the newly redeemed nation) specifies Israel's role as priestly mediator of blessing to the nations, the people of Israel had been prevented from accomplishing that task by Egyptian bondage. The fulfillment of Israel's mediational calling is predicated, in the promises of Genesis, on God blessing Abraham's descendants such that they become a great nation (Gen 12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 17:4–6; 22:17; 26:4, 24; 28:3, 14; 35:11) flourishing in their own land (Gen 12:1, 7; 13:14–17; 15:7, 18–19; 17:8; 22:17; 26:3–4; 28:4, 13; 35:12).¹¹ Although Israel's population does greatly increase while in Egypt, their enslavement and hard labor in a foreign land clearly prevents the fulfillment of the promise of having their own land; and certainly blessing and flourishing are contradicted by a situation of oppression. Egyptian bondage is, therefore, a significant impediment to the fulfillment of Israel's vocation.

This is the context for Moses, whose calling (recounted in Exod 3:1–4:18) is to get Israel back on track. In the exodus story, Moses figures prominently as God's agent to deliver Israel from bondage, to mediate the Torah as instruction for Israel's communal life, and to guide the people to the Promised Land, accompanied by God's presence in the tabernacle. The story of Moses thus functions as narrative resolution of the plot of Israel's story, when it gets stuck.

10 The summary of the biblical story given here is based on Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, chap. 3: "The Plot of the Biblical Story." That chapter is an expanded version of the earlier plot analysis given in Middleton, "A New Heaven and a New Earth: The Case for a Holistic Reading of the Biblical Story of Redemption," *Journal for Christian Theological Research* 11 (2006): 73–97.

11 It is important not to reduce the calling and purpose of Israel to the purely instrumental, as simply a means to an end. I have addressed God's intrinsic purposes for the blessing of Israel in relationship to their function in the wider story of salvation in J. Richard Middleton, "The Blessing of Abraham and the *Missio Dei*: A Response to Walter Moberly on the Purpose of Israel's Election in Genesis 12:1–3," in *Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis: Essays in Tribute to Paul Livermore*, ed. Douglas R. Cullum and J. Richard Middleton (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019).

The Story of Israel beyond Moses

Indeed, it is possible to read the various (often stereotypical) call narratives in Scripture, beyond that of Moses—whether of Gideon (Judg 6:11–23), Saul (1 Sam 9:15–10:1), David (2 Sam 7:8–27), Solomon (1 Kgs 3:4–9), Isaiah (Isa 6:1–13), Jeremiah (Jer 1:1–19), or Ezekiel (Ezek 1:1–3:15)—as signaling sub-plots in Israel’s larger narrative.¹² In each case various judges, kings, and prophets are empowered as agents of plot resolution, called to address the various crises in the story of Israel, with a view to enabling the nation to fulfill its calling.

Israel in the Story of the World

But the narrative of Israel is itself only a sub-plot in an even larger story, one that begins with creation and stretches to the eschatological fulfillment of God’s purposes for the world. In the context of the canonical narrative, God selects Abram (later called Abraham) and his descendants in order to bring plot resolution to the original story, which has gone awry. The human race, which God empowered and called (in Gen 1 and 2) to rule or tend the earth as faithful stewards, has rejected God’s norms (Gen 3) and turned their power against each other (Gen 4), until the earth has become filled with (and destroyed by) violence (Gen 6). Inter-human violence has prevented the human race, now divided into differing geographical, cultural, and linguistic groups (the “nations”; Gen 10), from fulfilling their original calling from God. The initial narrative thrust of the biblical story has been thwarted.

The narrative function of Abraham and his family is to embody God’s blessing in such a way that this blessing will spill over to all the nations or families of the

12 Walther Zimmerli has classified two broad sorts of call narratives in the Old Testament, which I would distinguish as the *dialogue type* and the *throne vision type*. See Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24*, trans. Ronald E. Clements (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 97–100.

The *dialogue type* of call narrative recounts a personal encounter of the elect one with YHWH (or with his messenger/angel), in which there is divine-human dialogue and room for the expression of reluctance, and even objection, to the call. This objection is typically in the form of questions highlighting the elect one’s sense of inadequacy for the task (focused around “Who am I?”) and often accompanied by the promise of divine support. The call narratives of Moses, Gideon, Saul, David, Solomon, and Jeremiah are of this type.

In contrast to the dialogue type of call narrative is the rarer *throne vision type*, in which the elect one has access to the heavenly throne room (often by means of a vision), with YHWH seated on a throne as king, surrounded by the divine council of angelic beings, and is commissioned to represent God’s royal government on earth. There is no room in these call narratives for the expression of reluctance and little, if any, personal dialogue. The call narratives of Isaiah and Ezekiel are of this type, and it may be found also in the prophet Micaiah’s vision of the heavenly council, from which God sends a “spirit” to mislead King Ahab (1 Kgs 22:19–23).

It is intriguing that there are similarities between both types of call narratives and the statements of the human calling in Ps 8 and Gen 1. Ps 8:4–5 [MT 8:5–6] resembles the dialogue type of call narrative, with its questioning of why God would elect humanity to such a high calling, while the articulation of the human calling in Gen 1:26–28, with the angelic host implied in the divine plurals (“let us” and “in our image”), has similarities with the throne vision type of call narrative.

earth (that is, to the human race, in all their cultural diversity). The story of Israel can thus be read as intended to bring resolution to the plot of the larger, canonical story of humanity on earth. In this context, the New Testament understands Jesus, the Messiah, as the one who brings decisive resolution to the plot of Israel's story, which enables the blessing of the gentiles to be accomplished.

The Narrative Contribution to Ethical Discernment

In one sense, then, there is already a fundamental ethical norm built into the plot, since the story is precisely about the use of agency and power, which may function either to impede or to enact God's purposes. *Calling* or *vocation* is thus intrinsically a moral category. This provides an implicit norm for judging what actions in the story contribute to plot tension/complication or plot resolution (for example, it is illuminating to read the ancestor narratives in Genesis, asking whether Abraham and his family are bringing blessing to the nations or are impeding blessing by their actions¹³).

But we may also evaluate the function of various laws and exhortations given in Scripture vis-à-vis their role in the larger biblical story. This means that without attention to the overarching biblical macro-narrative (and especially its implicit plot thrust) it is difficult, if not impossible, to understand the *point* of explicit ethical injunctions Scripture—whether in the Torah, the Old Testament wisdom literature, the moral exhortations found in prophetic oracles, the Sermon on the Mount and other teachings of Jesus, the New Testament epistles, or *implicit* norms embedded in specific biblical narratives. Indeed, without attention to the overall thrust of the larger biblical story we are in danger of reducing the Bible to moralism (independent and unrelated bits of moral instruction)—which it is most definitely not.

We may frame matters this way: All the Bible's ethical teaching is *grounded in* the overarching story of God's people on the move towards redemption, and all this ethical teaching is meant to *move* God's people closer to this telos or goal. This means that the ethical teachings found in Scripture are not ends in themselves; rather they are meant to serve the goal of the larger story. But this also means that we may *evaluate* the function of various laws and exhortations given in Scripture in terms of their role in the overarching biblical story.

13 For a summary of this approach to episodes from the stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph, see Middleton, "The Blessing of Abraham and the *Missio Dei*."

PROPOSAL #4: Biblical laws and exhortations are meant to be re-orienting in a post-fall world, but they do not always point due “north” (directly back to God’s original intent for creation)¹⁴

Undergirding my proposals (and my entire approach in this essay) is the metaphor of a journey. For us to *find our way* in both biblical interpretation and in our current praxis, we need a good *map* or *compass* to orient us. That is, we need to understand the canonical context that these texts are embedded in—the overarching biblical story—which *points to* the goal or telos that God intends for us, so we have a good sense of the destination we need to reach (we could call this destination “north”). But a good map or compass is not enough. We also need to understand the actual *lay of the land*, that is, the relevant historical circumstances that generated our texts, which have to be negotiated for us to arrive at our destination.¹⁵

This leads to my fourth proposal, namely that while biblical laws and exhortations are meant to be re-orienting in a post-fall world, they do not always point due “north” (directly back to God’s original intent for creation). To unpack this metaphor further, let us look at a number of biblical case studies that illustrate this point.

A Case Study: The Question of Divorce

The first case study is the dispute over divorce in the confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees in Matt 19:3–9. The Pharisees (drawing on Deut 24:1–4) ask Jesus, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?” (Matt 19:3) Jesus answers, “Have you not read that the one who made them *at the beginning* ‘made them male and female’?” (a quote from Gen 1:27); and Jesus continues by quoting Gen 2:24: “‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore [he concludes] what God has joined together, let no one separate.” (Matt 19:4–6) Jesus, in other words, answers the Pharisees in terms of God’s intent from the beginning—essentially pointing us to the overarching canonical narrative.

The Pharisees, however, object by asking: “Why then did *Moses* command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?” (Matt 19:7). Even though the actual text of the Torah uses language of permission, not of command, Jesus does not explicitly dispute this point. Rather he resolutely frames the Torah by reference to God’s intent from creation and gives a contextual reason for the Torah’s

14 My inspiration for this way of putting things comes from Hendrick Hart, *Setting Our Sights by the Morning Star: Reflections on the Role of the Bible in Post-Modern Times* (Toronto: Patmos, 1989), 28–29. The analysis that follows, however, is my own.

15 A more contemporary analogy might be to say that we need a Global Positioning System (GPS), since a GPS does more than orient us to our destination, but also helps us navigate the lay of the land. However, I have been in situations where a GPS got me hopelessly lost, since the lay of the land had recently changed and the satellite data had not been updated.

divergence from this: “It was *because you were so hard-hearted* that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, *but from the beginning it was not so.*” (Matt 19:8) His application follows: “I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery.” (Matt 19:9)

In my analogy, the overarching biblical narrative functions like a *map* or a *compass* telling us which direction God wants us to travel. Let’s call this direction “north.” That is our original direction before we got off track and it is also our ultimate destination (since redemption is meant to reorient us to God’s norms for human life). However, the question is, How will we arrive at this destination, given the actual lay of the land?

From almost any location in the world, if we attempt to go directly north, there will be certain obstacles that we will need to go around—whether buildings, mountains, trees, or other objects. Travel will not typically be in a straight line. The astute traveler will thus need to be aware not only of the intended destination, but also of the roadblocks that may require us to turn aside temporarily—precisely in order to get to where we need to go. In the case of a physical journey, we may need to adjust the immediate direction of travel, perhaps first turning east or west for a while (or sometimes even south) in order to get to our intended destination.

Likewise, not all laws or moral exhortations in Scripture point due “north”; many are meant to help us negotiate the lay of the land, given the roadblocks and detours that bar the way. They point “east” or “west” and so cannot be used (out of context) as if they indicated “true north.” They are thus not *absolute* but *relative*.

It is illuminating that after Jesus makes his rather absolute-sounding application prohibiting divorce (“what God has joined together, let no one separate”; Matt 19:6), he goes on to make an exception: “I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, *except for unchastity*, and marries another commits adultery” (Matt 19:9). In other words, although Jesus specifies “north” (there should not be any divorce), he makes an exception, a concession that takes into account the lay of the land. And there are other possible roadblocks that might require even more exceptions (such as divorce in the case of spousal abuse).¹⁶

Let us now look briefly at two other case studies in Scripture before coming back to Isa 56. One of these case studies continues to address the issue of marriage, while the other begins to move closer to the question being addressed in Isa 56.

16 When we begin to apply Jesus’s teaching about divorce to our contemporary world, we will need to acknowledge another aspect of the lay of the land specific to ancient Israel, namely, that only husbands (not wives) had the right to initiate divorce proceedings; and, given the patriarchal social structure, a divorced woman was (like a widow) deprived of her means of support. This asymmetry of power may well have been a factor in Jesus’s opposition to divorce.

*A Second Case Study: Husband-Wife Relationships
in the Ephesian Household Code*

The second illuminating case study relevant to our topic is found in the injunctions concerning husbands and wives in the household code in Eph 5:21–33. The two heuristic questions to raise at the outset are: Who is commanded to “submit” (or “be subject”) to whom? And who is commanded to “love” whom?

This text begins by exhorting everyone in the church to submit to one other (Eph 5:21); this is stated as a universal principle. Then the text moves on to address the appropriate attitudes and behavior of husbands and wives.

If we start with the first question (Who is commanded to “submit” to whom?), we find a complex answer. On the one hand, everyone is to submit to (or be subject to) everyone else (Eph 5:21); on the other hand, wives are expected to submit to their husbands (Eph 5:22);¹⁷ indeed, they are to do this as the church is subject to Christ (Eph 5:24). This presents a bit of a conundrum. Why is it that everyone is to submit to everyone else, yet Paul then singles out wives having to submit to their husbands?

Now for the second question: Who is commanded to “love” whom? And we might answer (correctly), that husbands are to love their wives (Eph 5:25, 28). But did we notice that the chapter begins with a universal love command (Eph 5:1–2)?

So the question arises: If we are all to love each other, and if we are all to submit to one another, why does Paul articulate the responsibilities of husbands and wives differently—in terms of *love* in the one case and *submission* (or *respect*; Eph 5:33) in the other?¹⁸

In discussing these questions, it is important to note that Eph 5 appeals to God’s creational intent by quoting Gen 2:24 (in 5:31), just as Jesus did in our previous case study. So we need to reflect on God’s creational intent for men and women; in other words, what is “true north” in terms of male-female relationships?

If we examine how the creation accounts of Gen 1 and 2 portray male-female relationships, it is clear that in Gen 1 *both* male and female are made in God’s image and they are *together* granted co-regency over the earth (Gen 1:26–28). In Gen 2 the woman is created to be a helper (‘*ēzer*’) corresponding to the man (Gen 2:18). And here it would be important to unpack the typical use of “helper” (the

17 This is an implicit expectation, since the statement about wives submitting to their husbands (5:22) occurs in a dependent clause, which does not repeat the verb for “submit” or “be subject” from 5:21. A literal translation of these two verses would read: “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ, wives to their husbands, as to the Lord” (Eph 5:21–22; NRSV adapted).

18 I realize that the authorship of Ephesians is a debated question in New Testament scholarship. Although I have no problem thinking it is an authentic Pauline letter, my analysis of Eph 5 does not depend on who wrote it.

noun ‘*ēzer* or the participle ‘*ozēr*) in the Old Testament, which consistently refers to one with superior power—therefore it is used of God as the helper (that is, Savior) of Israel.¹⁹ Here in Gen 2, however, the helper is meant to be an equal to the one helped, therefore the noun ‘*ēzer* is qualified by *kēnegdô* (“as his counterpart” or “as his partner”). The key point is that nowhere in the biblical creation accounts is one human being granted rule or power over another. Specifically, man is *not* granted rule over woman as part of the order of creation; this does not deny there are differences between male and female, but that there is an intended equality of power and authority between them.²⁰

However, a shift toward asymmetrical power relationships is indicated in Gen 3:16, when (as part of the consequences of the fall) we are told that the woman’s desire for the man is not reciprocated, but instead he begins to exercise dominion over her. And then this illegitimate rule is exemplified in the man naming the woman (Gen 3:20); this is precisely what he did to the animals, which proved that none of them was an equal companion for him. Naming signifies an asymmetry of power.²¹

So the beginning of unequal power relationships between men and woman is clearly (in context) part of the consequences of the primal human rebellion against God. It signifies going “south.” And it ought to be remedied by redemption, which ought to bend the direction of our journey back “north.”

Why then doesn’t Paul simply exhort the church to follow God’s creational intent as articulated in Gen 1 and 2?

Preciding for the moment from a suspicious reading of the text (and the way this text has been used to support the subjection of women), I suggest that we need to consider the first-century “lay of the land,” including the historical/cultural “roadblocks” that Paul was addressing. Given the hierarchical family structure in wealthy, elite Greco-Roman families, where the *pater familias* was husband, father, and slave master, and had absolute authority and power over everyone in the *familia*, the Ephesian household code is clearly pressing this pattern towards

19 For the use of “helper” in reference to someone coming the aid of another, see Ps 22:11 (MT 22:12); 72:12; 107:12; Isa 31:3; 63:5; Jer 47:7; Lam 1:7; Dan 11:34, 45. For God as helper of Israel, see Ps 30:10 (MT 30:11); 54:5.

20 This original equality of all people does not rule out the legitimate historical development of functional hierarchies for particular purposes (including the exercise of leadership in political, ecclesiastical, and commercial contexts, among others), but these are historically contingent developments, and are not grounded in the order of creation, and certainly not in any essential gender (or racial) qualities.

21 For a more extended analysis of the shift from Gen 2 to Gen 3 on the question of male-female relationships, see J. Richard Middleton, “From Primal Harmony to a Broken World: Distinguishing God’s Intent for Life from the Encroachment of Death in Genesis 2–3,” chap. 7 in *Earnest: Interdisciplinary Work Inspired by the Life and Teachings of B. T. Roberts*, ed. by Andrew C. Koehl and David Basinger (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), 145–73.

a redemptive ethic.²² It does this by, among other things, addressing wives, children, and slaves as moral subjects, something no Greco-Roman household code ever did; such codes were addressed only to the *pater familias*, and they typically exhorted him to exert his authority, as lord and master.²³

Now Paul wants to convince the *pater familias* to change his behavior towards those over whom he had power. But Paul needs to speak carefully otherwise he might not be heard. So he articulates what we might call a compromised ethic vis-à-vis God's creational intent. In other words, he doesn't expect we can get from "south" straight to "north," since there are some obstacles to get around (and, as in the case of Jesus in Matt 19, these have to do with hardness of the human heart).

But note the rhetorical possibility that is opened up by Paul framing these *different* (seemingly unequal) instructions for husbands and wives with the prior notion of *mutual* submission (Eph 5:21) and *mutual* love (Eph 5:1). Paul's seemingly contradictory rhetoric is precisely what prods us to ask the hermeneutical question of *why* he does this.

And there is the further (ethical) question: What actually would be the *difference in practice* between *submission* and *love*, given the model Paul cites? The model is Christ, who so *loved* us, that he *submitted* himself to death on our behalf (Eph 5:25–33).

So, in contradistinction to those conservative believers who think that Ephesians 5 is enjoining a male-female hierarchy of authority (and that this hierarchy points "north") and in contradistinction to those suspicious Bible readers who think that this text is irreparably androcentric (thus pointing "south"), I suggest that Ephesians 5 (in contextualizing an ethic of human equality) may well be pointing closer to "north" than we often realize—perhaps "northwest" (if read properly, in context).

22 This, of course, is not widely recognized, either in the Caribbean or elsewhere. For a study of how the household instructions concerning slaves and women have historically been treated differently by African American interpreters, see Clarice J. Martin, "The *Haustafeln* (Household Codes) in African American Biblical Interpretation: 'Free Slaves' and 'Subordinate Women,'" chap. 10 in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 201–31. Given that African American resistance to normalizing slavery has not typically spilled over into challenging the subordination of women, Martin (the first black woman in the U.S. to earn a PhD in New Testament, who was my colleague at Colgate Rochester Divinity School in the 1990s), proposes a set of hermeneutical strategies, grounded in the gospel, for engaging the household codes in the context of the rest of Scripture, along with advocating for the empowerment of black women today (228–231).

23 For an excellent summary of how Eph 5 critiques the Greco-Roman elite *familia*, see Gordon D. Fee, "The Cultural Context of Ephesians 5:18–6:9," *Priscilla Papers* 16 (2002): 3–8.

A Third Case Study: Kosher Laws and the Distinction between Israel and the Gentiles

The third case study concerns the Old Testament laws of *Kashrut* (Kosher foods) in Leviticus and how these laws (together with the hardened distinction between Israel and the gentiles) are called into question in the account of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10.

One of the emphases of the book of Leviticus is its distinction between clean and unclean animals (of which only the former may be eaten). This is summarized in the programmatic statement addressed to the priests: “You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean” (Lev 10:10).

While the rationale for the distinction between clean and unclean, which undergirds the Kosher food laws, is a debated issue, it nevertheless makes sense to think that it is grounded ultimately in the distinction that God makes between Israel and the gentiles. Such a distinction is found, for example, in the Exodus plague narrative, where God spares Israel because he makes a distinction between Israel and the Egyptians (Exod 8:22–23 [MT 8:18–19]; 11:6–7). And it is strongly implied in Lev 20:22–26, which twice states that YHWH has separated Israel from the other nations (20:24, 26) and associates Israel’s distinguishing between clean and unclean animals (20:25) with not following the ways of the nations (20:23).²⁴ The laws of *Kashrut* may thus be understood as functioning to shape Israel’s sense of identity as distinct from the surrounding nations, who do not follow God’s ways.

But the clean/unclean distinction among animals, like Israel’s distinction from the nations, is not traceable back to any biblical creation account; it is not part of God’s original intent for humanity.²⁵ Thus the “lay of the land” that required the Kosher laws seems to have been the very real historical need for Israel to develop its own identity (and moral and religious life) distinct from that of its pagan neighbors—precisely in order that they might be able to impact the nations with blessing from God. In that case, laws of *Kashrut* are best understood as pointing not “north,” but “east” or “west” (to continue the metaphor). They constitute part of an interim ethic.

While this (implicit) rationale for the Kosher laws is supportable from the Old Testament, it is not until the late Second Temple period that the holy/common, clean/unclean distinctions of Leviticus came to be explicitly associated with (and superimposed upon) the distinction between Israel and the gentiles. One result is

24 The Hebrew verb for making a distinction (or separating) in Lev 10:10 and 20:24–26 (the Hiphil of *bādal*) is different from that in Exod 8:22 and 11:7 (the Hiphil of *pālāh*); but that does not affect the relevant point.

25 God, indeed, engages in acts of separation (using the Hiphil of *bādal*) in Gen 1. But while God separates realms (light from dark; waters above from waters above below; water from dry land), God is not said to separate clean from unclean animals (or groups of humans).

that many Jews refrained not just from prohibited foods, but even from fellowship with gentiles. This development provides the background for understanding Acts 10.

In Acts 10, Peter, while praying on the rooftop of the house of Simon the tanner (Acts 10:6, 9), becomes hungry and has a vision of many different kinds of animals being lowered down to him on a sheet, including some explicitly prohibited in the laws of Leviticus (Acts 10:11–12). When he is told by a heavenly voice to kill and eat (Acts 10:13), he objects that he has “never eaten anything that is profane or unclean” (Acts 10:14). But the voice explains: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (Acts 10:15).

This explanation could mean that *at the beginning* of God’s creating there was no clean/unclean distinction; or it could mean that God has *now* made clean what was previously unclean. Either way, the laws of *Kashrut* are portrayed as historically contingent, without ultimate validity. And the point certainly is to prepare Peter for the arrival of a delegation from Cornelius, the God-fearing gentile (who would have been regarded as *unclean* in some quarters of Second Temple Judaism).²⁶

When the delegation has escorted Peter to Cornelius, Peter starts by citing not the Torah explicitly, but what amounts to Second Temple Jewish tradition: “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile”; but then he tells the gathered crowd what he has learned from the rooftop experience: “God has shown me that I should not call *anyone* profane or unclean” (Acts 10:28). That was the lesson of the abrogation of *Kashrut*. And to make the point even clearer, Peter adds: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all.” (Acts 10:34–36)

We might say that the narrative of Acts 10 judges that the time was right to shift from traveling “east” or “west” and to start heading “north” again.

Excursus: Holiness and Separation in the Teaching of Jesus

Indeed, this is the judgment of the entire New Testament. It is evident, among other places, in the shift from *holiness* language in Jesus’s citation of the Levitical injunction: “You shall be holy as I am holy” (Lev 19:2) in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The holiness of God that we are to imitate is redefined by Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel as *perfection* (Matt 5:48) and in Luke it is reconstrued as *mercy*

26 The fact that Peter is staying at the house of Simon the *tanner* (someone who works with the skins of dead animals) communicates the ironic point to the discerning reader that he was already in contact with someone who was unclean, according to Levitical law.

(Luke 6:36).²⁷ In both cases, imitating God's perfection or mercy means to love one's enemies (Matt 5:44; Luke 6:27).

Now "holiness" is a perfectly good term.²⁸ Yet Jesus himself rarely used language of holiness because it was too easily misunderstood in his first century Jewish context.²⁹ The problem (the lay of the land) was that language of holiness, clearly used in the Old Testament in connection to God's separation of Israel from the nations (Lev 20:26), had come to be understood in Second Temple Judaism as having connotations of elitism and superiority. Thus, Jesus begins his teaching about love of enemies by stating: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall *love* your neighbor and *hate* your enemy'" (Matt 5:43). But this was a distortion of the original purpose of Israel's election from among the nations, which was precisely to bring blessing to them.

The legitimate separation from that which is evil (and the distinction between Israel and the gentiles, which was meant to keep Israel from being corrupted by idolatry) had hardened into an absolute distinction that prevented Israel from fulfilling their vocation to the nations. Going "west" so resolutely had itself become a roadblock to going "north."

It is significant that Jesus does not abandon the idea of Israel's radical distinction from the nations. Indeed, the heart of his critique of those who treat the "other" as an enemy (withholding love from them) is that such treatment simply copies what gentiles and sinners do (Matt 5:47; Luke 6:33–34), which is a deviation from "true north." Israel, however, should exhibit behavior *different* from the nations. God's people are to model their behavior not on fallen humans but on *God* who, as Creator, sends rain and sun on the righteous and the wicked alike (Matt 5:45), and is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked (Luke 6:35). It is only by imitating God's own radical love that we will show ourselves to be "children of the Most High" (Luke 6:35), reoriented to God's intentions from the beginning.³⁰

27 "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5:48); "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36).

28 As a Wesleyan theologian, how could I think otherwise?

29 By far the majority of occurrences of the word "holy" (*hagios*) in the teaching of Jesus are in reference to the Holy Spirit (Matt 12:32; 28:19; Mark 3:29; 12:36; 13:11; Luke 11:13; 12:10, 12; John 14:26; 20:22; Acts 1:8), though we also find Jesus speaking about the "holy place" (Matt 24:15), "holy angels" (Mark 8:28; Luke 9:26), "Holy Father" (John 17:1), and "that which is holy" (Matt 7:6). For a seminal analysis of how Jesus differed from the Pharisees on the question of holiness, see Markus Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (rev. ed.; New York: Trinity Press International, 1998), esp. chaps. 4 and 5. The core issue is summarized by N. T. Wright in his Foreword to the book (see xv–xvi).

30 Although the citation of Lev 19:2 in Matt 5 and Luke 6 replaces *holy* with *perfect* and *merciful* (in order to address first-century Jewish roadblocks), by the time we get to 1 Peter, which is addressed to the gentile church of the diaspora, there seems to be no more problem with using holiness language. Thus we find the exhortation: "as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct" (1 Pet 1:15).

*A Fourth Case Study: Foreigners and Eunuchs in Israel (and the Temple)*³¹

So now we come back to Isa 56 and its contentious relationship to Neh 13 in the social context of postexilic Yehud (the province of imperial Persia that was roughly equivalent to Judah of old, though reduced in area).³²

The point of contention between these texts is that, although they both seem to be responding to Deut 23:3–6 (MT 23:4–7), which prohibits Ammonites and Moabites from being admitted to the congregation of Israel (because of how they treated Israel on the wilderness journey, in the time of Moses), they each respond quite differently. Whereas Neh 13 (which explicitly cites Deut 23) enjoins the divorce of foreign women *from any nations* who had married Jewish men, Isa 56 (which has only an implicit relation to Deut 23) goes in the opposite direction and argues *against* the exclusion of foreigners from Israel—so long as they worship YHWH.³³

The mention of *eunuchs* in Isa 56 suggests that the prophet is aware of returning Israelites who have compromised the wholeness of their sexuality, perhaps by working in the royal palace in Babylon in proximity to the king's harem. They were likely court officials who had been made eunuchs. They no longer bear the distinctive mark of circumcision in their flesh. Should they then be excluded from the covenant people and from temple worship now that they have returned to the land? Likewise, is there no place for God-fearing *foreigners* who desire to worship the God of Israel?

On the contrary, Isa 56 welcomes them both, with the proviso that they keep covenant with YHWH, especially the Sabbath. If they do, *eunuchs*, who have no biological descendants to carry on their name, will be given a memorial or monument and a name within the temple, by God himself, better than sons and daughters—a name that will never be cut off.³⁴ And faithful *foreigners* who desire even to be *priests* in the temple (for that seems to be the thrust of the text) will find that

31 Whereas Isaiah 56 addresses the inclusion of foreigners in *the temple*, Neh 13 seems to be focused on excluding foreigners from *the community of Israel*. This ambiguity or variation can be traced back to Deut 23:3, which speaks of excluding Ammonites and Moabites from the “assembly” or “congregation” (*qāhāl*) of Israel, where *qāhāl* can refer to the worshiping community, thus linking it to the temple (though it is not limited to that meaning).

32 For an excellent study of Isa 56 in its literary context, see Raymond de Hoop, “The Interpretation of Isaiah 56:1–9: Comfort of Criticism?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127.4 (2008): 671–95.

33 Just to complicate matters, we might ask how the divorcing of foreign wives in Neh 13 fits with Jesus's teaching on divorce in his discussion with the Pharisees (which we examined earlier). Or, just to stay with the Old Testament, we might wonder how Neh 13 fits with YHWH's proclamation through the prophet Malachi, “I hate divorce” (Mal 2:16). This pronouncement comes in the context of challenging Israelite men concerning “the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant” (Mal 2:14). “I hate divorce,” found in almost all modern English translations, is literally “He hates sending away” (the traditional translation requires emending the Hebrew verb for “he hates” to the first person singular and translating “sending away” contextually).

34 Note that “a monument and a name” (*yād vāšēm*) in Isa 56:5 has become the title of the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem—Yad Vashem.

God accepts their sacrifices—for, says the LORD, “my house shall be called a house of prayer for *all peoples*” (Isa 56:7). This rationale, which Jesus quotes when he overturns the tables of the moneychangers in the temple (Mark 11:15–17), seems to have its eye on the larger narrative framework of the biblical canon, which envisions God’s desire for the flourishing of all nations and peoples.³⁵

Here we may ask what direction Isa 56 and Neh 13 are pointing. Indeed, what direction does Deut 23 point? Given that God is the Creator of all humanity (Gen 1 and 2) and desires the blessing of the nations (Gen 12), it makes sense to consider the flourishing of all humanity as “north” (the destination we need to begin moving towards). In that case, perhaps we could say that Deut 23:3–6 (for whatever legitimate historical reasons) is pointing “west.” Then Neh 13 points even further away from God’s original normative intentions, perhaps “*southwest*” (or even directly “*south*”).³⁶

So the question arises of *why* Neh 13 interprets and applies Deut 23 the way it does. What *roadblocks* is the text trying to steer clear of? What was the cultural and religious context of Nehemiah, the *lay of the land* that this text has its eyes on, so to speak?

A significant part of the answer to this question would include the sense of tremendous loss on the part of postexilic Israel (their history in tatters), yet with the opportunity to start over after exile. But this second chance that Israel has received is combined with an overriding desire *not* to make the same mistakes this time, namely, assimilating to the cultural and religious practices of the surrounding nations (which is precisely what brought about the exile as God’s judgment in the first place). Indeed, Neh 13 explicitly cites the case of Solomon, who married foreign women, which resulted in the introduction of idolatry into Israel (Neh 13:26).

It is this desire to avoid idolatry that generates a deep anxiety on the part of the leadership of the returnees about the presence of anyone of foreign descent among the people. This anxiety can be seen not just in the over-interpretation of the Deut 23 injunction in Neh 13:1–3, but also later in the chapter where Nehemiah is upset because Jewish men “had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab; and half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke the language of various peoples” (Neh 13:23–24).

35 It is possible that the promise of Jesus to the church in Philadelphia in Rev 3 is based on the promises given to eunuchs and foreigners in Isa 56: “If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name” (Rev 3:12).

36 Note that immediately following the verses on the exclusion of Ammonites and Moabites, Deut 23 goes on to enjoin *different* (more positive) treatment for Edomites and Egyptians (Deut 23:7–8 [MT 23:8–9]).

Indeed, Nehemiah is so upset that he “contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair” and made them swear an oath in the name of God that they wouldn’t allow their children to intermarry with foreigners (Neh 13:25).

A similar anxiety (might we say xenophobia?) also surfaces in Ezra 9:1–4, which is placed narratively about thirteen years earlier than Neh 13, but still in the context of Israel’s postexilic return to the land. Here Ezra is greatly exercised about the intermarriage of Israelites (including priests and Levites) with the peoples of different lands, which has resulted in the “holy seed” becoming mixed (Ezra 9:1–2).³⁷ In response to this practice of intermarriage, Ezra explains: “I tore my garment and my mantle, and pulled hair from my head and beard, and sat appalled. Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the faithlessness of the returned exiles, gathered around me while I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice” (Ezra 9:3–4). Both Ezra 9 and Neh 13 make it clear that their primary concern was the idolatry that tends to accompany intermarriage with those from outside of Israel.

It is particularly significant that Ezra 9:4 uses the expression “all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel” to refer to those who were appalled at intermarriage with foreigners, since similar language is used in an oracle found in the very postexilic section of Isaiah (chaps. 56–66) that contains the encouragement to foreigners and eunuchs (Isa 56:1–8).

The oracle in question (Isa 66:1–2) begins with YHWH challenging those who would rebuild the Jerusalem temple as a “house” for God, since as Creator of heaven and earth he already has a “house” (heaven is God’s throne, earth is God’s footstool—the entire *cosmos* is God’s temple).³⁸ Given that the rebuilding of the temple (recounted primarily in Ezra 1–6) was a significant part of the rebuilding of Jerusalem (which was Nehemiah’s mission), and that his rebuilding was supported by Ezra, the teacher of the Torah, it becomes clear that there is a disagreement between Ezra-Nehemiah and the postexilic section of Isaiah (chaps. 56–66)

37 It is troubling that this text about the mixing of the “holy seed” is typically appealed to by white supremacists in their efforts to keep the so-called Aryan race “pure.” It is cited (along with other biblical texts about mixed marriages) in a section of the following Ku Klux Klan website about “Race Mixing” (<http://www.wckkkk.org/nature.html>). The Ku Klux Klan was originally founded in the 1860s in response to the era of Reconstruction in the American south, when the U.S. government was attempting to establish economic and political freedom for blacks after slavery. The current incarnation of the Klan is a post-World War II phenomenon, initially focused around opposition to the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

38 I have addressed the theme of the cosmos as God’s intended temple in a number of places, including J. Richard Middleton, “The Role of Human Beings in the Cosmic Temple: The Intersection of Worldviews in Psalms 8 and 104,” *Canadian Theological Review* 2.1 (2013): 44–58; “Image of God,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Theology*, vol. 2, ed. by Samuel E. Ballentine et al. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 516–23; *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, chap. 2 (esp. 37–50) and chap. 8 (esp. 163–76); and *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), chap. 2 (esp. 74–90).

concerning the Jerusalem temple. But the issue for Isa 56–66 is not simply the *fact* of the temple, but *how it was being used* to exclude some from access to the congregation of Israel, particularly eunuchs (Isa 56:4–5) and foreigners (Isa 56:6–7).

Having challenged those rebuilding the temple (Isa 66:1–2a), YHWH goes on to speak a word of assurance and comfort to one group among the returning exiles: “But this is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, *who trembles at my word*” (Isa 66:2b). In the context of Isa 56–66, this group is precisely those who were being excluded from the temple.

Since the language of *trembling at God’s word* (which signifies taking what God says seriously) is found in Ezra 9:4 and Isa 66:2b—and nowhere else in the Bible—we are justified in thinking that the expression was in use during the postexilic period, after Israel had returned to the land.³⁹ But given that the *referent* of those who tremble at God’s word in our two texts is not the same (indeed, they are diametrically opposite), we may fruitfully take Isa 56–66 and Ezra–Nehemiah as representing two sides of a debate about what constitutes genuine faithfulness to God in roughly the same historical context.⁴⁰ That is, these two sets of texts disagree profoundly about *which word from God* we are to tremble at.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah, in line with previous Scriptures emphasizing the separation of Israel from the nations, assume that God continues to desire such separation, resulting in the exclusion of foreigners from the Jewish returnees. Isa 56, however, proclaims in no uncertain terms that this is not God’s will in the postexilic situation: “Let *not* the foreigner joined to the LORD say, ‘The LORD [is the one who] will surely separate me from his people’” (Isa 56:3; NRSV adapted).⁴¹ Where Nehemiah and Ezra seem to hyperfocus on protecting the identity of Israel, turning a blind eye to the overarching purpose of Israel’s election, Isa 56 understands the Jerusalem temple (like the people of Israel) as having a mediational function, intended to connect the nations to the one God of creation.⁴²

We may wonder, then, if it is just that the two sides of this postexilic debate are focused on different *landscapes* or whether they are, in fact, using different *maps* or *compasses* entirely, which results in understanding the ultimate destination of

39 It is, however, possible that the expression was not in widespread use, but that Isa 66:2a is responding specifically to its use by Ezra.

40 My thanks to Walter Brueggemann for stimulating my thinking on this subject in a lecture he gave in the early 1990s.

41 It is significant that Isa 56:3 uses the very verb for “separate” (the Hiphil of *bādal*) that is used for YHWH separating Israel from the nations in Lev 20:24 and 26 (among other texts), in order to *deny* that YHWH is the one behind the separation of foreigners in the postexilic period.

42 Note that in Isa 65 YHWH passes judgment on “a rebellious people” (Isa 65:2), those who tell others: “Keep to yourself, / do not come near me, for I am too holy for you” (Isa 65:5). Or, in the famous language of the KJV, they declare: “I am holier than thou.”

the journey differently. After all, not everyone reads the canonical thrust of Scripture the same way—the direction of “true north” is itself contested.

The Ethiopian Eunuch in Light of the Isaiah-Nehemiah Conflict

One New Testament text that may well be a commentary on Isa 56 is the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26–39.⁴³ Here we have someone who fits both of the categories addressed in Isa 56:3–8 (a foreigner who is also a eunuch). And, significantly, “he had come to Jerusalem to worship” (Acts 8:27), presumably in the temple. Do we need to wonder what sort of reception he received?

This eunuch, we are told, “was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah” (Acts 8:28). The specific passage turns out to be Isa 53:7–8, which describes the suffering servant of YHWH, who was humiliated and had been denied justice (Acts 8:30).

What might have piqued the Ethiopian eunuch’s interest in this figure? Could it have been his own experience of humiliation when he attempted to enter the temple to worship the God of Israel? In Isa 53 he found a reference to someone in the Jewish Scriptures who had also been humiliated and was persecuted by his contemporaries. He could identify with this figure. No wonder the eunuch asks Philip about who this might be—the prophet himself or someone else (Acts 8:35). And starting with this Scripture, Philip “proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus” (Acts 8:35).

But what made the Ethiopian eunuch think he might be welcomed at the Jerusalem temple in the first place? It makes eminent sense to think that he had been reading Isa 56:3–8, which announced God’s welcome of eunuchs and foreigners. If reading Isa 56 had encouraged him to seek the God of Israel, this may explain how he later (on the way home) encountered the passage about the suffering servant in Isa 53; after all, the texts are only three chapters apart.

But the eunuch had clearly not read Ezra or Nehemiah (or Deut 23, for that matter). He knew only one side of this ancient debate, and it was not the side that had won the day in first-century Israel among those who controlled access to the temple.

43 Although the eunuch is called an Ethiopian (Greek *Aithiops*), we should not automatically think that his refers to present day Ethiopia, which in biblical times was known as Abyssinia, not Ethiopia. *Aithiops* is the standard Greek translation for “Cush” in the Greek Old Testament. Edwin M. Yamauchi has shown why this most likely referred to the ancient nation of Nubia (today’s Sudan, between Egypt and Ethiopia). See Yamauchi, *Africa and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), chap. 6: “Why the Ethiopian Eunuch Was Not from Ethiopia” (161–81). But even if he was not from present day Ethiopia, the eunuch may well have been the channel for the spread of the church to Africa, which then led to the founding of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. We might regard that as a possible fulfillment of the words of Isa 56:5 about “a monument and a name” for faithful eunuchs. But beyond that, the very narrative about the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 has fulfilled that promise.

Although Jesus himself taught a message of radical love and welcome, even for enemies (Matt 5:44; Luke 6:27) and explicitly quoted Isa 56:7, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations” (Mark 11:17), the episode about the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 comes before Jesus’s radical message had been consciously worked out in the communal ethics of the early Christian movement. So Philip’s sharing the good news about Jesus with the eunuch (prompted by the Spirit) is an anticipatory example of reaching out to the gentiles, predating Peter’s important insight (in Acts 10) about the place of God-fearing gentiles in the plan of God.

The Jerusalem Council as an Example of Biblical Decision-Making

Indeed, it was not until Acts 15 that the early church called a council to formally and explicitly grapple with the status of gentiles in the growing Jesus movement. Here, in the famous Jerusalem council, we find the early church debating whether gentiles who wanted to join the Jesus movement needed to become Jews first.

The issue was sparked by some of the early Jesus followers who claimed that salvation—even for gentiles—depended on their being circumcised (in the case of men) in accordance with the law of Moses (Acts 15:1). We are told that Paul and Barnabas had quite a dispute with this group, and that as a result they were sent as a delegation to the mother church in Jerusalem to discuss the question with the apostles and elders there (Acts 15:2).

On the way there (as they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria) Paul and Barnabas “reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers” (Acts 15:3). And then, when they arrived in Jerusalem, “they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them” (Acts 15:4). The consistent refrain so far is that Paul and Barnabas have been reporting the conversion of the gentiles as a significant fact to which they can testify.

But in Jerusalem, they were again opposed by some of the believers (associated with the Pharisaic movement), who claimed that the gentiles needed to be circumcised “and ordered to keep the law of Moses” (Acts 15:4). This was, after all, the authoritative Jewish tradition of what faithfulness to God involved. So “the apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter” (Acts 15:6).

What is particularly interesting is how the decision-making is narrated. First of all, Peter speaks (Acts 15:7–11), then Barnabas and Paul follow (Acts 15:12); all three testify to the fact that gentiles have been converted to the gospel of Jesus. Finally, James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, says his piece—quoting Scripture and rendering a verdict (Acts 15:13–21).

Peter, the first to speak, begins by reminding his audience that God chose him to bring the good news to the gentiles (an allusion to the events of Acts 10) and he

reports their conversion, claiming that God has “testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit” (Acts 15:8), “cleansing their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:9). Based on this *appeal to experience* (the claim that God has already been working among the gentiles, apart from circumcision), Peter recommends that the yoke of the law of Moses should not be placed on the necks of these new disciples (Acts 15:10), since this would amount to putting God to the test (Acts 15:9).

Then Barnabas and Paul speak, and although their words are not quoted, we are informed that, “the whole assembly kept silence, and listened to [them] as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles” (Acts 15:12). This is, again, an appeal to experience. For many contemporary Christians, including the Caribbean church, this is a bit disconcerting. Shouldn’t we begin with what the Bible definitively teaches, and subordinate our experience to that teaching?

It is only at this point that James begins to speak, and (thankfully) he brings Scripture into the mix. But he doesn’t start with Scripture, as we might hope. Instead, he begins by affirming the report given by Peter, namely, that “God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name” (Acts 15:14). So far there have been four cases of highlighting human experience (Acts 15:3, 4, 8–9, 14). It thus seems like a bit of an anti-climax when James notes that “this agrees with the words of the prophets” (Acts 15:15).

And then the prophetic text he quotes is an obscure one from Amos 9:11–12, which doesn’t even match what we find in the Hebrew Bible, on which our Old Testament is based. James seems to be quoting from a version of the Greek Septuagint (LXX), which speaks more clearly of the turning of the gentiles to the God of Israel than the Hebrew text did (and even then he seems to have modified the quotation somewhat).⁴⁴

But the real problem is not that the LXX text James quotes is different from the Hebrew, nor even that James (or Luke, the author of Acts) may have adapted the

44 It turns out that almost all Old Testament quotations in the New Testament are from some version of the LXX or other early Greek translation (rather than the Hebrew); and New Testament authors often seem to adapt the original in small ways (though some of what seem like adaptations may simply reflect a different textual tradition, since what we call the LXX is not a single Greek translation, but a variety of textual traditions, some of which were similar to Hebrew manuscripts from Qumran). The LXX that we find bound with the New Testament in various fourth and fifth century codices is an expanded, synthetic text, based on the *Hexapla* of the church father Origen. In the late AD 230s Origen compiled his Old Testament in six columns (thus *Hexapla*), with the Hebrew consonantal text in one column, a transliteration of the Hebrew into Greek characters in column 2, the Greek versions of Aquila, Symmacus, and Thodotion as columns 3, 4, and 6, with column 5 being a version of the LXX (as Origen reconstructed it, often supplemented with phrasing from the other ancient Greek versions). Although Origen used a number of textual notations to indicate both the changes he had made and how the Greek differed from the Hebrew, it was this harmonized Greek text in column 5, devoid of textual notations, that ended up becoming the *de facto* LXX in later generations.

LXX text to his purposes.⁴⁵ Both the citation of the LXX rather than the Hebrew and the adaptation of quotations by New Testament authors is standard practice, well known to biblical scholars.⁴⁶

More troubling for many contemporary readers of Acts 15 is that the appeal to Scripture by James seems to be an add-on to the primary appeal to human experience by Peter, Paul, and Barnabas. What justifies this appeal to experience even *before* the appeal to Scripture?⁴⁷

And, beyond that, what justifies this *very selective* use of Scripture? If James could appeal to Amos 9 for the inclusion of the gentiles, couldn't his opponents have appealed to a broad swath of Scriptures that speak to God's separation of his chosen people from the nations (as in Leviticus) and even for the explicit exclusion of gentiles (such as Ezra-Nehemiah)? And what about those prophetic texts that suggest that Israel will rule over the gentiles, so that the situation of the nations oppressing Israel will be reversed in the age to come?⁴⁸ How would James—or anyone else—know *which* Scriptures were applicable to the situation in Jerusalem?

Let me state upfront that I do not think that the procedures of the Jerusalem council—beginning with human experience, and only then bringing Scripture to bear on the question—support either relativism (equivalent to a simplistic appeal to experience as absolute) or proof-texting (selecting only favored Scriptures,

45 For details about the form of the LXX used by James at the Jerusalem council, including an analysis of the changes that James (or Luke) made, see W. Edward Glenny, "The Septuagint and Apostolic Hermeneutics: Amos 9 in Acts 15," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 22.1 (2012): 10–15 (full article 1–26). Glenny notes that James's phrase "the words of the prophets" (plural) may have been intentional, since not only was the LXX of Amos 9:11–12 already influenced by another prophetic text that speaks of the conversion of the gentiles (Zech 8:22–23), but the quotation in Acts 15 draws on phrasing from various prophetic texts with a similar theme, including Hos 3:5 (changing "In that day" to "after this" in Amos 9:11), Jer 12:15 (the addition of "I will return" in Amos 9:11), Zech 8:22 (specifying that it is "the Lord" that the nations will seek, in Amos 9:12), and Isa 45:21 (inserting the phrase "known from long ago," so that the Lord "who *does* these things" becomes the Lord "who *makes* these things *known from long ago*" at the end of Amos 9:12 [the verb *poieō* can mean to *do* or to *make*]). For a discussion of how (and possibly why) the LXX of Amos 9:11–12 is rendered differently from the Hebrew, see Glenny, 3–10.

46 For a lucid summary, see Timothy Michael Law, *When God Spoke Greek: The Septuagint and the Making of the Christian Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), chap. 8: "The Septuagint behind the New Testament" and chap. 9: "The Septuagint in the New Testament." Although most Old Testament quotations in the New Testament are from earlier versions of the LXX, the quote from Zech 12:10 in John 19:37 is identical to the later Greek text of Theodotion (which meant that Theodotion was using this form of the Old Greek as the basis for his translation).

47 A helpful essay on the Jerusalem council is Sylvia C. Keesmaat, "Welcoming the Gentiles: A Biblical Model of Decision Making," in *Living Together in the Church: Including Our Differences*, ed. Greig Dunn and Chris Ambidge (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 2004), 30–49.

48 Christopher Zoccali notes that there are two general prophetic understandings of Israel's future relationship to the nations. One envisions Israel's "service to other nations," a process where they are restored to equity with Israel. But the other prophetic understanding focuses on Israel's "abiding privilege," which sometimes involves the nations submitting to Israel, who will rule them with a rod of iron. See Zoccali, *Whom God Has Called: The Relationship of Church and Israel in Pauline Interpretation, 1920 to the Present* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010), 160–62.

which support our own agenda). Clearly, the statement of the council, “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28), suggests a communal process of active listening to what the Spirit has been saying in and through the lives of those who are being transformed by this Spirit (the undeniable fact of gentile conversion is the starting point of the discussion). But this communal discernment of the current situation (the lay of the land, if you will) is undergirded by an implicit, though astute, reading of Israel’s canonical “map” (the overall narrative thrust of Scripture, which indicates the direction of “north”).

Certainly, this map-exploration (Scripture searching) is not explicit in Acts 15. But that is because the early church had been struggling, from its origin, with trying to understand why Jesus, the Messiah, was rejected by his own people, and what it meant for them to follow this one who was crucified and is now risen from the dead.⁴⁹ The church came to understand that the very trajectory of Scripture was summed up in the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and future parousia of Jesus of Nazareth. Likewise, the identity of the church, as the followers of this Messiah, had to be worked out by grappling with the Scriptures in order to understand the very meaning of their existence as God’s people.

Jesus himself, on the road to Emmaus, explained to two of his followers something he had been emphasizing to the Twelve on previous occasions (Matt 16:21; 17:22–23 26:1–2; Mark 8:31; 9:30–31; Luke 9:22; 18:31–33), that it was “necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory” (Luke 24:26). And “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (Luke 24:27).

Likewise, Paul passed on to the church in Corinth what he had received as of first importance, “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve” (1 Cor 15:3–5). And we saw that Philip came alongside the Ethiopian eunuch who had been reading from Isa 53, “and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus” (Acts 8:35). The church, in other words, had been struggling since its inception with how the complex Scriptures they had inherited cohered in the person of the Messiah Jesus.

This grounding of the Christ event in the Scriptures is not proof-texting. Rather, the interweaving of multiple scriptural quotations, echoes, and allusions throughout the New Testament discloses a profound reading of the Scriptures as telling a

49 We might say they were trying to put together their inherited map (the Scriptures) with the lay of the land they were confronted with (the Christ event, in all its complexity).

coherent story of God's purposes for the world.⁵⁰ I judge that some version of the plot analysis sketched earlier in this essay had already been discerned by the early church and was in play when the apostles and elders convened in Jerusalem.

The situation in Acts 15 is thus no different from our own communal discernment today, when we try to understand how Scripture (inspired by the Holy Spirit) addresses the church in its contemporary situation, faced with new contextual challenges. We encounter the same bewildering array of biblical texts, which often point in different directions. And, like the early Christians, we are confronted with various groups in the church using different texts to advance divergent interpretations of the way forward.

Faithful Improvisation as the Path Forward

Brian Walsh and I previously used an adapted form of N. T. Wright's model of a five-act biblical drama (consisting in *Creation, Fall, Israel, Jesus*, and the *Church*) as a helpful way to think about how God's people might live out our calling in a postmodern world.⁵¹ Wright suggests that we are currently in the midst of the fifth act of the biblical drama, equivalent to the epoch of the *Church*. More and more writers have been using Wright's model (often following our addition of a sixth act, the *Consummation*) in order to articulate how it is possible to be faithful to the biblical story in a new historical and cultural context.⁵²

Here it will be helpful to summarize Wright's model, in order to apply it to the Jerusalem Council and to our own context today. Wright invites us to imagine a previously unknown play by Shakespeare that had been lost, but is now discovered, perhaps in an attic somewhere in England. This would not only generate great excitement among Shakespeare fans, but many Shakespeare repertoire com-

50 Richard B. Hays has helpfully illuminated the way in which Old Testament quotations, echoes, and allusions are interwoven into the New Testament. See *Hays, Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989); *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014); and *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016).

51 N. T. Wright, "How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?" *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991): 7–32. For our adaptation of Wright's model, see J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1995), 182–84.

52 Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen employ our suggestion of a sixth act in *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 14, 22, though they acknowledge their dependence only in a footnote (235, n. 6). Kevin Vanhoozer also adapts Wright's model to add the *Consummation* as a separate act but prefers to see *Fall* as part of the first act (*Creation*), thus ending up (like Wright) with a five-act drama. See Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model" in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry and Gary T. Meadors (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 151–99 (see esp. 173–74).

panies would want to put on the play. The trouble is that this five-act play is incomplete. The script breaks off somewhere during the fifth act.⁵³

This, Wright suggests, is similar to the Bible, in that the script (the biblical record) ends soon after Act 5 gets going, near the conclusion of the first century (we could consider the first century church as equivalent to Act 5, Scene 1). Here is where the suggestion of a sixth act makes sense, since we have glimmerings (in the book of Revelation, and elsewhere) of the culmination of the biblical drama in a new heaven and new earth, when sin and evil are vanquished, the nations are gathered in, and creation is healed. But we live now between the times, after the fifth act has begun, but before the sixth.

Our situation is analogous to that of a repertoire company that wants to stage the unfinished Shakespeare play. What would be the best approach? In the case of the Shakespeare play, three possibilities come to mind. First, someone could finish writing the fifth act. The trouble is that this would put in finalized, fixed form an ending to the drama that might not cohere with what the playwright had in mind. A second alternative would be for a Shakespeare repertoire company to stage the play and when the script ends they could just stop. But that would be terribly unsatisfying, both for the actors and the audience.

There is, however, a third option, somewhere between the fixity of the first option and the unsatisfying predicament of the second. “Better, it might be felt,” explains Wright, “to give the key parts to highly trained, sensitive and experienced Shakespearean actors, who would immerse themselves in the first four acts, and in the language and culture of Shakespeare and his time, *and who would then be told to work out a fifth act for themselves.*”⁵⁴

The actors, in other words, would have to *improvise* an ending. But this ending would need to be consistent with the play so far. Different groups of actors would undoubtedly improvise *different* endings. But for these various endings to have validity, as legitimate (though not identical) improvisations of *this particular play*, the actors would need to immerse themselves in the script, practicing their roles until they come to an intuitive understanding of the various characters and their motivations. They would especially need to have a solid grasp of where the plot is going, with a sense of what might be appropriate in the scenes that follow.

Wright notes that the extant script would function as the “authority” for the actors, in that “anyone could properly object to the new improvisation on the grounds that this or that character was now behaving inconsistently, or that this or that sub-plot or theme, adumbrated earlier, had not reached its proper resolution.”⁵⁵

53 Wright’s essay is available online (<http://ntwrightpage.com/2016/07/12/how-can-the-bible-be-authoritative/>) and as a downloadable PDF (<http://resources.thegospelcoalition.org/library/how-can-the-bible-be-authoritative-the-laing-lecture-for-1989>).

54 Wright, “How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?,” 18; emphasis original.

55 Wright, “How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?,” 18–19.

But he also cautions that the authority of the script does not mean that the actors are simply to repeat earlier parts of the play *ad infinitum*. Since the script has “its own impetus, its own forward movement,” this would lay a demand on the actors to take the creative risk of improvisation.

As anyone who has ever done improv theater or musical improvisation (whether jazz, blues, reggae, rock, or bluegrass) is aware, there is nothing arbitrary about *good* improvisation. It requires significant rehearsal time. Whereas improv theater involves intensive practice of multiple routines, as well as a sense of where the particular dramatic piece is going, musical improvisation requires regular practice of scales (until they are part of muscle memory), as well as a solid understanding of the underlying structure of the given musical piece.

When we apply this to the sort of improvisation required for *faithfulness* to the biblical drama, we might suggest that Christians need to have significant engagement with Scripture in its breadth (grasping its overarching narrative trajectory) and in its depth (attending to textual details). And such engagement cannot be limited to Bible study (whether formal or informal), but should include participation in the church’s liturgy (its patterns of worship), as well as participation in a life of discipleship, as we seek to embody the non-negotiable directives that Scripture provides (to the extent that we can discern such directives).

And then, when we come to those issues that Scripture does not explicitly address, where there is literally no script (which applies to a great deal of contemporary life), or where the direction Scripture gives is complex and even confusing—at that point improvisation comes into play. Such improvisation would need to be consistent with the direction of the biblical script so far and faithful to the Author’s plot intentions. But it would also need to take into account the current lay of the land.

It is no good for any one group of Christians to claim that they simply live out the script of the Bible, while other groups are making things up as they go along (this might well have been the attitude of the Ezra-Nehemiah group to the “deviant” perspective articulated by Isa 56–66). If we are honest with ourselves, we will recognize (and thus admit) that we are *all* engaged in improvisation. No one lives purely out of the Bible, unaffected by their context.

If we think about it, the church has been improvising on the script of the biblical drama for two millennia now. Some of that improvisation has been consistent with the script and, at the same time, innovative, opening up new avenues of faithfulness (such as the abolition of slavery by European Christians in the nineteenth century and, prior to that, the pervasive resistance to slavery by African Christians in the Caribbean). However, some of the church’s improvisation has been mixed or even sub-par, perhaps retarding or even impeding the fulfill-

ment of the biblical plot. Indeed, some of the church's improvisation over the centuries may be judged to have flatly contradicted the basic thrust of Scripture.

The question, therefore, is not *whether* we are improvising, but whether our improvisation is *faithful* to God's purposes in the biblical drama, given the present lay of the land.

The Faithful Improvisation of the Jerusalem Council—and Beyond

The result of the Jerusalem council's deliberations, after having heard the testimony of Peter, Paul, and Barnabas, is James's decision "that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood" (Acts 15:19–20). This list, which may be intended to echo aspects of the so-called Noahide laws (which Jews understood as applying to all people), is repeated in the letter sent with Paul and Barnabas (along with two other representatives) to the church in Antioch (Acts 15:28–29).

Given this momentous decision (which exempts gentile converts from circumcision and counsels them to avoid eating food offered to idols), it is fascinating that when Paul later improvises on these themes in his letters to the churches, he seems to have a more lax attitude to the matter of food offered to idols (1 Cor 8:1–13; also Col 2:16–17) and he claims that "in Christ Jesus neither circumcision *nor* *uncircumcision* counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love" (Gal 5:6; also 1 Cor 7:18–19).

In both cases (food offered to idols and circumcision), Paul's point is that concern for the well-being of others is more important than particular rules (and is especially more important than our own agendas). But Paul never loosens the ruling about avoiding sexual immorality—though, unlike many in the church today, he does not highlight sexual sin as greater than any other sort (see the list of sins in Rom 1:18–32; 1 Cor 6:9–10; Gal 5:19–21; Eph 5:3–6).

Admittedly, the different (even contrary) ethical injunctions in Scripture can be disorienting for Christians seeking definitive guidance for contemporary living.⁵⁶ And the fragmented and often oppressive social realities with which we are confronted (in the Caribbean and elsewhere) make it difficult to discern a clear path ahead. It is, therefore, important to acknowledge one significant way in which the Bible is *different* from an unfinished play by Shakespeare. Unlike Shakespeare, the Author of Scripture is still with us to provide guidance in our improvisation.

56 Beyond these contrary ethical injunctions, the textual variants between the Hebrew and Greek sources available to the early Christians can be confusing for modern Bible readers, who assume a singular "Old Testament"; and this is even apart from the relative fluidity of *which* texts counted as "Scripture" for different Christian groups prior to the closing of the Old Testament canon (indeed, there are different canons for Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox communions today). There is really no way around it; the church has *always* been improvising.

The presence of the Author at the Jerusalem Council is evident in the famous words that preface the ruling that was passed on to the church in Antioch: “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). Jesus told his disciples that the Spirit would remind them about his teaching (John 14:26) and would lead them into all truth, orienting them to what is yet to come (John 16:13).

The question for the church today in the Caribbean (indeed, for the church throughout the world) is whether we are attending to the overall direction of the biblical drama, while taking into account the complex lay of the land—all the while listening to the prodding of the Holy Spirit. Only then will we be led into innovative, yet faithful enactment of the next scene in the unfolding drama of God’s redemption, in the context of our fractured and hurting world.