

## Connecting the Dots: Responsible Biblical Interpretation Today

Honoring the interrelationship between the Bible, theology, and the needs of the people

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As a visiting professor of New Testament and Practical Theology at MIT over the past ten years, and as an ordained Christian minister over the past thirty-five years and former pastor, I am keenly aware of the important interrelationships between the Bible, theology, and preaching. Sacred texts (the Bible) inform our thoughts about the sacred (theology), producing ideas that significantly influence how we minister to the needs of the people (preaching, teaching, and counseling). How we read the Bible affects what we believe about God, and what we believe about God (and related subjects) affects how we pray, live, work, serve, and relate to others.

The goal of this article is not to simply repeat what anyone reading it already knows (at least intellectually) about the important interrelationship between the Bible, theology, and preaching. Rather, I'm writing out of a conviction that those of us entrusted with teaching, writing, leading, and ministering need to be more intentional and more diligent in holding the three together in coherent, meaningful, and faithful ways. Whether we teach in a seminary, Christian college, the church or some other setting where Christian education takes place, we have a sacred duty to be thoughtful and thoroughgoing in bridging between our intellectual work and the practical world. We have an obligation as leaders to interpret the Bible responsibly, offer sound theological reflection, and provide relevant and useful guidance to those who look to us for instruction in church and society.

What I'm talking about is our responsibility to "connect the dots" in our academic and practical ministries. For those not familiar with the expression, "connecting the dots" refers to creating a picture of something by drawing lines between (connecting) dots on a piece of paper. The expression addresses the intellectual problem that arises when we just focus on one idea or issue in isolation from others. In this article, we'll be talking about three different academic disciplines (Bible, theology, and practical ministry). If we look at each one in isolation from the other, we may develop ideas and practices that only make sense within our narrow academic world (say, the world of Biblical criticism, hermeneutics, theology and philosophy, or human services) but don't create a meaningful or coherent "picture" when we combine our ideas with the other points of view (Bible, theology, *and* ministry). That is, the all-to-common "silo" approach to academia and ministry can produce very skewed results that might make sense within a particular discipline but do a disservice to the Church and the Kingdom of God.

For example, one could imagine a Bible scholar interpreting a biblical text in ways that are interesting and "sound" from a particular exegetical or hermeneutical paradigm yet yield little of value for Christian theology or the church. Or, consider a theologian whose ideas are stimulating and intriguing among his/her fellow theologians but are only marginally supported by Scripture and are unhelpful in the church. Or, how many ministers sincerely preach something from their hearts or out of their own personal convictions, but what they are saying does violence to the overall teaching of the Bible, is theologically confusing, or contradicts basic Christian teaching?

In this article, I am not writing to criticize anyone in particular or any specific interpretative method (hermeneutic), theology, or ministry practice. Rather, I'm writing out of a deep concern for those who look to us for spiritual and theological guidance. I'm convinced that

we, scholars and ministers, have a sacred duty to connect the dots between Bible, theology, and preaching (practical ministry) for the sake of the people we serve. What picture emerges as we do our work responsibly? Is our work faithful to the central messages of Scripture, comprehensible in our context, and relevant for real people with real needs? Whose face will become visible as we connect the dots? Will others “see” the image of God, the Father? the face of Jesus? or someone or something else? Of course, it takes far more than three dots to create a picture, but the point is simply this: when we teach, write scholarly articles, preach, and serve as Christian leaders, *our thoughts, words, and actions must honor the interrelationship between the Bible, theology, and the needs of the people in ways that direct people to God in Christ and strengthens the body of Christ.* This article attempts to offer some modest suggestions for how we could do that responsibly and effectively. But first, it may be helpful to consider further the significance of theology along with some of the limitations and challenges we face in trying to connect the dots.

### **Theology matters**

As theologians, two of the most important theological questions to ponder are, what is the nature of God and how do we, as human beings, God’s creations, experience God? The answers we propose to these academic questions have huge practical implications for our relationship with God, how we live, and how we interact with one another. How we view God, and how we understand Jesus Christ for that matter, greatly affects what we expect (or hope for) from God and what we expect (or hope for) from ourselves and others. Further, our answers get to the core of what we believe about spirituality and the kind of relationship we can have with God.

Is “God” personal or impersonal? That is, is God a living being with whom we can have an intimate, personal relationship? Or, is God primarily a force, something to be tapped into in order to give us power? Will we be drawn to God in an intimate way, seek a personal relationship with God, and love God from our hearts as well as our minds (as so many biblical figures did) or will our relationship with God be more impersonal and more interested in whatever power we can derive from our connection to God? This issue is significant, complex, and cannot possibly be addressed in one small paragraph. I raise it simply to illustrate the fact that how we understand God will have implications for how we will think about God, pray, and serve. How we answer these questions will affect how we talk about God from the pulpit and how we will lead in our churches and communities.

Another relevant theological question pertains to how God works in the world and in human lives. Historic, orthodox Christianity has maintained that God is quite active to provide salvation, lead God’s people, and produce good out of our suffering and struggles. However, others consider God to be distant or absent from human affairs, leaving the fate of the world in the hands of human beings. If we believe that God is actively working, does God work independently of human beings or primarily through human beings and all other forces he has created? Are we part of God? Is God part of us?

Again, our answers to this important theological question (how God works in the world and in relation to human beings) have huge implications for our relationship with God as well as for how we are going to talk about God as ministers and Christian leaders. Do we reach for help *externally* (to God outside of us, as ancient Israel did in times of oppression and need) or *internally* (to God within, as the Psalmist, Paul, and other biblical writers model for us)? Whom

do we worship? Who has authority over our lives? In whom do we place our hope—in God, in ourselves, or in some combination of the two?

Further, how we answer the questions about the nature of God (personal or impersonal) and how God works through human beings (independently, inter-dependently, cooperatively, etc.) will influence our understanding of who Jesus was, who Christ is, and what we mean when we say Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior. Is Jesus Christ God incarnate, who provides salvation for those who put their faith in him (as orthodox Christianity has traditionally confessed), or is he primarily a great, moral or spiritual example to us (as liberal theologies of the past century have often asserted)? The implications of our answers are again significant. If Jesus Christ is seen as our Savior and Lord (as traditionally understood), then our most important response to his life, death, and resurrection is faith and dedication to him as a person. If Jesus is primarily our role-model (but not Savior in the traditional sense), then we should look to him for inspiration and wisdom as adherents of other religions look to their central figures (e.g., Moses, Buddha, Mohammed, Confucius) and rely on ourselves to live ethically and work for a better world.

Theology naturally leads to anthropology (how we understand the nature of human beings), human agency (what humans are capable of doing) and human responsibility (what God expects of us). Questions about the nature of God and Jesus Christ lead us to wonder about ourselves, our nature, our ability, our connection to God, our responsibility, and so forth. For example, do God's creatures have an independent existence for which we are responsible? That is, do we have a will, power, and responsibility to determine our own lives, or are we pawns of God who determines what we think and do for us? If we're not pawns, how independent are we? How free? How much responsibility? How much power? What power do we have that doesn't come from God? And even if we are free, independent, and able to determine our own destinies,

do we still need God's working in and through us to fulfill our God-given purpose? And if we need God's power, is that something God gives us through his Holy Spirit from outside of us or is it already built into us, as human creations made in the image of God?

All of these questions are very difficult, if not impossible, questions to answer with fine detail. However, our answers to them will affect our sense of responsibility, motivation, and priorities. For example, will we get up in the morning more eager to fulfill our responsibilities and take initiative to accomplish something for the sake of the kingdom of God, or will we draw closer to God so that we can see what God is doing, and so that we may be in better synch with the moving and leading of the Holy Spirit?

If we believe our lives and history are determined by God, then we may assume that we do not have responsibility to make our lives, families, villages, churches, nation, and world better. On the other extreme, if we believe that God is essentially absent or disinterested in human affairs, or if we equate ourselves with the divine, we may assume that all progress in human existence and society is on our shoulders. Only we can do what needs to be done. Success depends on our creativity, wisdom, strength and effort. If, in yet another possible conceptualization of God, we believe that the truth about God is a great mystery, and we cannot know much about God or even know God personally, we may marginalize faith and religion. We may value spirituality in theory; but in practice, we will seek peace, inspiration, wisdom, power or whatever else we value or need from any number of human-created rituals, techniques, and disciplines—practices that may acknowledge the existence or activity of a Supreme Being, but, in the end, are not dependent on a relationship with this Being. These are but a few examples of how our view of God holds significant, practical implications for how we think, live, and relate to God and others. Our (conscious or subconscious, articulated or unarticulated) theology

profoundly influences our lives and how we engage with the many challenges and needs of our families, churches, and society.

Given, then, the huge significance of our theology and the wide range of views and possibilities that exists, we as biblical interpreters, theologians, and ministers have a great responsibility to test our theological ideas in at least two ways. First, we need to test the ideas against what the writers of the Bible witness and teach. Almost all theologians draw on the Bible in support of their theology. What I'm talking about is a serious test to see how well do our ideas fit with the primary theological and practical priorities found throughout Scripture. Second, we need to test our biblical interpretation and theology against how our ideas will be heard and appropriated in the church—what will be gained, what will be lost, how will our ideas address the needs of the people and chief aims of the Christian church? What is the big picture—the key ideas, images, and messages—that Christians in the villages, countryside, and cities will see and hear when we share our interpretation and theology with them? What will they think? How will they feel? How will they be helped? What will they do as a result?

### **Limitations and challenges in theological inquiry**

The examples I've given so far of key theological issues pertain to the nature of our relationship with God and its implications for human existence, including how we respond to God and function in the world. How are human beings both separate from God and yet connected to God? What is the best way to differentiate Creator from creation? How should we think and talk about divine action versus human agency and responsibility? As we have been saying repeatedly, our answers to these questions have great implications for how we might approach a whole host of personal and public matters, from our own relationship to God to leadership, service, conflict

resolution, ecology, justice issues and any number of other pressing personal and corporate concerns in church and society.

However, determining definitive answers to our important theological questions is very challenging. Actually, it's impossible from a strictly intellectual point of view. First, we are limited in what we can know about God, since God cannot be observed, interviewed, or examined. We can draw inferences from nature and experience, and we can study whatever God reveals to us through the prophets and apostles in Scripture, but our ability to perceive and comprehend is still quite limited. Second, we can find many theological tensions and conflicting ideas about God in Scripture. (For example, is God is vengeful or merciful, forgiving or unforgiving? Does he judge on the basis of works or grace or both? Does God always help, never help, or sometimes help those who cry out to him? Each of these conflicting ideas can find support in biblical stories and teaching.)

Consequently, our task as theologians, biblical scholars, and ministers is very challenging. We must look intently to Scripture for stories and teachings pertaining to theology, human agency and responsibility, and hope, yet with a certain humility about our limitations. We trust that God has revealed spiritual truth in Scripture, yet we must sift through a collection of testimonies and teachings that will not answer all our questions nor always provide a consistent message. Theology attempts to provide a coherent picture of God, human agency and responsibility, and hope; but the raw material theologians must work with (the Bible) provides many challenges for the interpreter.

As a result, in terms of methodology, we need to be disciplined to consider the biblical writings as whole, and not handpick our favorite stories or passages to create (or justify) our theologies. In spite of the conflicting ideas in the Bible, we need to let them all inform our



thinking and be careful not to impose our own social or political agendas on the Bible. We need to be humble enough to let the Holy Spirit speak to us, convict us, and transform us through Scripture. At the same time, we need to have enough faith and courage to challenge, object, and wrestle with ideas, stories, and practices that seem morally objectionable, out-of-date, or even harmful in our present context.<sup>1</sup>

### **Our duty and priorities as theologians and interpreters**

When drawing on Scripture for theologizing, Biblical interpretation, or preparing for preaching and teaching, I am assuming that any serious biblical interpreter will employ the standard exegetical practices taught in seminary. It should go without saying that we have a responsibility to do the best we can to determine a text's meaning in its original context and then study how it has been read, understood, and applied historically. These academic practices should be standard for biblical interpretation, yet they only foundational. For the sake of the people we serve, we theologians and ministers must take further steps to answer three sets of simple questions, which align with three of the most important purposes of Scripture:

1. What does this text say about God? Implied or explicitly, what is the author's view of God? Is this view idiosyncratic (unique to the author) or well-represented elsewhere in Scripture? Is the writer's theology spiritually helpful or problematic in any way? For example, does this theology draw readers closer to God in faith, trust, love, and devotion, or does it repel, alienate, and undermine one's ability to trust God?

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<sup>1</sup> For example, consider teachings and stories in the Bible that justify slaughtering men, women, and children; taking slaves; polygamy; patriarchy; shunning; etc. Whether we interpret these elements in Scripture positively, negatively, or neutrally, the point remains that biblical interpretation requires squarely facing the presence of these troubling teachings and stories in the Bible.

2. What does this text say about human agency and responsibility? As theologians and spiritual guides to others, we have an obligation to help readers of the Bible to know what they are capable of and what God expects of them. In some churches, for example, there is so much emphasis on the sinfulness of humanity and God's grace, some don't realize what they are capable of and how much they can contribute to so many pressing problems in their lives. In other churches, there may be so much emphasis on human initiative and responsibility that some don't fully appreciate their sinfulness and need for forgiveness, grace, and the work of the Holy Spirit.
3. Where is the hope? How does the theology in the Bible passage affect the reader's daily life and perspective on the world? Of course, not every biblical message is "hopeful," given the range of situations, circumstances, and relationships addressed in Scripture. However, ultimately the Gospel is good news precisely because of the hope it offers. The story of how God has brought salvation first to Israel and then to the whole world through Christ is fundamentally a message of hope for those who put their trust in God and Christ in heart, mind, soul, and actions. Connecting the dots from Bible to theology to the needs of the people calls for identifying whatever hope is discernible in any given passage.

### **Responsible interpretation in practice—Sample texts**

I've chosen several biblical passages to test out this proposed methodology for doing responsible biblical interpretation (i.e., connecting the dots between Bible, theology, and preaching). Many other passages could have been chosen, but I've selected a handful of texts that particularly illustrate the value of focusing on three proposed major interpretive questions: Who is God? What are humans capable of and responsible for? What hope does this text offer? What can and

should we be preaching? They also provide examples of some of the many challenges that arise in biblical interpretation.

### Psalm 103

Some biblical passages seem easy to interpret for the church today. However, they are not.

Consider Psalm 103 and many other psalms of praise, thanksgiving, and testimony.

Bless the LORD, O my soul,  
and all that is within me,  
bless his holy name.  
Bless the LORD, O my soul,  
and do not forget all his benefits—  
who forgives all your iniquity,  
who heals all your diseases,  
who redeems your life from the Pit,  
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,  
who satisfies you with good as long as you live  
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.  
The LORD works vindication  
and justice for all who are oppressed.  
(Psalm 103:1-6, NRSV)

A song of praise from David, recorded in 2 Samuel 22, is more personal but has a similar message:

The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;  
my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge,  
my shield and the horn of my salvation.  
He is my stronghold, my refuge and my savior—  
from violent people you save me.  
I called to the LORD, who is worthy of praise,  
and have been saved from my enemies....

He brought me out into a spacious place;  
he rescued me because he delighted in me.  
(2 Sam. 22:2-4, 20)

### *Analysis*

If we address the three sets of pertinent interpretive questions outlined above to these passages, we can summarize David's theology, his beliefs about human agency and responsibility, and his message of hope in the following ways.

**Theology:** The Lord is external, powerful, active in human affairs, worthy of praise. God chooses sides and is responsive to human cries for help.

**Human agency and responsibility:** Human beings are known by God and can be delighted in by God. Human beings can and should praise, trust, and pray; but it is God's efforts, not human effort, that saves them.

**Hope:** The Lord will give strength and help to those who ask.

### *Responsible Interpretation*

In passages such as these, the messages seem clear and relevant to believers of all generations. When David, and others in ancient Israel, praise God for his gifts and help, they absolutize their own personal experience in ways that sound like God always does such things for all believers, all the time. However, responsible interpretation will not take the testimonies we read in Scripture, no matter how they may be worded, as absolute truth for all people, in all circumstances, in all times. Why not? Because we all know very well that not all diseases are healed. Not all of us are satisfied with good all of our lives. The oppressed are not always delivered, nor do they always see justice and vindication in this life. We are not always protected from harm. When we consider all the faithful who have put their trust in God and have prayed with great faith, yet who have not been delivered from enemies, sickness, or other threatening forces, the full witness of Scripture (together with our own personal experience) indicates that

reality is more complex than the literal words of the psalms.<sup>2</sup> Interpreting psalms of praise and thanksgiving (Hebrew poetry) requires the caveat that these are testimonies, not absolute promises. They reflect the experience of the writers, not a prescription for all people under all circumstances.

When we are theologizing and preaching, we must certainly draw on these important testimonies and teachings in the Bible, but we must be careful not give false hope to people who are suffering (e.g., promising that because David declares that God heals all diseases that the sick person will definitely get better). On the other extreme, we must also avoid rejecting hope of God's intervention just because we know many examples of unanswered prayer, tragedy, and injustice (suggesting that David was mistaken, or that God doesn't heal or help people as biblical writers often claim). The Apostle Paul's example and teaching may be helpful here. While he would not hesitate to ask God for deliverance from danger or for material help in times of need,<sup>3</sup> he mostly taught Christians to seek spiritual help in the form of peace, comfort, and encouragement in the midst of their suffering, or to ask God to help them grow spiritually, particularly in faith, insight, and love.<sup>4</sup>

### 2 Samuel 21:1-14

In 2 Samuel 21, we find the story of King David reaching out to God in prayer for relief from three years of famine. This is a more difficult passage for interpreters.

Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year; and David inquired of the LORD. The LORD said, "There is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death." (2 Sam. 21:1, NRSV)

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Abel, Joseph, Josiah, Uriah, Daniel, Jesus, James, Stephen, et al., all suffered or died unjustly, in spite of their faithfulness and sometimes because of it. See, too, Hebrews 11:36-40.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., Phil. 1:19; 4:19; 2 Cor. 1:8-10.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Rom. 5:1-6; 8:28-39; Eph. 3:13-19; Phil. 1:9-11, 15-26; 4:4-7, 13.

According to the text, the famine Israel was suffering from was somehow linked to human sin. David's predecessor, King Saul, apparently had put the Gibeonites to death unjustly at some point. So, what did David do? He asked the aggrieved Gibeonites what would satisfy them, found out that they wanted seven male descendants of Saul offered as a sacrifice, and did as they requested.

He handed them over to the Gibeonites, who killed them and exposed their bodies on a hill before the LORD. All seven of them fell together; they were put to death during the first days of the harvest, just as the barley harvest was beginning. (2 Sam. 21:9)

And how did God respond, according to the story? He was mollified. The famine ended.

They buried the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan in the tomb of Saul's father Kish, at Zela in Benjamin, and did everything the king commanded. After that, God answered prayer in behalf of the land. (2 Sam. 21:14)

### *Analysis*

Theology: God is a God of justice, who holds humans accountable for their behavior. Yet, this point is not unequivocal. Israel is suffering because of the behavior of their former king. Is it just to make the people suffer for something someone else did years before? Maybe yes (who did the killing of the Gibeonites, if not the people, those who cooperated with Saul's orders?), maybe no (everyone suffered from the famine, including those born years after Saul's offense and children). One's point of view and the standards used for judging God's fairness determine one's answer. Nevertheless, even if some may feel that God is being unfair, there is a rhyme and reason to the logic of the passage: Saul acted rashly and cruelly against God's will; years later, God does not answer their prayers to deliver them from the famine as a result of Saul's shedding innocent blood; the people can make right what Saul did wrong; and God accepted their acts of atonement. In short, whatever one concludes about the justice of God, the theology emanating

from this story still affirms that God is just, but on God's own terms (whether we like them or not).

Human agency and responsibility: When leaders (such as Saul) sin, all the people may suffer as punishment from God (here, the famine). Further, David (presumably as king, believed it was his responsibility to somehow atone for the sins of the those who came before him (21:3), for the sake of the suffering people, so that God would again answer their prayers (here, stop the famine).

Hope: When we take responsibility for the wrongdoing we have or our nation has done, and seek to make wrongs right, relief from our suffering and the consequences of wrongdoing is possible.

### *Responsible Interpretation*

Meaningful interpretation of difficult biblical stories such as this one is challenging and sometimes may seem overwhelming. Yet, to work hard to connect the dots between the Bible, theology, and preaching is at the core of our responsibility as academicians, theologians, and ministers. How, then, are we to interpret this shocking and troubling story for our theology, teaching, and ministry?

On one level, this story fits with biblical teaching that sin multiplies human suffering. Sometimes, we bring suffering on ourselves due to our own foolishness or sin. Sometimes, we suffer because of the actions of others (e.g., the Gibeonites were killed unjustly by Saul). Sometimes, our suffering is due to God's refusal to bless a nation stained with blood-guilt (in this story, Israel suffered from the famine due to Saul's wrongdoing). In addition, this story indicates that human suffering is sometimes due to leaders seeking to right wrongs (David sacrificed Saul's descendants in compensation to the Gibeonites).

Yet, what are to make of human sacrifice in the Bible?<sup>5</sup> Do we need to agree with David's theology and actions to be respectful of Scripture? I think not. If our moral sensibilities are offended, can we object? Yes, certainly. Where is the justice in seizing seven (innocent, unwilling) descendants of Saul, killing them, exposing their bodies to the utter grief of their mothers and families? Further exegetical work may uncover additional mitigating circumstances for David's brutal treatment of Saul's male descendants, and a shrewd interpreter may also suspect ulterior political motives in David's actions; but on the surface, the story explains the decision to slaughter seven innocent, unwilling victims came as the result of David's belief that God expected him to appease the aggrieved Gibeonites.<sup>6</sup> That was his theology, his sense of human responsibility as a leader, and his plan to provide hope for his people suffering from famine.

Now, sometimes shocking biblical stories are intended to be "descriptive" rather than "prescriptive." That is, the writer is describing what someone thought and did, but not endorsing their theology or behavior.<sup>7</sup> One notable example from the Old Testament is the story of Jephthah, who sacrificed his daughter to keep a vow made to Yahweh (Judges 11:29). This horrifying story illustrates the impact of theology on practical living. It also provokes discussion on human responsibility. The writers of 1 Samuel and Hebrews alike reflect on Jephthah as a hero (1 Sam. 12:11; Heb. 11:32). Various attempts have been made to soften the barbarity of this

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<sup>5</sup> Strictly speaking, David did not sacrifice the seven men directly to God but did it to satisfy the Gibeonites. However, the narrative suggests that their sacrifice was required by God before the famine would end.

<sup>6</sup> The sacrifice of unwilling victims should not be confused with the voluntary sacrifice of righteous people. The notion of the sacrifice of the righteous on behalf of the nation is found in Hebrew tradition (e.g., 4 Macc 17:22) and is the theological underpinning for the substitutionary atonement interpretation of Jesus' death (see, Mk 10:45; Matt 20:28; Jn 1:29). I'm indebted to Nicholas Schaser, New Testament professor at Macelester College (Minneapolis, Minnesota), for bringing these texts to my attention in arguing that David's actions in this story are more in keeping with ancient biblical theology than I may want to acknowledge.

<sup>7</sup> There are many such examples in Judges, where the narrator tells stories of how God used the judges to deliver the people but does not necessarily endorse their beliefs or methods. Instead, he comments like, "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (e.g., Judges 17:6; 21:25).



story, such as suggesting that he didn't sacrifice his daughter but actually just required her to be celibate. However, there isn't much in the story to justify this interpretation. In my opinion, it is better to let the story speak for itself in its terrifying particulars: Jephthah made a foolish vow to God, and his daughter suffered the extreme consequences (she was killed). Apart from whatever else this story teaches about trusting in God for courage and strength to face one's enemies and lead God's people, there is at one practical lesson we can take from Jephthah's vow: Think before you open your mouth. Don't make foolish vows to God.

However, in the story of David's slaughtering seven descendants of Saul, there is no implicit, let alone explicit, criticism of David's actions in the story; and the conclusion that the Lord lifted the famine implies approval. So, in this case, we have to decide what to do with David's theology and leadership in light of internal conflict we might feel and tension with other Scripture.

Some of us may want to justify David's actions, portraying him as a strong leader who was willing to take bold action to honor God and address the needs of his people. Others may declare that his actions were morally wrong and should be repudiated. Still others may prefer saying that we cannot judge a situation so removed from our present day and circumstances. Regardless of our convictions on the matter, responsible interpretation requires providing biblically-based, theologically-sound, useful reflection on texts such as this one that puts the story in its broader biblical context and will be edifying in some way. Where is the hope?

For example, responsible interpretation might caution those who might want to use David's theology and actions as a guide for themselves today. Fortunately, none of us is a king with the option of selecting seven people to slaughter. None of us should think that we have a right to execute justice against someone (to take a life) as a vigilante or individual crusader. And

whenever we may be tempted to blame other people for our suffering (whether it is a tsunami, oppression, injustice, sickness, poverty, etc.), Jesus taught us never to wish evil on others. Some of us may even feel justified in punishing others (either actively or passively) as revenge or to exact justice. However, Christians cannot draw on this story to justify harming others in any way.

Responsible interpreters could also reflect on the story from the perspective of the grieving mothers who lost their sons. Sometimes our efforts to right wrongs produce new wrongs. Sometimes the injustice we seek to correct results in committing unjust actions against others. The biblical story begs the question, would there have been another way to compensate the Gibeonites without killing?

We also need to examine the theology and actions in any given story in light of other teachings in the Bible, in accordance with Reformed and Baptist traditions. First, we must admit that children/descendants in the Old Testament often suffered the consequences of sins committed by their parents (e.g., Exod. 34:7). For example, children would have been killed along with their parents when God executed judgment on whole cities.<sup>8</sup> However, Jeremiah, in foretelling the coming a new covenant, taught that God would no longer punish children for the sins committed by fathers/mothers as was done under the old covenant (e.g., Jer. 31:29-30; cf. Ezek. 18). Further, in contrast to David's belief, there is no teaching in Scripture that suggests that human sacrifice is prescribed or desired by Yahweh, as either a direct or indirect offering to God. The one notable exception is in the New Testament, where Jesus' death is interpreted as providing a sufficient sacrifice to atone for the sins of the world.<sup>9</sup> Yet, Jesus' sacrifice is a

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<sup>8</sup> See, as examples, Gen. 19:23-25; Num 21:2-3; Deut. 7:2.

<sup>9</sup> The substitutionary atonement theory is the dominant New Testament view. Examples include: Rom. 3:25; Eph. 5:2; Heb. 9:26; 10:10-18; 1 John 2:1-2; 4:10. Cf. Mark 10:45; 1 Tim. 2:6; and Heb. 9:15, where the notion of Christ sacrificing his life as a "ransom" is expressed.

special case, because New Testament writers describe it as a willing self-sacrifice on behalf of others, followed by vindication and resurrection.

In conclusion, even though we may be shocked or repulsed by stories such as this one, one constructive interpretive option would be to suspend judgment on David's theology and action, and let the story prompt us to search elsewhere in Scripture for a more appropriate understanding of God and for how God expects us to respond to sin. We could say, "that was then, but this is now." As grim and incomprehensible as that story may be to the average reader, hope emerges from it when we contrast David's theology and leadership with the good news of the new covenant, by which God provides atonement for sin through Jesus Christ and empowers us to be gracious, forgiving, and loving to others through his Holy Spirit. Whether David was right or wrong in his own day, the New Testament makes clear that no human sacrifice will ever be necessary or desired by God again, and wrongs can be righted without bloodshed.<sup>10</sup>

### 2 Samuel 24:1-14

There's another troubling story in 2 Samuel that poses a different kind of challenge for interpreters. Here the writer claims that the Lord prompted David to do something (take a census) that God had said was wrong to do, so that he could punish David and the people of Israel.

Again, the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go and take a census of Israel and Judah." (2 Sam. 24:1)

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<sup>10</sup> Biblical writers predominately portray God as merciful and forgiving, one who does not repay us according to what we deserve but according to his goodness and kindness (e.g., Dan. 9:4-14; cf. Exod. 34:5-7). In the New Testament, in particular, we find teaching from Jesus and the apostles on the importance of showing kindness, mercy, and forgiveness to those who do not deserve it, as a reflection of God's character (e.g., Zech. 7:9; Matt. 6:14; Eph. 4:32-5:1).

Thus, in this version of this story, the author says that the Lord was the one who prompted David to commit this sin. In a later version of this same story, Satan is the one who incited David to take the census (1 Chron 21:1). However, regardless of who prompted David, David holds himself responsible by himself, and so does God.

David was conscience-stricken after he had counted the fighting men, and he said to the LORD, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done. Now, LORD, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing." Before David got up the next morning, the word of the LORD had come to Gad the prophet, David's seer: "Go and tell David, 'This is what the LORD says: I am giving you three options. Choose one of them for me to carry out against you.'" (2 Sam. 24: 10-12)

### *Analysis*

**Theology:** This story indicates that God is differentiated from humans and yet very present and active in human affairs. He works in unseen ways and is capable of changing hearts, minds, nature, and outcomes.

**Human agency and responsibility:** David took responsibility for his decisions to count the troops, and later, he chose his punishment. Humans are held responsible for their actions by God, even if God is at work behind the scenes to provoke human action.

**Hope:** Hope is hard to find in this story, except perhaps in God's relenting of bringing the full judgment he promised on David (2 Sam. 24:16).

### *Responsible Interpretation*

This story is confusing as well as troubling. The text indicates that God is the sovereign force behind David's actions, the one who "incited" (prompted) David to do this sinful thing.

However, David is held morally responsible. Emotionally, it seems unfair. When we look elsewhere in Scripture, we find this same kind of tension between God's sovereignty and human responsibility in both Old and New Testaments. For example, in the story of the multiple

hardening of Pharaoh's heart, we read that the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart so as to provoke him to deny Moses' demand to let his people go.<sup>11</sup> The purpose was so that the Lord would be glorified, i.e., God did it because it fit with his purposes (e.g. Exod. 14:4). Yet, in some instances, the text says that Pharaoh hardened his own heart.<sup>12</sup>

As with other confusing Old Testament stories, we must first carefully identify what the text is saying and what the meaning of the text is in its context. In this case, the author wants to portray God as sovereign—nothing can thwart the will of God. The Lord is able to change and direct human hearts (and minds) in whatever ways fit with the Lord's purposes. At the same time, consistent with most biblical writings, humans are still held responsible for their own behavior. Without trying to reconcile these two key theological messages (God's sovereignty and human responsibility), responsible interpretation of Scripture will hold both in tension. This may be hard for the systematic theologian who wants to be able to clearly and consistently resolve this tension, but texts such as David's sin in counting his fighting men (2 Samuel 24) and the story of Pharaoh's hardened heart (Exodus 7-14) refuse to comply. The tension is there in plain sight without any attempt by the narrator to resolve it. Rather than ignore it or artificially resolve it, responsible biblical interpreters and theologians will identify and discuss this tension openly. In response to the various needs of their people, preachers will sometimes emphasize God's sovereignty to inspire humility and reliance on God's goodness, mercy, and generosity. Other times, they will preach human responsibility, calling the people to evaluate themselves, confess their sins, and repent.

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<sup>11</sup> Exod. 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 10, 27; 11:10; 14:4.

<sup>12</sup> Exod. 8:15, 32; 9:34.

### Preaching in Acts

In the Gospels and Acts, we find stories that are very much grounded in their historical context without indication about how they are to be appropriated by future generations or by people in other contexts. The writers include them as testimonies of how God worked through Jesus and the apostles, but the stories pose many challenges to interpreters. Here, we will consider responsible interpretation of New Testament sermons, focusing on just a few examples in Acts.

In both of Peter's famous sermons in Acts, he first explains to the Jews gathered in Jerusalem that Jesus' death was both their responsibility and a work of God (Acts 2:23; 3:11-26).<sup>13</sup> The climax of the sermons, though, comes when Peter interprets the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection and tells them precisely what they need to do in order to receive the salvation that comes from God.

“Therefore, let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.” Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:36-38, NRSV)

Then, in the second sermon, he concluded:

“Now, fellow Israelites, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer. Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets” (Acts 3:17-21).

### *Analysis*

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<sup>13</sup> This double theme of God's sovereignty and human responsibility is now a familiar theme in this article.

Theology: God is actively involved in human history, working to bring about salvation through Jesus, the Messiah. God speaks through prophets, forgives sins, restores broken people and nations. God's intention is to bless all peoples on earth.

Human agency and responsibility: Humans are responsible for their sins but unable to save themselves. They must put their faith in Jesus Christ, repent of their sins, and be baptized.

Hope: Forgiveness of sin and salvation from the judgment of God are available to all.

### *Responsible Interpretation*

The Gospel message as told throughout Acts offers great hope to all who put their faith in Jesus Christ. However, what is the applicability of Peter's sermons beyond his immediate context? The Gospel was preached first to the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles (Acts 13:26), but, as is well-known, Acts indicates that the message was eventually extended to all Gentiles, i.e., to the rest of humanity, as well.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, in the history of interpretation, the standard, orthodox interpretation of Acts is that the Gospel first preached in Jerusalem was also be relevant in Rome, New York, Nairobi, Beijing, and Yangon. The Council of Jerusalem agreed that the all requirements for Jewish converts would not be imposed on Gentiles, but the basic Christ-centered, Gospel message was the same (Acts 15). In Athens, Paul's approach to the Gospel changed because of his pagan context, but the core message of salvation through Jesus' death and resurrection did not change.<sup>15</sup>

As a result, an examination of Acts affirms the universality of the Gospel message to all peoples in all contexts. However, there remains the question of what is essential (core) to the

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<sup>14</sup> E.g., Acts 13:23, 25, 32, 38-39, 48. This is not to say that the Jews were thereafter excluded. Paul continued to preach to Jews after he turned to the Gentiles with his Gospel, and many became believers in Jesus (e.g., Acts 14:1).

<sup>15</sup> Acts 17:21-34. Paul models contextualizing his message by referencing their altar to an "unknown God" and quoting from their own poets, instead of referring to Old Testament prophets, prophecies, and teaching.

Gospel and what terminology can vary depending on the context. That is, were Peter and Paul contextualizing for the sake of their Jewish audiences (e.g., speaking of fulfillment of Jewish prophecies, the messiah, and the restoration “of all things”), or should we assume that everything they said belongs to the essentials of the Gospels (and cannot be altered or reworded)?

This question of what is essential in the Christian Gospel is much larger than we can address adequately here. Yet, we cannot ignore it in practice. Responsible biblical interpretation demands that we at least provisionally answer the question in our academic work and preaching. And when we believe that we cannot yet answer the question definitively (intellectually), we always have the option adopted by much of the historic Christian church of looking to the Apostle’s creed for what are essential, biblically-based, theological beliefs.

I believe in God, the Father almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit  
and born of the virgin Mary.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended to hell.

The third day he rose again from the dead.

He ascended to heaven

and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.  
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting. Amen.

## **Conclusion**

The main goals of this article have been, one, to demonstrate to Biblical interpreters, theologians, and ministers the importance of rigorously connecting the dots between Bible, theology, and



preaching; and two, to illustrate what responsible biblical interpretation looks like in practice when dealing with biblical texts, especially challenging stories and testimonies. Exegetes need to keep in mind how their exegesis will inform theological reflection. Theologians need to be sure to reach back to Scripture faithfully in the formulation of their theology and look forward to how their theology will inform Christian preaching. Practical theologians and ministers need resist the temptation to preach their own agendas without adequate consideration of biblical teaching and sound theological reflection.

While we, exegetes and interpreters, will sometimes analyze a text through one particular hermeneutical lens at a time (e.g., political, social, post-colonial, feminist, Asian, etc.), we must not neglect the big picture of what the text is saying that pertains to the needs of the people. We will also resist the temptation to use a text as a proof-text for our theological, hermeneutical, or social preferences without adequate consideration of broader, dominant biblical themes. When we are seeking fresh words and concepts to discuss the Gospel or other biblical teaching (for the sake of contextualizing for a particular ethnic group, to better address modern concerns and priorities, or to participate more effectively in inter-faith dialogue), responsible interpreters must choose words, concepts, and images that still honor the key theological messages found throughout the Bible—or else provide a solid, well-thought out rationale why not.

Practically, responsible interpreters will do the following.

1. Honor the intention of the text, as best scholars can determine it using bona fide exegetical methods of analysis and interpretation, clearly identifying the content and meaning of a passage in its literary and cultural context

2. Identify the theology expressed in the passage, what the text says about human agency and responsibility, and the implications for practical life (especially the message of hope) suggested by the writing, either explicitly or implicitly
3. Interact with the text and its message(s)—what thoughts, feelings, objections, concerns, questions, and issues are surfacing? Why do you think and feel as you do? What light do other Scripture passages bring to bear on the theology of the text? How well do your views fit with the history of interpretation of this passage?
4. Construct a coherent interpretation of the text that addresses whatever issues, lessons, insights, and questions arise for you individually or for your community
5. Keep in mind how others will read and apply what you say, write, and preach, and how your work will further the cause of Christ and strengthen the body of Christ

As I said at the beginning of this article, the value of connecting “the dots” between Scripture, theology, and preaching should be obvious and is nothing new for many of us. The goal of the article was to bring this awesome responsibility into sharper focus and to offer some practical biblical examples of how we could fulfill our sacred duty as exegetes, theologians, educators, and preachers more faithfully and effectively. If we are genuinely going to serve the needs of the people, we must continually ask ourselves these questions: What difference will our exegesis, theologizing, and preaching make for our students and parishioners? How will it enhance their relationship with God in Christ and prepare them to fulfill their roles in church and society? Where is the hope in our message?