

We Become What We Worship

A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF IDOLATRY

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Introduction

WHEN MY TWO DAUGHTERS, HANNAH AND NANCY, were about two or three years old, I noticed how they imitated and reflected my wife and me. They cooked, fed and disciplined their play animals and dolls just the way my wife cooked, fed and disciplined them. They gave play medicine to their dolls just the way we fed them medicine. Our daughters also prayed with their stuffed animals and dolls the way we prayed with them. They talked on their toy telephone with the same kind of Texas accent that my wife uses when she talks on the phone. It was amazing. Most people, I am sure, have seen this with children. But children only begin what we continue to do as adults. We imitate. We reflect, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously.

Most people can think back to junior high, high school or even college when they were in a group and to one degree or another, whether consciously or unconsciously, they reflected and resembled that peer group. Members of the group may have worn polo shirts with a certain logo, and a newcomer needed to have the same shirt in order to feel a part of the group. Others may have been in a group that was very athletic, and so to be accepted in the group the new kid had to pursue athletics. And still others, unfortunately, ran with a crowd in which they felt they had to use drugs or participate in other harmful activities. All of us, even adults, reflect what we are around. We reflect things in our culture and our society, sometimes consciously and sometimes subtly and unconsciously.

These contemporary examples follow a very ancient pattern that has its roots in the beginning of history. In Genesis 1 God created humans to be imaging beings who reflect his glory. What did God's people in the Old Testament, Israel, reflect, whether consciously or unconsciously? We will see what they resembled in their sinful disobedience. As we see what they reflected, we should ask ourselves whether we reflect anything similar in our culture today.

What do you and I reflect? One presupposition of this book is that God has made humans to reflect him, but if they do not commit themselves to him, they will not reflect him but something else in creation. At the core of our beings we are imaging creatures. It is not possible to be neutral on this issue: we either reflect the Creator or something in creation.

This book is not intended to be a comprehensive book on idolatry in the Bible but *primarily an attempt to trace one particular aspect of idolatry as it is sometimes developed in Scripture*. We will focus specifically on idol worshipers being identified with the idols around them. A number of the biblical passages that we will study express the idea that instead of worshiping and resembling the true God, idolaters resemble the idols they worship. These worshipers became as spiritually void and lifeless as the idols they committed themselves to. We will see that people are judged as their idols are; ironically, people are punished by means of their own sin: "Do you like idols? Then you will be punished along with them." It is difficult to distinguish between being punished like the idol and becoming identified with the character of the idol. Sometimes the idolater may not be viewed as reflecting the character of the idol but only suffering the same fate (e.g., being burned in destruction). At times it seems both are true.

Conversely, we will also discover how people are restored to the true worship of God and reflecting his likeness. Therefore, the main thesis of this book is: *What people revere, they resemble, either for ruin or restoration*. This then is a biblical-theological study of this one aspect of idolatry. Rather than attempting to observe threads of this theme throughout the Bible, we will proceed primarily by tracing the development of earlier biblical passages dealing with this theme and how later portions of Scripture interpret and develop these passages (what is today referred to as "intertextuality" or "inner-biblical allusion"). After setting forth these developments, a concluding chapter will address a sampling of contemporary concerns and applications of the study.

WHAT IS IDOLATRY?

Before launching into our study, I need to define *idolatry*. Martin Luther's larger catechism discussion of the first commandment ("You shall have no other gods before Me" [Ex 20:3]) included "whatever your heart clings to and relies upon, that is your God; trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and idol."¹ I might add here, "whatever your heart clings to or relies on *for ultimate security*." "The idol is whatever claims the loyalty that belongs to God alone."² These are good and basic definitions of idolatry. The word *idolatry* can refer to the worship of other gods besides the true God, or the reverence of images. According to both the ancient Near East and the Old Testament, an idol or image contained a god's presence, though that presence was not limited to the image.³ The ultimate biblical assessment about the purported divine reality behind idols is well summarized by Christopher Wright:

Although gods and idols are something in the world, they are nothing in comparison to the living God. . . .

[W]hile gods and idols may be implements of or gateways to the world of the demonic, the overwhelming verdict of Scripture is that they are the work of human hands, constructs of our own fallen and rebellious imagination. . . .

[T]he primal problem with idolatry is that it blurs the distinction between the Creator God and the creation. This both damages creation (including ourselves) and diminishes the glory of the Creator.

Since God's mission is to restore creation to its full original purpose of bringing all glory to God himself and thereby to enable all creation to enjoy the fullness of blessings that he desires for it, God battles against all forms of idolatry and calls us to join him in that conflict. . . .

[W]e need to understand the whole breadth of the Bible's exposure of the deleterious effects of idolatry in order to appreciate its seriousness and the reason for the Bible's passionate rhetoric about it.⁴

¹I was pointed to this reference by B. S. Rosner, "Idolatry," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. D. Alexander and B. S. Rosner (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), p. 571.

²J. A. Motyer, "Idolatry," in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Leicester U.K.: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 2:680.

³We will see evidence for this in the ANE below in chap. 2 in our discussion of Is 6. That a foreign deity's presence was considered to have been manifested in its image appears to be the best way to understand such texts as Ex 20:23 ("gods of silver or gods of gold"), Lev 19:4 ("do not turn to idols or make for yourselves molten gods"), and Josh 24:14 ("put away the gods which your fathers served").

⁴C. J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006), pp. 187-88.

This book will explore what Wright summarizes as the idolatrous “damages” to creation, especially humans as the crown of creation, and what he calls “the deleterious effects of idolatry” on humans, which is underscored by the “Bible’s passionate rhetoric about it.”

Discussions about the nature of idolatry often include the first two of the ten commandments in Exodus 20.

³You shall have no other gods before Me.

⁴You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth.

⁵You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, ⁶but showing loving-kindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. (Ex 20:3-6)

Though some commentators have seen the two commandments as separate, others have understood them as one.⁵ Whichever is the case, it seems plausible that the first commandment is to be interpreted by the second, so that to “have no other gods” before Israel’s God meant that one was not to make “an idol, or any likeness” of anything in the created world that was worshiped because it was believed that the divine presence was to be contained in that image. Even making an image in which the God of Israel was believed to be present (as likely in Ex 32:1-9) was forbidden for the following reasons: (1) God had not revealed himself in any form to Israel, and to portray him to any degree in the form of any part of the creation is to misrepresent him and thus to commit idolatry (Deut 4:12-16, 23-25). Accordingly, God’s “self-disclosure came through a revelation in words, and the Sinai experience constituted a paradigm of God’s self-disclosure to Israel; thus, images were prohibited.”⁶ (2) Images of God were also not allowed in order to maintain a continuing consciousness among God’s people that there is a distinction between the Creator and the finite creation, which “cannot even remotely accord with the absolute, transcendental character of the God of Israel.”⁷ (3) Images were also prohibited to maintain a continuing consciousness among

⁵The discussion in the preceding paragraph has followed B. S. Rosner, “Idolatry,” p. 575.

⁶E. M. Curtis, “Idol, Idolatry,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:379.

⁷U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), pp. 236-37.

the Israelites that their God is different from and incomparable to the pagan gods (Is 40:18-26),⁸ whose presence could be transferred to particular images in the form of created things, whereas God's presence could never be localized or captured in this manner. To deny that even part of the true God's presence can be possessed in a created object is to cause Israel to remember that every part of creation is the possession of God ("for all the earth is Mine" [Ex 19:5]) in contrast to the deities of the nations whose dominion is localized and only over the nation that worships them.⁹ "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in [the] spirit and truth" (Jn 4:24).¹⁰ To worship an image of any part of the creation is to take away from the incomparable glory of God: "I am the LORD, that is My name; / I will not give My glory to another, / nor My praise to graven images" (Is 42:8). God is "jealous" (i.e., intolerant of disloyalty) when people give glory to anything other than himself because he is truly the only being in the universe who deserves glory (cf. Ex 20:5; 34:14; Deut 4:24; 5:9; 32:16, 21).

In expounding on the second commandment, Calvin asserts that representing God by images of his creation is forbidden because as soon as people, who are so bound by physical surroundings, imagine a created image in connection to the deity, they are distracted from God's true spiritual being, and to some degree the deity is conceived of in some corporeal way.¹¹ It is all the more important not to make created images of God since such "idolrous deceits besiege us on every side, [so that] we shall in the vanity of our nature be liable" to turn aside to substitutions for the true worship of God.¹² "Since God has prescribed to us how He would be worshipped by us [i.e., apart from any images whatsoever], whenever we turn away in the very smallest degree from this rule, we make to ourselves other gods, and degrade Him from His right place."¹³ Such divinely prescribed worship is the difference "between

⁸See Curtis, "Idol, Idolatry," p. 379, for this latter point on incomparability.

⁹Ibid., p. 227.

¹⁰Though in the context of John 4 this refers to worshipers in the inaugurated eschatological age worshipping in the light of and in relation to escalated end-time realities (e.g., the eschatological gift of the Spirit), the principle still holds that since God is a spirit, he must be worshiped as a God without physical attributes.

¹¹John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Last Four Books of Moses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 2:116-17.

¹²Ibid., 2:127.

¹³Ibid., 1:419.

true religion and false superstitions.”¹⁴ Thus, though I have offered reasons behind the prohibition of images, Calvin rightly would say that God’s prescription of imageless worship is justification alone for such worship.

While it is true that there are appearances of God in human form, whether in heavenly visions or otherwise, it is generally acknowledged that these appear to be legitimate exceptions to the rule, especially since these are living appearances sovereignly initiated by God himself and not lifeless images made by humans in the form of parts of the creation. There is also general consensus that the second commandment did not prohibit the making of images in an artistic way to depict the parts of the creation, as long as these representations were not thought to represent God. While there is a distinction between an attempt to worship images of the true God and worshipping pagan gods (with or without images) and worshipping their images, the term *idolatry* in this study will refer to all of these, in line with our analysis of the first and second commandments, especially since biblical authors do not normally distinguish between them but consider both to be equally abominable.¹⁵

OTHER LITERATURE ON IDOLATRY

There are a fair amount of books and articles written directly and explicitly on idolatry, though many of these explore contemporary forms of idolatry and focus less on the notion in the Bible.¹⁶ Some of the pertinent material that has been written will be alluded to at various points throughout this book. There is, however, one book that has been published recently that is in some respects similar to the present one: Edward P. Meadors’s *Idolatry and the Hardening of the Heart*. Meadors relies on and develops to some degree the thesis about idolatry that have I set forth already in some articles and in my Revelation commentary, and on which this book will elaborate in more detail.¹⁷

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Curtis, “Idol, Idolatry,” p. 379, and more broadly Rosner, “Idolatry,” p. 571.

¹⁶See the bibliography compiled by S. F. Eix in *Ex Auditu* 15 (1999): 143-50, as well as bibliography in the footnotes of the articles in that volume on pp. 19-142; Ehud Ben Zvi, *Hosea* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 119, for secondary sources on Old Testament idolatry. Recently, see the well-balanced chapter on idolatry in Wright, *Mission of God*, pp. 136-88. Also, see Stephen C. Barton, ed., *Idolatry: False Worship in the Bible, Early Judaism and Christianity* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark International, 2007), though I became aware of this source too late to interact with it in the present work.

¹⁷Indeed, my prior publications on this topic are referred to in his book more than any other au-

Consequently, there are places where he states what is my own main thesis of this book: that people become like the idols that they worship, that is, they are described as becoming like their idolatrous objects of worship are portrayed.¹⁸ For the most part, however, Meadors discusses mere examples of idol worship without attempting to give examples of the principle of becoming like what we worship and the in-depth nature of it. In reality, Meadors's work traces a bit more the notion of "the hardening of the heart" as a part of idolatry (hence the title of his book), a specific theme I leave virtually untouched. He never gives one example of how idols are pictured as having "hard hearts." Consequently, when he then discusses people that Scripture says have hard hearts, and he says they have become as hardened as the idols, there is no precedent that he can point to as a precise parallel. Generally speaking, I think he is on the right track, but, in fact, the reality is that there is no place in Scripture that specifically affirms that idols have hard hearts and that those who worship them become as hardened as the idols that they worship. Nevertheless, Meadors's book does have some helpful discussions on the subject of idolatry.¹⁹

We will look at a number of examples whereby idols are described in a certain way, and then those who worship the idols are described in precisely the same manner. I will argue that the purpose of the identical description is to indicate mockingly that the worshiper, rather than experiencing an expected life-giving blessing, has received a curse by becoming as spiritually inanimate, empty, rebellious or shameful as the idol is depicted to be. For example, when idols are portrayed with eyes and ears that cannot see or hear, their worshipers are described as having eyes and ears but not see-

thor's, which are (1) "Isaiah 6:9-13: A Retributive Taunt Against Idolatry," *Vetus Testamentum* 41 (1991): 257-78; (2) "The Hearing Formula and the Visions of John in Revelation," in *A Vision for the Church: Studies in Early Christian Ecclesiology in Honour of J. P. M. Sweet*, ed. M. Bockmuehl and M. B. Thompson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), pp. 167-80. Meadors also refers to parts of my Revelation commentary, though he does not refer to the part where I discuss this idolatry topic most directly, where I integrated my earlier articles, on which see my *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 236-39.

¹⁸See Edward P. Meadors, *Idolatry and the Hardening of the Heart* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), pref., 2-3, 37-38, 49, 52, 59, 72, 84, 110, 167, 171-172, 190, 194. Most of the important examples that he mentions are in dependence on my earlier publications, though he does mention some other examples that I did not in my previous publications, but which I also have subsequently and independently observed in doing research for this book, and which I will point out as best as I can in agreement with him at points throughout the book.

¹⁹I will note the importance of Meadors's work as the study proceeds.

ing or hearing. Conversely, I will also focus on how the worshipers of the true God reflect his image in blessing. All humans have been created to be reflecting beings, and they will reflect whatever they are ultimately committed to, whether the true God or some other object in the created order. Thus, to repeat the primary theme of this book, *we resemble what we revere, either for ruin or restoration.*

A BRIEF COMMENT ON THE INTERPRETIVE APPROACH OF THIS BOOK

Before proceeding to the topic of this book, it is important to discuss the presuppositions and hermeneutical approach that underlies the way I will interpret Scripture in this book. This discussion may be a bit in-depth for the more popular reader, but I have tried to distill one of my main approaches to interpreting Scripture to make it communicable to a wider audience. Nevertheless, I suspect that there will be moments in the remainder of this chapter that some readers will have to exercise patience in following my discussion. I believe, however, such patience will pay off by enabling readers to better understand the remainder of the book.

An important presupposition underlying this study is the divine inspiration of the entire Bible, both Old and New Testaments. This foundational perspective means that there is unity to the Bible because it is all God's Word. While there is certainly significant theological diversity, it is not ultimately irreconcilable diversity. Therefore, there is legitimacy in attempting to trace common themes between the Testaments. Though interpreters differ about what are the most significant unifying themes, those who affirm the ultimate divine authorship of Scripture have a common database with which to discuss and debate.²⁰

Another important presupposition is that the divine authorial intentions communicated through human authors are accessible to contemporary readers. Though no one can exhaustively comprehend these intentions, they can be sufficiently understood, especially for the purposes of salvation, sanctification, and the glorification of God.²¹

²⁰For my own understanding of how the inspiration and authority of Scripture is to be understood, see my forthcoming book, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008).

²¹See G. K. Beale, "Questions of Authorial Intent, Epistemology, and Presuppositions and Their Bearing on the Study of the Old Testament in the New: a Rejoinder to Steve Moyise," *Irish Biblical Studies* 21 (1999): 1-26, which builds on Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This*

Within this framework of assumptions, I will interpret certain key Old Testament texts and will then try to trace how these Old Testament texts are alluded to by later Old Testament and New Testament texts. The first question that may arise for some readers is whether my interpretations of these so-called key texts and of the subsequent alluding texts are correct. I will use a method that combines grammatical-historical exegesis with canonical-contextual exegesis. First, grammatical-historical exegesis attempts to derive the meaning of a passage by examining it in its own literary and historical context, paying due attention to problems of grammar and syntax, text-critical variants, word meanings, figures of speech, historical background (ancient Near Eastern, Jewish or Hellenistic) and theology. By canonical-contextual exegesis I have in mind a careful study of a passage's literary allusions to other Scripture (whether the Old Testament in the Old Testament, Old Testament in the New Testament or allusions within an author's own writings, such as, for example, when Paul might make connections with something in one of his earlier letters). This is typically referred to today by the term *intertextuality*, a topic experiencing a proliferation of published writings.²²

Intertextuality will receive much attention in this work. A number of concerns must be kept in mind when working in this area. First, the interpreter must demonstrate that a later text actually is literarily linked to an earlier text (whether, e.g., by unique wording or a unique concept or both).²³ There may

Text? (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) and E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1967).

²²For a sampling of only a few works on intertextuality, in addition to the references to Richard B. Hays below, see *Intertextuality in Biblical Writings, Festschrift for B. van Iersel*, ed. S. Draisma (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1989); Michael A. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985); Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990); Richard L. Schultz, *The Search for Quotation*, JSOTSup 180 (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic, 1999), and the accompanying bibliography; Richard L. Schultz, "The Ties That Bind: Intertextuality, the Identification of Verbal Parallels and Reading Strategies in the Book of the Twelve," in *Thematic Threads in the Book of the Twelve*, ed. P. L. Redditt and A. Scharf, BZAW 325 (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2003), pp. 27-45. The emerging field of the use of the Old Testament in the Old Testament and the well-established field of the use of the Old Testament in the New Testament provide numerous studies of the same phenomenon; a sampling of the latter can be found in G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).

²³The word *intertextuality* is defined variously. I use the term synonymously with *allusion*: the intentional use of an earlier text by the author of a later text. Others would distinguish the two terms, defining *allusion* as I just have and *intertextuality* as the synchronic study of multiple linkages among texts that are not the result of authorial intent but are considered often only from the reader's viewpoint (for elaboration of the distinction, see B. D. Sommer, "Exegesis, Allusion and Intertextuality in the Hebrew Bible, a Response to Lyle Eslinger, *Vetus Testamentum* 46 (1996): 486-89.

be some connections that I will draw that other interpreters might not draw. In fact, in this field there are scholars who are minimalists and those that are maximalists. Minimalists are leery of seeing allusive literary connections, and when they do see them, they are apprehensive of seeing much interpretive significance in them. Indeed, many New Testament scholars would not even see that the original meaning of an Old Testament text has anything to do with the New Testament use of it, even when there are formal quotations of such texts. I am a maximalist, which means that I am open to exploring more intertextual connections than others might be. Nevertheless, that does not mean that I am happy to eisegete (read into) such links, but I attempt to give a reasonable explanation for each literary connection and interpretation of that connection that I propose. All such proposed connections have degrees of possibility and probability. The connections that I will propose will be those whose validity I see to be probable. Nevertheless, not all will agree with the connections that I draw or the interpretations that I draw from these links.

Among the important criteria for determining the validity of allusions from earlier biblical texts in later ones are: (1) the earlier text had to be easily available to the author, (2) volume (how clear is the reference verbally?²⁴), (3) recurrence or clustering (how often does the alluding author [e.g., Isaiah or Paul] cite the earlier Old Testament reference, or how often does he refer to the same Old Testament context elsewhere?), (4) thematic coherence (how well does the Old Testament reference fit into the later author's overall line of argument?²⁵), (5) satisfaction (does it make sense of the author's larger contextual argument?), (6) historical plausibility (does the historical situation allow for the possibility that the author could have intended the Old Testament reference and for the readers/hearers to have comprehended it?²⁶), (7) history of interpretation (have other interpreters discerned the same Old Testament allusions or echoes in these later texts?). These criteria can have a cumulative effect in pointing to the probability of the presence of an Old

²⁴Here, for example, in mind is the number of shared verbal terms and their uniqueness, though when reproduced phrases and not just words are used the probability of the allusion is enhanced even more.

²⁵A knowledge of the context alluded to is very important in order to better apprehend the text that has made the allusion (this is close to a criterion offered by Schultz, *Search for Quotation*, 224-27).

²⁶Could the reader or audience have been expected to be aware of the allusion, particularly a brief one? (cf. Schultz, *Search for Quotation*, 231, 236).

Testament allusion.²⁷ Ultimately, what matters most is uniqueness of a word, word combination, word order or even of theme (if the latter is especially unique). Nevertheless, it needs to be remembered that weighing the evidence for recognizing allusions is not an exact science but is a kind of art.²⁸

Nevertheless, readers will make different judgments on the basis of the same evidence, some categorizing a reference as probable, and others viewing the same reference as only possible or even so faint as not to merit analysis. I have tried to include for study in this book those Old Testament allusions whose validity are attested by sufficient evidence and that I consider to be probable (this includes not only references made by New Testament writers but those made by later Old Testament writers of earlier Old Testament texts). Some may still wonder, however, whether an author has intended to make a particular allusion, and they may ask, If the author really intended to convey all the meaning from an Old Testament text for which I am contending, should he not have made the explanation and the links with that text more explicit? In some of these cases I would allow for the possibility that later authors (like Paul) may have merely presupposed the Old Testament association in their mind, since they were such deep and long-experienced readers of the Old Testament Scriptures. This would not mean that there is no semantic link with the Old Testament text under discussion, but rather that the author was either unconscious of making the reference or was not necessarily intending his audience to pick up on the allusion or echo. In either case, identification of the reference and enhancement of meaning that comes from the context of the source text may well disclose the author's underlying or implicit presuppositions, which form the basis for his explicit statements in the text.²⁹

²⁷These criteria which here are applied to both Old Testament and New Testament intertextual uses are taken from Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 29-33, on which he elaborates further in *The Conversion of the Imagination* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 34-44, in order to discern echoes of the Old Testament in Paul. There are also helpful works that discuss similar criteria for identifying allusions made by later OT writers of earlier OT passages: e.g., among others, see Schultz, *Search for Quotation*, 22-239; idem., "The Ties that Bind"; Sommer, "Exegesis, Allusion and Intertextuality," who also cite sources in this respect for further consultation. For a case-by-case analysis of significant inner biblical allusions, see, e.g., Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*.

²⁸On which, e.g., see Sommer, "Exegesis, Allusion and Intertextuality," 485-86. One can lay out elaborate introductory criteria for verifying allusions, but in the end, what either carries or does not carry persuasion is the case-by-case analysis of each particular allusion under study.

²⁹This paragraph is adapted from my "Colossians and Philemon," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, p. 842.

If the presupposition that God ultimately has authored the canon is correct, then later parts of Scripture unpack the “thick description” of earlier parts. This may mean in some cases that secondary ideas of an Old Testament text are seen to be developed in the later alluding text. This also means that there is a reciprocal relationship between the use of earlier texts by subsequent texts (as Augustine said, in the Old Testament, the New is concealed, in the New, the Old is revealed) (*Quaest. Hept.* 2.73);³⁰ Augustine’s dictum is applicable likewise to the use of the Old Testament in the Old Testament). This is a basic Reformational approach: Scripture interprets Scripture. Some scholars are dubious or even outright doubtful about this back-and-forth approach, even those who may hold to the inspiration of the Bible; many of these appear to prefer a more linear development among related texts and are leery of reading the meaning of later texts back into the earlier texts. My view is that if a later text is truly unpacking the idea of an earlier text, then the meaning developed by the later text was originally included in the “thick meaning” of the earlier text. I think both approaches have validity, though, of course, one can misuse this method (or any other) in an uncontrolled or wrong manner. Sometimes it can be virtually impossible to precisely date two OT texts that are verbally and thus intertextually linked to one another, since they may have been written around the same general time. Thus, rather than trying to speculate about how one might be later than and might develop the other text, sometimes it is better to see that both are a commentary on one another. As Brevard Childs says with respect to the clear link between Isaiah 2:1-4 and Micah 4:1-3, which are almost impossible to date exactly in terms of what book was written first, “the two [texts] are to be heard together for mutual enrichment within the larger corpus” of the canon, which has shaped them and caused them to mould one another.³¹ R. L. Schultz says that this assessment can be applicable to intended verbal parallels elsewhere “in the prophetic corpus or within the Hebrew Bible as a whole.”³² We will come across some cases like this in chapter 3 of our study (especially with respect to discussion of Hos 4:7, Ps 106:18, 2 Kings 17:15, and Jer 2:5, 11). Even when I disagree with higher critical datings of OT books, those with whom

³⁰Translation by Jan Walgrave, *Unfolding Revelation: The Nature of Doctrinal Development* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), p. 53.

³¹B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM, 1979), p. 438.

³²Schultz, “The Ties That Bind,” 45 (for bibliography note that the full article is found on pp. 27-45).

I disagree and yet who still hold a view of an authoritative canon may still ultimately see the two texts as mutually interpretive of one another.

The academic guild, including many evangelical Old Testament scholars, does not typically think that reading the meaning of later texts into earlier ones is a valid hermeneutical approach. I have used this particular dual intertextual approach in an earlier work on biblical theology, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*, and I offer this as an example of the kind of approach that I will be following in the present work.³³ I have also been attempting to analyze the thorny issues of the Old Testament in the New Testament for years, and readers may consult some of my explorations in which I have tried to address these vexed matters.³⁴

In fact, together with my above-mentioned work on the temple, I am trying to forge a newer way of doing biblical theology in the English-speaking world. That is, most past attempts at doing whole-Bible biblical theologies have focused on tracing themes through various biblical books or through the Bible generally. A perennial problem with this approach is how one decides which themes are the most dominant to trace and develop. I am attempting to focus on and interpret those Old Testament texts that I see being repeatedly alluded to and quoted in subsequent Scripture, both later in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. This should provide more objectivity in deciding what to trace as key biblical-theological themes, since these are the very themes that Scripture itself *textually* develops.

A particularly difficult issue in the present project is determining how much of the contextual meaning of an earlier text alluded to in a later text carries over into the later text. This is the source of much discussion and many debates in the field of intertextuality. I will typically argue that the central ideas of the earlier texts are developed in the subsequent texts, though sometimes even what may be considered secondary ideas may have an impact on the later alluding passage. At times it may be appropriate to tease out from the later text a subtle influence from the earlier text. Such teasing out is based on hints in the immediate context of the alluding verse that suggest the idea of the text alluded to may be present. We may refer to such phenomena as an

³³The full title is *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, NSBT 17 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

³⁴E.g., see Beale, *Revelation*, including the bibliography therein to other works on the subject by Beale.

earlier text's echoes or reverberations in later texts. In this respect, a text may "allude to an earlier text in a way that evokes resonances of the earlier text beyond those explicitly cited [in the later text]. The result is that the interpretation . . . requires the reader to recover unstated or suppressed correspondences between the two texts."³⁵ What this means is that we "must go back and examine the wider contexts in the scriptural precursors to understand the . . . effects produced by the intertextual connections."³⁶ In this connection, part of the work of biblical theology is to observe the interpretive links between passages that are clearly literarily connected (such as quotations in the New Testament). In so doing, part of this task is to discern such interpretive links that are not verbally stated by the writer making the quotation or allusion.

In this respect, a particular difference of opinion will likely arise in my understanding of how some of the Old Testament texts about idolatry (e.g., especially Isaiah 6) are used in the New Testament. Some would say that even if my view of the idolatrous meaning of Isaiah 6 is right (see chap. 2), that this is not carried over into the quotations of Isaiah 6 in the four Gospels and in Acts. I will argue that this meaning is still included and that this fits Israel's idolatry at the time of the first century, which was not bowing down to cult images but trusting in tradition instead of God and his living Word. Even though the words *idol* or *idolatry* occur rarely in the Gospels, I believe a compelling case can be made on the conceptual level that human-made tradition was Israel's idol. In other words, there is a biblical-theological problem in the New Testament in comparison to the Old Testament: why is the Old Testament so soaked with the explicit problem of Israel's idolatry, but the New Testament is not so occupied with this subject? The Gospels and other New Testament books barely make reference to it overtly (though it is true that parts of Acts and Paul contain some mention of it, while Revelation has even more discussion of the topic). Shall we conclude that the problem of idolatry stopped or was not much of a problem in later Israel's history during Jesus' time, or was not a problem of the first-century church? This is not a satisfying solution, as I will argue later.

Along these lines, Richard Hays touches on the problematic issue about how much a New Testament author (and I would include Old Testament authors) can develop an earlier Old Testament text and whether or not such

³⁵Hays, *Conversion of the Imagination*, p. 2.

³⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

creative developments still remain within the original conceptual contours of the Old Testament context. He speaks about “the power of texts to engender unforeseen interpretations that may transcend the original authorial intention and historical setting.”³⁷ This is not to be seen as an argument for a radical reader-response approach (where there is lack of concern for original authorial intention) but a reading whereby one continues to see how an Old Testament text keeps imposing its original sense on the later text’s author (albeit sometimes subliminally), even as that author is creatively developing that original sense beyond what may appear to be the surface meaning of that Old Testament text.³⁸

Thus New Testament, or Old Testament writers before them, can build on earlier Old Testament texts that they interpret and develop creatively, though the creativity is to be seen in understanding such texts in the light of the further developments of a redemptive-historical epoch in the Old Testament, or developments in the light of the later events of Christ’s coming and work. In this respect, part of the creative development lies merely in the fact that fulfillment always fleshes out prior prophecy in a way that, to some degree, would have been unforeseen by earlier Old Testament prophets. Another way to say this is that progressive revelation always reveals things not as clearly seen earlier. Geerhardus Vos’s metaphor for this creative development between the Testaments is that Old Testament prophecies and texts are like seeds and later Old Testament and New Testament understandings of the same texts are like plants growing from the seeds and flowering; from one angle the full-bloomed plant may not look like the seed (as in botanical comparisons), but careful exegesis of both Old and New contexts can show, at least, some of the organic connections.

This is a difficult hermeneutical notion, so perhaps one more illustration might help to explain it. Suppose I say, “Nothing pleases me so much as the Third Symphony of Beethoven and other similar kinds of music.” In response, a friend might ask, “Does it please you more than a walk during a beautiful spring day?” My friend has misunderstood me by taking me too literally. I was speaking in hyperbole, so that a walk during a beautiful spring day was not one of the things that fell under what I meant by “things that please me,” for indeed such a walk might please me just as much as Beethoven’s Third. I used

³⁷Ibid., p. 169.

³⁸Ibid., pp. 173-76.

“nothing” as a hyperbole to stand for “no other comparable work of musical art.” How did I know that “a walk during a beautiful spring day” was not to be included within the specific class of “things that please me”? Some overriding principle in my meaning must have determined that “a walk during a beautiful spring day” was excluded from what I meant, and that Elvis Presley’s “You Ain’t Nothing but a Hound Dog” was also not intended as a musical genre that I had in mind, along with a number of other nonclassical music compositions. This is the case because I intended to refer to a particular type of “thing that pleases me” and “willed all possible members belonging to that type”³⁹ and excluded others not falling within the boundary of comparable classical and baroque compositions. Certainly, my *conscious* intention did not include all musical works which please me but only a select few, nor was there before my mind’s eye all musical pieces that do not please, but only a few. If my friend were to ask me if I would include Bach’s Mass in B Minor as works which especially please me, I would say yes, even though my conscious intention was to include explicitly only Beethoven’s Third and, implicitly, Handel’s *Messiah*, Bach’s *Brandenburg Concertos*, and Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*. My friend could suggest more musical pieces that I would also include and exclude in my willed musical type, but which were neither part of my explicit statement nor even part of my implicit conscious intention.⁴⁰ Such implicit meanings within my “willed type” can be called implications of the explicit verbal meaning⁴¹ or an unpacking of or development of my thickly described statement about music.

The same interpretive dynamic that existed between my statement about music and my friend’s interpretation thereof is applicable to how later biblical writers interpret earlier ones, and it explains what I meant earlier when I said that some of these later interpretations may go beyond the original *conscious* authorial intention of the earlier author’s statements, thus creatively developing them but still in line with and consistent with the willed type of the earlier statement made.

This notion of a “willed type” is instructive for understanding and analyzing the use of the Old Testament. First, when a New Testament author alludes to a particular text, it could be asked which feature of the Old Testa-

³⁹Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, p. 49.

⁴⁰This illustration about classical music has been adapted, with a few changes, from Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, pp. 48-49.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, pp. 61-67.

ment context does he have in mind, since it is apparent that New Testament writers have varying degrees of contextual awareness when they make reference to an Old Testament passage. In each case the New Testament writer probably has some specific feature in mind explicitly that more often than not is apparent to most readers, and perhaps implicitly he had other features consciously in mind but which are not apparent in his written expression. If we had opportunity to ask him directly after he had written what other implicit features he had in mind, he would probably acknowledge some. Even if we asked him whether or not some other contextual features of the Old Testament text could be included in his unconscious intention (or within the parameters of his willed type), he would probably acknowledge some more.⁴² To go beyond what is apparently his clear, explicit instance of the willed type is a matter of guesswork on the part of the interpreter, involving varying degrees of possibility and probability (indeed, sometimes it is difficult to know whether or not a New Testament writer even is conscious of some of the very Old Testament references themselves, which are apparent to commentators but could be the mere result of a mind so saturated with Old Testament language and ideas that they are unconsciously expressed).⁴³ Such multiple meanings should not be confused with the notion of allegory or the kind of contradictory, multiple meanings for which some reader-response critics argue, but they are unpacked layers of a prior thickly described text.⁴⁴

All of this is to say that I will be making interpretive explorations like this in the study of how Old Testament texts use earlier Old Testament texts

⁴²Perhaps this is what S. Moyise has in mind when he says with respect to John's use of Psalm 89 in Rev. 1:5, "That is not to say that discussion of the effect of intertextual echo must be limited to John's conscious intention. There is no reason to assume that John thought out all the possibilities of bringing Psalm 89 into a relationship with the living Christ in Rev 1:5" (*The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation*, JSNTSupp 115 [Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic, 1995], p. 118).

⁴³See further Beale, *John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*, pp. 163-67.

⁴⁴This is consistent with Christine Helmer, who rightly says that "biblical texts are theologically underdetermined," and are within other subsequent scriptural interpretation "rewritten . . . contextualized, actualized, and interpreted . . . through processes of the texts' reconceptualization and reconceptualization"; such texts "by virtue of their . . . incorporation into larger genre sequences [of later canonical books] lay claims at different textual layers to different theological meanings" ("Introduction: Multivalence in Biblical Theology," in *The Multivalence of Biblical Texts and Theological Meanings*, ed. C. Helmer, SBL Symposium Series 37 [Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000], pp. 3-4). My only qualification of the preceding is that, while I can see the same texts yielding a plurality of interpretations by subsequent scriptural and postscriptural interpreters, I would not see such interpretations to be mutually exclusive of one another (if that is what Helmer means by "different") but a development of an original thick expression of an authorial speech act.

and how the New Testament uses the Old. While some of my readers may not agree with some of the subtle implications that I draw or tease out of Old Testament texts, I hope, at least, that they can appreciate the general approach that I am attempting to follow and that there is legitimate difference of opinion in these matters. Some may view that at times I am doing historical-grammatical exegesis or canonical biblical exegesis, others that I am doing eisegesis, but sometimes I am doing *hyperegesis*—going beyond the Old Testament authors’ conscious original intention, not violating it but transcending it by creatively developing it in the ongoing light of progressive revelation and consistently within the parameters of the willed type of the original utterance. Some of the intertextual studies in this book, however, will contend that a subtle or implicit idea discerned in an earlier Old Testament text is developed more explicitly by later Old Testament or New Testament texts. For example, this will be argued in the case of how later Scripture (Hos 4:7; Ps 106:20; Jer 2:11; Rom 1:21, 23; 1 Cor 10:7, 18-21) interprets the golden calf episode of Exodus 32.

The genre of a “whole Bible” biblical theology project on a topic does not allow typically a thorough exegesis of every passage being addressed. Many of the texts more briefly discussed receive their validity from the cumulative evidence of the whole book. In such an undertaking where we are looking for the development of a theme we might be tempted to see too much and thus eisegete the theme into a passage where it really does not exist. Don Carson has stated this problem well, which is particularly applicable to works on biblical theology:

I frequently tell my doctoral students as they embark on their research that dissertations in the broad field of the arts disciplines, including biblical and theological disciplines, can, at the risk of slight oversimplification, be divided into two camps. In the first camp, the student begins with an idea, a fresh insight, a thesis he or she would like to test against the evidence. In the second, the student has no thesis to begin with but would like to explore the evidence in a certain domain to see exactly what is going on in a group [of] texts and admits to uncertainty about what the outcome will be. The advantage of the first kind of thesis is that the work is exciting from the beginning and directed by the thesis that is being tested; the danger is that, unless the student takes extraordinary precautions and proves to be remarkably self-critical, the temptation to domesticate the evidence in order to defend the

thesis becomes well-nigh irresistible. The advantage of the second kind of thesis is that it is likely to produce more even-handed results than the first, since the researcher has no axe to grind and is therefore more likely to follow the evidence wherever it leads; the danger is that there may not be much of a thesis at the end of the process, but merely a lot of well-organized data. In reality, of course, dissertation projects regularly straddle both camps in various ways.⁴⁵

This book definitely falls into the first camp. I have a specific thesis about idolatry and I have tried to isolate those passages in the Bible where I believe that my thesis is expressed. At times this thesis becomes a lens through which to see some passages in a way not otherwise seen. This lens may also cause me to see things in a passage that are not there. Therefore, eisegesis may happen in this book, but I have tried to be aware of this pitfall and have tried to step around such dangers in order not to domesticate the evidence. Of course, readers will have to decide whether I have been cautious enough and exercised due restraint or have fallen into the eisegetical pits. It will be at these precise points that I will be contending that I am teasing out some of the subtle layers of the thick significance of the earlier passage being alluded to or of the passage being exegeted. In a number of difficult cases I will cite some commentators who are in agreement with my proposal, while other commentators not mentioned have not argued against my proposal but have simply not mentioned the possibility of it. Therefore, I plead for appreciation of the genre within which I am writing and the approach that I am employing. Similarly, I ask that readers try to exercise a balance between a hermeneutic of love and a hermeneutic of suspicion, just as I need to exercise a similar balance between a hermeneutic of retrieval and a hermeneutic of suspicion.

Consequently, a typical strategy of argumentation throughout this book will be to adduce several lines of evidence in favor of a particular interpretation, literary connection and its interpretive implications. Some of the evidence will be stronger than others, but when all of the relevant material is viewed as a whole, the less convincing material should become more significant than when seen by itself. Therefore, it will sometimes be true that some of the arguments in favor of an interpretation will not stand on their own but are intended to take on more persuasive power when viewed in light

⁴⁵D. A. Carson, review of *Judgment and Justification in Early Judaism and the Apostle Paul* by Chris VanLandingham, *Review of Biblical Literature* 12 (2007).

of the other angles of reasoning. And even when this may not be the case, the design is that the overall weight of the cumulative arguments points to the plausibility or probability of the main idea or literary connection being contended for.

In light of this, I would categorize my biblical-theological approach to be canonical, genetic-progressive (or organically developmental), and intertextual.

This project is perhaps a bit more difficult than my book on a biblical theology of the temple, since it deals with a more subtle theme: I am not trying to follow the broad theme of idolatry throughout the canon, but I am attempting to trace the specific notion concerning idolatry that the worshiper becomes like that which is worshiped, which has been little discussed in past works on idolatry. What makes the study also challenging is that my own area of research and teaching is in the New Testament, whereas much of this book covers the Old Testament. Nevertheless, Christian scholars should be able to work competently in both Testaments, and since I also have some training in the area of the Old Testament, I have ventured forth where many New Testament researchers fear to tread. Hopefully, my shortcomings and relative lack of experience in this area will not pose insurmountable obstacles to accomplishing this undertaking effectively.

Perhaps a word about the intended audience of this book is appropriate. The book is primarily aimed at serious Christian readers—both people in the church who are not scholars and college or graduate theology students. However, I hope that the book will also contribute to biblical scholarship, especially the area of biblical theology. Attempting to communicate to both kinds of audiences is a tightwire act: if there is not enough argumentation in a number of areas, some scholars may be dissatisfied, but if there is too much for the scholar, the serious lay reader will be overwhelmed. So, I will try to walk that tightwire as best I can. It needs to be underscored that this book focuses on biblical interpretation and biblical theology, and much less on practical application of these truths in the modern world (this will be the subject of the last chapter). Nevertheless, I hope that the reader may glean theological principles with a view to living as a faithful Christian in an idolatrous world.

I will now proceed to address the nature of idolatry, particularly as it relates to how the spiritual nature of the idolater takes on the spiritual nature of the idol that is revered. The subject of how God's faithful people reflect him

by worshiping him will also be addressed to an extent, though this topic will occupy an entire subsequent chapter, after the problem of idolatry has been laid out sufficiently in the following chapters.