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The University of Edinburgh
College of Humanities and Social Science
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A Sure Foundation:
Christology, Covenant Theology, and Hermeneutics in
John Owen's Discourses on Hebrews

By
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Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

“This is to certify that the work contained within has been composed by me and is entirely my own work. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.”

Signed: _____

John W. Tweeddale

In Memoriam
James W. Tweeddale
(1937–2014)

ABSTRACT

John Owen's (1616–1683) four-volume commentary on the epistle to the Hebrews represents the apex of his literary career and exemplifies many of the exegetical methods of the post-Reformation. This thesis is the first detailed analysis of his introductory discourses, or "exercitations," on Hebrews. Owen's exercitations on the Messiah in particular are an ideal source for this examination, since they serve as the prolegomena for his exposition proper. More specifically, this thesis evaluates the hermeneutical function of Christological and covenantal patterns that arise from Owen's argument concerning the fulfilment of the messianic promise in the person and work of Christ. Therefore, this study is a descriptive analysis of the text and context of Owen's discourses on the Messiah.

The topics considered in each chapter are based upon hermeneutical questions that are pertinent to Owen's promise-fulfilment scheme in general and to the relationship of Christology and covenant theology in particular. Chapter 1 examines scholarship on Owen's commentary and suggests possible reasons for its neglect. Chapter 2 places Owen's exercitations and exposition within the context of his life and times, and explains the central argument of his work. Chapters 3 and 4 provide the conceptual basis for this study, as they introduce two essential components of Owen's discourses on the Messiah. Chapter 3 establishes the importance of federal theology for Owen by examining his exegesis of Genesis 3:15, and its relationship to the covenant of redemption and covenant of grace. Chapter 4 considers the problem posed by a Christological reading of the Old Testament for those like Owen who are committed to the literal sense of Scripture. Chapters 5 and 6 consider aspects of continuity and discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments, and seek to illustrate the connection between Owen's exercitations and exposition. Chapter 5 considers the nature of faith in the Old Testament, noting especially the importance of the Abrahamic covenant for what Owen calls "the oneness of the church." In contrast, chapter 6 provides an extended analysis of the role of the law in the Mosaic covenant, considering in particular the highly problematic question of the recapitulation of the covenant of works and the nature of the old and new covenants. The conclusion summarises the findings of this study.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

One of the ironies of Owen's commentary on Hebrews is that he begins his prefatory remarks to Sir William Morrice with a statement that he does not want to waste the secretary of state's time with a long discourse explaining the circumstances of why he wrote his work. In typical Owen fashion, he cites a Latin maxim: *Ne longo sermone morer tua tempora*. When expressing gratitude to others, in other words, get to the point. Sometimes a simple thank you must do.

I am grateful for the many family members, friends, mentors, colleagues, and students who have supported me throughout this project. Derek Thomas, Jerry O'Neill, Jim Spitzel, Josh Kines, Chris Larson, Burk Parsons, and Steve Nichols each have played significant roles in encouraging me to finish my thesis. Rick Stiffler, Aaron Garriott, Zachary Johnson, and Tyler Freire gave editorial help at various stages throughout my research. James Eglinton (my internal examiner) and Crawford Gribben (my external examiner) sharpened my understanding of Owen's role as a seventeenth century biblical interpreter in what was a stimulating and enjoyable viva. I am especially grateful for Susan Hardman Moore. Her patience, feedback, expertise, and encouragement were essential for the completion of my work. I could not have asked for a better advisor.

Several congregations have also supported me and my family, including First Presbyterian Church (Jackson, MS), Mount of Olives Baptist Church (Duluth, MN), Point Free Church of Scotland (Isle of Lewis), Saint Andrew's Chapel (Sanford, FL), Trinity Evangelical Free Church (Eustis, FL), and Woodland Presbyterian Church (Hattiesburg, MS). I am especially grateful for the saints in Buccleuch and Greyfriars Free Church of Scotland (Edinburgh) and First Reformed Presbyterian Church (Pittsburgh, PA). The love these two congregations have shown us over the years is incalculable.

Angela and I arrived in Edinburgh without children. We left with Amelia. Now our family has grown to include Knox and Evelyn. Over the course of my studies, I've learned a little about John Owen and a lot about myself. I am certain that I could not have finished my thesis without my family. The joy they bring me knows no bounds. Angela is undoubtedly the unsung hero of our marriage. Owen suggested that a godly spouse brings "wisdom to undergo the trials and temptations inseparable from this state of life." Our years together have known a season of great loss. I suspect we will know more. At every juncture, Angela has brought a combination of wisdom, strength, and grace into our marriage in such a way that has left me confident that whatever comes our way we can undergo it together.

My parents have been a steady support throughout my life. Sadly, my father died before seeing the completion of my thesis. He would frequently ask me about Owen, while also nudging me "to press on towards the mark." Owen made no apology in dedicating his book to Morrice, believing that the "dedication of books unto persons of worth and honour hath secured itself from the impeachment of censure, by taking sanctuary in the usage of all times and ages." It is in this same spirit that I dedicate this work in memory of my father.

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ANF</i>	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i>
<i>ARG</i>	<i>Archiv für Reformationgeschichte</i>
<i>BDE</i>	<i>Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals</i>
<i>BT</i>	John Owen, <i>Biblical Theology</i> , trans. Stephen P. Westcott
<i>BO</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Oweniana</i>
<i>CH</i>	<i>Church History</i>
<i>CTJ</i>	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
<i>CTS</i>	Calvin's Commentaries, Calvin Theological Society, 22 vols.
<i>CO</i>	<i>Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia</i>
<i>CTQ</i>	<i>Concordia Theological Quarterly</i>
<i>DHT</i>	<i>The Dictionary of Historical Theology</i>
<i>DLGTT</i>	<i>A Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms</i>
<i>DMBI</i>	<i>Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters</i>
<i>DNB</i>	<i>Dictionary of National Biography</i>
<i>EQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>Hebrews</i> (1668)	John Owen, <i>Exercitations on the epistle to the Hebrews also concerning the Messiah . . . with an exposition and discourses on the two first chapters of the said epistle to the Hebrews</i> (1668)
<i>Hebrews</i> (1674)	John Owen, <i>Exercitations on the epistle to the Hebrews, concerning the priesthood of Christ . . . with a continuation of the exposition on the third, fourth, and fifth chapters of said epistle to the Hebrews</i> (1674)

<i>Hebrews</i> (1680)	John Owen, <i>A continuation of the exposition of the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews viz, on the sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth chapters</i> (1680)
<i>Hebrews</i> (1684)	John Owen, <i>A continuation of the exposition of the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews viz, on the eleventh, twelfth & thirteenth chapters, compleating that elaborate work</i> (1684)
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>Institutes</i>	John Calvin, <i>Institutes of the Christian Religion</i> , ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford L. Battles
<i>JEH</i>	<i>Journal of Ecclesiastical History</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>MAJT</i>	<i>Mid-America Journal of Theology</i>
<i>NAK</i>	<i>Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis</i>
<i>NPNF</i>	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i>
<i>ODNB</i>	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i>
<i>PG</i>	<i>Patrologia Graeca</i>
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologia Latina</i>
<i>PRRD</i>	Richard Muller, <i>Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics</i> , 4 vols.
<i>RTR</i>	<i>The Reformed Theological Review</i>
<i>Sabbath</i> (1671)	John Owen, <i>Exercitations concerning the name, original, nature, use, and continuance of a day of sacred rest . . . together with an assertion of the divine institution of the Lord's Day, and practical directions for its due observation</i> (1671)
<i>Savoy</i>	Savoy Declaration (1658)
<i>SCJ</i>	<i>Sixteenth Century Journal</i>
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>

<i>Theologoumena</i> (1661)	John Owen, <i>Theologoumena pantodapa. Sive de natura, ortu, progressu, et studio verae theologiae libri sex</i> (1661)
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith (1646)
<i>Works</i>	<i>The Works of John Owen</i> (1850–1855), ed. William H. Goold, 24 vols.
<i>Works</i> , ed. T. Russell	<i>The Works of John Owen</i> (1826), ed. Thomas Russell, 21 vols.
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>

All citations to Owen’s commentary on Hebrews refer to the original four volumes along with the corresponding reference to the standard twenty-four-volume Goold edition of Owen’s works in parenthesis. For example, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.1.1 (*Works*, 18:25) equates to book 1, exercitation 1, and section 1 of the 1668 volume of Owen’s commentary (this reference then corresponds to volume 18, page 25 of the Goold edition of Owen’s works). However, the Goold edition will serve as the basis for all quotations, since Goold, as opposed to previous editors of Owen’s works and commentary, left the language of Owen “untouched and unmodified” (Goold, *Works*, 18:xii). Comparison of Goold’s volumes with the originals has confirmed that his edition is indeed unabridged. Unless otherwise noted, quotations are given without italicisation, since it is not always clear from the various editions of Owen’s works if the italics are original.

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CHAPTER 1

OWEN AND HEBREWS: A COMMENTARY IN REVIEW

It is impossible to embrace all the testimonies which have been given to the pre-eminent value of this great work,—a value not in the least degree abated by all which has been subsequently published in exposition of this Epistle; for though in verbal exegesis subsequent scholarship has greatly distanced Owen, there is scarcely any theological truth of the least importance, embodied in the Epistle to the Hebrews, the discovery and illustration of which have not been anticipated by his sagacious research.

—William Goold¹

Impartiality must also confess, that Dr. Owen was what we may call a voluminous writer; and in the present day, the very idea of an expository work, consisting of four volumes folio, on a single epistle, is enough to frighten the fashionable class of readers, who are never better pleased, as one observes, than when they peruse a book “brief, gaudy, and superficial.” The difference between the taste of the last and present age, in this respect, is very striking.

—Edward Williams²

1.1 INTRODUCTION

John Owen (1616–1683) is frequently acknowledged as a leading figure of the puritan and nonconformist movements of the seventeenth century. Historian Richard Greaves, for example, claims that Owen “was indisputably the leading proponent of high Calvinism in England in the late seventeenth century.”³ Such a comment is not without

¹ William H. Goold, “General Preface,” in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, 24 vols. (London: Johnstone and Hunter, 1850), 18:xi; cf. 1:viii–ix, xvii.

² Edward Williams, “The Editor’s Preface,” in *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews: with the Preliminary Exercitations . . . Revised and Abridged, with a Full and Interesting Life of the Author*, ed. Edward Williams, 4 vols. (London, 1790), 1:i–ii.

³ Richard L. Greaves, “Owen, John (1616–1683),” in *ODNB*.

precedent or justification. Owen's distinguished life warrants his significance for understanding the history and theology of "high Calvinism" in the post-Reformation period.⁴ His advisory role to Oliver Cromwell (1559–1658), educational reform at Oxford University as vice-chancellor and dean of Christ Church, leadership at the Savoy Assembly, advocacy of toleration, promotion of spiritual holiness and communion with the triune God, defence of Protestant orthodoxy against heretical, heterodoxical, and "popish" errors, as well as voluminous, if sometimes cumbersome, writings represent a sample of his achievements.⁵ Nevertheless, while Owen's reputation as an ecclesiastical

⁴ What Greaves refers to as "high Calvinism" is better termed "high orthodoxy," since Calvin was not the only reformed orthodox theologian in the post-Reformation period. As Richard Muller and others have argued, the era following the sixteenth century Reformation known as Protestant orthodoxy can be divided roughly into three phases: early orthodoxy (c. 1565–1618–1640), high orthodoxy (c. 1640–1685–1725), and late orthodoxy (c. 1725). See discussion in Muller, *PRRD*, 1:30–32; cf. Willem J. van Asselt, "Scholasticism in the Time of High Orthodoxy (ca. 1620–1700)," in Willem J. van Asselt, et al., *Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011), 132–166, esp. pp. 154–155.

⁵ For assessments of Owen's life, see Anonymous, "The Life of that Late Reverend and Learned John Owen, D. D.," in *Seventeen Sermons Preach'd by the Late and Learned John Owen, D. D.*, 2 vols. (London: William and Joseph Marshall, 1720), 1:iii–iv; John Asty, "Memoirs of the Life of John Owen, D. D.," in *A Complete Collection of the Sermons of the Reverend and Learned John Owen, D. D.* (London, 1721); Matthew Barrett and Michael A. G. Haykin, *Owen on the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 23–33; Sarah Cook, "A Political Biography of a Religious Independent: John Owen, 1616–1683" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1972); Tim Cooper, *John Owen, Richard Baxter, and the Formation of Nonconformity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011); Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 1–19; William H. Goold, "John Owen," in *The Evangelical Succession*, third series (Edinburgh: Macniven & Wallace, 1884), 1–40; Crawford Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Kelly M. Kapic, "Owen, John (1616–1683)," in *DMBI*, 795–799; James Moffatt, "Introductory Sketch," in *The Golden Book of John Owen* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904), 1–96; Robert W. Oliver, "John Owen—His Life and Times," in *John Owen: The Man and His Theology*, ed. Robert W. Oliver (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2002), 11–39; William Orme, "Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Dr. John Owen," in *Works*, ed. T. Russell, vol. 1; Jon D. Payne, *John Owen on the Lord's Supper* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2004), 1–17; J. M. Rigg, "Owen, John, D. D. (1616–1683), theologian," in *DNB*; Alan Spence, "Owen, John (1616–83)," in *DHT*, 412–414; Andrew Thomson, "Life of Dr Owen," in *Works*, 1:xxi–cxxxii; Peter Toon, *God's Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen—Pastor, Educator, Theologian* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1971), 173–178; Toon, ed., *The Correspondence of John Owen (1616–1683): With an Account of His Life and Work* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1970), 3–49; Carl R. Trueman, "Owen, John (1616–1683)," in *BDE*, 494–498; Godfrey Noel Vose, "Profile of a Puritan: John Owen (1616–1683)" (PhD diss., State University of Iowa, 1963), 7–8, 63–66; Dewey D. Wallace, Jr., "The Life and Thought of John Owen: A Study of the Significance of Calvinistic Theology in English Puritanism" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1965); Wallace, "Owen, John (1616–1683)," in *Puritans and Puritanism in Europe and America: A Comprehensive Encyclopedia*, eds. Francis J. Bremer and Tom Webster (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006), 187–189; Williams, "Memoirs of the Life of John Owen, D. D.," in *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. and abr., 1:9–42; Lloyd G. William, "'Digitus Dei': God and Nation in the Thought of John Owen: A Study in English Puritanism and Nonconformity, 1653–1683" (PhD diss.,

statesman, educator, pastor, polemicist, and theologian are widely recognized, he is generally not remembered as a biblical exegete and commentator. This is somewhat surprising given that one of Owen's final accomplishments was the writing of a commentary.

In 1668, John Owen published the first volume of his enormous commentary, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*. This work consists of a series of preliminary essays, what Owen calls "exercitations," that introduce the main historical, theological, and interpretive themes of Hebrews as well as an exposition of the first two chapters of the epistle. He continued writing the commentary, despite "manifold infirmities" and other "employments and diversions," until he completed the work just before his death in 1683.⁶ When finished it consisted of four hefty tomes exceeding two thousand folio pages and over two million words, making it one of the largest expositions of a single book of the Bible during the post-Reformation era if not the entire history of biblical interpretation.⁷

The significance of Owen's *Hebrews* goes beyond its size, as can be attested by the multiple editions and abridgments of it to surface every century since its original publication.⁸ His commentary not only saw widespread recognition within

Drew University, 1981); Anthony Wood, "John Owen," in *Athenae Oxonienses*, ed. Philip Bliss, 4 vols. (London, 1820), 4:97–114.

⁶ Owen, *Hebrews* (1674), n.p. (*Works*, 18:16). On Owen's declining health, see Toon, *God's Statesman*, 171; Goold, *Works*, 18:ix.

⁷ The subsequent volumes were published in 1674, 1680, and posthumously in 1684.

⁸ In the eighteenth century: *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. and abr., ed. Williams, 4 vols. (London, 1790). In the nineteenth century: *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. George Wright, 7 vols. (Edinburgh, 1812–1814); *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. Goold, 7 vols. (London, 1854–1855). In the twentieth century: *Hebrews: The Epistle of Warning*, abr. M. J. Tryon (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1953); *Hebrews*, Crossway Classic Commentaries, eds. Alister McGrath and J. I. Packer (Wheaton: Crossway, 1988); *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. William H. Goold, 7 vols. (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991). In the twenty-first century: *The Works of John Owen*, CD-ROM (Rio, WI: Ages Digital Library, 2000); *An Exposition of*

Britain and North America but also was translated into Dutch in the eighteenth century.⁹ Furthermore, the Lutheran theologian Johann Georg Walch (1693–1775), along with nonconformist church historians William Orme (1787–1830) and William H. Goold (1815–1897), reported that a Latin translation of *Hebrews* was scheduled to be released in Amsterdam in 1700; however, there is no evidence that it was ever published.¹⁰ The commentary was finally collected into seven volumes by Goold in the nineteenth century to form the final part of the standard 24-volume edition of Owen’s works (i.e., volumes 18–24) and was later reprinted and renumbered by the Banner of Truth Trust in the twentieth century (i.e., volumes 17–23).¹¹

the Epistle to the Hebrews, by John Owen (7 Vols.) (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2009). NB: this list consists only of the first printing of each edition.

⁹ Owen, *Eene uitlegginge van den sendbrief van Paulus den apostel aen de Hebreen*, ed. Simon Commincq, 4 vols. (Rotterdam, 1733–1740). The American theologian Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), for example, owned a set of Owen’s commentary and even lent two volumes to Mr. Cotton Smith on November 4, 1753. See *The Works of Jonathan Edwards. Volume 26: Catalogue of Books*, ed. Peter J. Thuesen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 339. Likewise, Samuel Mather (1706–1785) owned a copy of volume one of *Hebrews* that may have been inherited from his grandfather Increase Mather (1639–1723), who seems to have owned at least two of the four volumes. See Julius H. Tuttle, *Libraries of the Mathers* (Worcester: Davis Press, 1910), 15, 75. Increase, in fact, records in his diary that he read from Owen’s exposition on *Hebrews* 2 and 4, as well as his discourse on the Sabbath. See *Diary by Increase Mather*, ed. Samuel A. Green (Cambridge: John Wilson & Son, 1900), 33–34. On Owen’s influence on North America, see Alan Bearman, “‘The Atlas of Independence’: The Ideals of John Owen (1616–1683) in the North Atlantic Christian World” (PhD diss., Kansas State University, 2005).

¹⁰ Walch records, “Memoratur etiam versio latina, Amstelodami mdcc. fol. edita.” Johann Georg Walch, *Bibliotheca theologica selecta litterariis adnotationibus instructa*, 4 vols. (Jena, 1765), 4:733; cf. Orme, “Memoirs of Dr. John Owen,” in *Works*, ed. T. Russell, 1:254; Goold, “General Preface,” in *Works*, 18:x. The origin of this claim appears to be a passing reference in the bibliographical work by Jacques Le Long, *Bibliotheca sacra in binos syllabos*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1723), 2:889. This reference is cited by both Walch and Orme and repeated without citation by Goold. In addition, the church historian Philip Schaff references the Amsterdam Latin translation but may be following Goold. See Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 1:809.

¹¹ Due to the omission of Owen’s Latin works in volumes 16 and 17, the Banner of Truth Trust reprint of the Goold edition renumbered the *Hebrews* volumes but preserved the original pagination. Therefore, volumes 18–24 of the Goold edition correspond to volumes 17–23 in the Banner edition. To make matters even more confusing, the Ages Digital Library CD-ROM version of Owen’s works and commentary is based on the Banner edition but with different pagination, while the Logos Bible Software version follows the volume numbering and pagination of the standard nineteenth century Goold edition. For a brief account of the various editions of Owen’s commentary until the mid-nineteenth century, see Goold, “General Preface,” in *Works*, 1:ix–x; Goold, “General Preface,” in *Works*, 18:ix–xiii.

While Owen's *Hebrews* has enjoyed modest success within the history of reformed exegesis, there exists little critical evaluation of his work. The purpose of this chapter is to evaluate the state of research on Owen's commentary, as well as to suggest reasons for its neglect in current scholarship. A brief statement of the aims and the objectives of this thesis will conclude the chapter.

1.2 SCHOLARSHIP ON OWEN AND HIS COMMENTARY

Admirers of Owen have often extolled the superlative quality of *Hebrews*. The Bible translator James Moffatt (1870–1944), for example, commends Owen's commentary for standing “in the front rank of scholarship in its own day.”¹² William Orme, one of Owen's earliest biographers, likewise heralds his work as “the most valuable exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews ever published.”¹³ He boldly suggests that *Hebrews* “forms a pedestal on which John Owen will appear an object of admiration to all future generations.”¹⁴ Similarly, the nineteenth century Church of England clergyman Charles Bridges (1794–1869) praises Owen as “pre-eminent among the writers of this school [of puritan divines]” and declared that *Hebrews*, despite its length, was “probably the most elaborate and instructive comment upon a detached portion of Scripture.”¹⁵ Edward Williams (1750–1813), an eighteenth century editor of Owen's commentary, went as far as to call his exposition, along with the exercitations, “one of the most valuable systems of doctrinal, practical, and

¹² Moffatt, “Introductory Sketch,” in *The Golden Book of John Owen*, 73.

¹³ William Orme, *Bibliotheca Biblica: A Select List of Books on Sacred Literature* (Edinburgh, 1824), 336.

¹⁴ Orme, “Memoirs,” in *Works*, ed. T. Russell, 1:255.

¹⁵ Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry* (1830; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967), 40.

experimental divinity, that is to be met with in the English language.”¹⁶ Bogue and Bennett in their history of British nonconformity even suggest that if a theological student does not own a set of Owen’s commentary, he should sell his shirt in order to purchase one.¹⁷ However, the most laudatory endorsement comes from the nineteenth century Free Church of Scotland leader and principal of New College in Edinburgh, Thomas Chalmers (1780–1847):

Let me again recommend your studious and sustained attention to the Epistle to the Hebrews; and I should rejoice if any of you felt emboldened on my advice to grapple with a work so ponderous, as Owen’s Commentary on that Epistle—a lengthened and laborious enterprise certainly, . . . I promise you a hundredfold more advantage from the perusal of this greatest work of John Owen, than from the perusal of all that has been written on the subject of the heathen sacrifices. It is a work of gigantic strength as well as gigantic size; and he who hath mastered it is very little short, both in respect to the doctrinal and practical of Christianity, of being an erudite and accomplished theologian.¹⁸

While these statements appear overly enthusiastic and even hagiographic, Owen’s commentary reflects the ripest expression of his biblical-theological endeavours and represents one of the great literary accomplishments of seventeenth century English puritanism. However, beyond evangelical and confessional quarters such as these, *Hebrews* has received little attention by scholars of the post-Reformation period.

¹⁶ Williams, “Preface,” in *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 1:iv.

¹⁷ They also praise Owen’s work as one of the finest commentaries in the English language, “But [Owen’s] grand work, which forms the colossal pedestal to his mortal fame, is his exposition of the epistle to the Hebrews. To this, the studies of his life were more or less directed . . . no part of the sacred Writings has received so perfect an elucidation in the English or perhaps in any other language . . . than Owen’s on the Hebrews.” David Bogue and James Bennett, *History of Dissenters from the Revolution in 1688 to the Year 1808*, 4 vols. (London, 1809), 2:235–236.

¹⁸ Thomas Chalmers, *Prelections on Butler’s Analogy, Paley’s Evidence of Christianity, and Hill’s Lectures in Divinity* (Edinburgh, 1852), 282. On several occasions, Chalmers expressed his appreciation for Owen. For example, see his essays on Owen’s *The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded* (1681), and *On the Divine Original, Authority, and Self-Evidencing Light and Power of the Holy Scriptures* (1659), in *The Works of Thomas Chalmers* (Glasgow, n.d.), 13:80–106, 289, 307–308.

1.2.1 EARLY SCHOLARSHIP ON OWEN

While several recent studies have advanced the state of research on Owen, the field is still less developed when compared to literature on figures such as Luther, Calvin, Baxter, and Edwards. Even biographical material is limited.¹⁹ Not surprisingly, earlier scholarship focused on more generalized accounts of his life, ministry, and thought. The merit of these studies should not be underestimated, since they have laid an important foundation for subsequent research to build upon so that overtime the full scope of Owen's writings might be examined. Nevertheless, scholarship has concentrated on Owen's political, polemical, theological, and devotional work (i.e., volumes 1–17 of his *Works*) to the near exclusion of his commentary (i.e., volumes 18–24 of his *Works*). Three early studies illustrate this point.²⁰

¹⁹ As Cotton Mather (1663–1728) declared, “The Church of God was wrong’d, in that the life of the great John Owen was not written.” See his *Magnalia Christi Americana* (London, 1702), lib. 3, p. 168. The paucity of biographical material is due in part to the limited personal information, such as diaries and letters, to survive Owen. Peter Toon ably overcomes this hurdle in his biography on Owen, *God’s Statesman*; see also Toon, *The Correspondence of John Owen*, v. Two early dissertations also stand out for placing Owen’s biography within its historical context; see Cook, “A Political Biography of a Religious Independent;” and Williams, “‘Digitus Dei’: God and Nation in the Thought of John Owen.” More recently, Tim Cooper has made a significant contribution in uncovering “the man behind the theology.” See his “Owen’s Personality: The Man behind the Theology,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology*, eds. Kelly M. Kapic and Mark Jones (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 215–226; cf. Cooper, *John Owen, Richard Baxter, and the Formation of Nonconformity*, 1–32, 101–136; Cooper, “Why Did Richard Baxter and John Owen Diverge? The Impact of the First Civil War,” *JEH* 61.3 (2010): 496–516. Crawford Gribben’s recent intellectual biography on *John Owen and English Puritanism* will replace Toon as the new standard in the field.

²⁰ The following section is not intended to be a comprehensive literary review of research on Owen. Only a survey of pertinent studies will be given in order to substantiate the claim that a lacuna exists in the field regarding his commentary on Hebrews. For an analysis of major biographies, monographs, and dissertations on Owen from the seventeenth century to the close of the twentieth century, see Kelly M. Kapic, “Communion with God: Relations between the Divine and the Human in the Theology of John Owen” (PhD diss., King’s College, London, 2001), 12–48. Tim Cooper has provided a critical review of recent scholarship in his “State of the Field: ‘John Owen Unleashed: Almost,’” *Conversations in Religion and Theology* 6 (2008): 227–257. For a bibliography of primary and secondary sources related to Owen, see John W. Tweeddale, “A John Owen Bibliography,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology*, 297–328.

The first doctoral dissertation on Owen emerged out of the University of Edinburgh in 1942 by R. Glynne Lloyd,²¹ although two works by James Moffatt at the beginning of the twentieth century introduced Owen to a popular audience.²² After a brief biographical sketch, Lloyd contrasts a wide selection of doctrines within Owen's theology with the teachings of Socinianism (e.g., Scripture, toleration, doctrine of God, Holy Spirit, person of Christ, offices of Christ, etc.). While his analysis endeavours to situate Owen's theology in a polemical context, he omits Owen's exercitations and exposition from his discussion. This is an unfortunate oversight considering that a primary reason for Owen's commentary was to provide a biblical refutation of Socinianism.²³

Godfrey N. Vose, in his 1963 doctoral dissertation from the State University of Iowa, outlines what he calls a "bifocal" approach to four doctrinal components in Owen's and puritan thought. He explains this method by stating that "attention is directed primarily towards Owen's theology, and within it, four aspects are selected for analysis." Focusing on the doctrines of the Holy Spirit, Scripture, the church, and salvation, he argues that his work "may be viewed either as the study of one man, or as an essay in certain features of seventeenth century English Puritanism in the

²¹ R. Glynne Lloyd, "The Life and Work of John Owen with Special Reference to the Socinian Controversies of the Seventeenth Century" (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1942); cf. Lloyd, *John Owen: Commonwealth Puritan* (Pontypridd: Modern Welsh Publications, 1972).

²² Moffatt, ed., *The Golden Book of John Owen*; Moffatt, *The Life of John Owen: Puritan Scholar, Sometime Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford and Dean of Christ Church* (London: Congregational Union of England and Wales, 1910).

²³ For a critique of Lloyd's reading of Owen, see Kapic, "Communion with God," 19–21. The best historical study of the challenge of Socinianism to the political and religious aspirations of English puritanism, especially in relation to Owen, is Sarah Mortimer, *Reason and Religion in the English Revolution: The Challenge of Socinianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For analysis of the Socinian challenge to Trinitarian theology and spirituality in England, see Paul C. H. Lim, *Mystery Unveiled: The Crisis of the Trinity in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), esp. 172–216.

theology of one of its leading divines.”²⁴ The weakness in this approach, however, is that while Owen was certainly a leading puritan figure, English puritanism was far from monolithic.²⁵ Nevertheless, Vose’s dissertation ably articulates these four essential aspects of Owen’s thought and serves as an entry point for subsequent studies on these doctrines in Owen’s theology. Yet he only occasionally cites *Hebrews*, particularly in support of his discussions on Scripture and covenant.

Sinclair B. Ferguson’s work *John Owen on the Christian Life* is one of the major catalysts for the recent growth of Owen studies and has been reprinted numerous times since its original publication in 1987. The book is a revision of Ferguson’s 1979 doctoral thesis from the University of Aberdeen and serves as a detailed introduction to several theological and pastoral themes in Owen’s writings. According to Ferguson, it “is intended in part as something of a ‘Reader’s Guide to John Owen’, providing a framework to his works and a conducted tour of much of his teaching.” Additionally, it is “also a study in pastoral theology.”²⁶ Notwithstanding several important summary discussions of Owen’s covenant theology, understanding of law, and views of apostasy, he interacts little with *Hebrews*.²⁷ His book, however, remains the most user-friendly introduction to Owen’s writings to date. Ferguson’s research has prompted a small cottage industry of Owen scholarship, most often associated with Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (USA)

²⁴ Vose, “Profile of a Puritan,” 11.

²⁵ On the range of views on these and other doctrines within English puritanism, see the essays in Michael A. G. Haykin and Mark Jones, eds., *Drawn into Controversie: Reformed Theological Diversity and Debates within Seventeenth-Century British Puritanism* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011).

²⁶ Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, xi; cf. Ferguson, “The Doctrine of the Christian Life in the Teaching of Dr. John Owen (1616–83): Chaplain to Oliver Cromwell and sometime Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford” (PhD diss., University of Aberdeen, 1979), 3.

²⁷ E.g., Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, 20–36, 48–54, 235, etc.

where he once taught full-time and now serves as a visiting professor.²⁸ He has also popularized Owen's teaching in several publications geared for a general audience.²⁹

Since the studies of Lloyd, Vose, Ferguson, among others, research on Owen has noticeably increased. Vose and Ferguson in particular are illustrative of earlier scholarship on Owen's theology. Both recognize the reformed and puritan settings of Owen's writings as well as provide solid expository accounts of his thought. Yet neither study supplies a fully contextual analysis of Owen's writings, whether political, intellectual, or exegetical. As a result, a one-dimensional portrait of Owen emerges, namely, that of a timeless theologian.³⁰ In regards to *Hebrews*, little can be

²⁸ In addition to the role of Ferguson, with the appointment of Carl R. Trueman as a professor of church history at Westminster in 2001, the tradition of Owen research at Westminster has continued. See Joel R. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991); Oh Changlok, "Beholding the Glory of God in Christ: Communion with God in the Theology of John Owen (1616–1683)" (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 2006); Richard W. Daniels, *The Christology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004); James E. Dolezal, "Unity without Uniformity: Taking Account of John Owen's Nonconformity" (ThM diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 2007); Howard Griffith, "High Priest in Heaven: The Intercession of the Exalted Christ in Reformed Theology, Analysis and Critique" (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 2004); Mark K. Harbour, "John Owen's Doctrine of Church and State" (ThM diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1991); Richard Mitchell Hawkes, "The Logic of Grace in John Owen, D. D.: An Analysis, Exposition, and Defense of John Owen's Puritan Theology of Grace" (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1987); Jonathan Jong-Chun Won, "Communion with Christ: An Exposition and Comparison of the Doctrine of Union and Communion with Christ in Calvin and the English Puritans" (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1989); David Wai-Sing Wong, "The Covenant Theology of John Owen" (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1998); Wong, "John Owen on the Suffering of Christ and the Suffering of the Church" (ThM diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1990).

²⁹ Most significant is Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Trinitarian Devotion of John Owen* (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust, 2014); see also Ferguson, "John Owen and the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit," and "John Owen and the Doctrine of the Person of Christ," in *John Owen: The Man and His Theology*, ed. Robert Oliver, 69–99; 101–129. In addition to articles on Owen for the *Banner of Truth* magazine, Ferguson has also written introductions to several unabridged and reformatted reprints of Owen's works: *Assurance* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Heritage, 2013); *Communion with God* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Christian Heritage: 2007); *The Glory of Christ* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Heritage, 2004); *The Holy Spirit* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Heritage, 2004); *The Person of Christ* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Heritage, 2015); *The Priesthood of Christ* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Heritage, 2010).

³⁰ Ferguson and Vose are only two examples. Other earlier studies on Owen introduce his thought with more or less success in placing him within broader historical and theological contexts. For example, Dewey Wallace's "The Life and Thought of John Owen" gives a detailed analysis of Owen's early life and writings against the political and polemical backdrops with which he wrote, with particular emphasis on predestinarian and Christocentric elements in Owen writings against Arminianism, even if he overstates the central place of predestination as a controlling doctrine in Owen's theology. In contrast,

gleaned except in reference to a subject predominated by the epistle (such as the priesthood of Christ) or in a passing quotation in a larger thematic discussion (such as on covenant theology).³¹ Rarely is consideration of Owen's commentary the primary focus. However, since the intent of these early studies was to provide preliminary investigations into Owen's life and thought, sustained examination of a single work that contributes to the development of his theology should neither be expected nor required of them. The challenge of contributing a more substantial analysis of his commentary resides with current Owen scholarship.

1.2.2 SCHOLARSHIP ON OWEN'S COMMENTARY

As research on Owen continues to develop, gaps in earlier research are beginning to be filled. Two landmark studies are Carl Trueman's first monograph on Owen titled *The Claims of Truth* (1998) and Sebastian Rehnman's *Divine Discourse* (2002). Taking into account the writings of Heiko Oberman, David Steinmetz, and Richard Muller, both monographs situate Owen within the larger intellectual contexts of western Trinitarian theology and reformed orthodoxy. While Owen's commentary is not dealt with directly in either work, their contributions are essential for grasping the basic structural and methodological dimensions of Owen's theology. To date there are only two doctoral dissertations on *Hebrews*, although there are several articles, dissertations, and monographs that discuss aspects of Owen's commentary. References to *Hebrews* within secondary literature fall under at least four categories:

Daniels's *The Christology of John Owen* and Hawkes's "The Logic of Grace in John Owen" provide expository descriptions of Owen's theology with little contextual or critical evaluation.

³¹ E.g., Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, 27–32; Daniels, *The Christology of John Owen*, 72–73; 329–384.

(1) Christology and the priesthood of Christ, (2) covenant theology, (3) the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, and (4) exegetical methodology.

Richard Daniels, Robert McGregor Wright, Howard Griffith, Kelly Kopic, and Edwin Tay each deal with aspects of Owen's Christology and his doctrine of the priesthood of Christ in particular. Daniels's *The Christology of John Owen* attempts to "provide students of Puritanism, and of historical and systematic theology, with a comprehensive systematic exposition of the Christology of a representative Puritan."³² The book is indeed comprehensive in scope, systematic in structure, and expository in description, although it lacks detailed historical analysis. In keeping with his stated objective, his chapters on the eternal counsels, the Old Testament, and the priesthood of Christ provide a clear outline of Owen's thought on those subjects, especially in relation to *Hebrews*, and are worth consulting.³³ McGregor Wright's dissertation on "John Owen's Great High Priest" focuses on Owen's critiques of Arminianism and Socinianism but presents a variation of the now defunct central dogma theory as he argues for the doctrine of the priesthood of Christ as the unifying theme in Owen's theology.³⁴ He also devotes a substantial section to Owen's exercitations on the priesthood of Christ.³⁵ Griffith's biblical-theological study on Christ's heavenly intercession is written "from the vantage point of the Reformed tradition" and surveys

³² Daniels, *The Christology of John Owen*, 516; cf. 16–19.

³³ Daniels, *The Christology of John Owen*, 147–177; 230–261; 329–384.

³⁴ Robert K. McGregor Wright, "John Owen's Great High Priest: The High Priesthood of Christ in the Theology of John Owen (1616–1683)" (PhD diss., The Iliff School of Theology and University of Denver, 1989), 217–218. For the standard critique of the so-called central dogma theory, see Richard A. Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008); cf. Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 63–80; Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 30, 43–44; Muller, *PRRD*, 1:37–46, 123–146, *passim*.

³⁵ McGregor Wright, "John Owen's Great High Priest," 176–209.

“five central figures, spanning three centuries, who represent a major stream in Reformed theology.” One of these key figures is Owen.³⁶ His discussion of Owen’s exertions on the sacerdotal office of Christ in relation to his polemic with the Socinians is terse and to the point but is limited in scope. Kopic’s *Communion with God: The Divine and the Human in the Theology of John Owen* is a revision of his doctoral thesis at King’s College, London and concentrates on Owen’s *Communion with God* (1657) as an entry point into his overall theology. The book traces tensions and developments within Owen’s theological anthropology along Christological and Trinitarian lines, noting especially its “anthroposensitive” character.³⁷ Kopic provides a helpful overview of Owen’s exposition of Hebrews 4 in relation to the priesthood of Christ and in particular probes Owen’s articulation of creational, Christological, and eschatological aspects of the Lord’s Day in his exertions on the Sabbath.³⁸ The most substantial study on Owen’s doctrine of the priesthood of Christ is Edwin Tay’s revised doctoral thesis wherein he situates Owen’s atonement theology within the context of Christ’s priestly ministry of oblation and intercession.³⁹ While these five studies contribute to a better understanding of the crucial role of the priestly office of Christ in Owen’s theology, interaction with Owen’s commentary is secondary to broader questions relating to his Christology. Along these lines, mention should also be made of Alan Spence’s excellent *Incarnation and Inspiration*, based on his doctoral

³⁶ Griffith, “High Priest in Heaven,” viii.

³⁷ Kelly M. Kopic, *Communion with God: The Divine and Human in the Theology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 33–34.

³⁸ Kopic, *Communion with God*, 94–105; 207–220; cf. Michael W. Bobick, “Appendix A: Owen’s Sabbath Argument,” in “Owen’s Razor: The Role of Ramist Logic in the Covenant Theology of John Owen (1616–1683)” (PhD diss., Drew University, 1996), 249–263.

³⁹ Edwin E. M. Tay, *The Priesthood of Christ: Atonement in the Theology of John Owen (1616–1683)* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2014). For a synopsis of his work, see Tay, “Christ’s Priestly Oblation and Intercession: Their Development and Significance in John Owen,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology*, 159–169.

work at King's College, London, where he draws upon *Hebrews* in a carefully argued defence of Owen's Spirit-Christology, a theme that has received noteworthy consideration by several scholars.⁴⁰

On covenant theology, Carl Trueman's *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man* places Owen within the context of post-Reformation developments in federal theology and discusses the theme along exegetical and Christological lines. He makes several passing references to *Hebrews*, calling it "quite possibly the most elaborate and important precritical commentary ever written on the book [of *Hebrews*]." ⁴¹ Articles by Rehnman, Brown, Jones, and Najapfour examine the difficult question of the Mosaic covenant and the republication of the covenant of works in Owen's exposition of *Hebrews* 8.⁴² Also significant is Michael Bobick's work on the role of Ramist logic within Owen's federal theology and commentary.⁴³ Ferguson, Vose, Steve Griffiths, David Wai-Sing Wong, Richard Barcellos, and Ryan

⁴⁰ Alan Spence, *Incarnation and Inspiration: John Owen and the Coherence of Christology* (London: T&T Clark, 2007); cf. Oliver D. Crisp, *Revisioning Christology: Theology in the Reformed Tradition* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 91–110; Stephen R. Holmes, "Reformed Varieties of the *Communicatio Idiomatum*," in *The Person of Christ*, eds. Stephen R. Holmes and Murray A. Rae (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 70–86; Brian K. Kay, *Trinitarian Spirituality: John Owen and the Doctrine of God in Western Devotion* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2007); Bruce L. McCormack, "'With Loud Cries and Tears': The Humanity of the Son in the Epistle to the Hebrews," in *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology*, eds. Richard Bauckham, et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 37–68; Carl R. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen's Trinitarian Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 151–164; Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 67–99; Tyler R. Wittman, "The End of the Incarnation: John Owen, Trinitarian Agency and Christology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 15.3 (2013): 284–300.

⁴¹ Trueman, *John Owen*, 67–99.

⁴² Sebastian Rehnman, "Is the Narrative of Redemptive History Trichotomous or Dichotomous? A Problem for Federal Theology," *NAK* 80 (2000): 296–308. This article supplements his discussion of the federal structure of Owen's theology in Rehnman, *Divine Discourse* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 155–177. See also Michael Brown, "The Covenant of Works Revived: John Owen on Republication in the Mosaic Covenant," *The Confessional Presbyterian* 4 (2008): 151–161, 310; Mark Jones, "The 'Old' Covenant," in *Drawn into Controversie*, 183–203; Jones, "The Minority Report: John Owen on Sinai," in Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 293–303; Brian G. Najapfour, "'That It Might Lead and Direct Men unto Christ': John Owen's View of the Mosaic Covenant," *SBET* 29 (2011): 196–204.

⁴³ Bobick, "Owen's Razor."

McGraw further emphasize the significance of covenant theology for Owen's theology.⁴⁴

Articles by A. Craig Troxel and Andrew Malone interact directly with Owen's commentary, especially on the issue of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. Troxel contends that Owen's central concern is "to worship God according to the supremacy of His glory." He argues, "Owen's thoughts on gospel worship were informed and controlled in large measure by the book of Hebrews."⁴⁵ His discussion of Owen's arguments for the superiority of "gospel worship" provides a window into the exposition proper, and a glimpse into Owen's exertions on the priestly office of Christ. Especially helpful is Troxel's discussion on Owen's use of typology and his analysis of the comparative glory of New Covenant worship to the Old. However, the complex interrelationship of the biblical covenants with regards to gospel worship needs to be set against the backdrop of debates within Reformed orthodoxy on the continuity and discontinuity between the Mosaic covenant and New Covenant, a subject touched on by Troxel but more robustly handled in the writings by Rehnman, Jones, and McGraw mentioned above. His discussion on typology also needs to be augmented by a consideration of the broader question for Owen regarding the relationship of promise and fulfilment. But these issues are well beyond the scope of this excellent article. Malone explores Owen's view of pre-incarnate revelations of Christ in the Old Testament. The background of his article is

⁴⁴ Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, 20–36; Vose, "Profile of a Puritan," 248–305; Steve Griffiths, *Redeem the Time: Sin in the Writings of John Owen* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2001), 18–29; Wong, "The Covenant Theology of John Owen"; Richard C. Barcellos, *The Family Tree of Reformed Biblical Theology: Geerhardus Vos and John Owen—Their Methods of and Contributions to the Articulation of Redemptive History* (Owensboro, KY: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2010), 53–107; Ryan M. McGraw, *A Heavenly Directory: Trinitarian Piety, Public Worship, and a Reassessment of John Owen's Theology* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 140–186.

⁴⁵ A. Craig Troxel, "'Cleansed Once for All': John Owen on the Glory of Gospel Worship in Hebrews," *CTJ* 32 (1997): 469.

important. According to Malone, “Owen’s reputation has been enlisted in support of the ‘rediscovery’ of an active and visible pre-incarnate Son in the Old Testament. His position on such matters has earned a hearing among evangelicals in the UK and Australia . . . The debate pivots on the revelatory value of such christophanies, and how these contribute to the progress of revelation and the veracity of faith.”⁴⁶ The strength of Malone’s article lies in his exposition of the “clear distinction between the clarity of the revelation of the two testaments.”⁴⁷ His article is one of the few that deals significantly not only with Owen’s exposition but also with his exercitations on the Messiah. Nevertheless, the corrective dimension of the article restricts its focus.

Henry Knapp’s doctoral dissertation on Owen’s exegetical methodology is the first detailed examination of *Hebrews*. Knapp provides a necessary corrective to a common stereotype of dogmatic proof-texting levelled against many of the reformed orthodox. He concentrates on Owen’s commentary on Hebrews 1:1–3 and notes “a reluctance to speak on theological issues not directly flowing from the text.”⁴⁸ He also explores Owen’s assessment of Old Testament citations in Hebrews, his use of typology, and his interpretation of Hebrews 6:4–6 in the relation to the doctrine of perseverance.⁴⁹ Knapp concludes that Owen’s commentary reflects a combination of precritical assumptions about the biblical text, scholarly developments from Renaissance humanism, and scholastic methods that formulate the rich exegetical heritage of reformed orthodoxy.⁵⁰ His work is marked by a thorough examination of

⁴⁶ Andrew A. Malone, “John Owen and Old Testament Christophanies,” *RTR* 63 (2004): 138–139.

⁴⁷ Malone, “John Owen and Old Testament Christophanies,” 153.

⁴⁸ Knapp, “Understanding the Mind of God,” xii.

⁴⁹ For his research on Owen’s doctrine of perseverance, see also Henry Knapp, “Augustine and Owen on Perseverance,” *WTJ* 62 (2000): 65–88; Knapp, “John Owen’s Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4–6: Eternal Perseverance of the Saints in Puritan Exegesis,” *CTJ* 34 (2003): 29–52.

⁵⁰ Knapp, “Understanding the Mind of God,” xii.

Owen's exposition and a keen awareness of post-Reformation hermeneutical texts and commentaries on Hebrews. In a similar manner, Lee Gatiss's dissertation complements Knapp's research but focuses on the polemical contexts of Owen's exegesis of Hebrews. Through a careful analysis of Owen's interaction with Socinian, Jewish, Protestant, and Roman Catholic scholarship, Gatiss shows that Owen was "working at the cutting edge of scholarly New Testament study in the seventeenth century."⁵¹ While both Knapp and Gatiss focus primarily on Owen's exposition, this thesis will focus more specifically on his preliminary exercitations that introduce the main interpretative themes of his commentary.⁵²

1.3 NEGLECT OF OWEN AND HIS COMMENTARY

While this discussion highlights an emerging interest in Owen, he, like other puritans, has received less scholarly attention than his Reformation forebears. What factors have contributed to his neglect? After over three hundred years since his death, why has research on Owen only begun to materialize? If *Hebrews* represents the height of his exegetical competence, why has it received so little consideration? Obviously, no definitive answer can be given, but the following are five factors that may help to explain the neglect of Owen and his commentary: (1) historically, the decline of puritanism; (2) hermeneutically, the displacement of precritical exegesis with the rise of the Enlightenment; (3) historiographically, the Calvin-Calvinist debate; (4) polemically, the use of Owen in evangelical debates regarding the nature of Scripture; and (5) literarily, the prolixity of Owen's writing style.

⁵¹ Lee Gatiss, "Adoring the Fullness of the Scriptures in John Owen's Commentary on Hebrews" (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2013), 25; cf. 112, 114.

⁵² See chapter 2 for a detailed discussion on the relationship between Owen's exercitations to his exposition proper.

1.3.1 DECLINE OF PURITANISM

When Owen died on St. Bartholomew's Day in 1683, puritanism was in a state of fragmentation. Two days before his death, Owen wrote to Charles Fleetwood (c. 1618–1692) that he was “leaving the ship of the church in a storm.”⁵³ Although Owen endured comparatively little direct persecution as a result of the Restoration, the re-establishment of the Stuart monarchy with the enthronement of Charles II in 1660 dealt a deathblow to nonconformists of all stripes. Their initial desire for national and ecclesiastical reform was never realised. As a result, the efforts of Owen and others shifted towards toleration.⁵⁴ However, the political, academic, and religious influences of puritanism quickly faded, as leaders like Owen were removed from centres of power and prestige. As Alan Spence suggests, “The fall of the Puritans from political power at the Restoration and the ejection of their ministers from the pulpits of England contributed to the comparative neglect of Owen's theology in the years that followed.”⁵⁵

⁵³ Owen, “To Charles Fleetwood” (22 Aug. 1683), in Toon, ed., *The Correspondence of John Owen*, 174. Fleetwood was a Lieutenant General under Cromwell and long-time friend of Owen's.

⁵⁴ For Owen's views on toleration during the Interregnum and the Restoration, see John Coffey, “John Owen and the Puritan Toleration Controversy, 1646–59,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen's Theology*, 227–248; Cooper, *John Owen, Richard Baxter, and the Formation of Nonconformity*; Paul Lim, “The Trinity, *Adiaphora*, Ecclesiology, and Reformation: John Owen's Theory of Religious Toleration in Context,” *WTJ* 67 (2005): 281–300; cf. Gary S. De Krey, “Reformation in the Restoration Crisis, 1679–1682,” in *Religion, Literature, and Politics in Post-Reformation England, 1540–1688*, eds. Donna B. Hamilton and Richard Strier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 231–252. For a historical analysis of the Restoration, see Keeble, *The Restoration: England in the 1660s* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 132–158; and the dated C. E. Whiting, *Studies on English Puritanism from the Restoration to the Revolution, 1660–1688* (New York: MacMillan, 1931), 76–81.

⁵⁵ Alan Spence, “Owen, John (1616–83),” in *DHT*, 413. Vose also states, “The Restoration brought such a reversal in the fortunes on the non-conformists and subjected them to such furious ignominy that their regulations and their writings remained in eclipse for many years, and theologians like Owen whose works belonged to a much wider circle of readers became regarded as the exclusive possession of a small coterie of admiring dissenters.” Vose, “Profile of a Puritan,” 316–317.

Owen never lived to see toleration granted to nonconformists in England, although, as Christopher Hill states, “he would have appreciated 1688 if he had lived to welcome it.”⁵⁶ But even with the Glorious Revolution and subsequent Act of Toleration, the dissenting movement was never the same. In the words of John Spurr, “For the puritans within the ranks of dissent the price of religious liberty was the abandonment of their hope of re-joining and re-shaping the national church.”⁵⁷ Puritanism was a lost cause. Dissenters like Owen have since faced the fate of many who never claimed the victor’s prize: marginalization. Sympathizers of Owen’s theological heritage have maintained a level of interest in him by keeping his books in print; however, the academic world has paid him little attention until recently.⁵⁸

1.3.2 ENLIGHTENMENT AND PRECRITICAL EXEGESIS

The collapse of puritanism as a catalyst for ecclesiastical and theological reform is only part of the story of its neglect. The revolutionary ideas of the Enlightenment created a “crisis of the European mind” and proved even more deleterious to any hope of a puritan legacy.⁵⁹ In the closing years of the seventeenth century, the confessional

⁵⁶ Christopher Hill, *The Experience of Defeat: Milton and Some Contemporaries* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), 178.

⁵⁷ John Spurr, *English Puritanism 1603–1689* (London: MacMillan Press, 1998), 149; cf. Spurr, “From Puritanism to Dissent, 1660–1700,” in *The Culture of English Puritanism, 1560–1700*, eds. Christopher Durston and Jacqueline Eales (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), 234–265; Spurr, “Later Stuart Puritanism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism*, eds. John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 89–105. See also B. R. White, “Twilight of Puritanism in the Years before and after 1688,” in *From Puritanism to Toleration: The Glorious Revolution and Religion in England*, eds. Ole Peter Grell, Jonathan I. Israel, and Nicholas Tyache (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 307–330.

⁵⁸ For a discussion on the effects of the Great Ejection on Puritan and Owen scholarship, see Trueman, *The Claims of Truth*, 1–9; Trueman, “Puritan Theology as Historical Event: A Linguistic Approach to the Ecumenical Context,” in *Reformation and Scholasticism: An Ecumenical Enterprise*, eds. Willem J. van Asselt and Eef Dekker (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 253–256.

⁵⁹ Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 14–22.

infrastructure erected in the wake of the Reformation was slowly deteriorating as the dawn of the Enlightenment emerged with greater cultural strength and sway. Jonathan Israel argues that from the middle of the seventeenth century a process of “rationalization and secularization set in which rapidly overthrew theology’s age-old hegemony in the world of study.” Within Owen’s lifetime, an intellectual shift took place. Israel contends, “Whereas before 1650 practically everyone disputed and wrote about confessional differences, subsequently, by the 1680s, . . . the main issue now was the escalating context between faith and incredulity.”⁶⁰ The orthodox and scholastic convictions that undergirded the thinking of many puritans gave way to a host of modern philosophies and theologies that rendered the more precritical world of Owen obsolete. “As a result,” Carl Trueman states, “Calvinism ceased on the whole to be a significant intellectual force in the eighteenth century, and was subject to little creative theological development.”⁶¹ In other words, the worldview of Owen did not prevail into the modern world of the eighteenth century. As the distance, both chronologically and intellectually, between the puritans and the present grows wider, the proverbial ditch between the two becomes more difficult to cross. For many today, the questions, systems, and commentaries of the puritans are provincial and irrelevant.

⁶⁰ Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 4. G. R. Cragg’s similar comment applies more specifically to Britain, “Though traditional patterns of thought persisted, the distinguishing feature of the Restoration era was the far-reaching intellectual changes which it initiated.” *The Church and the Age of Reason, 1648–1789* (London: Penguin, 1960), 67.

⁶¹ Carl Trueman, “Calvinism,” in *DHT*, 104. On the effects of the Enlightenment on continental scholasticism, see James T. Dennison, Jr., “The Twilight of Scholasticism: Francis Turretin at the Dawn of the Enlightenment,” in *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment*, eds. Carl R. Trueman and R. S. Clark (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999), 244–255; Martin I. Klauber, *Between Reformed Scholasticism and Pan-Protestantism: Jean-Alphonse Turretin (1671–1737) and Enlightened Orthodoxy at the Academy of Geneva* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1994). For a summary of his work, see Klauber, “Theological Transition in Geneva: From Jean-Alphonse Turretin to Jacob Vernet,” in *Protestant Scholasticism*, 256–270.

One example of the impact that the Enlightenment has had on puritan studies is in the underdeveloped field of the history of biblical interpretation. In the middle of the twentieth century, Basil Hall urged for a renewed interest into the history of biblical exegesis, which he called “one of the most neglected fields in the history of the Church and its doctrine.”⁶² Since then improvements have been made, especially in the area of Reformation exegesis, much of which was prompted by David Steinmetz’s probing into the “superiority of pre-critical exegesis.”⁶³ However, the era of the post-Reformation remains largely uncharted territory.⁶⁴ As Adriaan C. Neele has recently stated, “The examination of the method and practice of biblical interpretation of post-Reformation documents in the second half of the seventeenth century awaits, in general, a much needed appraisal.”⁶⁵

⁶² Basil Hall, “Biblical Scholarship: Editions and Commentaries,” in *Cambridge History of the Bible: The West from the Reformation to the Present Day*, ed. S. L. Greenslade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 76. Hall however minimises the contribution of the puritans in light of his rigid division between Calvin and the Calvinists. *Ibid.*, 87, 91. See below for a brief discussion of the Calvin-Calvinist debate and its effects on puritan scholarship.

⁶³ David C. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of the Pre-Critical Exegesis,” *Theology Today* 37 (1980): 27–38; cf. Steinmetz, “Theology and Exegesis: Ten Theses,” in *Historie de l’exégèse au XVII^e siècle* (Geneva: Droz, 1978), 382; Richard A. Muller and John L. Thompson, “The Significance of Precritical Exegesis: Retrospect and Prospect,” in *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation: Essays Presented to David C. Steinmetz in Honor of His Sixtieth Birthday* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 335–345; Muller, *PRRD*, 2:520–524.

⁶⁴ Following the basic trajectory of Steinmetz’s article, see e.g., James E. Bradley and Richard A. Muller, eds., *Church, Word, & Spirit: Historical and Theological Essays in Honor of Geoffrey W. Bromiley* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987); Irena D. Backus, *Reformation Readings of the Apocalypse: Geneva, Zurich, and Wittenberg* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Craig S. Farmer, *The Gospel of John in the Sixteenth Century: The Johannine Exegesis of Wolfgang Musculus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Timothy George, *Reading Scripture with the Reformers* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011); A. N. S. Lane, ed., *Interpreting the Bible: Historical and Theological Studies in Honour of David F. Wright* (Leicester: Apollos, 1997); Muller, *After Calvin*, 146–174; Muller, “Biblical Interpretation in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” in *DMBI*, 22–44; Muller and Thompson, eds., *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation*; Richard A. Muller and Rowland S. Ward, *Scripture and Worship: Biblical Interpretation and the Directory for Worship* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2007), 3–82; T. H. L. Parker, *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans 1532–1542* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986); David C. Steinmetz, ed., *The Bible in the Sixteenth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).

⁶⁵ Adriaan C. Neele, *Petrus Van Mastricht (1630–1706): Reformed Orthodoxy: Method and Practice* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 141. Trueman commented in 1997, “As yet there are no significant studies of the exegetical and interpretive strategies of the Reformed Orthodox of the seventeenth century”: see his “Faith Seeking Understanding: Some Neglected Aspects of John Owen’s

One of the most noteworthy studies on the doctrine and interpretation of Scripture in the seventeenth century is the second volume of Richard Muller's *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*. Muller not only explores the formulation of the doctrine of Scripture within Protestant orthodoxy, noting dependence upon medieval and reformed theologies while highlighting developments within the period, but he also provides an extensive analysis of the history of post-Reformation biblical interpretation.⁶⁶ Muller makes several passing references to Owen's controversy with Brian Walton (1600–1661) over the inspiration of the Hebrew vowel points as well as notes Owen's use of the *London Polyglot* (1653–1657), the Septuagint, and Jewish scholarship in his commentary.⁶⁷ Muller acknowledges that his synthetic approach "barely scratches the surface" of the reformed orthodox doctrine of Scripture and calls for more focused research on the exegetical methods of those like Owen whose writings span a variety of genres from doctrinal and polemical to exegetical and homiletical.⁶⁸ His work has provided the basis for additional studies that investigate the exegetical contributions of individuals within the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁶⁹ Moreover, Muller's writings, along with the scholarly efforts of his associates and students, raise a question about why studies on post-Reformation

Understanding of Scriptural Interpretation," in *Interpreting the Bible*, 160–161. While the field has changed since Trueman's statement, Muller's observation remains true, "The history of biblical interpretation is, moreover, a comparatively new field: it is really only in the last twenty years that we have seen examinations of the biblical interpretation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that do justice, historically and contextually, to the exegesis of the era—and the study of the seventeenth century still lags behind." Muller, *After Calvin*, 41.

⁶⁶ Muller, *PRRD*, 2:442–524.

⁶⁷ Muller, *PRRD*, 2:130–133, 406–414, 432–434, 445.

⁶⁸ Muller, *PRRD*, 2:18.

⁶⁹ Muller has supervised several doctoral dissertations along these lines. See e.g., Knapp, "Understanding the Mind of God"; Lee, *Johannes Cocceius and the Exegetical Roots of Federal Theology*; Shim, "Biblical Hermeneutics and Hebraism in the Early Seventeenth Century as Reflected in the Work of John Weemse."

developments in biblical interpretation have lagged behind other fields of inquiry and illustrate the need for a reappraisal of the exegetical practices of Protestant orthodoxy in general and figures such as Owen in particular.

With the Enlightenment came not only a shift in theological, philosophical, and scientific inquiries but also in biblical criticism. In light of these changes, current discussions of hermeneutics sometimes view the precritical exegesis of the seventeenth century as passé, and occasionally even with disdain. For example, the belief held by many of the Protestant orthodox (including Owen) concerning the inspiration of the vowel points in the Hebrew text is seen as primitive and unsophisticated.⁷⁰ Likewise, the vast majority of commentators since Owen have not followed his “excessive” defence of the Pauline authorship of Hebrews.⁷¹ In his Bampton Lectures at Oxford University, nineteenth century clergyman and contrarian Frederic Farrar (1831–1903) derided the confessional and scholastic interpretative framework of Protestant orthodoxy as “cheerless,” “tyrannous,” “exorbitant,” “contentious,” and “rigid.”⁷² While Farrar’s criticisms have been substantially challenged by current scholarship, negative estimations about the contributions of precritical exegesis to contemporary discussions on hermeneutics

⁷⁰ E.g., Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 221–223; Bert Loonstra, “Scholasticism and Hermeneutics,” in *Reformation and Scholasticism*, 295–306; Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Historical Theology: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1978), 318; cf. Muller, *After Calvin*, 146–155; Muller, *PRRD*, 2:406–413.

⁷¹ David L. Allen, *Hebrews* (Nashville: B&H, 2010), 38, n. 69. On the debate regarding Pauline authorship in the sixteenth century, see the standard work by Kenneth Hagen, *Hebrews Commenting from Erasmus to Bèze, 1516–1598* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1981); cf. Kelly M. Kapic, “Typology, the Messiah, and John Owen’s Theological Reading of Hebrews,” *Christology, Hermeneutics, and Hebrews: Profiles from the History of Interpretation*, eds. Jon C. Laansma and Daniel J. Treier (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 138–139.

⁷² Frederic W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1886), 358–359. Despite such scathing remarks, Owen receives a passing commendation. “Among the nonconformist communities Baxter, Bunyan, Owen, Howe, and Isaac Watts helped to keep alive the flame of spiritual life.” *Ibid.*, 377.

remain.⁷³ Bert Loonstra has argued that many of the interpretative assumptions of reformed scholasticism are “untenable” and “out of step with our modern analytic approach.”⁷⁴ Regarding Owen’s commentary in particular, although sympathetic of its pastoral benefits, biblical scholar Harold W. Attridge sees it as “something of a period piece” and “dated” when compared to later historical-critical commentaries.⁷⁵ From this perspective, precritical exegesis is a relic from the past with little to offer the present.⁷⁶

While the development of textual criticism since Owen’s day has altered scholarly understanding of the vowel pointing of the Hebrew text and the authorship of the letter to the Hebrews, to dismiss the exegetical contributions of Protestant scholastics because they do not share modern assumptions about the biblical text is a fallacy of judging the part for the whole. Precritical exegetes were not uncritical.⁷⁷ Even the most superficial reading of Owen’s commentary reveals a high level of textual-critical discussion and exegetical nuance. As Kelly Kapic has argued, “In

⁷³ See Steinmetz, “The Superiority of the Pre-Critical Exegesis,” *Theology Today* 37 (1980): 27–38; for the most up-to-date evaluation of scholarship on reformed exegesis, see Henry M. Knapp, “The Criticism and Reassessment of Seventeenth-Century Exegesis,” *Church and School in Early Modern Protestantism: Studies in Honor of Richard A. Muller on the Maturation of a Theological Tradition*, eds. Jordan J. Ballor, David Sytsma, Jason Zuidema (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 533–550; Knapp, “Understanding the Mind of God,” 1–13.

⁷⁴ Loonstra, “Scholasticism and Hermeneutics,” 296.

⁷⁵ Harold W. Attridge, “Hebrews and the History of Its Interpretation: A Biblical Scholar’s Response,” *Christology, Hermeneutics and Hebrews: Profiles from the History of Interpretation*, eds. Jon C. Laansma and Daniel J. Treier (London: T&T Clark, 2013), 206.

⁷⁶ Owen’s precritical exegesis is not always viewed in such a negative light. Bruce McCormack, for example, has recently drawn attention to the contribution of Owen’s Spirit-Christology: “Of all the traditional advocates of the orthodox ‘two natures Christology’ set forth at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, John Owen is the most intriguing known to me. When I say ‘traditional advocates,’ I am referring of course to those who lived prior to the rise of modern biblical criticism and the sea-changes in philosophical outlook that brought classical metaphysics into question. What I like most about Owen is that he did not allow his commitment to two-natures Christology to hinder his appreciation for the Spirit’s ministry in the life of Jesus. It is a testimony to the Reformed character of his Christology that he did not allow this to happen.” McCormack, “‘With Loud Cries and Tears’: The Humanity of the Son in the Epistle to the Hebrews,” 38–39.

⁷⁷ Cf. Muller, *PRRD*, 2:396–401.

both style and method Owen functions as a bridge between earlier, pre-critical approaches and the developing scholarly methods that would soon come to dominate modern commentaries.”⁷⁸ Puritans like Owen approached the text with a variety of hermeneutical assumptions and need to be evaluated on their own terms, even when engaging in contemporary discussions on hermeneutics.⁷⁹

Reflecting on the contributions of Hans Frei (1922–1988), Jens Zimmermann has argued in his book *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics* that neither the philosophical nor evangelical communities has fully acknowledged the depth and nuance of the precritical exegetical tradition. He claims, “The intellectual snobbery that regards pre-Enlightenment hermeneutics as inferior to modern and postmodern approaches because of an outdated worldview greatly influenced and continues to shape the formulation of interpretive theories.”⁸⁰ Although Zimmermann surveys the hermeneutical views of the reformers, English puritanism (including Owen), and German Pietism, his goal is not to engage in the interpretive questions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but in the philosophical debates of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In particular, he seeks to relate the value of precritical hermeneutics for contemporary epistemological and ethical discussions on topics such as self-knowledge in regards to an understanding of human finitude and

⁷⁸ Kapic, “Typology, the Messiah, and John Owen’s Theological Reading of Hebrews,” 138.

⁷⁹ Note Sheppard’s counsel: “In my view, any description of premodern interpretation should initially endeavor to understand the term peculiar to the older form of discourse without assuming that hermeneutical expressions from one era will carry the same semantic import in another.” Gerald T. Sheppard, “Interpretation of the Old Testament between Reformation and Modernity,” in William Perkins, *A Commentary on Hebrews 11* (1609 Edition), ed. John H. Augustine (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1991), 49.

⁸⁰ Jens Zimmermann, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics: An Incarnational-Trinitarian Theory of Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 17; cf. Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 17–50.

sinfulness and knowledge of God in regards to his self-disclosure in creation, in Christ, and in the Bible.⁸¹

The history of biblical interpretation, particularly in the seventeenth century, is a growing but still relatively uncultivated field of research. While stereotypes about precritical hermeneutics have seemingly contributed to the neglect of this scholarly field, studies such as Muller's and Zimmermann's have attempted to reassess exegetical strategies in the post-Reformation, albeit from different vantage points—one more historical and the other more philosophical.⁸² A study of the interpretative and theological assumptions employed by Owen in his discourses on *Hebrews* could serve as a small contribution towards a reassessment of precritical exegesis.

1.3.3 CALVIN AND THE CALVINISTS DEBATE

In 1966 Basil Hall published his ominously titled essay “Calvin against the Calvinists” only to be followed by the more substantial and controversial works of Brian Armstrong and R. T. Kendall.⁸³ Since then much debate has arisen pertaining to the alleged dichotomy between the Reformation and post-Reformation periods, not least of which has been a surge of revisionist scholarship that has shown that

⁸¹ Zimmermann, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics*, 78–132.

⁸² For a thorough critique of conventional scholarship on precritical exegesis, see Knapp, “Understanding the Mind of God,” 1–14.

⁸³ Basil Hall, “Calvin against the Calvinists,” in *John Calvin*, ed. G. E. Duffield (Appleford: Abingdon, 1966); Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969); R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981). For a reassessment of the debate, see Muller, *After Calvin*, 63–102. The content of this material was published previously as two articles: “Calvin and the Calvinists’: Assessing Continuities and Discontinuities between Reformation and Orthodoxy—Part 1,” *CTJ* 30.2 (1995): 345–375; “Calvin and the Calvinists’: Assessing Continuities and Discontinuities between Reformation and Orthodoxy—Part 2,” *CTJ* 31.1 (1996): 125–160; cf. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 13–50; Muller, *Christ and the Decree*, 1–13; Muller, “The Problem of Protestant Scholasticism—A Review and Definition,” in *Reformation and Scholasticism*, 45–64; Muller, *PRRD* 1:27–146, 446–450.

there exists more doctrinal continuity than discontinuity between these two periods.⁸⁴ Rather than seeing Calvin against the Calvinists, these scholars have argued that more links the intellectual and confessional tapestries of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries than mere chronology. Historiography of the post-Reformation therefore should not be forced into an either/or disjunction between Calvin and the puritans, as though Calvin were the only point of comparison for subsequent generations within the broader confines of reformed orthodoxy. Instead, both Calvin and the puritans must be placed within an historical context whereby similarities and differences are noted in both periods against the larger setting of the western theological catholic tradition that stretches back to the medieval and patristic periods.

Neither side overlooked Owen in this debate. Most notable in terms of those who see a division between Calvin and the Calvinists is Alan Clifford's *Atonement and Justification*. He applies Kendall's thesis to argue that Owen was the "undoubted champion of the Bezan school" and that his doctrine of limited atonement was "governed more by Aristotelian than by Scriptural considerations."⁸⁵ The validity of these claims has been substantially challenged. Yet what is striking for the purposes of this review is that Clifford mentions Owen's commentary only once in passing—a surprising oversight given the subject of his study.⁸⁶ In addition to Clifford, the Calvin-Calvinist debate coloured much of the scholarship on Owen during the 1980s

⁸⁴ For a survey of interpretative models, see Willem J. van Asselt, "Reformed Orthodoxy: A Short History of Research," in *A Companion to Reformed Orthodoxy*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 11–26; cf. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*, 1–8; Paul Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982); Stephen R. Holmes, *Listening to the Past: The Place of Tradition in Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), 68–85; Carl R. Trueman, "Calvin and Calvinism," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 225–244; Trueman and Clark, eds., *Protestant Scholasticism*.

⁸⁵ Alan C. Clifford, *Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology 1640–1790: An Evaluation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 82, 98.

⁸⁶ Clifford, *Atonement and Justification*, 7. For a critique of Clifford, see Trueman, *The Claims of Truth*, 233–240, *passim*.

and 1990s. As a result, this scholarship often took on a corrective tone.⁸⁷ Not until studies by Trueman, Rehnman, Knapp, Griffiths, Kopic, and others were the broader intellectual and historical aspects of Owen's theology given more in-depth consideration. The question of the relationship between the Reformation and post-Reformation is extremely important, not to mention the importance (or, dare we say, unimportance) of Calvin to individuals within the seventeenth century (including Owen). Nevertheless, Owen's commentary suffered from near abandonment, as the scholarly world was busy seeking to demonstrate with various amounts of academic dexterity Calvin's supposed agreement or disagreement with the reformed orthodox.

1.3.4 EVANGELICAL DEBATES ON SCRIPTURE

Not unrelated to the previous discussion is the use of Owen by evangelicals in debates over the nature and authority of Scripture in the last quarter of the twentieth century. On several occasions, Owen's writings on Scripture have been employed to garner support for a particular theological viewpoint.⁸⁸ While these articles and essays at times provide useful summaries of his doctrine of Scripture, Owen is more often called upon to serve the role of a courier from the past to bring a specific doctrinal perspective to a modern-day debate. The problem with this approach, as Carl Trueman has observed, is that "it narrows the field of scholarly investigation to

⁸⁷ Cf. Donald K. McKim, "John Owen's Doctrine of Scripture in Historical Perspective," *EQ* 45 (1973): 195–207; Rogers and McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible*, 218–223; Randall C. Gleason, *John Calvin and John Owen on Mortification: A Comparative Study in Reformed Spirituality* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995); Bobick, "Owen's Razor"; Wong, "The Covenant Theology of John Owen." For an overview of most of the literature relating to Owen and the Calvin-Calvinist debate, see Kopic, "Communion with God," 35–44; cf. Griffiths, *Redeem the Time*, 12.

⁸⁸ The best of these articles is Stanley N. Gundry, "John Owen on Authority and Scripture," in *Inerrancy and the Church*, ed. John D. Hannah (Chicago: Moody, 1984), 189–221; see also Malone, "John Owen and Old Testament Christophanies," 138–154; Rogers and McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible*; David J. McKinley, "John Owen's View of Illumination: An Alternative to the Fuller-Erickson Dialogue," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (1997): 93–104.

those areas which are perceived to be directly relevant to the present and thus prevents a broader investigation of the wider theological and historical context of the primary texts.”⁸⁹ This is not to imply that historical figures should not have a voice in contemporary ecclesial and doctrinal discussions but to emphasize that the distinct circumstances of the past can be clouded by the demands of the present. The criterion for assessing the historical value of Owen’s *Hebrews* should not primarily be based upon what it does or does not offer to contemporary theological debates but upon its merit as a seventeenth century commentary. From this perspective, Owen’s exposition can be evaluated for its own qualities and peculiarities and not for its effectiveness in bolstering the theological agendas of the day. Reflecting on the historiography of reformed scholasticism in relation to the doctrine of inspiration, Andrew Leslie states, “Owen’s understanding of scriptural inspiration was no more or less than a creature of his seventeenth-century Reformed context, and so it is not surprising, perhaps, that it too has been tarred with the brush of . . . disapproval.”⁹⁰

1.3.5 OWEN’S LITERARY STYLE

If reasons are being considered for the neglect of Owen’s commentary, his dense and discursive literary style is surely a contributing factor to its lack of attention. William Orme argues that “the chief objection to the Exposition of the Hebrews is its vast extent; four folio, or seven large 8vo. volumes [sic] on one epistle, and that not the longest in the New Testament, appear rather a cumbrous apparatus of explanation.”⁹¹

⁸⁹ Trueman, “Faith Seeking Understanding,” 148–149; cf. Muller, *PRRD*, 2:27.

⁹⁰ Andrew M. Leslie, *The Light of Grace: John Owen on the Authority of Scripture and Christian Faith* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 188.

⁹¹ Orme, “Memoirs of Dr Owen,” in *Works*, ed. T. Russell, 1:255.

Likewise, Andrew Thomson (1814–1901) states that the “appalling magnitude of the work is the most formidable obstacle of its usefulness.”⁹² In his 1899 Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale University, John Brown (1830–1922) wryly suggests that “life is not long enough, and things move too fast nowadays for . . . elaborate and exhaustive treatments of every line of every verse like that which John Owen has given in his Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews.”⁹³ The Baptist minister Robert Hall (1764–1831) erupted when a friend admitted to him of reading Owen’s commentary, “You astonish me, Sir, by your patience. You have accomplished a herculean undertaking in reading Owen’s Preliminary Exercitations. To me he is intolerably heavy and prolix.”⁹⁴ While commendatory of the work, the German theologian August Tholock (1799–1877) opined that Owen’s commentary “entombs the reader under a mass of exercitations, disputations, and porismata [deductions] of every kind.”⁹⁵

Owen was not unaware of his tendency towards prolixity. He acknowledges that his work was long even for seventeenth century standards, “We live in times that are fortified against the use of discourses of this nature, especially such as are so long and bulky.”⁹⁶ Ironically, the length of the commentary is partly the result of his desire to accommodate a wider readership.⁹⁷ He organized *Hebrews* into three basic categories: (1) textual and grammatical, (2) expositional, and (3) practical. In the first

⁹² Thomson, “Life of Dr Owen,” in *Works*, 1:lxxxvi.

⁹³ John Brown, *Puritan Preaching in England: A Study of Past and Present* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1900), 42–43.

⁹⁴ John Foster, ed., *The Works of Robert Hall*, 6 vols. (London, 1855), 6:120.

⁹⁵ August Tholock, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, trans. James Hamilton (Edinburgh, 1842), lib. 1, p. 116. For additional comments on Owen’s “ponderous comprehensiveness” and “lumbering Latinised idiom,” see Keeble, *The Literature Culture of Nonconformity*, 246; J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990), 16, respectively; cf. Vose, “Profile of a Puritan,” 61–62, 318.

⁹⁶ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), n.p. (*Works*, 18:19).

⁹⁷ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. [ix–x] (*Works*, 18:9, cf. p. 14ff).

unit, Owen probes the Greek text along with “the examination of ancient and modern translations, and the grammatical construction and signification of the words.” Next, he offers an extended exposition of the biblical passage in its original “context, with the declaration and vindication of the sense and meaning of the Holy Ghost in them.” Lastly, he gives several practical observations that can be deduced from the text.⁹⁸ While each section within this threefold structure logically flows from one part to the next, each interpretative category forms a self-contained unit. The purpose for this division was to make the commentary more accessible. Owen wanted to help his readers—who might be less concerned with the technical components of his exegesis of a specific text—move with relative ease to those sections within his work that were of more personal interest or seen as having more devotional value. He states,

And if any one shall hereon conceive our discourses over long or tedious, or too much diverting from the expository part of our work, I have sundry things to offer towards his satisfaction: . . . The method of the whole is so disposed, as that any one, by the sole guidance of his eye, without further trouble than by turning the leaves of the book, may carry on or continue his reading of any part of the whole without interruption or mixing any other discourse therewithal . . . Wherefore, from the constant observation of the same method as to the principal distinct parts of the whole Exposition, everyone is at liberty to use that order in the perusal of it which he judgeth most for his own advantage.⁹⁹

This structure was not uncommon in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as can be seen, for instance, in Wolfgang Musculus’s (1497–1563) highly regarded commentary on the Psalms wherein he divides his work into three sections: *lectio*, *explanatio*, and *observatio*. Each of these parts corresponds roughly with the textual, expositional, and practical portions of Owen’s commentary.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Owen, *Hebrews* (1674), n.p. [i] (*Works*, 18:15).

⁹⁹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1674), n.p. [i] (*Works*, 18:14–15). Compare the similar hermeneutical method outlined by Owen’s colleague: Henry Lukin, *An Introduction to the Holy Scripture* (London, 1669), 33.

¹⁰⁰ See Jordan J. Ballor, “Introduction,” in Wolfgang Musculus, *On Righteousness, Oaths, and Usury: A Commentary on Psalm 15*, trans. Todd M. Rester (Grand Rapids: CLP Academic, 2013);

While few, if any, commentaries the length of Owen's would survive today's publishing houses without drastic editorial measures being taken, the meticulous quality of *Hebrews* not only reflects the conventional methods of seventeenth century commentary writing but also provides ample material for this study.¹⁰¹

1.4 METHODOLOGY AND OUTLINE OF THESIS

As other chapters will show, Owen's exercitations and exposition on the epistle to the Hebrews represent the apex of his literary career and exemplify many of the exegetical methods of the post-Reformation. Surprisingly, however, his commentary has received little scholarly attention, as this review of secondary literature has established. This study is the first to provide a detailed analysis of his introductory discourses on Hebrews.

1.4.1 METHODOLOGY

This thesis is a textual analysis of Owen's Christological reading of Scripture as developed in his introductory discourses on Hebrews. As will be shown, Owen's exercitations on the Messiah in particular are an ideal source for this examination, since they not only provide clear parameters of investigation, but, more importantly, they also serve as the prolegomena for Owen's exposition. These essays are the natural starting point for any evaluation of *Hebrews*. More specially, this thesis will limit discussion to Christological, covenantal, and hermeneutical themes that arise

Wolfgang Musculus, *In sacrosanctum Davidis Psalterium commentarii* (Basel: Johannes Herwagen, 1551). On the history and methodology of commentary writing in the post-Reformation, see Muller, "Biblical Interpretation in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in *DMBI*, 22–44.

¹⁰¹ See chapter 2 for a discussion on the historical context surrounding the publication of Owen's commentary.

from Owen's "triple foundation" argument concerning the fulfilment of the messianic promise as outlined in the first volume of *Hebrews* (1668).¹⁰² Although, his other essays (e.g., on the priesthood and the Sabbath), exposition proper, occasional and theological writings, as well as other pertinent primary sources from patristic, medieval, and reformed writers, will be discussed in order to situate Owen's commentary within its proper theological, historical, and intellectual contexts. Therefore, this study is a descriptive analysis of the text and context of Owen's essays on the Messiah. The reason for this approach is simple: these essays are the key to his exercitations, and his exercitations are the key to his exposition.

The topics considered in each chapter are based upon Owen's "triple foundation" argument and are thus related to hermeneutical questions that are pertinent to his promise-fulfilment scheme in general and to the relationship of Christology and covenant theology in particular. This thesis is neither a detailed discussion of post-Reformation hermeneutical methods, nor is it a comprehensive analysis of the exegetical history of the epistle to the Hebrews or the development of federal theology.¹⁰³ Rather, this thesis will evaluate the hermeneutical function of Christological and covenantal patterns in Owen's commentary. The value of this approach is that it will not only allow us to focus discussion on the nuances of Owen's

¹⁰² Owen's "triple foundation" is a hermeneutical argument used for explaining the fulfilment of Old Testament messianic promises in the person and work of Christ. See chapter 2, especially section 2.2.4 on "Christological Context," for details, including discussion about the overall role of Owen's exercitations in relation to his exposition.

¹⁰³ See J. Mark Beach, *Christ and the Covenant: Francis Turretin's Federal Theology as a Defense of the Doctrine of Grace* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007); Henry Knapp, "Understanding the Mind of God;" and Brian Lee, *Johannes Cocceius and the Exegetical Roots of Federal Theology* for evaluations of reformed orthodox hermeneutical method, federal theology, and exegesis of Hebrews, respectively.

arguments in his discourses on Hebrews, but it will also enable us to give greater attention to how a particular doctrine such as covenant operates in his writings.¹⁰⁴

1.4.2 OUTLINE OF THESIS

This chapter has examined current scholarship on Owen's commentary and suggested several possible reasons for its neglect. Chapter 2 will place Owen's exertions and exposition within the context of his life and times, and will explain the central argument in his "triple foundation." Chapters 3 and 4 provide the conceptual basis for our study, as they introduce two essential components of Owen's discourses on the Messiah. Chapter 3 establishes the importance of federal theology for Owen by examining his exegesis of Genesis 3:15, and its relationship to the covenant of redemption and covenant of grace. This text is indispensable for understanding Owen's interpretative framework, since he contends that it serves as the covenantal foundation of the divine promise of messianic deliverance, and thus of all redemptive-history. Chapter 4 considers the problem posed by a Christological reading of the Old Testament for those like Owen who are committed to the literal sense of Scripture. Chapters 5 and 6 consider aspects of continuity and discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments, and seek to illustrate the connection between Owen's exertions and exposition. Chapter 5 will consider the nature of faith in the Old Testament, noting especially the importance of the Abrahamic covenant for what Owen calls "the oneness of the church." In contrast, chapter 6 will provide an

¹⁰⁴ For a similar methodological approach, but with a different context and purpose, see the discussion on "patterns of religion" in E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 16–18. He explains, "A pattern of religion does not include every theological proposition or every religion concept within a religion. The term 'pattern' points toward the question of how one moves from the logical starting point to the logical conclusion of the religion . . . A pattern of religion, defined positively, is the description of how a religion is perceived by its adherents to *function*." *Ibid.*, 17, italics original.

extended analysis of the role of the law in the Mosaic covenant, considering in particular the highly problematic question of the recapitulation of the covenant of works and the nature of the old and new covenants. The conclusion will summarise the findings of this study.

CHAPTER 2

CHRIST AND HEBREWS: A COMMENTARY IN CONTEXT

Then appeared [in 1668] the first volume of Owen's greatest work, his "Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews,"—a work which it would be alike superfluous to describe or to praise.

—Andrew Thomson¹

In this year [1668] also he gave another blessing to the Church of God in publishing the first volume of his exposition on the Epistle to the Hebrews, and the three other followed in their order, the last coming out in 1684. It is not easy for us to give a full account of the value and usefulness of this work . . . The whole performance shews him to be an interpreter one among a thousand.

—John Asty²

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Owen begins his commentary on Hebrews with a plea “to the Christian Reader.” He states, “If thou intendest to engage any part of thy time in the perusal of the ensuing Discourses and Exposition, it may not be amiss to take along with thee the consideration of some things, concerning the design and aim of their author in the writing and present publishing of them.”³ In other words, readers of his exertions and exposition on Hebrews should know why he wrote the work before they read it. The purpose of this chapter is to explain several reasons that led Owen to spend the

¹ Andrew Thomson, “Life of Dr Owen,” in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, 24 vols. (London: Johnstone and Hunter, 1850), 1:lxxxiv.

² John Asty, “Memoirs of the Life of John Owen, D. D.,” in *A Complete Collection of the Sermons of the Reverend and Learned John Owen, D. D.* (London, 1721), xxvi.

³ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. [v] (*Works*, 18:5).

final third of his life, as he describes it, “executing my purpose of casting my mite into this treasury” of the epistle to the Hebrews.⁴

2.2 OWEN’S COMMENTARY IN CONTEXT

At least five factors can be evaluated that help explain why Owen spent so much of his time, energy, and resources on writing his commentary. First, the social-political climate after the Restoration provided Owen with not only time but also a rationale to write material that would ideally minister to his defeated nonconformist brethren. Second, Owen’s personal and pastoral interests throughout his career point to a near lifelong interest in the epistle of Hebrews. Third, the reformed commitment to the inspiration and authority of Scripture fostered not only a renewal of biblical interpretation but also a positive interaction with church tradition in the production of projects like *Hebrews*. Following this trajectory, Owen’s commentary represents both a self-conscious attempt to contribute to the exegetical tradition on the epistle and a sustained application of the principle that Scripture is the epistemological foundation for doctrine and life. Fourth, developments within reformed theology regarding the relationship between Christology and covenant theology furnish Owen with a hermeneutical framework for not only expounding upon a biblical passage but also reflecting on the process of biblical interpretation. More than any other book within the biblical canon, Hebrews gave Owen a platform to explore the themes of Christ, covenant, and hermeneutics. Fifth, challenges posed by Jewish and Socinian interlocutors compelled Owen to turn to the epistle of Hebrews to defend the

⁴ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. [vi] (*Works*, 18:5–6).

reformed faith. These five factors provide an important backdrop for analysing Owen's commentary.

2.2.1 SOCIAL-POLITICAL CONTEXT: A POST-RESTORATION PUBLICATION

The production of a four-volume commentary of the magnitude of Owen's *Hebrews* is itself noteworthy.⁵ His exposition however was not his only work during this period of his life. After his removal as Dean of Christ Church by parliament in 1660, he wrote at a prolific rate. Freed from his administrative duties at Oxford and the demands of public life under the Commonwealth, he was able to devote considerable effort to his literary output.⁶ Although Owen suffered comparatively little from the impact of the Restoration and the subsequent Clarendon Code, these events served as a catalyst for his writing career. And while the abrupt conclusion of the Interregnum may have crippled the political aspirations of some puritans, the re-ascension of the Stuart monarchy paradoxically served to foster a period of literary excellence within puritanism. In the words of Neil Keeble, "political defeat was the condition of cultural achievement."⁷ Owen's commentary was one of many outstanding accomplishments

⁵ Portions of this chapter have appeared in abbreviated form in John W. Tweeddale, "John Owen's Commentary on Hebrews in Context," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen's Theology*, eds. Kelly M. Kapic and Mark Jones (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 49–63.

⁶ On the increase of Owen's writing from 1660–1683, see William Goold, "General Preface," in *Works*, 18:ix; Steve Griffiths, *Redeem the Time: Sin in the Writings of John Owen* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2001), 8; Robert W. Oliver, "John Owen—His Life and Times," in *John Owen: The Man and His Theology*, ed. Robert W. Oliver (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2002), 35; William Orme, "Memoirs of Dr. John Owen," in *Works*, ed. T. Russell, 1:239–240; Peter Toon, *God's Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen—Pastor, Educator, Theologian* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1971), 150–172; Carl R. Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 5; Godfrey Noel Vose, "Profile of a Puritan: John Owen (1616–1683)" (PhD diss., State University of Iowa, 1963), 49–50; Dewey D. Wallace, "The Life and Thought of John Owen: A Study of the Significance of Calvinistic Theology in English Puritanism" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1965), 310.

⁷ Neil H. Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity in Later Seventeenth Century England* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1987), 22. Keeble links the positive cultural effects of

from puritan pens during this period. The same timeframe from which *Hebrews* emerged also saw the publication of notable masterpieces such as John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) and John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), probably the two most important puritan literary achievements of the seventeenth century.⁸

Owen sought to take full advantage of the time, resources, and connections he had at his disposal. He considered his commentary to be of service to the church at large. Thus in the dedicatory epistle to the first volume of *Hebrews*, Owen explained to Sir William Morrice (1602–1676), secretary of state under Charles II and a Presbyterian sympathizer, that his writing was the “only way left me to serve the will of God and the interest of the church in my generation.” He also expressed gratitude to the secretary for not deserting “those wearisome labors [of mine] which have no other reward or end but the furtherance of public good.” In fact, Morrice assisted in the publication of several of Owen's works. In the same dedication, Owen confessed his reliance upon the Morrice's good graces, “It was also through the countenance of your favour that this and some other treatises have received warrant to pass freely

the persecution of nonconformists with the increase of puritan works during the Restoration period. He states, “The literature of Puritanism, far from being left over from an earlier age [i.e., Interregnum period], was generated by the Restoration experience and persecution of nonconformity. . . . [The literature of Puritanism] made a distinctive contribution to our literary history precisely because it was the product of a movement accommodating itself to the experience of defeat, repression and ridicule.” *Ibid.*, 22–23; cf. Keeble, “Puritanism and Literature,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism*, eds. John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 309–324; Keeble, *The Restoration: England in the 1660s* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 148–158.

⁸ The story is well known. After Bunyan was released from prison in 1676, he went to Owen for assistance with the publication of a manuscript that he wrote while in prison. Owen recommended Bunyan to his publisher, Nathaniel Ponder. The manuscript was none other than *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and Owen's publisher would henceforth be remembered as “Bunyan Ponder.” See Asty, “Memoirs of the Life of John Owen, D.D.,” xxx; Toon, *God's Statesman*, 162; cf. Beth Lynch, “Nathaniel Ponder (1640–1699),” in *ODNB*.

into the world.”⁹ For Owen, it paid to have friends in high places. Although divested of a deanship, his days of prominence at Oxford no doubt gained him a measure of respect within the royal court.¹⁰ With connections to men such as Sir William Morrice, Owen was enabled to devote himself more freely to writing books that would hopefully encourage a splintered and beleaguered nonconformist church.¹¹ Unlike some of his colleagues, he had the time and contacts to engage in massive writing projects like *Hebrews*.¹²

During this period in his life, in addition to his commentary, Owen wrote a variety of other works on topics as wide-ranging as worship, toleration, justification, spiritual devotion, and Christology. Next to *Hebrews*, his most ambitious and elaborate project from this timeframe was a massive multi-volume work on the Holy Spirit.¹³ In these volumes, Owen sought to write a comprehensive pneumatology and believed his endeavour, like *Hebrews*, to be a major contribution to the life of the church.¹⁴ Even if Owen never produced his commentary, his literary accomplishments

⁹ Owen, “To the Right Honourable Sir William Morrice, Knight, One of His Majesty’s Most Honourable Privy Council, and Principal Secretary of State,” in *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. [ii–iii] (*Works*, 18:3–4).

¹⁰ Another anecdote involving Bunyan illustrates this point. On one occasion, Charles II (1630–1685) allegedly asked Owen why he listened to “the tinker” (i.e., Bunyan). To which Owen replied, “Could I possess the tinker’s abilities for preaching, please your majesty, I would gladly relinquish all my learning.” Quoted in Toon, *God’s Statesman*, 162. On the reliability of this account, see Robert J. McKelvey, *Histories that Mansoul and Her Wars Anatomize: The Drama of Redemption in John Bunyan’s Holy War* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 66–67, n.157.

¹¹ For biographical details on Morrice, see Paul Seaward, “Morrice, Sir William (1602–1676),” in *ODNB*; cf. Toon, *God’s Statesman*, 127, 149.

¹² For an overview of the political context of Owen’s writings, see Crawford Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 234–235; Christopher Hill, *The Experience of Defeat: Milton and Some Contemporaries* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), 170–178.

¹³ For a comprehensive and chronological list of Owen’s works, see Toon, *God’s Statesman*, 179–181; Jon D. Payne, *John Owen on the Lord’s Supper* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2004), 77–80; cf. Richard L. Greaves, “Owen, John (1616–1683),” in *ODNB*.

¹⁴ Owen boldly states in the preface to the first volume on the Spirit, “I know not any who ever went before me in this design of representing the whole economy of the Holy Spirit, with all his

during this period would surely secure for him a place as one of the most prodigious puritans in seventeenth century England. Yet for Owen, *Hebrews* marked the climax of his post-Restoration writing career.

2.2.2 BIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT: “THE WHOLE COURSE OF MY STUDIES”

Owen wrote more than half of his works during the final twenty-three years of his life. While this period saw the publication of several of his most well-known books, there is reason to believe that he considered *Hebrews* to be his greatest work. In the preface to the first volume of his commentary he writes,

It is now sundry years since I purposed in myself, if God gave life and opportunity, to endeavour, according to the measure of the gift received, an Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews. . . . I confess, as was said before, that I have had thoughts for many years to attempt something in it, and in the whole course of my studies have not been without some regard thereunto.¹⁵

According to Owen, he regarded the “whole course” of his studies as preparation for writing his exposition. The earliest explicit reference that he makes to his commentary is located in his volume on theological prolegomena titled *Theologoumena pantodapa*. The book was published in 1661, seven years before the release of the first volume of *Hebrews*, and may have been based on a series of lectures given to his students at Oxford.¹⁶ The work traces the progression of

adjuncts, operations, and effects.” Owen, *Pneumatologia: or, A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit* (London, 1674), n.p. [iii] (*Works*, 3:7). For a synopsis of Owen’s contribution to the development of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, see Sinclair B. Ferguson, “John Owen and the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit,” in *John Owen: The Man and His Theology*, 100–129; Kelly M. Kapic, “The Spirit as Gift: Exploration in John Owen’s Pneumatology,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology*, 113–140; cf. Colin E. Gunton, *Theology through the Theologians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 115, 191–192. For the historical context, see the standard treatment by Geoffrey Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1946).

¹⁵ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. [v, ix] (*Works*, 18:5, 8, 9).

¹⁶ Rehnman suggests that *Theologoumena* “probably contains [Owen’s] introductory lectures to students of theology at the University of Oxford.” Sebastian Rehnman, *Divine Discourse: The*

theology in redemptive-history from Adam to Christ. In a discussion on the inception of the covenant of grace and subsequent development of post-lapsarian theology, Owen makes a passing statement about his intention to write a commentary. Reflecting on Hebrews 2:14–15, he states, “But the apostle in the Epistle to the Hebrews is arguing from a basis which was formerly conceded among the Jews, as I will make clear, with God’s help, in our commentary on the epistle.”¹⁷ Owen’s argument about the Jewish context of the epistle will be considered below. At this point, what is important to note is that this passage demonstrates that in the days immediately following the Restoration, and perhaps even before if this statement originated from when Owen was teaching at Oxford, the writing of a commentary on Hebrews was clearly on his mind.

Additional evidence of Owen’s near lifelong interest in the epistle to the Hebrews may be found as early as 1643. In his second publication, *The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished*, Owen refers to an unpublished polemical treatise on the priesthood of Christ written “against Arminians, Socinians, and Papists” (*Tractatu de Sacerdotio Christi, contra Armin. Socin. et Papistas*).¹⁸ Unfortunately, he gives little if

Theological Methodology of John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 18; cf. J. I. Packer, “Forward,” in John Owen, *Biblical Theology*, trans. Stephen P. Westcott (Grand Rapids: Soli Deo Gloria, 2009), xii.

¹⁷ “Apostolum autem, ex principiis inter Judaeos olim concessis, in Epistola ad Hebraeos disputare, commentariis nostris ad eam epistolam (σὺν Θεῷ) ostendemus.” Owen, *Theologoumena* (1661), 2.1.5 (*Works*, 17:137), unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine; cf. Owen, *BT*, 173. For critical evaluations of *Theologoumena*, see Rehnman, *Divine Discourse*; Carl R. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen’s Trinitarian Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998).

¹⁸ See the marginal note in Owen, *The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished* (London, 1644), p. 16 (*Works*, 13:18). While the publication date of *The Duty of Pastors* is 1644, Owen elsewhere states that it was actually written the year before: “That little treatise was written by me in the year 1643, and then printed: however, it received the addition of a year in the date affixed to it by the printers, which, for their own advantage, is a thing usual with them. I was then a young man myself, about the age of twenty-six or twenty-seven years.” See *A Review of the True Nature of Schism* (London, 1657), p. 33 (*Works*, 13:222); cf. Peter Toon, ed., *The Correspondence of John Owen*

any indication about the document's content other than the title. While Owen seems to imply that it would eventually be put to press, as he states that it is "yet to be published" (*nondum edito*), there is no record that such a publication ever existed. Goold suggests that Owen's missing manuscript "may have supplied part of the long and valuable exertions on the priesthood of Christ prefixed to the Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews, as, from the slight allusion to it in this treatise, the same topics appear to have been handled in it."¹⁹ Goold's hypothesis notwithstanding, Owen's vague reference to his unpublished work at the very least indicates that from the onset of his ministry he devoted himself to a subject that he would later argue is central to understanding the epistle to the Hebrews, namely, the priesthood of Christ.²⁰ Furthermore, this lost work marks the starting point of a series of theological and polemical trajectories that reach over the course of his career and culminate in his commentary. As Carl Trueman has argued, "From the start of his career to its end, Owen consciously directs most of his polemical fire against these three targets [Arminians, Socinians, and Papists] . . . As the title of his lost manuscript suggests, at the heart of his dispute with these three groups is his attitude to the priesthood of Christ."²¹

Owen turned to the epistle to the Hebrews throughout the early years of his ministry. For example, when he was called by the House of Commons to preach a

(1616–1683): *With an Account of His Life and Work* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1970), 15; Goold, "Prefatory Note," in *Works*, 13:2.

¹⁹ Goold, "Prefatory Note," in *Works*, 13:2; cf. Orme, "Memoirs of Dr. John Owen," in *Works*, ed. T. Russell, 1:37; Trueman, *John Owen*, 17.

²⁰ Owen states, "Amongst the many excellencies of this Epistle unto the Hebrews, which render it as useful to the church as the sun in the firmament is unto the world, the revelation that is made therein concerning the nature, singular pre-eminence, and use of the priesthood of our Lord Jesus Christ, may well be esteemed to deserve the first and principal place." *Hebrews* (1674), 1.1.1 (*Works*, 19:3).

²¹ On the central role of the priesthood of Christ in Owen's career long critique of Roman Catholicism, Arminianism, and Socinianism, see Trueman, *John Owen*, 17–33.

fast sermon at St. Margaret's, Westminster on April 19, 1649, Owen chose as his text Hebrews 12:26–27 on the “shaking and translating of heaven and earth.”²² The sermon is most well-known for beginning a series of events that led to Owen's first encounter with Oliver Cromwell in the home of Lord Thomas Fairfax (1612–1671).²³ However, the sermon is also important for illustrating Owen's grasp of the epistle. In the first half of the sermon, he gives a careful exegesis of the text, noting linguistic nuances, expounding the wider biblical context of the letter, and interacting with differing commentators on the passage. He then takes his own interpretative slant on these verses by arguing that the shaking of heaven and earth refers “neither [to] the material heavens and earth, nor yet Mosaical ordinances, but [to] the political heights and splendour, the popular multitudes and strength, of the nations of the earth.”²⁴ Peter Toon has drawn attention to the political bent of this interpretation and of the sermon as a whole, coloured as it was by the dawn of the Interregnum. He states, “[Owen] explained that ‘heaven’ referred not to the celestial regions but rather to the ‘political heights and glory’ which men had framed for themselves.”²⁵ By suggesting that this biblical passage refers to the downfall of national realities rather than the collapse of heaven and earth, Owen offered a “metaphorical rather than literal reading” of the text.²⁶ He summarises the main point of the sermon as follows:

²² Owen, *The Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth* (London, 1649).

²³ For details of the meeting between Owen and Cromwell, see Toon, *The Correspondence of John Owen*, 32; cf. Toon, *God's Statesman*, 36–37; Thomson, “Life of Dr Owen,” in *Works*, 1:xliv.

²⁴ Owen, *The Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth*, p. 11 (*Works*, 8:253). Owen references the interpretations of Robert Rollock (c. 1555–1599), Johannes Piscator (1546–1625), Franciscus Junius (1545–1602), David Pareus (1548–1622), and Hugo Grotius (1583–1645) in *Works*, 8:251–253.

²⁵ Toon, *God's Statesman*, 35–36; cf. Toon, *The Correspondence of John Owen*, 29–31.

²⁶ Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 105.

The Lord Jesus Christ, by his mighty power, in these latter days, as antichristian tyranny draws to its period will so far shake and translate the political heights, governments and strength of the nations, as shall serve for the full bringing in of his own peaceable kingdom:—the nations so shaken become thereby a quiet habitation for the people of the Most High.²⁷

At the end of Owen's life, the exegetical work done for this sermon finds expression in the last volume to his commentary. The same line of interpretation remains even if the political fervour of his sermon is less apparent. Rather than finding a "quiet habitation for the people of the Most High" as he had hoped for when he spoke before the House of Commons over thirty years earlier, he assures his faithful readers that the "antichristian world, which at present in many places seem to prevail" will one day give way to the "kingdom of Christ."²⁸

Similar traces of Owen's interest in the epistle to the Hebrews can be found throughout his writings. Henry Knapp, for example, has demonstrated that Owen's exposition on Hebrews 6:4–6 provided the basis for his treatise on apostasy titled *The Nature of Apostasy from the Profession of the Gospel* (1676).²⁹ Likewise, Owen explicitly states that his discourse on the Sabbath developed out of his exegetical work on Hebrews and functioned as a supplement to his exposition of Hebrews 4. He states, "Wherefore, an inquiry into this matter being unavoidably cast upon me, from the work wherein I am engaged, in the exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews, I could not on any

²⁷ Owen, *The Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth*, p. 17 (*Works*, 8:260).

²⁸ Owen, *Hebrews* (1684), comm. Heb. 12:25–27 (*Works*, 24:368).

²⁹ Henry M. Knapp, "John Owen's Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4–6: Eternal Perseverance of the Saints in Puritan Exegesis," *SCJ* 34 (2003): 44; cf. Owen, *The Nature of Apostasy from the Profession of the Gospel* (1676), in *Works*, 7:11–40; *Hebrews* (1680), pp. 38–52 (*Works*, 21:67–91). On the dating of these two works, Knapp states "Although the treatise on apostasy was published before the third Hebrews volume (which contains the 6:4–6 pericope), from the style of writing, etc., it seems most likely that Owen had first completed his exegetical work in the commentary before writing *The Nature of Apostasy*." Knapp, "John Owen's Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4–6," *SCJ* 34 (2003): 44, n. 39. Goold however suggests that Owen's work on apostasy "is in substance an expansion of his commentary on Heb. 6:4–6; and his Exposition on this passage is accordingly brief and meagre, having been forestalled by the publication of this treatise." See *Works*, 7:2.

such accounts waive the pursuit of it; for this discourse, though upon the desires of many now published by itself, is but a part of our remaining Exercitations on that Epistle.”³⁰

While these selections represent only a fraction of Owen’s writings, they demonstrate a pattern of personal, pastoral, polemical, and exegetical interests in the epistle to the Hebrews from the early days of his ministry in the 1640s until his death in 1683. These statements further reveal that Owen viewed his commentary as his crowning achievement. Even within his lifetime, *Hebrews* gained a level of international acclaim. Owen acknowledges that while working on the third volume of the commentary, he received encouragement “at home and abroad” to complete the work.³¹ Likewise, in the sermon preached at Owen’s funeral, David Clarkson (c. 1622–1686)—his assistant and successor at the Leadenhall Street congregation in London—not only drew attention to the widespread recognition his commentary received but also suggested that Owen believed that *Hebrews* concluded his life’s work:

His Excellent Commentary upon the *Hebrews*, gain’d him and it Honour and Esteem, not only at Home, but in Foreign Countries, as I have had credible Notice when that was finish’d; (and it was a merciful Providence that he lived to finish it.) He said, Now his Work was done, it was time for him to die.³²

The completion of *Hebrews* signalled the conclusion of his career as an author and theologian. It was his *magnum opus*. Goold proposes that Owen “regarded the exposition as the

³⁰ Owen, *Sabbath* (1671), pp. 5–6 (*Works*, 18:267). Owen reiterates this point in the preface to the second volume of *Hebrews*: “And indeed those Exercitations [on the Sabbath] were both prepared and designed to be a part of the preliminary Discourses unto this part of our Exposition, but were forced from me by the importunate desires of some and the challenges of others to prove the divine institution of the Lord’s-day Sabbath.” *Hebrews* (1674), n.p. [ii–iii] (*Works*, 18:16).

³¹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1674), n.p.[i] (*Works*, 18:19).

³² David Clarkson, “A Funeral Sermon of the Much Lamented Death of the Late Reverend and Learned Divine John Owen, D. D.,” in *Seventeen Sermons*, 1:lxixiii. This last sentence is sometimes quoted, without citation, in the first person, “Now my work is finished, it’s time for me to die.” E.g., Goold, “General Preface,” in *Works*, 18:xi; Toon, *God’s Statesman*, 168. The source for this rendering of the quote is unknown. Most likely, Clarkson’s printed funeral sermon has been modified. For biographical information on Clarkson, see Barry Till, “Clarkson, David (bap. 1622, d. 1686),” in *ODNB*.

production by which he had rendered the most service to the cause of divine truth, and on which his reputation as a theological author would chiefly depend.”³³

If the range of publication dates of Owen’s work on Hebrews is considered in light of the “sundry” and “many years” of preparation preceding its publication, his commentary emerges as the product of no less than twenty-two years of focused research.³⁴ Arguably, the “whole course” of Owen’s ministry was directed towards the writing of this commentary. The outcome was the production of one of the most exhaustive philological, hermeneutical, exegetical, doctrinal, polemical, and pastoral treatises of seventeenth century puritanism, by one of its leading theologians.

2.2.3 INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT: EXEGETICAL METHODOLOGY

Unlike many of his reformed forebears and colleagues, *Hebrews* was Owen’s only full-length biblical commentary.³⁵ But this fact makes him no less of a biblical exegete. Throughout Owen’s various types of writings, whether doctrinal, polemical, pastoral, or methodological, he actively engaged in the task of interpreting the Bible. Even a cursory reading of his works will demonstrate his high regard for Scripture as the epistemological foundation for dogmatics, the final authority in polemics, and the normative standard for piety. Owen believed that the only way to apprehend the

³³ Goold, “General Preface,” in *Works*, 18:xi; cf. Goold, “John Owen,” in *The Evangelical Succession*, third series (Edinburgh: Macniven & Wallace, 1884), 30–31.

³⁴ This calculation is based upon Owen’s explicit statement about his intention to write a commentary on Hebrews in *Theologoumena*, published in 1661. See discussion above.

³⁵ For a selection of commentaries written in the Reformation and post-Reformation periods, see Richard A. Muller, “Biblical Interpretation in the Sixteenth & Seventeenth Centuries,” in *DMBI*, 22–44; Muller, *PRRD*, 2:442–524. For a comprehensive catalogue of mostly but not exclusively English commentaries until 1663, see William Crowe, *An Exact Collection or Catalogue of Our English Writers on the Old and New Testament, either in Whole, or in Part* (London, 1663).

“mind of God” was to expound the written word of God.³⁶ His belief in the divine inspiration and authority of Scripture necessitated the careful study, explanation, defence, and application of biblical revelation (*necessitatem interpretationis*).³⁷ From this perspective, most if not all of his works could be broadly categorized as exegetical, since the explication of biblical texts was the most basic activity he engaged in throughout the entirety of his writing ministry. For Owen, the interpretation of sacred writ was essential for faith and practice.³⁸

³⁶ Owen explicitly links knowing God’s mind with interpreting correctly God’s word in his hermeneutical manual, *Synesis Pneumatike: or, The Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God as Revealed in His Word, with Assurance Therein* (London, 1678), in *Works*, 4:118–234. For the best analysis of Owen’s exegetical methodology, see Henry M. Knapp, “Understanding the Mind of God: John Owen and Seventeenth Century Exegetical Methodology” (PhD diss., Calvin Theological Seminary, 2002), 40–137; 375–390; cf. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth*, 64–101; Trueman, “Faith Seeking Understanding: Some Neglected Aspects of John Owen’s Understanding of Scriptural Interpretation,” in *Interpreting the Bible: Historical and Theological Studies in Honour of David F. Wright*, ed. A. N. S. Lane (Leicester: Apollos, 1997), 147–162.

³⁷ “Imo, tam certum est quàm quod certissimum, Deum in infinita sua sapientia, eam voluntatis suae declarationem quae in verbo scripto continetur, ita temperasse, atque totam ejusdem revelandi methodum eo ordine disposuisse, ut necessitatem interpretationis in ecclesia continuandae, quamdiu ipsum verbum continetur, extra omnem dubitationis aleam poneret.” Owen, *Pro sacris Scripturis adversus hujus temporis fanaticos* (London, 1658), in *Works*, 16:450; cf. Owen, *BT*, 813–814. At several points in his commentary, Owen reflects on the idea that divine inspiration necessitates biblical interpretation: e.g., *Works*, 21:164–169, 286–287, 305–306, 310–317. On the authority of Scripture in Owen’s theology, see Stanley N. Gundry, “John Owen on Authority and Scripture,” in *Inerrancy and the Church*, ed. John D. Hannah (Chicago: Moody, 1984), 189–221; Andrew M. Leslie, *The Light of Grace: John Owen on the Authority of Scripture and Christian Faith* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), esp. 219–246.

³⁸ For example, in Owen’s *Lesser Catechism* (1645), he answers the question, “Whence is all truth concerning God and ourselves to be learned?” accordingly, “From the holy Scripture, the Word of God.” Likewise, in his *Greater Catechism* (1645), he affirms the importance of Scripture for determining what must be “believed and done.” Question 4 states, “What is the Scripture?” To which he responds, “The books of the Old Testament, given by inspiration from God, containing things necessary to be believed and done, that God may be worshiped and our souls saved.” *Works*, 1:467, 470; cf. WCF 1.6–10 and Savoy 1.6–10. Savoy is cited not only because it is a reduplication of the WCF’s chapter on Scripture but also because Owen served as a leading member of the Savoy Assembly. For a history of Savoy including a full comparison with the WCF, see Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (New York: Scribner, 1893), 341–402; Peter Toon, “The Westminster and Savoy Confessions: A Brief Comparison,” *JETS* 15 (1972): 153–160. See also Ryan Kelly, “Reformed or Reforming? John Owen and the Complexity of Theological Codification for Mid-Seventeenth-Century England,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology*, 3–29.

Owen's exegetical endeavours are a reflection of the reformed orthodox principle that Scripture is the cognitive foundation of theology (*principium cognoscendi theologiae*).³⁹ One example of his belief in the necessity of scriptural exegesis for correct doctrine and proper living may be found in his expository treatment of Psalm 130, published the same year as the first volume of his commentary in 1668.⁴⁰ This work is a devotional study on divine forgiveness and may have arisen out of a spiritual crisis in Owen's own life. His intention in writing the book was explicitly pastoral. He states, "The ensuing exposition and discourses are intended for the benefit of those whose spiritual state and condition is represented in the psalm here explained."⁴¹ While the personal and pastoral contexts of this work are significant, most relevant for this discussion is Owen's insistence upon anchoring the experience of a believer in the text of Scripture, which he calls the "sole rule and standard of truth."⁴² In fact, the entire discourse is an inquiry into the "mind of the Holy Spirit" in order to relate the experience of the psalmist to the seventeenth

³⁹ Muller, *PRRD*, 2:151–223; see also Muller, "*principia theologiae*," in *DLGTT*, 245–246; Knapp, "Understanding the Mind of God," 40, 100, 108; Trueman, *The Claims of Truth*, 64–71, 89. Owen explicitly adopts the standard Protestant orthodox distinction of the twofold foundation of theology. Reflecting on the doctrine of perseverance in relationship to the covenant of grace, he states "The *principium essendi* of this truth, if I may so say, is in the decrees and purposes of God; the *principium cognoscendi* [of this truth is] in his covenant, promise, and oath, which also add much to the real stability of it, the truth and faithfulness of God in them being thereby peculiarly engaged therein." Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saint's Perseverance Explained and Confirmed* (London, 1654), p. 96 (*Works*, 11:205). The modification of the *principium cognoscendi* to accommodate the covenant of grace does not nullify the point that for Owen Scripture is the epistemological foundation of theology. As we will see in chapter 3, he believed that the revelation of God in Scripture is based on the principle of covenant. Furthermore, God's covenant cannot be known apart from Scripture. For similar reformed orthodox expressions of the twofold foundation of theology, see Edward Leigh, *A Systeme or Body of Divinity Consisting of Ten Books* (London, 1654), 1.2, p. 5; 2.1, p. 121; and Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George M. Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, 3 vols. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1992), 1:2 (1.1.7).

⁴⁰ Owen, *A Practical Exposition upon Psalm CXXX* (London, 1669).

⁴¹ Owen, *A Practical Exposition upon Psalm CXXX* (1669), n.p. [v–vi] (*Works*, 6:325).

⁴² Owen, *A Practical Exposition upon Psalm CXXX* (1668), n.p. [v] (*Works*, 6:326).

century quest for personal assurance of faith.⁴³ Furthermore, in his exhaustive critique of the controversial treatise *Redemption Redeemed* (1651) by John Goodwin, refutation of the puritan-Arminian theologian's opposition to the doctrine of eternal perseverance was of secondary importance to Owen. Of greater importance was the grounding of doctrine in the biblical text. He states, "The confutation of Mr. Goodwin was but secondarily in my eye; and the best way for that I judged to consist in a full scriptural confirmation of the truth he opposed. That I chiefly intended."⁴⁴ The same concern for the normative function of Scripture is also seen in Owen's theological work on *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (1677) whereby "the main weight of the whole [treatise] lies in the interpretation of Scripture testimonies."⁴⁵

From a methodological perspective, Owen outlines his principles for biblical exegesis in *The Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God* (1678). This work clearly demonstrates the foundational role of Scripture in his theological program. In the opening words of the book, he asserts that the doctrine of inspiration and the practice of biblical interpretation form the "two springs" of the Christian religion: "Our belief of the Scriptures to be the word of God, or a divine revelation,

⁴³ For summaries of Owen's exposition of Psalm 130 in the context of the question of assurance in puritan theology, see Joel R. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 239–252; Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 100–124.

⁴⁴ Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saint's Perseverance Explained and Confirmed* (1654), n.p. [li] (*Works*, 11:74). For a detailed account of Owen's exposition of Hebrews 6 and the development of his doctrine of perseverance in contrast to John Goodwin (c. 1594–1665), see Henry M. Knapp, "John Owen's Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4–6: Eternal Perseverance of the Saints in Puritan Exegesis," *SCJ* 34 (2003): 29–52; cf. Knapp, "Understanding the Mind of God," 335–374. For an intellectual biography of John Goodwin (1594–1665), as well as a discussion on his own commitment to biblical exegesis, see John Coffey, *John Goodwin and the Puritan Revolution: Religion and Intellectual Change in Seventeenth Century England* (Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2006), esp. pp. 31–39, 50, 70–71, 207–229.

⁴⁵ Owen, *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (London, 1677), n.p. [i] (*Works*, 5:5). For an overview of Owen's doctrine of justification, see Kelly M. Kapic, *Communion with God: The Divine and Human in the Theology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 107–148; Trueman, *John Owen*, 102–121.

and our understanding of the mind and will of God as revealed in them, are the two springs of all our interest in Christian religion.”⁴⁶ Owen further delineates three necessary means for correctly interpreting divine revelation: (1) spiritual, (2) disciplinary, and (3) ecclesiastical.⁴⁷ Of first importance is the spiritual means of prayer in seeking the illuminating work of the Spirit of God, who divinely inspired Scripture, to enable the individual to interpret rightly the word of God. Second, Owen advocates the use of various scholarly disciplines, such as a working knowledge of the original languages of the Bible, an acquaintance of the history and geography of the ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman worlds, and a firm grasp of humanistic and scholastic tools such as rhetoric and logic.⁴⁸ In the final category, Owen discusses the ecclesiastical context of biblical interpretation. He acknowledges his indebtedness to Greek and Latin church fathers such as Chrysostom (c. 349–407),

⁴⁶ Owen, *Works*, 4:121. This book forms one part of his multi-volume project on the Holy Spirit. It was preceded in this series by a work titled *The Reason of Faith* (London, 1677) that evaluates both the grounds for believing the Scriptures to be the word of God and the role of the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. See *Works*, 4:4–115, esp. pp. 109–115 for Owen’s summary. Related to the question of interpretation is Owen’s discussion on the subject of “textual criticism” in *Of the Divine Original of the Scriptures* (London, 1659) and *A Vindication of the Hebrew and Greek Texts* (London, 1659); see *Works*, 16:281–343; 345–421. Also pertinent to Owen’s exegetical method is his polemical work against the “fanatical” interpretations of the Quakers, *Pro sacris Scripturis adversus hujus temporis fanaticos* (1658), in *Works*, 16:423–476, and esp. pp. 437–452 for Owen’s discussion “on the interpretation of Scripture” (*De Scripturarum interpretatione*). For the English translation of this work, see *A Defense of Sacred Scripture Against Modern Fanaticism*, in *BT*, 769–861, esp. 793–816. For an instructive overview of Owen’s critique of the Quakers, see Michael Haykin, “John Owen and the Challenge of the Quakers,” in *John Owen: The Man and His Theology*, 131–155; cf. Donald K. McKim, “John Owen’s Doctrine of Scripture in Historical Perspective,” *EQ* 45 (1973): 193–207.

⁴⁷ Owen, *Works*, 4:199–234.

⁴⁸ Even a cursory glance at the auction catalogue of Owen’s library will substantiate this claim. His library appears to have consisted of a wide array of theological, exegetical, philosophical, historical, geographical, linguistic, literary, and other types of works; see *Bibliotheca Oweniana sive catalogus librorum*, ed. Edward Millington (London, 1684). For evaluations of Owen’s library and the scholastic and humanistic contexts of his writings, see Rehnman, *Divine Discourse*, 15–46; Rehnman, “John Owen: A Reformed Scholastic at Oxford,” in *Reformation and Scholasticism: An Ecumenical Enterprise*, ed. Willem J. van Asselt and Eef Dekker (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 181–203; Trueman, *The Claims of Truth*, 13–46; Trueman, *John Owen*, 5–17; cf. Knapp, “Understanding the Mind of God,” 94–137. For a cautionary reading of Owen’s library catalogue, see Crawford Gribben, “John Owen, Renaissance Man? The Evidence of Edward Millington’s *Bibliotheca Oweniana* (1684),” *WTJ* 72 (2010): 321–332.

Theodoret (c. 393–458), Jerome (c. 347–420), Ambrose (c. 339–397), and Augustine (354–430) as well as reformers such as Martin Bucer (1491–1551), Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562), John Calvin (1509–1564), and Theodore Beza (1519–1605). While Owen argues that church tradition is not inherently authoritative and evidences minimal doctrinal consensus, he recognizes that exegesis does not occur in a historical vacuum. Yet he insists that the final authority in all matters is Scripture alone. Ecclesiastical tradition is therefore ancillary to divine revelation not supplementary to it.⁴⁹ Owen’s *Causes, Ways, and Means* is an essential point of reference for *Hebrews*, since it reveals much of the exegetical method behind his commentary.⁵⁰

Perhaps the most obvious, but often overlooked, example of Owen’s commitment to Scripture as the epistemological foundation of theology is his commentary. Here the principles outlined in *Causes, Ways, and Means* are pervasively applied and even occasionally expressed.⁵¹ In the preface to the first volume of *Hebrews*, Owen delineates his exegetical method. Central to his concern are the related issues of the grammatical-historical exegesis of the text and the avoidance of eisegesis. He states,

⁴⁹ For an excellent discussion on the relationship of Scripture and tradition throughout church history, see A. N. S. Lane, “Scripture, Tradition and Church: An Historical Survey,” *Vox Evangelica* 9 (1975): 37–55; cf. the standard treatment by Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 365–393; see also Trueman, *John Owen*, 11.

⁵⁰ For further analysis of the various means of biblical interpretation in Owen’s thought, see Knapp, “Understanding the Mind of God,” 51–137; Leslie, *The Light of Grace*, 240–246; Trueman, *Claims of Truth*, 84–90; Trueman, “Faith Seeking Understanding,” 154–157. Knapp is especially helpful at highlighting the nuances between the *analogia fidei* and the *analogia Scripturae* within Owen’s hermeneutic; cf. Thomas Jackson Tucker, “Safeguarding the Treasury: John Owen and the Analogy of Faith” (PhD diss., University of Aberdeen, 2006); Barry H. Howson, “The Puritan Hermeneutics of John Owen: A Recommendation,” *WTJ* 63 (2001): 351–376.

⁵¹ Compare *The Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God* with the various summaries of the “ways and means” of biblical interpretation in Owen’s commentary: e.g., *Works*, 19:273–277, 474; and esp. 21:310–317.

Careful I have been, . . . to bring no prejudicate sense unto the words, to impose no meaning of my own or other men upon them, nor to be imposed on by the reasonings, pretences, or curiosities of any, but always went nakedly to the word itself, to learn humbly the mind of God in it, and to express it as he should enable me. To this end I always in the first place considered the sense, meaning, and importance of the words of the text; and the consideration of their original derivation, use in other authors, especially in the LXX of the Old Testament, in the books of the New, particularly the writings of the same author, was constantly made use of to that purpose. Ofttimes the words expressed out of the Hebrew, or the things alluded unto amongst that people, I found to give much light into the worlds of the apostles themselves.⁵²

Out of context, Owen's statement about always going "nakedly to the word itself" may give the impression that he, in a proto-fundamentalist fashion, was espousing a "no-creed-but-the-bible" hermeneutic. His point however was not to disparage the critical appropriation of past and present commentators on the epistle but to unambiguously assert the primacy of exegesis for theological deliberation. Owen readily admits his indebtedness to previous commentaries on the epistle, and refers to his "perusal of all the comments, expositions, annotations, or observations on the Epistle, which by any means I could obtain."⁵³ He also unequivocally states that his exercitations and exposition should not be seen as a replacement of the exegetical tradition on the epistle but as an addition to it. Owen explains,

The help which I might receive from the sedulous labours of so many learned men, and those in times, places, principles, distant and distinguished from each other, as also managing their common design with great variety as to particular intentions, I looked on as a matter of no small advantage to me. . . . The helps and advantages, in the investigation of the mind of God, which by their labours might be obtained, I looked on as a great encouragement to undertake the same works with them, and to promote the light of truth thereby.⁵⁴

⁵² Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. [ix] (*Works*, 18:9).

⁵³ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. [vi] (*Works*, 18:6).

⁵⁴ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. [v–vi] (*Works*, 18:5–6). Throughout his commentary, Owen cites and references multiple "ancient and modern expositors." Among these include patristic and medieval expositors such as Basil (330–379), Ambrose, Chrysostom, Augustine, Theodoret, Oecumenius (c. 900), Theophylact (1055–1107), and Nicolas of Lyra (c. 1270–1349); Roman expositors such as Aquinas (c. 1225–1274), Erasmus (c. 1466–1536), T. Cajetan (1469–1534), F. Ribera (1537–1591), Estius (1542–1613), à Lapide (1567–1637), and de Tena (d. 1622); Arminian and Socinian expositors such as Grotius,

Owen's writings affirm, in principle and practice, the Protestant orthodox belief in Scripture as the epistemological foundation of theology. Even with this cursory overview of his pastoral, polemical, doctrinal, and methodological works, the substantial weight he places upon biblical exegesis for constructing theological arguments is evident. Nevertheless, the most significant resource for examining his interpretation of Scripture lies not within these treatises but in his exercitations and exposition on Hebrews. After all, Owen is a one-commentary man.⁵⁵

2.2.4 CHRISTOLOGICAL CONTEXT: THE "TRIPLE FOUNDATION"

According to Owen, the epistle to the Hebrews is about the person, office, and work of the promised Messiah. As a result, his commentary is predominated by a Christological thrust. He first outlines the motif of the messianic role of Christ along with background details about the epistle—such as its canonical authority, author,

Crellius (1590–1633), and Schlichtingius (1592–1661); and Protestant expositors such as Brentius (1499–1570), Marlorat (1506–1562), Calvin, Beza, Piscator, Paraeus, Gomarus (1563–1641), Cameron (c. 1579–1623), and Poole (1624–1679). See e.g., *Works*, 20:42, 86, 89, 109, 118, 151, 198, 243, 364, 455, 477; 22:160, 275, 291, 518; 23:181, 238, 244, 376, etc. According to Knapp, Owen owned approximately fifty commentaries on Hebrews in his personal library; see "Understanding the Mind of God," 106, n.221. On the exegetical history of the epistle to the Hebrews, see *ibid.*, 18–24; cf. Kenneth Hagen, *Hebrews Commenting from Erasmus to Bèze, 1516–1598* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1981); Brian J. Lee, *Johannes Cocceius and the Exegetical Roots of Federal Theology: Reformation Developments in the Interpretation of Hebrews 7–10* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009); Bruce Demarest, *The History of Interpretation of Hebrews 7:1–10 from the Reformation to the Present* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1976); see also the introductions in Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, trans. Thomas L. Kingsbury, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1868), 22–35; Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), xiii–xv; Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 19–63; Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 1:808–810.

⁵⁵ While Owen wrote only one commentary, his writings are replete with exegetical insights from nearly every book of the Bible. See, for example, his extensive comments on Canticles in *Christologia* (1678) and *Communion with God* (1657), in *Works*, 1:1–272 and 2:41–46, 54–58, 60. Like other puritans, Owen interpreted Canticles allegorically; see his "To the Reader," in James Durham, *Clavis Cantici: An Exposition of the Song of Solomon* (London, 1669), n.p. [i–iv]. Owen's biblical exposition may also be seen in his sermons, which are an often-neglected resource (cf. *Works* 8, 9, and 16). For an excellent examination of Owen's twenty-five communion homilies, see Payne, *John Owen on the Lord's Supper*, 1–75.

design, and original audience—in a series of exercitations. Owen claims that these introductory essays function as a “prolegomena” to his exposition and thus serve as an *a priori* template for his study of the epistle. They are the key to his commentary. He explains their importance at the beginning of his exposition of the first two chapters of Hebrews, “The general concernments of this Epistle have all of them been discussed and cleared in the preceding Exercitations and Discourses. The things and matters confirmed in them we therefore here suppose, and take for granted.”⁵⁶

The exercitations to the first volume of *Hebrews* (1668) are divided into three series of essays: first, concerning the epistle to the Hebrews (exercitations 1–7); second, concerning the Messiah (exercitations 8–18); and third, concerning the institutions of the Jewish church (exercitations 19–24). A summary of the overall argument of these exercitations is found in the extended title of the commentary:

Exercitations on the epistle to the Hebrews, also concerning the Messiah wherein the promises concerning him to be a spiritual redeemer of mankind are explained and vindicated, his coming and accomplishment of his work according to the promises is proved and confirmed, the person, or who he is, is declared, the whole oeconomy of the mosaical law, rites, worship, and sacrifice is explained: and in all the doctrine of the person, office, and work of the Messiah is opened, the nature and demerit of the first sin is unfolded, the opinions and traditions of the ancient and modern Jews are examined, their objections against the Lord Christ and the Gospel are answered, the time of the coming of the Messiah is stated, and the great fundamental truths of the Gospel vindicated: with an exposition and discourses on the two first chapters of the said epistle to the Hebrews.

The bulk of Owen’s exercitations in this volume are located in the second series of essays “concerning the Messiah” (i.e., exercitations 8–18). These discourses are subdivided into three “dissertations” and are united by one central argument.

⁵⁶ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), lib. 2, n.p. [i] (*Works*, 18:9; cf. 18:8, 14, 447; 20:12, 276, 424, 543).

Owen outlines his main thesis in an essay titled, “The First Dissertation Concerning the Messiah, Proving Him to be Promised of Old.” He states,

We proceed now unto our principal intendment in all these discourses, which is, the consideration and discussion of those great principles, as of all religion in general, so of the Christian in particular, which the apostle supposeth as a foundation of his whole treaty with the Hebrews, and which are the basis that he stands upon in the management of his whole discourse.⁵⁷

Owen asserts that underlying the letter to the Hebrews is a threefold Christological foundation upon which every theological assertion and parenetical exhortation in the epistle rests. The importance of this “triple foundation” goes beyond even the epistle. He contends that “the very fundamental principles of our Christian profession” (τῆς ὁμολογίας Χριστιανῆς) are built upon this threefold foundation. It is as follows:

First, that there was a Messiah, or Saviour of mankind from sin and punishment, promised upon, and from, the first entrance of sin into the world, in whom all acceptable worship of God was to be founded, and in whom all the religion of the sons of men was to centre.

Second, that this Messiah, long before promised, was now actually exhibited in the world, and had finished the work committed unto him, when the apostle wrote this Epistle.

Third, that Jesus of Nazareth was this Messiah, and that what he had done and suffered was the work and duty promised of old concerning him.⁵⁸

Each of the three “dissertations” in the second series of essays “concerning the Messiah” corresponds with a premise in Owen’s triple foundation argument.⁵⁹ He explains his rationale behind these discourses as follows, “I found it necessary to examine and confirm, to unfold, vindicate, and declare [this triple foundation], that their influence into the apostle’s discourse might be manifest, and his arguing from

⁵⁷ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.1 (*Works*, 18:141).

⁵⁸ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.1 (*Works*, 18:142; cf. p. 7).

⁵⁹ Thus the first dissertation concerning the Messiah comprises exercitations 8–11; the second dissertation concerning the Messiah long since come comprises exercitations 12–16; and the third dissertation proving Jesus of Nazareth to be the Messiah comprises exercitations 17–18.

them be understood.”⁶⁰ In other words, this threefold foundation is not something he believes that he imposed upon the text; rather, he argues that the apostle himself presupposed these “first maxims.”⁶¹ Owen unambiguously states, “There is not a line in the Epistle to the Hebrews that doth not virtually begin and end in these principles.”⁶²

Owen’s triple foundation argument bears resemblance to the Christological syllogism developed by William Perkins in the *The Arte of Prophecyng* (1607). Perkins states, “The summe of the Scripture is contained in such a syllogisme,” as follows:

[*The Major or Proposition*] The true Messiah shall be both God and Man of the seede of David; he shall be borne of a Virgin; he shall bring the Gospell forth of his Fathers bosome; he shall satisfie the Law; he shall offer up himselfe a sacrifice for the sinnes of the faithfull; he shall conquer death by dying and rising againe; he shall ascend into heaven; and in his due time hee shall returne unto judgement. [*The Minor or Assumption*] But Jesus of Nazareth, the Sonne of Mary is such a one. [*The Conclusion*] He therefore is the true Messiah.

Perkins then summarises his argument: “In this syllogisme the major is the scope or principall drift in all the writings of the prophets: and the minor [is contained] in the writings of the evangelists and apostles.”⁶³ Following Perkins, Francis Roberts (1609–1675) crafted a comparable argument concerning the four Gospel accounts in the New Testament. He states, “The summe and principal scope of all these foure evangelists is to demonstrate, That Jesus Christ the sonne of the Virgin Mary, is that

⁶⁰ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. [vii] (*Works*, 18:7).

⁶¹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.1 (*Works*, 18:142). Earlier in the preface, he states, “Some great principles I observed that the apostle supposed, which he built all his arguings and exhortations upon; not directly proving or confirming the principles themselves, but as taking them for granted, partly from the faith of the Judaical church, and partly from the new revelation of the gospel, which those to whom he wrote did as yet admit and avow.” *Works*, 18:7.

⁶² Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.1 (*Works*, 18:142; cf. p. 7).

⁶³ William Perkins, *The Arte of Prophecyng* (London, 1607), 7; the bracketed and italicised headings are taken from the marginalia. For an introduction to this work, see Paul R. Schaefer, “The *Arte of Propheying* by William Perkins (1558–1602), in *The Devoted Life: An Invitation to the Puritan Classics*, eds. Kelly M. Kapic and Randall C. Gleason (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 38–51.

very Messiah the son of David and Abraham, the seed of the woman, from the beginning of the world promises, typified, and fore-prophecied of in the whole Old Testament.” He then concludes by outlining a messianic syllogism that is strikingly similar to Perkins’s.⁶⁴ These statements by Owen, Perkins, and Roberts reflect a pair of commonly held hermeneutical assumptions among the reformed orthodox whereby Christ was identified as both the foundation (*fundamentum Scripturae*) and scope of Scripture (*scopus Scripturae*).⁶⁵

Johannes Cocceius (1603–1669) locates the origin of the *fundamentum* concept in Augustine’s *Enchiridion* (c. 420).⁶⁶ Augustine opens his devotional handbook with a question central to the Christian faith: “What is the sure and proper foundation (*fundamentum*) of the catholic faith?”⁶⁷ Building upon the apostle Paul’s architectural metaphor in 1 Corinthians 3:11, he answers: “The sure and proper foundation (*fundamentum*) of the catholic faith is Christ.”⁶⁸ Cocceius further develops this idea to suggest that the *fundamentum* is the most basic principle upon

⁶⁴ Francis Roberts, *Clavis Bibliorum: The Key of the Bible, Unlocking the Richest Treasury of the Holy Scripture* (London, 1648), p. 470. The syllogism is as follows: “Whosoever he be, in whom all the promises, types and prophecies of the Old Testament concerning the Messiah are actually fulfilled: he, and he alone, is the true Messiah . . . But in Jesus Christ, the Son of the Virgin Mary, all the promises, types, and prophecies, of the Old Testament concerning the Messiah are actually fulfilled . . . Therefore, Jesus, Son of the Virgin Mary, and he alone, is the true Messiah.” Ibid.

⁶⁵ For discussion on Christ as the foundation of Scripture, see Muller, *PRRD*, 2:206–223; cf. Muller, “*fundamentum Scripturae*,” in *DLGTT*, 126; Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. G. T. Thomson, ed. Ernst Bizer (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950), 42–46.

⁶⁶ Johannes Cocceius, *Summa theologiae ex Scripturis repetita*, 2nd ed. (Geneva, 1665), cap. 46, sec. 36, p. 469: “Quod Augustinus Enchir. c. 4 & 5 & Catech. q. 67 cum Scriptura fundamentum vocat: cui nimirum inaedificatur omnis veritas in Scripturis patefacta, & ad quod tanquam centrum, collineat.” Cf. Willem J. van Asselt, *The Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius (1603–1669)*, trans. Raymond A. Blacketer (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 131, n.53.

⁶⁷ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, cap. 4, in *NPNF*¹, 3:238; cf. “Quod certum propriumque fidei catholicae fundamentum.” *PL*, 40:232–233.

⁶⁸ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, cap. 5, in *NPNF*¹, 3:238; cf. “Certum vero propriumque fidei catholicae fundamentum Christus est.” *PL*, 40:233.

which all other scriptural truths are built.⁶⁹ While historical differences exist between the Old and New Testaments, the gospel of Christ unites them both. Cocceius contends that the notion of *fundamentum* provides interpreters with a hermeneutical axiom (*axioma*) that structures the biblical narrative, since “in the Old and New Testament there is one foundation (*unum fundamentum*).”⁷⁰ For Cocceius, as Willem van Asselt states, “This doctrine of the foundation is . . . the point of departure for the unfolding of the doctrine of the covenant and testament.”⁷¹

The principle of Christ as the *fundamentum Scripturae* is also found in Calvin’s discussion on biblical covenants in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559). While granting elements of discontinuity between various historical dispensations, he argues that there is “nothing to hinder the promises of the Old and New Testaments from remaining the same, nor from having the same foundation of these very promises, Christ!” (*idem ipsorum promissionum fundamentum, Christus*).⁷² Elsewhere he also asserts that the “church [in both testaments] always had its foundation (*fundatum*) in the person of Christ.”⁷³ Perkins makes a similar comment regarding God’s covenant promises and the mediatorial work of Christ, “The foundation and groundworke of the Covenant is Christ Jesus the Mediatour, in whome all the promises of God are yea and

⁶⁹ Cocceius, *Summa theologiae*, cap. 7, sec. 21, p. 93: “Eam verò veritatem, ut fundamentum sit, necesse est, in se continere omnes veritates theologicas: quemadmodum à fundamento sustineatur totum aedificium.”

⁷⁰ Cocceius, *Summa theologiae*, cap. 7, sec. 40 and 43, p. 95: “Ideoque & in Veteri & in Novo Testamento unum fundamentum est . . . Quamvis autem variis verbis in Scripturis Veteris & Novi Test. Axioma fundamentale proponatur, tamen id in se unum est.”

⁷¹ Van Asselt, *The Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius*, 140, cf. pp. 131–132.

⁷² Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.11.1; cf. “Hac ratione nihil impediunt quominus eadem maneat veteris ac novi Testamenti promissiones, atque idem ipsorum promissionum fundamentum, Christus.” *CO*, 2:329.

⁷³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.6.2; cf. “Ecclesiae statum semper in Christi persona fuisse fundatum.” *CO*, 2:247; see also Owen, *Works*, 1:29–35.

amen.”⁷⁴ Likewise, Thomas Goodwin (1600–1680), Owen’s colleague at Oxford University, echoes Augustine when he applies the concept of *fundamentum* to personal faith in the Christ of Scripture. He stresses that “faith must pitch [itself] upon our mediator as a corner-stone laid by God, as a sure foundation.”⁷⁵ Finally, Owen provides a summary of this teaching in his posthumous book on the glory of Christ. Commenting on Ephesians 2:20, he states, “This principle is always to be retained in our minds in reading of Scripture,—namely, that the revelation and doctrine of the person of Christ and his office, is the foundation whereon all other instructions of the prophets and apostles for the edification of the church are built, and whereinto they are resolved.”⁷⁶ Christ is the foundational principle upon which all promises and prophecies in Scripture are built.⁷⁷

Related to the *fundamentum* of Scripture is the question of its *scopus* or aim. This concept found its first formal codification in article 5 of the First Helvetic Confession (1536), where the ultimate purpose (German, *Zweck*) of Scripture was

⁷⁴ William Perkins, *An Exposition of the Symbole* (1623 ed.), in *The Workes of . . . Mr. William Perkins*, 3 vols. (London, 1626), 1:165; cf. Muller, *PRRD*, 2:217.

⁷⁵ Thomas Goodwin, *Of Christ the Mediator* (1692), in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, ed. John C. Miller, 12 vols. (Edinburgh, 1863), 5:39.

⁷⁶ Owen, *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ, in His Person, Office, and Grace* (London, 1684), pp. 54–55 (*Works*, 1:314–315).

⁷⁷ Similar statements are found in the writings of Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575), Jerome Zanchi (1516–1590), Zacharias Ursinus (1534–1583), Caspar Olevianus (1536–1587), Edward Leigh (1602–1671), Herman Witsius (1636–1708), among others, and are often developed in the context of discussions on what doctrines comprise the fundamental articles of the Christian faith. See Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 42–46; Muller, *PRRD*, 1:414–418; 2:208–222. Owen explicitly uses this concept of foundation as an expression of the fundamental truths of the Christian religion in a discussion on the “particular subject-matter of this Epistle.” He argues that the content of Hebrews “consists in things of pure revelation, and which have no other foundation ‘in rerum natura’ [in the nature of things].” In other words, the information contained in the epistle of Hebrews cannot be known apart from revelation and thus can have “no other foundation” but one that is “purely divine, spiritual.” Therefore, the subject-matter of the epistle is vitally important because “the principal things treated of in it are matters of the greatest importance in Christian religion, and such as concern the very foundation of faith.” This includes topics such as the doctrine of the person and work of Christ, especially in his office as high priest, the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, the role of the Mosaic Law, and the nature of gospel worship. See *Hebrews* (1668), 1.1.24 (*Works*, 18:45–48).

said to be the declaration of God’s goodness in Christ. Over a century later, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646) and *Savoy Declaration* (1658) similarly stated that “the scope of the whole” of Scripture was the glory of God.⁷⁸ Building upon the work of the church father Eusebius (c. 263–339AD), Owen applies this principle to the overall design of the epistle to the Hebrews. He states,

This *end*, supremely and absolutely, is the glory of that God who is the author of [the epistle]. This is the *center* where all the lines of it do meet, the *scope* and mark towards which all things in it are directed. It is the revelation of himself that is intended, of his mind and will, that he may be glorified; wherein, also, because he is the principal fountain and last end of all, . . . Particularly, the demonstration of [the] glory of God in and by Jesus Christ is aimed at.⁷⁹

The concepts of the *fundamentum* and *scopus* of Scripture go hand-in-hand. As the *scopus Scripturae*, Christ is the climax of biblical revelation, the culminating point of the redemptive narrative, and the end to which every promise of salvation is aimed.⁸⁰

But as the *fundamentum Scripturae*, Christ is also the bedrock of biblical revelation,

⁷⁸ For the German text of article 5 of the First Helvetic Confession, see E. F. K. Müller, *Die bekennnisschriften der Reformierten kirche* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1903), 102; for the Latin text, see Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 3:212–313. The reference to “the glory of God” as the scope of Scripture is from WCF 1.5 and Savoy 1.5.

⁷⁹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.1.25, p. 14 (*Works*, 18:48), emphasis original. Owen’s treatment on the scope of the epistle is set in a larger context whereby he elucidates three principles drawn from Eusebius’s well-known discussion on the canon of Scripture in his *Ecclesiastical History*: (1) the φράσεως χαρακτήρ or the character of speech of the writer; (2) the γνώμη or subject matter of the writing, both in terms of its general argument and particular subject matter; and (3) the προαίρεσις or the purpose and design of the writer. Owen’s analysis of the scope of Scripture falls under Eusebius’s third category. See *Works*, 18:42–51, esp. 48; cf. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.25.7, in *NPNF*², 1:157; for the Greek text, see *PG*, 20:269, 272.

⁸⁰ The term *scopus* was used both in a broad sense as a statement of the overall purpose of Scripture and in a narrow sense to refer to the proximate context of a given biblical text. Therefore, to suggest that the glory of God in Christ is the exegetical bull’s-eye that every interpreter must aim does not mean that Owen and other reformed expositors understood Christ as the immediate referent of every biblical passage, but that they recognized that the person and work of Christ formed the centrepiece of redemptive history. For an analysis of the puritan use of scope, see Gerald T. Sheppard, “Between Reformation and Modern Commentary: The Perception of the Scope of Biblical Books,” in William Perkins, *A Commentary on Galatians*, ed. Gerald T. Sheppard (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), xlvii–lxxvii. On the various uses of the term scope, see Müller, *PRRD*, 2:207–208; cf. R. Ward Holder, *John Calvin and the Grounding of Interpretation: Calvin’s First Commentaries* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 139–180; Klass Runia, “The Hermeneutics of the Reformers,” *CTJ* 19 (1984): 128–132.

the starting point of the redemptive narrative, and the basis upon which every promise of salvation is built. Christ is the beginning and end of Scripture.

Closely related to these two hermeneutical principles is the central role of promise and fulfilment in Owen's triple foundation. Herein lies the hinge of his overall argument in his exertions. He states,

That there was a Messiah promised from the foundation of the world, to be a spiritual redeemer of mankind; that this Messiah was come, and had performed and accomplished the work assigned unto him for the end of their redemption; that Jesus of Nazareth was this Messiah. Not one line in the whole Epistle but is in an especial manner resolved into these principles, or deduced from them.⁸¹

From the pronouncement of the *protoevangelium* in Genesis 3:15 to the close of the canon in Revelation 22, Christ is understood as the ultimate fulfilment of the divine promise of redemption. For Owen, redemptive-history turns on this promise and fulfilment axis. His threefold foundation therefore should not be seen as an abstract theological construction but as a biblical-theological statement of his fundamental belief in the unity and continuity of Scripture.

Owen's threefold Christological foundation is best understood as an expression of the reformed orthodox concept of *fundamentum Scripturae*. Not only does this triple foundation structure the central argument of Owen's exertions, it provides him with a hermeneutical platform upon which he builds his exposition of the epistle to the Hebrews. In short, Owen's commentary is founded upon his belief in Christ as the foundation of Scripture.

⁸¹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. [vii] (*Works*, 18:7, cf. p. 142).

2.2.5 POLEMICAL CONTEXT: JEWISH AND SOCINIAN ERRORS

Throughout his commentary, Owen often refutes Jewish and Socinian interpretations of Scripture. Commenting on the Trinitarian implications of Genesis 1:26, he states,

But there are two sorts of persons who, with all their strength and artifices, oppose our exposition of this place,—namely, the Jews and the Socinians, with whom we have to do perpetually in whatever concerns the person and offices of Christ the Messiah, and in what any way relates thereunto.⁸²

Both groups held to a belief in the authority of Scripture; however, neither affirmed the Chalcedonian formula of the doctrine of the person of Christ. On the one hand, the Jews denied that Christ was the promised Messiah, and consequently rejected the New Testament. On the other, the Socinians denied that Jesus was the divine Son of God, and consequently reinterpreted the New Testament. The structure of Owen’s exertions in the first two volumes of *Hebrews* evidences these polemical concerns, with the largest series of essays focusing upon the promised Messiah in first volume (1668) and the priesthood of Christ in the second volume (1674).

In the preface to the first volume, Owen declares his reluctance to write a commentary on Hebrews due to the “many eminent and learned men, both old and late” who expounded upon the epistle.⁸³ Nevertheless, he delineates three reasons that compelled him to join the long list of commentators on the epistle, one highlights the positive value of Hebrews while the other two impinge more directly

⁸² Owen, *Hebrews* (1674), 1.3.6 (*Works*, 19:46).

⁸³ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. [v] (*Works*, 18:5). Owen explains, “The help which I might receive from the sedulous labours of so many learned men, and those in times, places, principles, distant and distinguished from each other, as also managing their common design with great variety as to particular intentions, I looked on as a matter of no small advantage unto me.” He then identifies at least six different kinds of commentaries on Hebrews: (1) some “critically examined many of the words, phrases, and expressions of the writer”; (2) others “compared his quotations with the places in the Old Testament”; (3) some “endeavored an analysis of the several discourses of the author”; (4) others focused on the practical usefulness of the epistle; (5) some “collected the difficulties . . . in a scholastic way, with objections and solutions”; and (6) “others had an especial design unto the places whose sense is controverted amongst the several parties at variance in Christian religion.” *Ibid.*

upon the polemical context. The first reason Owen gives is the inexhaustibility of the theology of Hebrews along with the indispensability of its practical usefulness. He insists upon the need for continual investigation in and application of the text of Scripture for the life of the church, and thus the on-going need for writing new commentaries that could benefit present and future generations.⁸⁴

Second, Owen expresses pastoral concern about the emerging threat of Socinianism to a biblical understanding of the person and work of Christ, a matter not nearly as pressing for earlier reformers and expositors of the epistle. He states, “It is evident that the principal things asserted and taught in this Epistle—such as is the doctrine of the person and the priesthood of Jesus Christ—have received a more eager and subtle opposition since the labours and endeavours of the most in the exposition of it, than they had done before.”⁸⁵ The spread of Socinian teaching through “many artifices” of scholarly and popular writings represented a pressing danger to the wellbeing of the church. In Owen’s mind, “The greatest opposition that ever was made among Christians unto the doctrine of the priesthood of Christ . . . is that which at this day is managed by the Socinians.”⁸⁶ He saw the Socinian denial of the priestly ministry of Christ on earth, substitutionary and propitiatory sacrifice of Christ on the cross, and the intercessory work of Christ in heaven as a “crime” against the church that must be

⁸⁴ He states, “I found the excellency of the writing [of Hebrews] to be such; the depths of the mysteries contained in it to be so great; the compass of the truth asserted, unfolded, and explained, so extensive and diffused through the whole body of Christian religion; the usefulness of the things delivered in it so important and indispensably necessary; as that I was quickly satisfied that the wisdom, grace, and truth, treasured in this sacred storehouse, are so far from being exhausted and fully drawn forth by the endeavours of any or all that are gone before us, or from being all perfectly brought forth to light by them, as that I was assured there was left a sufficient ground and foundation, not only for renewed investigation after rich branches in this mine for the present generation, but for all them that shall succeed, unto the consummation of all things.” Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. [vi] (*Works*, 18:6).

⁸⁵ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. [vi] (*Works*, 18:6).

⁸⁶ Owen, *Hebrews* (1674), n.p. [iv–v] (*Works*, 18:17).

prosecuted in the court of biblical exegesis. Since previous commentators on Hebrews were not faced with this unique challenge to orthodoxy, Owen believed that exposure of these errors was crucial for the “edification of the present church.”⁸⁷

Third, and most importantly for Owen, was the lack of adequate consideration of the authorial intent of the writer of Hebrews in addressing the “past, present, and future condition of the Hebrews, or church of the Jews.”⁸⁸ Following the Aristotelian and Thomistic traditions of locating the literal sense of the text in the author’s original intent, he believed that in order to understand the “mind of the Holy Ghost” he had to understand the mind of the author (who for Owen was the apostle Paul) as well as the Jewish customs and circumstances that provide the backdrop for the epistle.⁸⁹ For Owen, “the design of the author” and the “sense of the Epistle” go hand-in-hand.⁹⁰ As a result, he was convinced that recognition of the Jewishness of the epistle was crucial for rightly dividing it. He states,

⁸⁷ Owen, *Hebrews* (1674), n.p. [iv–v] (*Works*, 18:17); cf. Owen, “Exercitations Concerning the Sacerdotal Office of Christ,” in *Works*, 19:3–259. The best examination of Owen’s doctrine of the priesthood of Christ is Edwin E. M. Tay, *The Priesthood of Christ: Atonement in the Theology of John Owen (1616–1683)* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2014). For Owen’s interaction with Socinian scholarship on Hebrews, see Lee Gatiss, “Adoring the Fullness of the Scriptures in John Owen’s Commentary on Hebrews” (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2013), 49–98. For a detailed political, ecclesiastical, and theological reading of the history of Socinianism in England, see Sarah Mortimer, *Reason and Religion in the English Revolution: The Challenge of Socinianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), esp. 194–232. See also the standard but dated histories, Stanislas Kot, *Socinianism in Poland*, trans. E. M. Wilbur (Boston: Star King Press, 1957); John H. McLachlan, *Socinianism in Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Oxford University Press, 1951); Earl M. Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism: Socinianism and its Antecedents* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1946); idem, *A History of Unitarianism: In Transylvania, England, and America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952).

⁸⁸ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. [vii] (*Works*, 18:6).

⁸⁹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. [vii] (*Works*, 18:6). On the question of authorial intent in the context of the development of the Aristotelian commentary tradition in the medieval period, see Karlfried Froehlich, “Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament in the High Middle Ages,” in *Hebrew Bible, Old Testament: The History of Interpretation, Volume 1/2: The Middle Ages*, ed. Magne Saebø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 545–546; cf. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth*, 34–44; Trueman, *John Owen*, 8.

⁹⁰ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), lib. 2, n.p. [i] (*Works*, 18:9).

Many principles of truth [the author] takes for granted, as acknowledged amongst the Hebrews during their former church-state, and makes them a foundation for his own superstructure; many customs, usages, ordinances, institutions, received senses of places of Scripture amongst the Jews, he either produceth or reflects upon; and one way or other makes use of the whole Mosaical economy, or system of divine worship under the law, unto his own purpose. The common neglect of these things, or slight transaction of them in most expositors, was that which principally relieved me from the fore-mentioned discouragement.⁹¹

In addition to his expressed desire to uncover the authorial intent of the epistle, why was Owen so concerned with the Jewish context of Hebrews? One explanation is that he benefited from the renaissance of biblical humanism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, including a revival of interest in the Hebrew language and Jewish studies. From the contributions of rabbinical and Hebrew scholars such as Johannes Reuchlin (1455–1522) and John Lightfoot (1602–1675) to the efforts of Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel (1604–1657) and the petition for readmission of Jews to England in 1655, a heightened awareness of Jewish life and thought pervaded the atmosphere Owen breathed. As David Katz has argued, the revival of Hebrew studies in the Reformation and post-Reformation, the renewed interest in Jewish scholarship, and the readmission of the Jews to England are inextricably linked together. During this time, religious life in the English-speaking world was “characterized above all else by the intense emphasis placed on reading and understanding the Word of God as expressed in Scripture.” Katz further states that “it was in this period that the Old Testament regained a place of honour next to the New, and the ‘language of Canaan’ spoken by God to the Israelites became a tool of biblical scholarship much in demand.”⁹²

⁹¹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. [vii] (*Works*, 18:6–7).

⁹² David S. Katz, *The Jews in the History of England 1485–1850* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 110. A similar point is made by Cecil Roth, *A History of the Jews in England* (Oxford:

When Owen goes to write his commentary, he is the beneficiary of nearly two centuries worth of humanistic and Protestant reflection on Jewish culture and the “language of Canaan.” Thus Owen’s tutor at Oxford University, Thomas Barlow (1608/9–1691), gave the following advice to his divinity students: “For the better understanding of the Scriptures, it will be convenient to know, and to consult such books as have given general directions for studying Scriptures, and particular explications of the Jewish antiquities, and customs.”⁹³ Edward Leigh also encouraged Protestant interpreters of the Bible to plunder Jewish scholarship. He states, “The Church of God is much beholding to the Hebrew Rabbines, being great helps unto us for understanding holy Scripture in many places . . . There are divers places both in the Old and New Testament, which cannot be well understood, unless we borrow Candle-light from the Hebrews Doctors.”⁹⁴ Given this intellectual climate, it comes as no surprise that Owen’s commentary is suffused with references and allusions to Old Testament themes and practices, as well as extensive quotations from the Talmud, Targum, and other rabbinical literature. Nevertheless, his use of Jewish scholarship

Clarendon Press, 1941), 149, 154. For Owen’s role at the Whitehall Conference and use of Jewish scholarship, see Carl Trueman, “Protestant Scholasticism, Jews and Judaism: Some Notes on Their Connection,” *Journal of Progressive Judaism* (1995): 61–75; cf. Gatiss, “Adoring the Fullness of the Scriptures,” 99–135; Knapp, “Understanding the Mind of God,” 32–33; 123–128; Peter Toon, “The Question of Jewish Immigration,” in *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel: Puritan Eschatology 1600 to 1660*, ed. Peter Toon (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1970); Toon, *God’s Statesman*, 96–97. On the development of Jewish studies in the seventeenth century, see Stephen G. Burnett, *From Christian Hebraism to Jewish Studies: Johannes Buxtorf (1564–1629) and Hebrew Learning in the Seventeenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); Peter T. van Rooden, *Theology, Biblical Scholarship, and Rabbinical Studies in the Seventeenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1989); Jai-Sung Shim, “Biblical Hermeneutics and Hebraism in the Early Seventeenth Century as Reflected in the Work of John Weemse (1579–1636)” (PhD diss., Calvin Theological Seminary, 1998).

⁹³ Thomas Barlow, *Autoschediasmata, De studio theologiae: or, Directions for the Choice of Books in the Study of Divinity, Published from the Original Manuscript by William Offley* (Oxford, 1699), 14. On Barlow, see John Spurr, “Barlow, Thomas (1608/9–1691),” in *ODNB*; cf. Rehman, *Divine Discourse*, 20, 24, 32–33; Toon, *God’s Statesman*, 6; Trueman, *John Owen*, 2–3, 9–11.

⁹⁴ Leigh, *A Systeme or Body of Divinity*, p. 112; cf. John Sutton, “Leigh, Edward (1603–1671),” *ODNB*.

was not an end in itself. His employment of Jewish texts and traditions was ultimately a result of his desire to explain more clearly the background of the epistle to the Hebrews—something which he believed was overlooked by previous commentators and made possible due to the renewed interest of Hebraic studies—as well as to defend the claims of Christ against Jewish critics, both past and present.

2.3 CONCLUSION

Owen's choice of Hebrews was not without cause. The subject matter of the epistle afforded him with the exegetical artillery he needed to engage in an unabashed apologetic of the reformed orthodox view of Christ as the *fundamentum Scripturae*. More specifically, his interpretation of Christ as the foundation of Scripture as developed upon the axis of divine promise and fulfilment provided him with a common hermeneutical tool of the seventeenth century to probe the text of Hebrews, bring theological cohesion to the biblical narrative, defend the fundamental principles of Christianity against Jewish and Socinian errors, and encourage a beleaguered nonconformist church. Although he wrote no other full-length commentary on an entire book of the Bible, *Hebrews* is a considerable enough work to provide significant insight into his understanding of Scripture and serve as a substantial example of the exegetical enterprise of late seventeenth century Protestant orthodoxy.

CHAPTER 3

CHRIST AND COVENANT: THE FOUNDATION OF REDEMPTION

For the argument treated of being the covenants of God with Christ the mediator, and with the church in him, there are none who have any acquaintance with Christian religion, or care of their own souls, but must, and will acknowledge it to be of the greatest weight in itself, and highest concernment unto them. For the doctrine hereof, or the truth therein, is the very centre wherein all the lines concerning the grace of God and our own duty do meet; wherein the whole of religion doth consist. Hence unto the understanding, notions, and conceptions that men have of these covenants of God, and according as the doctrine of them is stated in their minds, their conceptions of all other sacred truths, or doctrines, are confirmed.

—John Owen¹

Oh how incomparably sweet and satisfying is it unto a self-studying Christian soul, to be acquainted with the faithfull engagements of the Almighty Majestie, unto the poor penitent sinner, through that Son of his loves, in a Covenant of free, rich, everlasting grace! This Covenant being transacted betwixt Christ and God, here, here lyes the first and most firm foundation of a Christians comfort.

—Simeon Ash²

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The goal of this chapter is to examine the function of federal theology in John Owen's exercitations on the epistle to the Hebrews. In particular, we will explore how the principle of covenant relates to Owen's promise-fulfilment hermeneutic that is

¹ John Owen, "To the Reader," in Patrick Gillespie, *The Ark of the Covenant Opened: or, A Treatise of the Covenant of Redemption between God and Christ, as the Foundation of the Covenant of Grace* (London, 1677), n.p. [i–ii].

² Simeon Ash, "To the Christian Reader," in John Ball, *A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace wherein the Graduall Breakings Out of Gospel Grace from Adam to Christ Are Clearly Discovered* (London, 1646), n.p. [iv].

expressed in his “triple foundation” argument in the discourses on the Messiah. The purpose is not to engage in a comprehensive examination of his federal theology. Rather, the objective is to consider how it informed his exegesis of Scripture and, as an ancillary point, how his promise-fulfilment hermeneutic fits within the broader scope of reformed discussions on the doctrine of covenant.³ The primary reason for this approach is that federal theology is more presupposed and practised in Owen’s preliminary essays on Hebrews than it is defined or defended. This inductive method will not only ensure that Owen’s federalism is evaluated in the context of his commentary and writings, but it will also provide a textually crafted *scènes de genre* of the hermeneutics of post-Reformation federal theology, and thus unveil, so to speak, an everyday portrait of the exegetical endeavours of at least one major figure in the high orthodox period. By focusing on the utilization of covenant concepts in Owen’s exertions, greater clarity may be gained on how the conceptualization of federal theology in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries informed the practice of biblical interpretation in the final years of the era of reformed orthodoxy.⁴

³ The term “covenant” will be used in three distinct yet overlapping ways: dogmatically to denote a system of thought (i.e., the bi-covenantal theological construct known as the covenants of works and grace), economically to refer to various biblical administrations (e.g., Abrahamic covenant), and linguistically to highlight exegetical and etymological nuances of a given biblical text (e.g., the translation of διαθήκη in the epistle to the Hebrews). Context should make plain in what sense the word is being used. Furthermore, no formal distinction is made between descriptive terms such as “doctrine of covenant,” “covenant theology,” “federal theology,” and “federalism.” These terms are taken synonymously and are used to refer to the development, systemization, and codification of the doctrine of covenant as expressed in the treatises, systems, and confessions of the Reformation and post-Reformation periods.

⁴ On Owen’s federal theology, see Richard C. Barcellos, *The Family Tree of Reformed Biblical Theology: Geerhardus Vos and John Owen—Their Methods of and Contributions to the Articulation of Redemptive History* (Owensboro, KY: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2010); Michael W. Bobick, “Owen’s Razor: The Role of Ramist Logic in the Covenant Theology of John Owen (1616–1683)” (PhD diss., Drew University, 1996); Michael Brown, “The Covenant of Works Revived: John Owen on Republication in the Mosaic Covenant,” *The Confessional Presbyterian* 4 (2008): 151–161, 310; Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 20–36; Lee Gatiss, “Adoring the Fullness of the Scriptures in John Owen’s Commentary on Hebrews” (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2013), 136–195; Steve M. Griffiths, *Redeem the Time: Sin in the Writings of John Owen* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2001), 18–29; Jeong Koo Jeon, *Covenant Theology: John Murray’s and Meredith G. Kline’s Response to the Historical Development of Federal Theology in Reformed Thought* (New York: University Press of America, 1999), 46–56;

3.2 A SUMMARY OF OWEN’S FEDERAL THEOLOGY

In an important essay on the “Federal transactions between the Father and the Son about the redemption of mankind” in his exercitations on the priesthood of Christ,

Owen summarises his understanding of covenant theology as follows:

We must distinguish between the covenant that God made with men concerning Christ, and the covenant that he made with his Son concerning men. That God created man in and under the terms and law of a covenant, with a prescription of duties and promise of reward, is by all acknowledged. After the fall he entered into another covenant with mankind, which, from the principle, nature, and end of it, is commonly called the covenant of grace. This, under several forms of external administration, hath continued ever since in force, and shall do so to the consummation of all things. And the nature of this covenant, as being among the principal concernments of religion, hath been abundantly declared and explained by many. . . . That the Lord Jesus Christ was the principal subject-matter of this covenant, the undertaker in it and surety of it, the Scriptures expressly declare: for the great promise of it was concerning him and his mediation, with the benefits that should redound unto mankind thereby in grace and glory; and the preceptive part of it required obedience in and unto him new and distinct from that which was exacted by the law of creation, although enwrapping all the commands thereof also. And he was the surety of it, in that he undertook unto God whatever by the terms of the covenant was to be done for man, to accomplish it in his own person, and whatever was to be done in and by man, to effect it by his own Spirit and grace; that so the covenant on every side might be firm and stable, and the ends of it fulfilled.⁵

Although this passage introduces Owen’s articulation of the “personal compact” between the Father and the Son, or the *pactum salutis*, three preliminary points are

Mark Jones, “The ‘Old’ Covenant,” in *Drawn into Controversie: Reformed Theological Diversity and Debates within Seventeenth-Century British Puritanism*, eds. Michael A. G. Haykin and Mark Jones (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 182–203; Jones, “The Minority Report: John Owen on Sinai,” in Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 293–303; Kelly M. Kapic, *Communion with God: The Divine and the Human in the Theology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 97–104; Brian K. Kay, *Trinitarian Spirituality: John Owen and the Doctrine of God in Western Devotion* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2007); Ryan M. McGraw, *A Heavenly Directory: Trinitarian Piety, Public Worship, and a Reassessment of John Owen’s Theology* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 140–186; Brian G. Najapfour, “‘That It Might Lead and Direct Men unto Christ’: John Owen’s View of the Mosaic Covenant,” *SBET* 29 (2011): 196–204; Sebastian Rehnman, *Divine Discourse: The Theological Methodology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 155–177; Rehnman, “Is the Narrative of Redemptive History Trichotomous or Dichotomous? A Problem for Federal Theology,” *NAK* 80 (2000): 296–308; Carl R. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen’s Trinitarian Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998); Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 67–99; Godfrey Noel Vose, “Profile of a Puritan: John Owen (1616–1683),” (PhD diss., State University of Iowa, 1963), 248–305; David Wai-Sing Wong, “The Covenant Theology of John Owen” (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1998).

⁵ Owen, *Hebrews* (1674), 1.4.2 (*Works*, 19:78; cf. 5:191–205).

noteworthy for our discussion on the relationship of federal theology to his promise-fulfilment hermeneutic. First, Owen self-consciously appropriates the standard reformed orthodox categories of the covenant of works and covenant of grace to discuss the purposes of God concerning humanity that are revealed in Scripture.⁶ He regards this bi-covenantal structure as something that is “acknowledged by all” and that “has been declared and explained by many.”⁷ Second, while Owen’s statement clearly reflects his appreciation for and adoption of standard reformed categories, his federalism is developed as a result of a careful reading of the text of Scripture and not simply from an uncritical reception of the reformed tradition or a blind adherence to a presupposed logical system imposed upon the biblical narrative. This is evident in the context of his essays and exposition wherein he weds theological discourse with exegetical investigation. As Owen reflects upon the scriptural warrant for an eternal federal transaction between the Father and the Son (i.e., covenant of redemption), he begins his discussion with a detailed linguistic and textual analysis of the subtle nuances of multiple terms for covenant (i.e., בְּרִית, συνθήκη, διαθήκη, and *foedus*). For example, regarding the semantic range of the biblical term “covenant,” Owen concludes that “the word is used in great variety, and what is intended by it must be learned from the subject-matter treated of [in the biblical text].”⁸ The primary point to

⁶ On the difference between the covenants of works and grace, see Owen, *Works*, 5:275–277.

⁷ Owen’s interest in the literature on covenant theology is evidenced by his providing a commendatory preface for two of the “many” reformed expositions on the subject. See John Owen, “Christian Reader,” in Samuel Petto, *The Difference between the Old and New Covenant Stated and Explained* (London, 1674); Owen, “To the Reader,” in Gillespie, *The Ark of the Covenant Opened*. For a sampling of works on covenant theology in the auction catalogue of Owen’s library, see footnote 37 below.

⁸ Owen, *Hebrews* (1674), 1.4.5 (*Works*, 19:80); cf. he gives a more detailed lexical analysis of the biblical terms for covenant in his exposition of texts such as Hebrews 7:22; 8:8–12; and 9:15–17, in *Works*, 22:493–512; 23:111–139, 319–343. On Owen’s analysis of the term covenant, see Trueman, *John Owen*, 67–99. For a study of the development of covenant terminology in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, see Brain J. Lee, *Johannes Cocceius and the Exegetical Roots of Federal Theology: Reformation Developments in the Interpretation of Hebrews 7–10* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 23–97; Lee, “The Covenant Terminology of Johannes Cocceius: The Use of *Foedus*, *Pactum*, and *Testamentum* in a Mature Federal Theologian,” *MAJT* 14 (2003): 11–36; cf. J.

be made here is that Owen's federalism is closely tied to his reading of the text and context of Scripture and, as a result, attempts to take into account the full range of biblical data on the theme of covenant. In other words, covenant theology is something he believed that "the Scriptures expressly declare." Third, Owen sees the covenant of grace as resting on, and giving historical expression to, the Trinitarian counsel of God (*consilium Dei*) and the eternal pact that the Father made with the Son concerning the elect. For Owen, the covenant of grace is founded on the eternal covenant of redemption, revealed in the various stages of redemptive-history, and fulfilled in the mediatorial work of Christ.

This last point is especially important as some scholars have criticized reformed orthodox theologians in general and Owen in particular for casting federal theology in strictly decretal terms while paying little attention to the historical development of covenant administrations within the biblical narrative. James B. Torrance, for example, states that the "federal scheme sees all under the sovereignty of God, but not under the mediatorial Headship of Christ as Man. . . . By operating with an abstract concept of sovereignty and the decrees of God it subordinates grace in Christ to the task of executing these (logically) prior decrees—teaching, as Calvin had not done, the doctrine of limited atonement."⁹ Elsewhere, Torrance drives a wedge between the

Mark Beach, *Christ and the Covenant: Francis Turretin's Federal Theology as a Defense of the Doctrine of Grace* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 150–159.

⁹ James B. Torrance, "The Concept of Federal Theology—Was Calvin a Federal Theologian?," in *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae Professor*, ed. Wilhelm H. Neuser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 33. Part of the problem with Torrance's critique of federal theology is that he does not take into consideration that later reformed orthodox theologians made a formal distinction between God's eternal decree—i.e., his sovereign predestining will—and his eternal pact, representing the distinct acts of the persons of the Trinity *ad intra* in the formation of the eternal covenant. For example, speaking of the covenant of redemption, Owen states, "Thus, though this covenant be eternal, and the object of it be that which might not have been, and so it hath the nature of the residue of God's decrees in these regards, yet because of this distinct acting of the will of the Father and the will of the Son with regard to each other, it is more than a decree, and hath the proper nature of a covenant or compact. Hence, from the moment of it (I speak not of time), there is a new habitude of the will in the Father and Son towards each other that is not in them essentially; I call it new, as being in God freely, not naturally. And hence was the salvation of men before the incarnation, by the undertaking, mediation, and death of Christ. That the saints under the Old

federalism of reformed orthodoxy, including Owen, and the promise-fulfilment hermeneutic of earlier reformers. He argues that while the federal scheme began with a genuine concern for the unity of biblical revelation, it placed the “real moment of salvation beyond history.” He states,

There was a concern [in federal theology] to discern the historical nature of revelation and see the movement of God in history—an anticipation of the notion of *Heilsgeschichte*. So T. M. Lindsay interpreted federal theology. But I think we can add two qualifying notes. (a) The earlier Scots Confession had already manifested a sense of God’s dealings with Israel and the Church in history and interpreted it in terms of the category of promise and fulfilment which preserved better a christological understanding of grace and election than the later federal scheme. (b) The federal emphasis on the eternal decrees of God places the real moment of salvation beyond history and sees history as the arena for the execution of the decrees in a way that can detract from the more dynamic notion of God as actively at work within history.¹⁰

Testament were saved by Christ at present I take for granted; that they were saved by virtue of a mere decree will not be said. From hence was Christ esteemed to be incarnate and to have suffered, or the fruits of his incarnation and suffering could not have been imputed to any.” Owen, *Vindiciae Evangelicae* (1655), in *Works*, 12:497; cf. 19:87–88. Owen’s argument is that the free, sovereign, eternal, intra-Trinitarian covenant of redemption serves as the basis for the salvation of the elect in space and time as a result of the mediatorial work that the Son agreed to carry out on their behalf. Thus, for example, the saints in the Old Testament (who obviously lived before the incarnation of Christ) were not saved by divine fiat, as a result of God’s sheer will, but were redeemed by Christ proleptically in light of his substitutionary atonement on the cross. Drawing upon reformed categories, Owen makes what he calls an anthropopathic and formal distinction between the divine counsel (*consilium Dei*) and the eternal transactions (*pactum salutis*). The divine counsel is an intra-trinitarian consultation (*genere deliberativo*) between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit regarding the salvation of elect, while the eternal transactions represent the actual agreement between the Father and Son to redeem the elect by way of covenant (*per modum foederis*); see *Works*, 19:58. This distinction is clearly discernible by the fact that Owen devotes a separate exercitation to both the divine counsel and divine transactions in *Hebrews* (1674), 1.3 and 1.4, respectively (*Works*, 19:42–76, and 77–97; cf. 5:190–191); cf. Muller, *DLGTT*, s.v. “consilium Dei,” and “decretum.” On the question of the subordination of Christ to the decree, see the rebuttal by Richard A. Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).

¹⁰ James B. Torrance, “Covenant or Contract? A Study of the Theological Background of Worship in Seventeenth-Century Scotland,” *SJT* 23 (1970): 65. See also T. M. Lindsay, “The Covenant Theology,” *The British and Foreign Evangelical Review*, vol. 28, no. 109 (July 1879): 521–538. Thomas F. Torrance makes a similar argument in “Introduction,” *The School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Church*, ed. T. F. Torrance (London: James Clarke, 1959), lxxviii–lxxix. J. B. Torrance’s comments occur in a larger argument concerning an alleged divide between Calvin and the Calvinists. Along these lines, he levels several criticisms against Owen: (1) he charges Owen for using Aristotelian logic to formulate the doctrine of “limited atonement”; (2) for confusing covenant and contract; (3) for developing “virtually a tri-theistic way of thinking about God” in the covenant of redemption; and (4) for employing a “Stoic anthropology” in his exposition of Genesis 1–3 by creating a radical dichotomy between the spheres of nature and grace. Torrance, “The Incarnation and ‘Limited Atonement,’” *EQ* 55 (1983): 83–94; cf. Torrance, “The Concept of Federal Theology,” 33–36; Torrance, “The Contribution of McLeod Campbell to Scottish Theology,” *SJT* 26 (1973): 303–306. These arguments have been substantially rebutted by a host of scholars. E.g., see Beach, *Christ and the Covenant*, 46–64; J. Ligon Duncan, “Recent Objections to Covenant Theology: A Description,

John Stek has also argued that federal theology developed as a reformed attempt to overcome the ontological Creator-creature divide as well as construe the nature of the divine-human relationship. According to Stek, the result was a cutting loose of the covenant concept “from the narrative (and historical) specificity of the biblical covenants.”¹¹ Bert Loonstra has likewise contended that “the Reformed scholastics were of the opinion that biblical texts were apt to function as logically exploitable arguments in a systematic discourse . . . the historical context and the specific scope of the texts are left out of consideration too easily.”¹² Michael Bobick has charged Owen in particular with eroding the historical differences between the Old and New Testaments as a result of an allegedly Ramist formulation of covenant theology. He states, “At the risk of echoing what has been accepted as a truism, suffice it for now to say that like many seventeenth-century scholastics, Owen is more attuned to logical than historical relationships in Holy Scripture.”¹³ David Wai-Sing Wong has also

Evaluation and Response,” in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*, ed. J. Ligon Duncan, 3 vols. (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2003–2010) 3:467–500; Richard A. Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 175–189; Trueman, *The Claims of Truth*, 7, n.15; 8, n.17; Trueman, *John Owen*, 72–73, 91; Cornelis P. Venema, “Recent Criticisms of the Covenant of Works in the Westminster Confession of Faith,” *MAJT* 9 (1993): 165–198. This chapter will not deal directly with these charges of J. B. Torrance’s but with the claim that federal theology is opposed to a promise-fulfilment hermeneutic.

¹¹ John H. Stek, “‘Covenant’ Overload in Reformed Theology,” *CTJ* 29 (1994): 15. See the rejoinder by Craig G. Bartholomew, “Covenant and Creation: Covenant Overload or Covenant Deconstruction,” *CTJ* 30 (1995): 11–33.

¹² Bert Loonstra, “Scholasticism and Hermeneutics,” in *Reformation and Scholasticism*, eds. Willem J. van Asselt and Eef Dekker (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 298–299.

¹³ Bobick, “Owen’s Razor,” 212; cf. pp. 236–246. On the role of Ramist logic in Owen’s theology, see Rehnman, *Divine Discourse*, 38, n.89; Trueman, *The Claims of Truth*, 37, n.84; Toon, *The Correspondence of John Owen* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1970), 6; cf. Robert Letham, “The *Foedus Operum*: Some Factors Accounting for Its Development,” *SCJ* 14 (1983): 464–467; David B. McWilliams, “The Covenant Theology of the Westminster Confession of Faith and Recent Criticism,” *WTJ* 53 (1991): 117–118. On the overuse of Ramism as an explanation of the development of reformed theology, see Howard Hotson, *Commonplace Learning: Ramism and its German Ramifications, 1543–1630* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 16–25, 108–114; cf. Walter J. Ong, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

criticized Owen for overemphasizing the continuity of the Old and New Testaments while minimising historical discontinuities.¹⁴

Owen's exertions however reveal a different portrait of federal theology as developed within reformed orthodoxy than the ones represented by these statements. Rather than minimising the complexities of salvation history, Owen's articulation of covenant theology drove him to a closer evaluation of the historical shape of the biblical narrative. His formulation is closer to what Karl Barth called "theological historicism" in his examination of federal theology.¹⁵ In light of these criticisms, this chapter is concerned with analysing the function of Owen's federalism in his essays as it relates to his promise-fulfilment hermeneutic, noting particularly how it bears upon his understanding of the covenant of redemption, the covenant of grace, and the progression of redemptive history. But in order to evaluate Owen's argument in his exertions more closely, a survey of the federal structure of his *Theologoumena pantodapa* (1661) and an excursus on the history of federal theology will provide a necessary backdrop for understanding how Owen's doctrine of covenant relates to his commentary.

¹⁴ Wong, "The Covenant Theology of John Owen," 377–382.

¹⁵ Barth saw federal theology, represented most clearly for him in Johannes Cocceius, as an improvement upon medieval and Protestant scholasticism in its attempt to understand Scripture in dynamic, and not in static, terms. However, in contrast to Torrance above, he criticizes federal theology for what he calls its "theological historicism." He states, "The 'Loci' are no longer 'Loci,' common places, to which this and that must be related either not at all or on the basis of a presupposed concept, as abstract doctrine and truth revealed in and for itself. They are now different stages in a series of events, the individual moments in a movement. This movement is now understood as such to be Christian truth, and Christian doctrine is the description of this movement. This theology is concerned with the bold review of a history of God and man which unfolds itself from creation to the day of judgment." Barth then criticizes federal theology for developing an overly dynamic reading of Scripture and historicizing the activity and revelation of God in Christ. In particular, he contends that the reconciling work of Christ is diminished to mere "biblical history," whereby this single incomparable event becomes relativized amidst a string of similar events in redemptive history. He states, "As becomes increasingly plain in the sketches of the Federal theologians, the atonement accomplished in Jesus Christ ceases to be the history of the covenant, to which (in all the different forms of expectation and recollection) the whole Bible bears witness and in face of which theology must take up and maintain its standpoint, and it becomes a biblical history, a stage in the greater context of world-history, before which, and after which, there are other similar stages." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 55–56.

3.3 THE FOUNDATION OF THEOLOGY AND EXEGESIS

3.3.1 OWEN'S FEDERAL-BASED DEFINITION OF THEOLOGY

The structure of Owen's *Theologoumena* is significant. It follows the progression of the administration of biblical covenants from Adam to Christ, as opposed to the more common method of outlining the loci of theology from prolegomena to eschatology. Owen was certainly not averse to using scholastic categories and distinctions; he used them profusely throughout his writings. However, he also believed that the way Scripture is articulated in the writing of theology should in some measure reflect the way God's revelation unfolds in Scripture. For Owen the concept of covenant provided the best organizational framework for explaining the biblical narrative. He explicitly states, "all theology is . . . founded on covenant" (*foedere fundetur*).¹⁶ This programmatic statement embraces both "natural theology" before the fall (*de theologia naturali*) and the renewal of theology after it (*de theologiae post lapsum instauratione*). While the form and substance of God's covenant with man changed radically with the entrance of sin and subsequent promise of restoration, the basic principle remains the same on both sides of the fall: all theology is founded on either one of two distinct covenants between God and man, namely, the covenant of works or the covenant of grace.

According to Owen, "natural theology" before the fall was founded on God's relationship with Adam in the covenant of works.¹⁷ This covenant has several key

¹⁶ "Cum enim omnis theologia uti diximus in foedere fundetur." Owen, *Theologoumena* (1661), 1.4.11 (*Works*, 17:44). For discussion on the federal organization of *Theologoumena*, see Rehnman, *Divine Discourse*, 155–177; Trueman, *Claims of Truth*, 48–56, esp. 49–50, n.8; cf. Trueman, *John Owen*, 67–76.

¹⁷ On the relational nature of Owen's federal theology, see Trueman, *Claims of Truth*, 49, 55, 77, passim; cf. Willem van Asselt, "Covenant Theology as Relational Theology: The Contributions of Johannes Cocceius (1603–1669) and John Owen (1616–1683) to a Living Reformed Theology Today," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen's Theology*, eds. Kelly M. Kapic and Mark Jones (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 65–84.

features. For example, it was sovereignly initiated and administered by God; it was immediate in nature in that no mediator was needed to stand between God and Adam; and it was contingent upon Adam's obedience to the divine directive "do this and live." This pre-lapsarian covenant was demolished (*destructo foedere*) as a foundation for relating to God because of Adam's rebellion and failure to keep God's command.¹⁸ As a result, the shape of theology took an entirely different form after the fall in the covenant of grace. Since the covenant changed, so did the way humanity related to God. Although post-lapsarian theology was still based on a covenant, it was now graciously founded upon a mediator (*mediatore gratuito fundatum*).¹⁹ Theology after the fall—that is, the way a renewed relationship with God was established and maintained given the presence of sin—no longer rests on Adam, and the covenant he represents, but on Christ and the covenant he mediates.

All theology then is based on either one of two covenants: one that is built on God's covenant with Adam (i.e., covenant of works) or the other that is founded on the mediatorial work of Christ (i.e., covenant of grace).²⁰ With the first covenant broken, theology that rests upon it is insufficient to lead to a full knowledge of God let alone provide redemption from sin. The problem with "natural theology" however is not with the covenant as such but with humanity's inability to keep it. The principle of "do this and live" that was imbedded in the first covenant is still alive and well. However,

¹⁸ Owen, *Theologoumena* (1661), 1.4.11 (*Works*, 17:44). On the development of the federal structure of Owen's natural theology and its historical antecedents in the patristic and medieval periods, see Rehnman, *Divine Discourse*, 73–89; Trueman, *Claims of Truth*, 56–60; Trueman, *John Owen*, 67–71.

¹⁹ Owen, *Theologoumena* (1661), 2.1.3 (*Works*, 17:135).

²⁰ Cf. Owen, *Theologoumena* (1661), 1.4.11 (*Works*, 17:44; cf. 5:186, 275–277; 10:82–87; 22:390; 23:60–62).

neither Adam nor his progeny are able to obey it (*nemo obtemperare possit*).²¹ The covenant of grace, in contrast, is unable to be destroyed (*aboleri nequit*) because it was ratified by Christ as mediator (*Christo mediatore sancitum*) and thus the theology that rests upon it is stable and unchangeable (*stabilis et immutabilis*).²² For Owen there is a structural link between a given theological construction and the covenant it is built upon that must be grasped in order to interpret correctly the word of God. In short, Owen's federal theology is foundational for his reading of Scripture.

One important although implicit aspect of Owen's federal-based definition of theology in *Theologoumena* is the central role he gives to biblical exegesis in the task of organizing and systematizing theology. This point can be deduced from Owen's work for at least three reasons. First, Owen firmly held to the epistemological necessity of supernatural revelation for knowledge of God. This is evidenced by his reliance upon the scholastic division between archetypal (*theologia archetypa*) and ectypal theology (*theologia ectypa*), as Rehnman and Trueman have demonstrated.²³ Second, as mentioned above, theology on both sides of the fall is based on the sovereign administration of a covenant. This is summarised in the axiomatic phrase, "the theology

²¹ "Quando, quamvis bene omnia praecipiat, nemo tamen est qui obtemperare possit. Doctrina sane istius foederis etiamnum verissima est; 'qui enim quae legis sunt facit, vivet in illis.'" Owen, *Theologoumena* (1661), 1.4.10 (*Works*, 17:44).

²² "Foedus ipsum aboleri nequit, quia in, et cum Christo mediatore sancitum; nequè proindè theologia ei innixa labefactari. Utcúnque igitur abs ejus doctrina theologi, uti videbimus saepius desciverint, at ipsa theologia stabilis et immutabilis prorsus permansit." Owen, *Theologoumena* (1661), 1.4.11 (*Works*, 17:44; cf. 22:508).

²³ Owen, *Theologoumena* (1661), 1.3.1–7 (*Works*, 17:35–39). *Theologia archetypa* refers to God's infinite, incomprehensible, and perfect knowledge of himself and all things. It is unknowable to all but God. *Theologia ectypa* in contrast refers to finite, apprehensive, and incomplete knowledge of God and is dependent upon God's supernatural revelation. Under the designation of ectypal theology are also related categories such as *theologia angelorum* (theology of angels), *theologia unionis* (theology of the Mediator by virtue of the hypostatic union), *theologia beatorum* (theology of the blessed in heaven), and *theologia viatorum* (theology of believers on earth). Owen in the section just cited employs all of these categories. For more discussion, see Rehnman, *Divine Discourse*, 57–89; Trueman, *Claims of Truth*, 48–101; cf. Willem J. van Asselt, "The Fundamental Meaning of Theology: Archetypal and Ectypal Theology in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Thought," *WTJ* 64 (2002): 319–335; Muller, *PRRD*, 1:221–269; and the relevant entries in Muller, *DLGTT*, 298–304.

of the covenant rests on the covenant” (*theologia foederatorum, foederi innititur*).²⁴ As Owen developed the category of covenant as the divinely appointed basis for a divine–human relationship, he also believed that it was the foundation of theological investigation and exegetical inquiry. In other words, if theology is essentially discourse about God—with an aim towards faith, worship, and obedience, as Owen contended²⁵—then God, who is the object of theology, cannot be known apart from his covenant, and God’s covenant cannot be known apart from supernatural revelation. This basic principle is maintained both before and after the fall, since Adam’s pre- and post-lapsarian knowledge of God was contingent upon God’s revelation. Third, the primary source of theology is therefore supernatural revelation. More specifically, if the basis of post-lapsarian theology is the covenant of grace founded on Christ, the content of that theology is located in Scripture.²⁶ This is why Owen could claim, in modified Scotist terms, that “the Scripture is our theology” (*nostra theologia*).²⁷ Exegesis therefore is an

²⁴ Owen, *Theologoumena* (1661), 1.4.11 (*Works*, 17:44).

²⁵ Cf. Owen, *Theologoumena* (1661), 1.3.1 (*Works*, 17:35). On Owen’s definition of theology, see Rehnman, *Divine Discourse*, 47–55, 91–107.

²⁶ Owen uses a standard reformed orthodox distinction by referring to a threefold (*triplex*) categorization of supernatural revelation: ὑποστατικός, ἐνδιάθετος, and προφορικός. For Owen, the Word of God is understood essentially or personally (ὑποστατικός) in reference to the second person of the Trinity, the eternal Logos. But the Word of God can also be understood as either the internal and unwritten Word (ἐνδιάθετος) as well as the spoken and written Word (προφορικός), both of which are founded upon the person of Christ as the λόγος ὑποστατικός. See esp. *Works*, 12:633–644; and 16:429–430, 433, 435; cf. *Works*, 1:74; and 13:465. For discussion, see Andrew M. Leslie, *The Light of Grace: John Owen on the Authority of Scripture and Christian Faith* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 190–203; Rehnman, 83–89; Trueman, *The Claims of Truth*, 68–71; Trueman, *John Owen*, 68–71.

²⁷ “. . . omne Dei verbum quodcunque scriptis commissum est, Scriptura ista ita est nostra theologia.” Owen, *Theologoumena* (1661), 1.3.4 (*Works*, 17:37). On the distinction between *theologia in se* and *theologia nostra* in the thought of the medieval philosopher and theologian Duns Scotus (c. 1265–1308), see Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 6–8. Muller’s comments regarding the role of Scotist thought in the work of Francis Turretin apply to Owen: “Scotus’s distinction between *theologia in se*, the divine self-knowledge, and *theologia nostra*, ‘our theology’ as determined by revelation is mirrored in Turretin’s use of a distinction between *theologia archetypa* and *theologia ectypa*, the former known only to God, the latter resting on God’s self-revelation. This does not mean that Turretin can be characterized neatly as a Scotist: he borrows from the medieval doctors when they contribute to his own theological efforts, but never for the sake of reproducing an earlier systematic pattern.” Muller, *After Calvin*, 140; see also Muller, *PRRD*, 1:94–95, 227–228; Asselt, “The Fundamental Meaning of Theology,” *WTJ* 64 (2002): 321–324; Rehnman, *Divine Discourse*, 57, 62–63; Trueman, *John Owen*, 57–60.

indispensable tool for the Christian pilgrim (i.e., *viatorum theologia*) not simply for extrapolating knowledge about God as he is revealed in Scripture but, more importantly, for entering into a covenant relationship with him.²⁸ For Owen the task of exegesis must be anchored in the biblical–theological concept of covenant, since the doctrine of the covenant is the epistemological *principium* of theology.²⁹

Theologoumena is the outworking of Owen’s federally based definition of theology, with each main section corresponding to a major epoch in redemptive history. After an initial discussion of natural theology, Owen surveys the progressive development of post-lapsarian theology by sequentially moving through four main epochal periods from Adam to Noah, Noah to Abraham, Abraham to Moses, Moses to Christ, and culminating with what he calls “evangelical theology” (*de theologia evangelica*). As Trueman observes, “The choice of this order is not without significance.”³⁰ This structure is noteworthy not only for its organizational emphasis upon the unfolding of biblical revelation but also for what it suggests about how Owen understood the relationship of his definition of theology to his exegetical method.

For Owen, federal theology was not only employed to explain the foundation of theology but also the evolution of the biblical narrative. This principle is reiterated in his exposition on Hebrews 1:1. Commenting on the “sundry parts” (πολυτρόπως) of salvation history after the fall, Owen refers to the “gradual discovery of the mind and will of God” and the “whole progress of divine revelation” which consists of “four principal parts or degrees, with those that were subservient unto them.” He then provides a sweeping synopsis of the *series historica* from Adam to Christ wherein he

²⁸ Cf. Owen, *Theologoumena* (1661), 1.4.10 (*Works*, 17:44).

²⁹ Cf. Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saint’s Perseverance Explained and Confirmed* (London, 1654), p. 96 (*Works*, 11:205); Owen, *Hebrews* (1684), comm. Heb. 11:6 (*Works*, 24:44–45). See chapter 2 above on “Intellectual Context,” section 2.2.3, n.39.

³⁰ Trueman, *Claims of Truth*, 49; cf. Rehnman, *Divine Discourse*, 155–177.

refers his readers to *Theologoumena* for a more detailed discussion.³¹ Owen's point is to stress that careful attention to the organic development of each redemptive-historical epoch, built upon the foundation of the covenant of grace, is crucial for rightly identifying who the Messiah is and what he came to do. According to Owen, post-lapsarian theology rests on a biblical principle of covenant that finds its contours in redemptive history and its content in the divine promise of the Messiah.³²

3.3.2 HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF OWEN'S FEDERAL THEOLOGY

Owen's programmatic statement that "all theology is founded on covenant" is indicative of a growing concern in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to articulate theology within a federal framework. William Tyndale (c. 1494–1536), for example, anticipated the next one hundred and fifty years of reformed thought when he declared that the "ryght waye into the scripture" was to search "the covenants made betwene God and us."³³ Writing several decades later, Robert Rollock (c. 1555–1599) commenced his work on effectual calling with words that aptly summarise reformed

³¹ Owen gives several examples of what he means by "subservient revelations" under the headings of the four major federal epochs: (1) from Adam to Noah (e.g., Seth, Enos, Enoch, Lamech, and others before the flood); (2) from Noah to Abraham (e.g., Melchizedek); (3) from Abraham to Moses (e.g., Isaac, Jacob, etc.); and (4) from Moses to Christ (e.g., David and Solomon, the prophets at the division of the kingdom, and Ezra with the post-exilic prophets). Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), comm. Heb. 1:1 (*Works*, 20:17–18); cf. Owen, *Theologoumena* (1661), 2.1.2 (*Works*, 17:134).

³² Owen states, "These were the principal parts and degrees of the revelation of the will of God, from the foundation of the world until the coming of Christ in his forerunner, John the Baptist. And all this I have fully handled and unfolded in my discourse of the rise, nature, and progress of Scripture divinity or theology [*Theologoumena*]. But, as I showed before, if we attend unto the special intention of the apostle, we must take in the date of these revelations, and begin with that to Moses, adding to it those other subservient ones mentioned, peculiar to the Judaical church, which taught and confirmed the worship that was established amongst them. This, then, is that which in this word the apostle minds the Hebrews of, namely, that the will of God concerning his worship and our obedience was not formerly revealed all at once to his church, by Moses or any other, but by several parts and degrees,—by new additions of light, as in his infinite wisdom and care he saw meet. The close, and last hand was not to be put unto this work before the coming of the Messiah. He . . . was to reveal the whole counsel of God." Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), comm. Heb. 1:1 (*Works*, 20:18–19).

³³ William Tyndale, "To the Reader," in *The Newe Testament Dylygently Corrected and Compared with the Greke* (Antwerp [?], 1534), n.p. [iii]. On the covenant motif in Tyndale, see Carl R. Trueman, *Luther's Legacy: Salvation and English Reformers, 1525–1556* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2002), 109–120.

sentiment on the scriptural significance of the doctrine of covenant: “all the worde of God appertaines to some covenant: for God speaks nothing to man without the covenant: for which case all the scripture both old and new, wherein all Gods word is contained, beares the name of Gods covenant or testament.”³⁴ Towards the end of the high orthodox period, Francis Turretin (1623–1687) likewise argued that the biblical concept of covenant forms the centrepiece of the divine-human relationship and thus is indispensable for the discipline of theology: “Since [the covenant] is of the greatest importance in theology (being as it were the center and bond of all religion, consisting in the communion of God with man and embracing in its compass all the benefits of God towards man and his duties towards God), our highest interest lies in rightly knowing and observing it.”³⁵

Although writing in different historical contexts with different pastoral and polemical concerns, Tyndale, Rollock, Owen, and Turretin are four among many. As reformed theologians wrestled with the theological and hermeneutical implications of federal theology, doctrinal treatises, manuals, and sermons on “the covenants made between God and us” became more widespread throughout Britain, the Continent, and the New World. While the organizational structure of these texts varies, there was considerable agreement within the reformed ranks on the basic tenets of covenant theology, such as on the twofold division of the covenants of works and grace.

³⁴ Robert Rollock, *A Treatise of Gods Effectual Calling*, 2nd ed., trans. Henry Holland (London, 1603), 6. “Quod totum verbum Dei ad foedus aliquod pertineat: nihil enim loquitur Deus homini extra foedus: undea foedere sive testamento Dei utraque Scriptura & vetus & nova, qua continetur universum verbum Dei, appellationem suam est fortita.” Rollock, *Tractatus de vocatione efficaci* (Edinburgh, 1597), 8.

³⁵ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1994), 2:169. “Jam de ipso foedere agendum est, quod cum maximi sit in theologia momenti, utpote quod sit veluti centrum ac vinculum totius religionis, quae communiione Dei cum homine constat, et omnia Dei in hominem beneficia, et hominis erga Deum officia ambitu suo complectatur, in eo rite cognoscendo et servando rei summa vertitur.” Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae* (Edinburgh, 1847), 12.1.1, p. 151. For a detailed examination of Turretin’s covenant theology, see Beach, *Christ and the Covenant*; cf. Peter J. Wallace, “The Doctrine of the Covenant in the Elenctic Theology of Francis Turretin,” *MAJT* 13 (2002): 143–179.

However, there was not complete unanimity on how all the pieces of the federal puzzle of Scripture should fit together, such as on the precise relationship between the Mosaic covenant and the covenant of works.³⁶ This historical context is important to bear in mind for a number of reasons, not least of which is that it helps to situate Owen's commentary within an intellectual climate that took seriously the doctrine of covenant for rightly dividing Scripture.³⁷

Owen's development of a theological system based upon the gradual unfolding of the concept of covenant in biblical revelation was unique but not entirely original in the history of federal theology. He adopted an organizational model that was articulated in seed form by church fathers such as Irenaeus (c. 130–c. 200), anticipated by the reformers in their discussions on the continuity and discontinuity of the Old and New Testaments, and integrated into comprehensive theological treatises on the doctrine of covenant by the reformed orthodox.

³⁶ See Jones, "The 'Old' Covenant," in *Drawn into Controversie*, 182–203; Jones, "The Minority Report: John Owen on Sinai," in Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 293–303; Rehnman, "Is the Narrative of Redemptive History Trichotomous or Dichotomous? A Problem for Federal Theology," *NAK* 80 (2000): 296–308. See also the discussion in chapter 6.

³⁷ The following is a sampling of books on federal theology that were registered in the auction catalogue of Owen's library [referenced in brackets]. These works reflect the vast amount of time, energy, and resources spent by reformed theologians on developing a doctrine of covenant. While the presence of a volume in the catalogue does not mean that Owen endorsed it, rejected it, was influenced by it, read it, or even owned it, the wide selection of books on covenant theology in the catalogue at the very least represent the kind of scholarship available to him and illustrate the vested interest many reformed theologians had in the subject. E.g., see William Allen, *A Discourse of the Nature, Ends, and Differences of the Two Covenants* (London, 1673) [BO, 10.309, p. 17]; William Ames, *Medulla s. s. theologiae* (Amsterdam, 1641; 1659) [BO, 3.288, p. 16; and 3.292, p.16]; John Ball, *A Treatise on the Covenant of Grace* (London, 1645) [BO, 9.6, p. 4]; Samuel Bolton, *True Bounds of Christian Freedome* (London, 1656) [BO, 11.150, p. 21]; William Bridge, *Christ and the Covenant Delivered in Ten Sermons* (London, 1667) [BO, 10.48, p. 11]; Peter Bulkeley, *The Gospel–Covenant: or The Covenant of Grace Opened* (London, 1651) [BO, 9.32, p. 4]; William Carter, *Covenant of God with Abraham Opened* (London, 1654) [BO, 9.36, p. 4]; Johannes Cocceius, *Summa doctrinae de foedere et testamento Dei* (1648) [BO, 3.313.17]; George Downame, *The Covenant of Grace* (London, 1647) [BO, 11.131, p. 21]; E[dward] F[isher], *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (London, 1651) [BO, 11.144, p. 21]; Samuel Petto, *The Difference between the Old and New Covenant* [BO, 10.153, p. 13]; Samuel Rutherford, *The Covenant of Life Opened* (Edinburgh, 1655) [BO, 9.100.6, p. 6]; Obadiah Sedgwick, *Bowels of Mercy Sealed in the Covenant* (London, 1661) [BO, 8.84.2, p. 2]. On the background to Owen's catalogue, see Crawford Gribben, "John Owen, Renaissance Man? The Evidence of Edward Millington's *Bibliotheca Oweniana* (1684)," *WTJ* 72 (2010): 321–332.

Irenaeus was among the first to emphasize the importance of the various covenant administrations for interpreting Scripture as well as incorporate them into a theological system. As Everett Ferguson states, “The covenant scheme of the interpretation of holy history became the foundation of Irenaeus’ theological method . . . With Irenaeus the various covenants were integrated as progressive and ordered phases in a total, organic history of salvation.”³⁸ While there is textual uncertainty over how Irenaeus precisely demarcated the federal landscape of the biblical narrative, he did speak of “four principal covenants given to the human race” covering the whole of redemptive history, although he more frequently divided Scripture into two parts: Old Covenant (law) and New Covenant (gospel).³⁹ Whether Owen developed his fourfold scheme of the biblical covenants with Irenaeus in mind is past finding out. There is little if any internal data to suggest that he did. The similarities are nevertheless striking. Owen’s federal model might even be called Irenaeian. Indeed, what parishioners in Lyons said of the famed bishop could equally apply to Owen: he was a man “zealous for the covenant of Christ.”⁴⁰ At the very least, the development of the covenant idea in the second century as seen in Irenaeus serves as a reminder that there is a wider covenant tradition outside the narrow confines of reformed orthodoxy. Contrary to James B. Torrance who suggests that the decretal

³⁸ Everett Ferguson, “The Covenant Idea in the Second Century,” in *Texts and Testaments: Critical Essays on the Bible and Early Church Fathers*, ed. W. Eugene March (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1980), 144, 148; cf. J. Ligon Duncan, “The Covenant Idea in Ante-Nicene Theology” (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1995), 150–151; Andrew A. Woolsey, *Unity and Continuity in Covenantal Thought: A Study in the Reformed Tradition to the Westminster Assembly* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 161–183, esp. pp. 164–166. While the covenant idea was not absent in other second century fathers, it was most prominent in Irenaeus, as Ferguson, Duncan, and Woolsey have shown.

³⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.11.8. There is a discrepancy between the Latin and later Greek version of this text, see *ANF*, 1:429, n.3460. But as Duncan explains, “Whatever one’s textual decision, the only covenants brought into question—Adam and Abraham—are attested elsewhere in Irenaeus implicitly if not explicitly.” Duncan, “The Covenant Idea in Ante-Nicene Theology,” 147, 150, n.40; cf. Ferguson, “The Covenant Idea in the Second Century,” 145.

⁴⁰ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.4.2, in *NPNF*², 1:219; cf. “ζηλωτὴν ὄντα τῆς διαθήκης Χριστοῦ,” *PG*, 20:440.

emphasis of federal theologians in the post-Reformation differs considerably from the more Christological and biblical perspective of church fathers such as Irenaeus, the methodological assumption of Irenaeus that the concept of covenant is essential to explaining the biblical narrative established a hermeneutical trajectory that culminated in the writings of reformed theologians like Owen.⁴¹

The covenant idea that was latent in church fathers like Irenaeus blossomed in the Reformation and post-Reformation periods. Among early reformers, Muller notes that Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560), Musculus, and Vermigli gave significant attention to the similarities and differences between the Old and New Testaments in their respective *loci communes*.⁴² Along these lines, Calvin’s well-known discussion in the *Institutes* on the fundamental continuity of the covenant found confessional sanction at the Westminster Assembly when the divines declared that there are not “two covenants of grace differing in substance, but one and the same under various dispensations” (WCF 7.6).⁴³ While emphasis on the continuity of the covenant of

⁴¹ Torrance, “The Concept of Federal Theology,” 33; cf. “When Irenaeus uses διαθήκη/*testamentum* in connection with a reference to an era in redemptive history, he generally uses it to refer to a specific period or administration in God’s economy. Occasionally he seems to use ‘old covenant’ to designate the whole period of God’s redemptive work up to the first advent of Christ, but he apparently never employs διαθήκη/*testamentum* in the singular to indicate the whole redemptive plan of God – though he may use ‘the covenants’ in this way (AH 3.12.12). His most common designation of that plan is ‘economy’ (*dispositio*) or ‘universal economy’ (*universam dispositionem*), which in function is not dissimilar to the sixteenth century Protestant idea of the Covenant of Grace.” Duncan, “The Covenant Idea in Ante-Nicene Theology,” 148.

⁴² Muller, “Divine Covenants, Absolute and Conditional: John Cameron and the Early Orthodox Development of Reformed Covenant Theology,” *MAJT* 17 (2006): 43, n.111; Muller, *Christ and the Decree*, 47–75; cf. Peter Fraenkel, *Testimonia Patrum: The Function of the Patristic Argument in the Theology of Philip Melanchthon* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1961), 52–109.

⁴³ Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.10.2. On Calvin’s doctrine of the covenant, see Stephen Edmondson, “The Biblical Historical Structure of Calvin’s *Institutes*,” *SJT* 59 (2006): 1–13; Edmondson, *Calvin’s Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 40–88; Peter Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin’s Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001); Lillback, “Calvin’s Interpretation of the History of Salvation: The Continuity and Discontinuity of the Covenant,” in *A Theological Guide to Calvin’s Institutes*, eds. David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2008), 168–204; Lillback, “The Continuing Conundrum: Calvin and the Conditionality of the Covenant,” *CTJ* 29 (1994): 42–74; Lillback, “The Early Reformed Covenant Paradigm: Vermigli in the Context of Bullinger, Luther, and Calvin,” in *Peter Martyr Vermigli and the European Reformations*, ed. Frank A. James (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 70–96; Lillback,

grace was a commonplace teaching in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, reformed theologians differed on how they delineated the “various dispensations.”⁴⁴ Heinrich Bullinger, for example, argued for a fourfold development of the covenant that “began with Adam, and was afterward renewed with Noe [sic], and more plainly with Abraham, put in writing with Moses, and lastly established and confirmed by Christ.”⁴⁵ More common was the division of the threefold administration (*administrationis triplex*) of the covenant of grace, with the omission of the Noahic covenant, typified by the early English puritan William Ames (1576–1633): from Adam to Abraham, Abraham to Moses, and Moses to Christ.⁴⁶ Owen however was among the first to organize a system of theology according to the economical development of biblical covenants. As Rehnman states, “Federal theologians generally use the concept of covenant as a means of explaining the dispensation of divine grace, but in Owen it is also a way of explaining the dispensation of revelation.”⁴⁷ In addition to Owen, other examples include John Ball’s *A Treatise on the Covenant of Grace* (1645), Johannes Cocceius’s *Summa doctrinae de foedere et testamento Dei* (1648), and Francis Roberts’s *The Myserie and Marrow of the Bible*

“Ursinus’ Development of the Covenant of Creation: A Debt to Melanchthon or Calvin,” *WTJ* 43 (1981): 247–288; cf. Everett H. Emerson, “Calvin and Covenant Theology,” *CH* 25 (1956): 136–144; Paul Helm, “Calvin and the Covenant: Unity and Continuity,” *EQ* 55 (1983): 65–81; Anthony A. Hoekema, “The Covenant of Grace in Calvin’s Teaching,” *CTJ* 2 (1967): 136–161.

⁴⁴ While the Savoy Declaration retained the language of “various dispensations,” and affirmed the “spiritual and saving” efficacy of the covenant of grace, it abbreviated this portion of its chapter on covenant most likely to accommodate those like Owen who believed the majority position represented in the Westminster Confession did not adequately account for the distinct nature of the covenant that was revealed at Sinai. See Savoy 7.5; cf. Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:69, 71, 73). Owen’s position will be considered in chapter 6.

⁴⁵ Heinrich Bullinger, *Common Places of Christian Religion*, 2nd ed., trans. John Stockwood (London, 1572), 43. See discussion in Muller, *Christ and the Decree*, 39–47, esp. 41; Won Taek Lim, *The Covenant Theology of Francis Roberts* (Seoul, South Korea: King & Kingdom, 2002), 124–125.

⁴⁶ William Ames, *Medulla s. s. Theologiae*, 2nd ed. (London, 1629), 1.38–39, pp. 205–18; Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, trans. John Dykstra Eusden (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 202–205; cf. Johannes Wollebius, *Compendium theologiae Christianae*, 2nd ed. (London, 1647), 1.21–28.11, pp. 100–101; Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:220.

⁴⁷ Rehnman, *Divine Discourse*, 164–165.

(1657).⁴⁸ These works stand out in the history of federal theology for organizing their respective treatises according to a diachronic framework of federal theology, as opposed to the more common synchronic model as represented by Samuel Rutherford's *The Covenant of Life Opened* (1654) and Thomas Blake's *Vindiciae foederis* (1658).⁴⁹

As this overview shows, Owen's emphasis upon the foundational role of the covenant motif for the disciplines of theology and exegesis, while unique in its organizational structure, did not develop in an historical vacuum but emerged out of an intellectual context that paid careful attention to the progression of biblical covenants from Adam to Christ. Federal theology was not for Owen an alien dogmatic system imposed upon the text of Scripture. Rather, it was a commonly held

⁴⁸ For an overview of Ball and Roberts, see Geerhardus Vos, "The Doctrine of Covenant in Reformed Theology," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1980), 240–241; for a detailed discussion, see Lim, *The Covenant Theology of Francis Roberts*, 40–50. Rehnman also suggests that Owen's emphasis on the gradual progress of biblical revelation may echo John Cameron's *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere* (1642). He states, "Although Owen does not follow Coccejus' view that the covenant of works was abolished through a gradual process in revelation, we may conjecture that, together with the concept of a gradual mode of revelation found in Cameron and Ball, this may have stimulated a progressive concept of revelation." *Divine Discourse*, 164; see also, Rehnman, "Is the Narrative of Redemptive History Trichotomous or Dichotomous? A Problem for Federal Theology," *NAK* 80 (2000): 296–308; cf. Muller, "Divine Covenants, Absolute and Conditional: John Cameron and the Early Orthodox Development of Reformed Covenant Theology," *MAJT* 17 (2006): 11–56. For a critical evaluation of Cocceius, see Willem J. van Asselt, *The Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius (1603–1669)*, trans. Raymond A. Blacketer (Leiden: Brill, 2001); cf. Asselt, "The Doctrine of Abrogations in the Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius (1603–1669)," *CTJ* 29 (1994): 101–116. Owen considered Cocceius a "worthy scholar" (*viro docto*) and owned several of his works, including *Summa doctrinae*; see Owen, *Theologoumena* (1661), 3.1.6 (*Works*, 17:158); cf. *BO*, 3.313.17. However, as Rehnman noted above, there is nothing in Owen's writings to suggest that he subscribed to a doctrine of abrogations to the level of sophistication of his Dutch colleague. Perhaps the closest he came may be found in his comments on Hebrews 8:13, a seminal text for Cocceius, where he speaks of the "gradual removal" of the old covenant (i.e., Mosaic covenant) from the period of the giving of the promise of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31 (given the context of Hebrews 8) to the establishment of the new covenant in Christ, see Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), pp. 293–296 (*Works*, 23:173–177). The relationship between the Mosaic covenant and the covenant of works in Owen's federal theology will be explored in chapter 6.

⁴⁹ The organizational difference between the diachronic and synchronic models is one of methodology, not orthodoxy. The federal theology expressed in the loci-based works represented by Rutherford and Blake compared to the economical-based works of Ball, Roberts, Cocceius, and Owen is similar, if not essentially the same. Care should be taken not to read too much into this distinction. The difference is more formal than substantial; see Willem van Asselt's warning against the "facile juxtaposition of federal-biblical theology with scholastic-dogmatic theology," in "The Fundamental Meaning of Theology," *WTJ* 64 (2002): 323.

theological framework within the reformed tradition, with deep historical roots, that he believed arose out of Scripture and paid exegetical justice to the divine-human relationship that was sovereignly established by God and supernaturally revealed in Scripture. Contrary to the suggestion of Bobick who argues that Owen was not attuned to the historical relationships of the various biblical covenants, and therefore developed a “somewhat flattened redemptive history,” Owen took great care to situate his exegesis within the gradual unfolding of the mind of God in the written word of God.⁵⁰ Not only did he pay careful attention to the progressive development of the economies of the covenant of grace in Scripture, he built his theology upon it. To suggest that Owen “uses [Ramist] division rather than true development as his primary methodological approach” is a misreading of his federal theology, especially as developed in his *Theologoumena*.⁵¹ Even if Bobick’s argument that Owen was influenced by Ramist logic is granted, Owen’s use of scholastic distinctions and schematizations was intended to clarify historical nuances of the covenant concept in Scripture, not flatten them out.⁵² Owen’s federally based theological program therefore stands as a corrective to those who suggest that covenant theologians placed decrees and dogmatics over and against history and hermeneutics.⁵³

⁵⁰ Bobick, “Owen’s Razor,” 241–242.

⁵¹ Bobick, “Owen’s Razor,” 245. While Bobick interacts with several passages in Owen’s commentary, evaluation of *Theologoumena* is surprisingly absent from Bobick’s work, as is Owen’s exposition of Hebrews 1:1 wherein the link between *Theologoumena* and *Hebrews* is explicitly stated.

⁵² See footnote 13 above; cf. Muller, “What we do not see in the historical materials . . . is any identifiable difference between the Reformed orthodox theology of the Ramists and the Reformed orthodox theology of their non-Ramist or Aristotelian contemporaries. Even the so-called ‘Ramist’ definition of theology as a fundamentally practical science can be found in other, non-Ramist trajectories of the Reformed. In the case of Ramism, as in the case of ‘scholasticism,’ the method had little impact on actual doctrinal or theological content.” *PRRD*, 1:184.

⁵³ See comments of J. B. Torrance, Stek, and Loonstra above. For revisionist evaluations of these and other arguments relating to the development of federal theology—including the writings of Armstrong, Barth, Baker, Greaves, Hagen, Heppel, Kendall, McCoy, McGiffert, Miller, Møller, Poole, Rolston, Trinterud, etc.—see Muller, *After Calvin*, 175–189; Muller, *Christ and the Decree*; Muller, “Covenant and Conscience in English Reformed Theology: Three Variations on a 17th Century Theme,” *WTJ* 42 (1980): 308–334; Muller, “The Covenant of Works and the Stability of Divine Law in

When Owen wrote his commentary on Hebrews, his commitment to federal theology as the foundation of biblical interpretation provided him with a coherent hermeneutic to exegete, defend, and apply the text of Scripture, as well as supplied him with a platform to build his argument for Christ as the fulfilment of the messianic promise. His federally fashioned spectacles, to alter Calvin’s metaphor, should not be viewed as an expression of the latest dogmatic fad in the post-Reformation world, but as a self-conscious appropriation of a heritage of biblical scholarship on the doctrine of covenant to expound the unfolding storyline of redemptive history. To borrow Benjamin Warfield’s phrase, federal theology is unquestionably an “architectonic principle” in Owen’s writings and commentary.⁵⁴ It grounds his theology and structures his exegesis. For Owen, in the words of Heinrich Heppé, “The basic

Seventeenth Century Reformed Orthodoxy: A Study in the Theology of Herman Witsius and Wilhemus À Brakel,” *CTJ* 29 (1994): 75–101; Muller, “Divine Covenants, Absolute and Conditional,” *MAJT* 17 (2006): 11–56; Muller, “Toward the *Pactum Salutis*: Locating the Origins of a Concept,” *MAJT* 18 (2007): 11–65. See also the growing list of scholarly literature represented by Van Asselt, *The Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius*; Beach, *Christ and the Covenant*; Beach, “The Doctrine of the *Pactum Salutis* in the Covenant Theology of Herman Witsius,” *MAJT* 13 (2002): 101–142; Lyle D. Bierma, *The Covenant Theology of Caspar Olevianus* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2005); Bierma, “Covenant or Covenants in the Theology of Olevianus?,” *CTJ* 22 (1987): 228–250; Bierma, “Federal Theology in Sixteenth Century: Two Traditions?,” *WTJ* 45 (1983): 304–321; Bierma, “Law and Grace in Ursinus’ Doctrine of the Natural Covenant: A Reappraisal,” in *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment*, eds. Carl R. Trueman and R. Scott Clark (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999), 96–110; Bierma, “The Role of Covenant Theology in Early Reformed Orthodoxy,” *SCJ* 21 (1990): 453–462; R. Scott Clark, *Caspar Olevian and the Substance of the Covenant* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 2005); Clark, “Christ and Covenant: Federal Theology in Orthodoxy,” in *A Companion to Reformed Orthodoxy*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 403–428; Aaron C. Denlinger, *Omnes in Adam ex pacto Dei: Ambrogio Catarino’s Doctrine of Covenantal Solidarity and Its Influence on Post-Reformation Reformed Theologians* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010); Duncan, “Recent Objections to Covenant Theology,” in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*, 3:467–500; Lee, *Johannes Cocceius and the Exegetical Roots of Federal Theology*; Lillback, *The Binding of God*; Lim, *The Covenant Theology of Francis Roberts*; McWilliams, “The Covenant Theology of the Westminster Confession of Faith and Recent Criticism,” *WTJ* 53 (1991): 109–124; Venema, “Recent Criticisms,” *MAJT* 9 (1993): 165–198; John von Rohr, *The Covenant of Grace in Puritan Thought* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986); Rowland S. Ward, *God and Adam: Reformed Theology and the Creation Covenant* (Wantirna, Australia: New Melbourne Press, 2003); David A. Weir, *The Origins of the Federal Theology in Sixteenth-Century Reformation Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); Carol A. Williams, “The Decree of Redemption is in Effect a Covenant: David Dickson and the Covenant of Redemption” (PhD diss., Calvin Theological Seminary, 2005); and Woolsey, *Unity and Continuity in Covenantal Thought*.

⁵⁴ Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931), 56.

foundation of all revealed truths in Scripture is thus the covenant of God with believers in Christ.”⁵⁵ Having laid the foundation of Owen’s theology and exegesis, we now turn to his exercitations to see how he builds upon his covenant theology.

3.4 OWEN’S FEDERAL READING OF GENESIS 2–3

Owen begins his “first dissertation concerning the Messiah” with a brief discussion on original sin.⁵⁶ His starting point is intentional. In order to establish the proper identity of the promised deliverer, he rehearses humanity’s need for deliverance. He states his thesis accordingly, “Now the work which we assign unto the Messiah is the deliverance of mankind from this state and condition [of sin]. Upon the supposition, and revelation, of this entrance of sin, and the evil that ensued thereon, is the whole doctrine of his office [as mediator] founded.” Owen’s objective in declaring the foundational role of the messianic promise of deliverance is more than descriptive; his method of discourse is also decidedly apologetic. He states,

And because we contend against the Jews that he was promised and exhibited for a relief, in the wisdom, grace, and righteousness of God, against this sin and misery of mankind, as our apostle also expressly proveth, chap. ii of his Epistle unto them; this being denied by them, as that which would overthrow all their fond imaginations about his person and office, we must consider what is their sense and apprehension of these things, with what may be thence educed for their own conviction; and then confirm the truth of our assertion from those testimonies of Scripture which themselves own and receive.⁵⁷

Owen’s contention against Jewish rejection of Christ as the Messiah could hardly be clearer. But while this statement is instructive for summarising the polemical context of Owen’s essays, at a more basic level, it is illustrative of his deep-seated belief in the

⁵⁵ Heinrich Heppé, *Reformed Dogmatics Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, ed. Ernst Bizer, trans. G. T. Thomson. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1950), 42.

⁵⁶ The full title is “The First Dissertation Concerning the Messiah, Proving Him to Be Promised of Old.” This dissertation consists of exercitations 8–11 and comprises the first premise of Owen’s “triple foundation.” See Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), lib. 1, pp. 68–141 (*Works*, 18:141–262).

⁵⁷ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.5 (*Works*, 18:146).

sufficiency of Scripture for achieving his stated goal: proving Christ to be the promised Messiah from the Old Testament.⁵⁸ Having outlined his plan of attack, he begins his discourse at the most natural point of contact with the Jews—in the beginning.

Owen turns his attention to the opening chapters of the book of Genesis. In typical reformed orthodox fashion, he interprets the creation, fall, and redemption narrative as a federal theologian. Rather than give a verse by verse exposition of the text, he highlights key theological points to establish the interpretative principle that what was promised of the Messiah in the Old Testament finds fulfilment in the person, office, and work of Christ in the New Testament. This promise-fulfilment apparatus in turn becomes paradigmatic for Owen's reading of Scripture and consequently a fully operative hermeneutic for his exposition of Hebrews. In other words, his commitment to Christ as the *fundamentum Scripturae* hinges on this axis of promise and fulfilment. Furthermore, Owen's argument in his first dissertation on the Messiah stands or falls on the legitimacy of the first premise of his "triple foundation":

That there was a Messiah, or Saviour of mankind from sin and punishment, promised upon and from the first entrance of sin into the world, in whom all acceptable worship of God was to be founded, and in whom all the religion of the sons of men was to center.⁵⁹

For the remainder of the chapter, we will examine this argument of Owen's, considering in particular the charge that federal theology developed an alternative hermeneutic to the promise-fulfilment paradigm of the earlier reformers as well as the

⁵⁸ Statements like this were not uncommon in Owen's day. For example, in a discussion on Scripture as "the Rule of Faith and Life," Edward Leigh explicitly asserts what Owen implies: "How can we convince the Jews but by the Old Testament . . . Paul and Apollo Act. 17. 3. & 18. 28. proved to the Jews by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ." Edward Leigh, "To the Christian and Candid Reader," in *A Systeme or Body of Divinity* (London, 1654), n.p. [viii].

⁵⁹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.1 (*Works*, 18:142). For discussion on Owen's triple foundation, especially as it relates to Christ as the *fundamentum Scripturae*, see section 2.2.4 on "Christological Context" in chapter 2.

broader criticism that an overemphasis on decretal theology led to a de-emphasis upon historical developments in the biblical record.

3.4.1 THE PENAL AND MORAL EFFECTS OF SIN

For Owen the presence of evil, both in human nature and in creation, is a universal reality that should be obvious to any reasonable person. However, the origin of evil can only be known by divine revelation. Therefore, given the limitations of both human reason and the light of nature because of the fall of Adam, Owen looks to Scripture for an explanation of the entrance of sin into the world. Central to his understanding of the fall is the apostle Paul's assertion in Romans 5:12: "By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin."⁶⁰ The importance of Romans 5 for Owen's reading of Genesis 2–3 can hardly be overstated, as Carl Trueman has observed.⁶¹ Paul's Adam-Christ typology not only supplies Owen with a federal framework for his exegesis of the fall and subsequent promise of deliverance, but the apostle's description of sin and death as the twin consequences of Adam's rebellion provides Owen with the two pillars upon which he structures his initial argument for Christ as the promised Messiah. He states, "Sin and death are comprehensive of all that is evil in any kind in the world. All that is morally so, is sin; all that is penally so, is death. The entrance of both into the world was by the sin of one man, that is, Adam the common father of us all."⁶² It is upon this state and condition, Owen believes, that

⁶⁰ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.2–5 (*Works*, 18:143–145; cf. 5:275–277; 20:286, 440; 22:390–391).

⁶¹ Trueman, *John Owen*, 73, 75–76; cf. Griffiths, *Redeem the Time*, 172–173; Muller, "Either Expressly Set Down . . . or by Good and Necessary Consequence": Exegesis and Formulation in the Annotations and the Confession," in Richard A. Muller and Rowland S. Ward, *Scripture and Worship: Biblical Interpretation and the Directory for Worship* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2007), 69–81.

⁶² Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.5 (*Works*, 18:145).

the work of the Messiah as the last Adam was founded—namely, the deliverance of humanity from the penal and moral effects of sin.

Owen’s distinction between the penal and moral effects of sin finds similar expression in other reformed orthodox theologians. The German theologian Zacharias Ursinus (1534–1583), for example, spoke of the “double evil” (*duplex malum*) of guilt and corruption that was propagated to humanity because of Adam’s sin. In his posthumously published work *Doctrinae Christianae Compendium* (1584), he states,

For Christ freeth us, not onelie from guilt (*reatu*), but also from corruption (*pravitate*). For as a double evil (*duplex malum*) befell us from Adam, even our guilt (*reatus*) for the sin committed in him, and the corruption (*depravatio*) of our nature propagated (*propagata*) from him unto us: so by Christ, the other Adam, a double grace hath befallen us: even imputation of righteousness and regeneration.⁶³

Amandus Polanus (1561–1610), professor at the University of Basel, also made this distinction in his *Partitiones Theologicae* (1591), and likewise appealed to Romans 5:12 for support. He further elaborates upon the penal concepts of original guilt, fault, and punishment on the one hand and the moral categories of original “naughtinesse,” depravity, and corruption on the other:

The partes [of originall sin] are two: originall guilt (*reatus originalis*), and originall naughtinesse (*pravitas originalis*). Originall guilt (*reatus*) is a natural [fault] (*culpa*), & subjection to punishment (*poenam*), because of the fall of our first parents. Rom. 5. 12. So death went over all men. Originall naughtinesse (*pravitas*), is a naturall depravity (*depravatio*) and corruption (*corruptio*) of mans whole nature.⁶⁴

This distinction between the moral and penal consequences of sin provided Owen with exegetical ammunition to defend his case for Christ as the promised Messiah against his Jewish interlocutors. The core problem of Adam’s sin in the

⁶³ Zacharias Ursinus, *The Summe of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henrie Parrie (Oxford, 1587), lib. 1, p. 68; cf. Ursinus, *Doctrinae Christianae Compendium* (Geneva, 1584), p. 34.

⁶⁴ Amandus Polanus, *The Substance of the Christian Religion*, 2nd ed. (London, 1597), lib. 1, cap. 13, p. 34; cf. Polanus, *Partitiones Theologicae*, 2nd ed. (London, 1591), lib. 1, cap. 13, p. 20. See also Muller, *DLGTT*, s.v. “culpa,” “poena,” and “reatus.”

garden was not simply that he ate an apple, a “small thing” in itself, but that he deliberately disobeyed the command of God. This is a point, Owen concedes, that even “the Jew supposeth.”⁶⁵ But as the apostle Paul makes clear, the penalty for Adam’s disobedience was death. Far from being harsh or unjust, the threat of death was given by God in Genesis 2:17 (“Dying, thou shalt die”) in order to deter Adam from sin. Consequently, when the divine malediction was pronounced in Genesis 3:16–19, Owen states that it was “but the execution of the commination.” In other words, “the threatening [in Genesis 2:17] was the rule and measure of the curse [in Genesis 3:16–19].”⁶⁶ Owen elaborates,

The condition wherein man was created was morally good and upright; the state wherein he was placed, outwardly happy and blessed; the law given unto him, just and equal; the reward proposed unto him, glorious and sure; and his defection from this condition, voluntary . . . The execution of a righteous sentence, upon the voluntary transgression of a law just and equal, hath no unrighteousness in it. And this was the sum of what God did in this matter, as to the misery that came on mankind.⁶⁷

The punishment Adam received was in accordance with the directive God gave in the covenant of works; it was the just sentence for his wilful violation of the law of God.

The plight caused by Adam’s rebellion is further complicated by the fact that he was not the only person liable unto divine punishment and moral corruption. As God’s appointed federal head for all humanity, “his sin was imputed unto all his posterity.” Owen’s covenantal explanation of the fall is embedded in the language and categories of Pauline theology. He explains, “Now this could not be, but by virtue of some divine constitution. For, naturally Adam could have no other relation to his posterity than every other man hath unto his own. And this was no other but that

⁶⁵ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.9 (*Works*, 18:151).

⁶⁶ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.6 (*Works*, 18:146).

⁶⁷ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.13 (*Works*, 18:155).

covenant which God made with all mankind in him; whose promises and threatenings, rewards and punishments, must therefore equally respect them with him.”⁶⁸

Owen’s federal reading of Genesis 2–3, as interpreted through the grid of Romans 5, is neither novel nor unusual. Not only are similar accounts found in many of the standard reformed commentaries and systems, as exemplified by Ursinus and Polanus, Owen acknowledges that on the broad contours of his teaching concerning the penal and moral effects of sin, there is general, though not complete, agreement from the Jews in “the Targum, Talmuds, and private writings of their principal masters.”⁶⁹ Nevertheless, Owen’s federalism is not without its purpose as he takes up the question of whether humanity is left remediless in this fallen condition.

3.4.2 THE NEED FOR DELIVERANCE

Regarding the possibility of deliverance, Owen proposes two alternatives: “The great relief enquired after must be brought about by men themselves, or by some other for them.”⁷⁰ Integral to humanity’s deliverance, however, is the satisfaction of God’s justice. As Ursinus concisely states, “God will have his justice satisfied: wherefore it is necessary that we satisfy, either by ourselves or by another.”⁷¹ Contrary to some Jews who look to the “double relief” of personal repentance and the various sacrifices appointed in the Mosaic Law, Owen argues that neither of these means can remove either individual culpability or innate corruption.⁷² The moral precepts outlined in stone at Sinai are “the same with those that were written in the heart of man by nature,

⁶⁸ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.8 (*Works*, 18:148).

⁶⁹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.10 (*Works*, 18:151).

⁷⁰ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.16 (*Works*, 18:161).

⁷¹ Ursinus, *Summe of the Christian Religion*, p. 205; cf. “Vult Deus suae iustitiae satisfieri: quocirca necesse est, vel per nos, vel per alium satisficiamus.” Ursinus, *Doctrinae Christianae Compendium*, p. 89.

⁷² Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.18 (*Works*, 18:164).

or the law of his creation, which he transgressed in his first rebellion. And he must be delivered from that guilt before any new obedience can be accepted of him.”⁷³ Equally, the sacrifices of the law were not meant to remove permanently sin, or the guilt that accompanies it, but to represent a greater sacrifice to come. The moral and sacrificial law simply cannot provide deliverance from sin and death.⁷⁴

For Owen, the crux of the matter is summarised in the maxim “that which is under the curse can contribute nothing unto its removal.”⁷⁵ Only someone who is not liable unto the penal and moral effects of sin can achieve deliverance. A sinless substitute therefore is needed. “If, then, any deliverance be ever obtained for mankind, it must be by some other, not involved in the same misery with themselves.”⁷⁶ Furthermore, it is also required of this substitute “that they were such as that the benefit of their undergoing that penalty might, according to the rules of justice, redound unto them for whom and in whom stead they underwent it; otherwise they would suffer in vain.”⁷⁷ In summary, to quote Ursinus, “he that is himself a sinner, cannot recompense for others.”⁷⁸ Both Owen’s and Ursinus’s statements have clear Anselmic overtones and resonate with the medieval theologian’s belief in the necessity of the God-man to make satisfaction for sin. Anselm (c. 1033–1109) writes, “No one can pay [recompense] except God, and no one ought to pay except man: it is necessary that a God-Man should pay it.” The joining of the divine and human natures in the person of Christ was for the purpose of substitution and satisfaction. “In order,

⁷³ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.20 (*Works*, 18:167).

⁷⁴ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.21 (*Works*, 18:168–169).

⁷⁵ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.16.21 (*Works*, 18:162).

⁷⁶ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.17 (*Works*, 18:163).

⁷⁷ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.17 (*Works*, 18:163–164).

⁷⁸ Ursinus, *Summe of the Christian Religion*, p. 205; cf. “. . . qui verò ipse peccator esset, pro aliis dependere non posset.” Ursinus, *Doctrinae Christianae Compendium*, p. 90.

therefore, that a God-Man should bring about what is necessary,” Anselm argues, “it is essential that the same one person who will make the recompense should be perfect God and perfect man. For he cannot do this if he is not true God, and he has no obligation to do so if he is not a true man.”⁷⁹

Owen’s proposal that deliverance must be achieved by either “men themselves or by some other for them” presents two divergent pathways for justification before God: one by faith and the other by works. In opposition to those Jews who believed that the law of Moses was given as a means of deliverance from sin and death, Owen, as a good Protestant, insisted that the law at Sinai was never intended to provide a means of salvation. Its purpose was to re-establish the law of creation that was revealed in the covenant of works—a law that was broken by Adam and that henceforth left his posterity powerless to deliver themselves from either their own moral corruption or the curse of God against them.⁸⁰ For relief from the penal and moral effects of sin, Adam and his descendants would have to look for deliverance by “some other for them.”⁸¹

3.4.3 THE PROMISE OF RELIEF

According to Owen, the first indication that deliverance would be provided for Adam and his posterity was given by God in the midst of the curse pronouncement in

⁷⁹ Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, eds. Brian Davis and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 2.6–7, pp. 320–321 (*PL*, 158:404A–B); cf. Stephen R. Holmes, “The Upholding of Beauty: A Reading of Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo*,” *SJT* 54 (2001): 189–203. On Owen’s use of Anselm, see Alan Spence, *Incarnation and Inspiration: John Owen and the Coherence of Christology* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 67–69, 75, 83.

⁸⁰ Cf. Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.18–22 (*Works*, 18:164–170).

⁸¹ While not elaborated upon in his essays, Owen assumes his belief in the absolute necessity of the death of Christ both to purchase redemption and vindicate God’s justice. This position represents a change of opinion from when he was a young man and held that sin could have been pardoned by a mere act of God’s will; see Carl R. Trueman, “John Owen’s *Dissertation on Divine Justice: An Exercise in Christocentric Scholasticism*,” *CTJ* 33 (1998): 87–103; cf. Goold, *Works*, 10:482.

Genesis 3:15: “And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.” Owen’s federal-based reading of the creation-fall-redemption account in his exercitations comes to a head in his exposition of this single verse. This divine promise revealed a new way that fallen humanity would be able to relate to God. It represents the establishment of a better covenant, that is, a covenant of grace.⁸² This biblical text not only promises divine redemption but also hints at the way by which deliverance from the ravaging effects of the fall will ultimately come. Owen states,

There is an intimation of the manner how this work shall be performed. This, first, God takes upon himself: ‘I will do it; “I will put enmity.”’ It is an issue of his sovereign wisdom and grace. But secondly, he will do it in and by the nature of man, “the Seed of the woman.” And two things must concur to the effecting of it;—first, That this Seed of the woman must conquer Satan, bruise his head, destroy his works, and procure deliverance for mankind thereby; secondly, That he must suffer from, and by the means of, Satan in his so doing,—the serpent must “bruise his heal.” This is the remedy and relief that God hath provided from mankind. And this is the Messiah, or God joining with the nature of man to deliver mankind from sin and eternal misery.⁸³

Despite Adam’s apostasy, a basis for redemption was laid. In the midst of judgment, God gave the world an unexpected promise in Genesis 3:15. As Owen’s colleague Samuel Petto states, this verse represents the “first dawning of a day of grace.”⁸⁴

Owen summarises the preceding discussion under three headings. First, while evil is universally recognized and experienced, only the testimony of Scripture reveals that the sin of Adam and Eve was “the occasion and cause of all that evil which is in the world.” Second, the moral and penal consequences of the fall have left humanity

⁸² See Owen, *Christologia* (1679), pp. 107–109 (*Works*, 1:101–102); Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), comm. Heb. 2:17, 18 (*Works*, 20:471).

⁸³ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.23 (*Works*, 18:170–171). In a posthumously published sermon on Psalm 48:12–14 titled “The Beauty and Strength of Zion,” Owen provides a more elaborate summary of this interpretation wherein he argues that the promise of Genesis 3:15 provides “the foundation of the Old Testament” (*Works*, 9:316). This sermon was preached on April 22, 1675, the year after he published the second volume of his commentary.

⁸⁴ Petto, *The Difference between the Old and New Covenant*, p. 25.

unable “to deliver themselves from under the power of their own innate corruption and disorder, nor from the effects of the curse and wrath of God that came upon them.” As a result, only the grace of God can rescue humanity from the judgment of God. Third, the first indication of how God would provide liberation from the guilt and corruption of sin came in the unlikely form of the curse pronouncement in Genesis 3:15.⁸⁵ Herein lies the foundation of redemption. This verse marks the point in redemptive history when God gave the first promise of deliverance. All subsequent promises of rescue and relief given in Scripture are thus built on this promise.⁸⁶

3.4.4 THE FOUNDATION OF THE COVENANT OF GRACE

Owen contends that “all men acknowledge that a promise of Christ, for the object and guide of the faith of the ancient patriarchs, was given” in Genesis 3:15.⁸⁷ But from the perspective of those initially receiving the promise, he readily admits that it was “obscurely expressed” and that it was much later when the full import of the text was “made plain unto us in the gospel.”⁸⁸ Nevertheless, the promissory nature of the *protoevangelium* was clear enough, especially in the light of additional biblical revelation, to serve as the bedrock of Israel’s faith as they anticipated the arrival of the Messiah. Owen states,

The words in themselves seem obscure unto any such end or purpose. But yet there is such light given into them, and the mind of God in them, from the

⁸⁵ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.26 (*Works*, 18:173–174).

⁸⁶ Cf. Ursinus outlines a similar argument in a question and answer format in *Summe of the Christian Religion*, pp. 205–206.

⁸⁷ Owen, *Sabbath* (1671), p. 173 (*Works*, 19:359). Owen interacts with several different lines of interpreting Genesis 3:15, including Jewish, Socinian, and Roman, in *Theologoumena* (1661), 2.1.4–5 (*Works*, 17:134–138; cf. *BT*, 170–176); see also a similar discussion in Thomas Goodwin, *Of Christ the Mediator* (1692), in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, 12 vols. (Edinburgh: J. Nichols, 1861–1866), 5:309–311.

⁸⁸ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.23 (*Works*, 18:171; cf. 20:58). For a discussion on the delayed fulfilment of this promise, see Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 6:1, 2 (*Works*, 22:35–36).

circumstances of time, place, persons, occasion, from the nature of the things treated of, from the whole ensuing economy, or dealing of God with men, revealed in the Scripture, as that no sober man doubts of the promissory nature of those words, nor of the intention of them in general, nor of the proper subject of the promise, nor of the grace intended in it.⁸⁹

Each additional promise that God gave to his people thus added to the basic principle outlined in Genesis 3, namely that deliverance will come through the promised Seed who will bring victory over sin and death.⁹⁰ The first promise regulated all other promises, and later promises expanded upon the first promise.⁹¹ If Genesis 3:15 is the seed, then the other promises of God are “as branches of the first promise.”⁹² Throughout Scripture, there is an organic development of the divine promise. As Calvin states, “At the beginning when the first promise of salvation was given to Adam it glowed like a feeble spark. Then, as it was added to, the light grew in fullness, breaking forth increasingly and shedding its radiance more widely. At last—when all the clouds were dispersed—Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, fully illumined the whole earth.”⁹³ The entire story of the Old Testament can be told from the perspective of this one promise. Owen states in his *Christologia* (1679):

The first promise, Gen. 3:15—truly called Πρωτευαγγέλιον—was revealed, proposed, and given, as containing and expressing the only means of delivery from that apostasy from God, with all the effects of it, under which our first parents and all their posterity were cast by sin. The destruction of Satan and his work in his introduction of the state of sin, by a Saviour and Deliverer, was prepared and provided for in it. This is the very foundation of the faith of the church; and if it be denied, nothing of the economy or dispensation of God

⁸⁹ Owen, *Sabbath* (1671), p. 173 (*Works*, 19:359).

⁹⁰ Owen explores in more detail the theme of Christ’s victory over sin, death, and Satan, drawing upon his discussion in his exercitations on the moral and penal effects of sin, in *Hebrews* (1668), comm. Heb. 2:14–16 (*Works*, 20:432–462).

⁹¹ Cf. “The first promise, and consequently first revelation, of the incarnation of the Son of God, was after the entrance of sin, and with respect unto the recovery of the sinner, unto the glory of God. Hereby are all other promises, declaration, and revelations concerning it, as to their end, to be regulated; for that which is the first in any kind, as to an end aimed at, is the full of all that follows in the same kind.” Owen, *Hebrews* (1674), 1.2.11 (*Works*, 19:22–24; cf. 22:35).

⁹² Owen, *Hebrews* (1684), comm. Heb. 11:2 (*Works*, 24:15).

⁹³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.10.20 (*CO*, 2:326).

towards it from the beginning can be understood. The whole doctrine and story of the Old Testament must be rejected as useless, and no foundation be left in the truth of God for the introduction of the New . . . All the promises that God gave afterward unto the church under the Old Testament, before and after giving the law—all the covenants that he entered into with particular persons, or the whole congregation of believers—were all of them declarations and confirmations of this first promise, or the way of salvation by the mediation of his Son, becoming the seed of the woman, to break the head of the serpent, and to work out the deliverance of mankind.⁹⁴

Owen spends considerable time in his exercitations developing this seed theology, as he traces the gradual unfolding of the identity of the promised deliverer throughout the law, prophets, and writings of the Hebrew Scriptures, focusing especially on the significance of Abraham, and ultimately culminating in the revelation of the person and work of Christ.⁹⁵ According to Owen, “The substance of the first promise, wherein the whole of the covenant of grace was virtually comprised, directly respected and expressed the giving of him for the recovery of mankind from sin and misery, by his death, Gen. iii. 15.”⁹⁶ In other words, the divine promise of Genesis 3:15 is the “great foundation of the covenant of grace.”⁹⁷ Owen grants that more revelation was needed to enlarge and expand upon this promise; nevertheless, he insists that it set the agenda for the rest of redemptive history. The work that Christ came to accomplish was the fulfilment of this promise, and all others built upon it. “From this did all other promises of God arise, as from their spring and fountain; and upon the accomplishment thereof do all their accomplishments depend.”⁹⁸ For these reasons, Owen claims that the

⁹⁴ Owen, *Christologia* (1679), pp. 130–131, 143 (*Works*, 1:120, 124–125).

⁹⁵ For a summary, see Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.9.50 (*Works*, 18:214–215; cf. 18:239; 20:47–48).

⁹⁶ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 7:22 (*Works*, 22:506).

⁹⁷ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), comm. Heb. 2:10 (*Works*, 18:380); note the context of the entire quote: “[God] signally gave out the first promise, that great foundation of the covenant of grace; and afterwards declared, confirmed, and ratified by his oath, that covenant wherein all the means of bringing the elect unto glory are contained, Gen. 3:15; Jer. 31:31–34; Heb. 8:8–12. The person of the Father is considered as the principal author of the covenant, as the person covenanting and taking us into covenant with himself; the Son, as the Messiah, being considered as the surety and mediator of it, Heb. 7:22, 9:15, and the purchaser of the promises of it.”

⁹⁸ Owen, *Hebrews* (1674), comm. Heb. 5:12–14 (*Works*, 21:589; cf. 20:98; 22:35–36).

revelation of Genesis 3:15 “became the foundation and centre of all the religion that ensued in the world: for as those who received it by faith, and adhered unto, continued in the worship of the true God, expressing their faith in the sacrifices that he had appointed typically to represent and exemplify before their eyes the work itself, which by the promised Seed was to be accomplished.”⁹⁹

3.4.5 THE COVENANT OF REDEMPTION AND GENESIS 3:15

The messianic work that Christ came to accomplish was in fulfilment of a divine promise first given in Genesis 3:15 and subsequently expanded throughout salvation history. The origin of these promises of redemption however is ultimately eternal, not historical. According to Owen, in the person of Christ “were laid all the foundations of the counsels of God for the sanctification and salvation of the church” so that “from the giving of that promise [in Genesis 3:15] the faith of the whole church was fixed on him whom God would send in our nature, to redeem and save them.”¹⁰⁰ Elsewhere, Owen states that the covenant between the Father and the Son is the “ground and foundation” of the covenant of grace.¹⁰¹ This language is similar to that of Owen’s Scottish companion, Patrick Gillespie (1617–1675), in his posthumously published work, *The Ark of the Covenant Opened: or, A Treatise of the Covenant of Redemption between God and Christ, as the Foundation of the Covenant of Grace* (1677), to which Owen attached a commendation.¹⁰² Gillespie, for example, opens his discourse by stating, “As the covenant of grace hath its life from God only, and from grace; so ‘tis founded and

⁹⁹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.28 (*Works*, 18:176; cf. 9:316).

¹⁰⁰ Owen, *Christologia* (1679), pp. 53–54, 107 (*Works*, 1:64, 101).

¹⁰¹ Owen, *Vindiciae Evangelicae* (1655), in *Works*, 12:496.

¹⁰² Owen writes of his friendship with Gillespie: “My long Christian acquaintance and friendship with the author made me not unwilling to testify my respects unto him and his labours in the church of God, now he is at rest, for whom I had so great an esteem whilst he was alive.” See “To the Reader,” in Gillespie, *Ark of the Covenant Opened*, n.p. [iii].

bottomed upon nothing in us, but upon God’s covenant with Christ, whom he gave *for a covenant of the people*, Isa. 49:8; whom he *layed in Zion for a foundation, a sure foundation*, Isa. 28.16.” He further clarifies the distinction between these two covenants by stating, “The covenant made with us, did spring out of the covenant made with Christ; and as ‘tis commonly distinguished, the covenant of reconciliation, whereby we are actually recovered and reconciled unto God, is bottomed upon the covenant of redemption; or as others speak, the covenant of suretiship [sic].”¹⁰³

The basic point is relatively straightforward: the Father’s eternal covenant with the Son concerning humanity serves as the “sure foundation” of God’s historical covenant with humanity concerning Christ.¹⁰⁴ Without the covenant of redemption, there is no covenant of grace. In the *pactum salutis*, the Son agrees to undertake the necessary steps to ensure that the promises of the covenant of grace are accomplished and thus applied to the elect. Owen explains,

It may be considered with respect unto the federal transactions between the Father and the Son, concerning the accomplishment of this counsel of this will . . . In the covenant of the mediator [i.e., the *pactum salutis*], Christ stands alone for himself, and undertakes for himself alone, and not as the representative of the church; but this he is in the covenant of grace. But this is that wherein it had its designed establishment, as unto all the ways, means, and ends of its accomplishment . . . Wherefore the covenant of grace could not be procured by any means or cause but that which was the cause of this covenant of the mediator, or of God the Father with the Son, as undertaking the work of mediation.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Gillespie, *Ark of the Covenant Opened*, p. 1, italics original; cf. for biographical details, see K. D. Holfelder, “Gillespie, Patrick (1617–1675), Church of Scotland minister,” in *ODNB*.

¹⁰⁴ Owen, *Hebrews* (1674), comm. Heb. 4:6 (*Works*, 21:300; cf. 20:553; 22:543).

¹⁰⁵ Owen, *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (1677), in *Works*, 5:191. This section is repeated almost verbatim in *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 7:20–22 (*Works*, 22:504–505). In the context of this quote, Owen references and builds upon his exercitations on the “divine counsel” (*consilium Dei*) and the “eternal pact” (*pactum salutis*) in *Hebrews* (1674), 1.3, and 1.4 (*Works*, 19:42–76, and 77–97). For Owen, the “procuring cause” of the covenant of grace is the *consilium Dei* while the eternal foundation of the covenant of grace is the *pactum salutis*. The “divine counsel” represents the consultation of the members of the Trinity *ad intra* to freely and sovereignly formulate an eternal covenant, while the “eternal pact” represents the voluntary agreement between the Father and the Son concerning the accomplishment of this divine counsel. See also Owen, *Hebrews* (1684), comm. Heb. 12:2 (*Works*, 24:240–241); cf. the discussion in footnote 9 above.

In other words, in the person, office, and work of the Messiah, the redemptive-historical narrative interlocks with the divine-eternal pact and finds its fulfilment. Thus, the ultimate foundation of the covenant of grace is not the promise of redemption per se but the historical fulfilment of that promise by Christ in accordance with the eternal pact he made with the Father as a result of the predetermined counsel of God.¹⁰⁶ To quote Thomas Goodwin, “all promises in the word are but the copies of God’s promises made to Christ for us from everlasting.”¹⁰⁷

Once again Owen emphasizes the necessity of biblical revelation for knowing God. In Scripture God’s eternal plans and temporal promises regarding his covenant are disclosed. Quoting Deuteronomy 29:29, he states, “But these counsels, absolutely considered, are hid in God, in the eternal treasures of his own wisdom and will. What we learn of them is by external revelation and effects . . . Our work is, to inquire wherein, how, and whereby, God hath revealed his eternal counsels, to the end that we may know his mind, and fear him for our good.”¹⁰⁸ In the words of the biblical text, which Owen quotes, “The secret things belong unto the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong unto us.” While God’s eternal ways are inherently incomprehensible, they are not entirely unattainable. An historical record of the “counsel of God concerning the salvation of the elect by Jesus Christ” has been “transcribed into the beginning of the book of truth, in the first promise given unto Adam after the fall.”¹⁰⁹ This means that the gospel story began in eternity but unfolds in history. The covenant of grace “is a transcript and effect of [the] covenant of

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Owen, *Vindiciae Evangelicae* (1655), in *Works*, 12:498.

¹⁰⁷ Goodwin, *Of Christ the Mediator* (1692), in *Works*, 5:139; cf. Samuel Rutherford, *The Covenant of Life Opened* (Edinburgh, 1654), p. 297.

¹⁰⁸ Owen, *Hebrews* (1674), 1.2.1 (*Works*, 19:15); cf. *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 7:20–22 (*Works*, 22:498–512); *Hebrews* (1684), comm. Heb. 12:2 (*Works*, 24:240–241).

¹⁰⁹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1674), 1.3.14 (*Works*, 19:70).

redemption.”¹¹⁰ Therefore, for Owen the job of the biblical interpreter is “to trace those discoveries which God hath made of his eternal counsels in this matter, and that through the several degrees of divine revelation whereby he advanced the knowledge of them, until he brought them to their complement in the external exhibition of his Son, clothed in human nature with the glory of this office, and discharging the duties thereof.”¹¹¹

3.5 CONCLUSION

The importance of Owen’s federal-based reading of Genesis 2–3 can hardly be overstated. His use of the scholastic distinction of the penal and moral effects of sin, drawn largely from his interpretation of Romans 5, along with his emphasis upon the Anselmic principle of the necessity of the God-man to make satisfaction for sin, provided him with a set of exegetical tools to interpret the text of Scripture, to address the question of original sin, to defend the fundamentals of Christianity against Jewish errors, and, perhaps most importantly, to bring theological cohesion to the biblical narrative. Contrary to the suggestion of Torrance and others who argue that federal theologians are guilty of placing the real moment of salvation beyond the realm of history, Owen frames his covenant theology in historical terms. While he builds his hermeneutic upon the foundation of the eternal covenant of redemption, he does so by utilizing the category of promise and fulfilment to structure his exegesis. For Owen at least, federal theology and a promise-fulfilment hermeneutic are not mutually exclusive

¹¹⁰ Owen, *Hebrews* (1684), comm. Heb. 13:20, 21 (*Works*, 24:475).

¹¹¹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1674), 1.2.1 (*Works*, 19:15; cf. pp. 43, 89–90; 20:45). On the historical development of the doctrine of the covenant of redemption, see Williams, “The Decree of Redemption is in Effect a Covenant;” Mark Jones, *Why Heaven Kissed Earth: The Christology of the Puritan Reformed Orthodox Theologian, Thomas Goodwin (1600–1680)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), 123–145; Muller, “Toward the *Pactum Salutis*: Locating the Origins of a Concept,” *MAJT* 18 (2007): 11–65. On Owen’s formulation of the covenant of redemption, see Van Asselt, “Covenant Theology as Relational Theology,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology*, 66–84; Trueman, *John Owen*, 80–99; Trueman, *The Claims of Truth*, 133–150, 157, passim.

categories. Far from minimising either the gradual progression of biblical revelation or the work of Christ in history, he saw the covenant of redemption as providing the eternal basis upon which the story of salvation unfolds. As a result, his federalism is decidedly redemptive-historical in its orientation and Christological in its focus.

CHAPTER 4

CHRIST AND SCRIPTURE: THE PROBLEM OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Our Lord Jesus Christ is in the Old Testament.

—John Owen¹

In the Old Testament Christ is veiled: in the New revealed: in both testified.

—Francis Roberts²

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Owen's contention that the fulfilment of the messianic promise serves as the interpretive foundation of the epistle to the Hebrews raises an age-old hermeneutical question: how does the advent of Christ in the New Testament—or, simply "*the Event*," to use Owen's shorthand expression³—inform exegesis of the Old Testament?

This chapter will consider the challenge posed by a Christological reading of the Old Testament to a Protestant literal interpretation of Scripture, and how Owen attempted to resolve it. After a brief statement of the problem and an overview of puritan resources produced for interpreting the biblical text, we will consider a series of hermeneutical rules that Owen developed to answer Jewish objections concerning a

¹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1674), 1.1.6 (*Works*, 19:8).

² Francis Roberts, *Clavis Bibliorum: The Key of the Bible, Unlocking the Richest Treasury of the Holy Scripture* (London, 1648), p. 126. Before turning his attention to the New Testament, Roberts closes his study of the Old Testament by echoing the famous words of Augustine, "Thus farre of the Old Testament, wherein (as Augustine saith) the New Testament is veiled. Come we next to consider of the New Testament, wherein the Old Testament is Revealed." *Ibid.*, p. 465. Cf. "Quapropter in veteri testamento est occultatio Novi, in Novo Testamento est manifestatio Veteris." Augustine, *De catechizandis rudibus* (c. 400), in *PL*, 40:315.

³ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.11.36, p. 141 (*Works*, 18:262), capitalisation and italics original.

Christological understanding of the Old Testament. We will conclude with a brief explanation of how Owen's commitment to a literal hermeneutic informs his argument for Christ as the foundation and fulfilment of Scripture.

4.2 CHRIST IN THE OLD TESTAMENT: A HERMENEUTICAL PROBLEM

The precise relationship between Christ and the Old Testament has long plagued interpreters of the Bible. Heiko Oberman has even argued that “since early in the history of the Christian Church, the Old Testament has posed the chief exegetical problem to the biblical interpreters.”⁴ Along these lines, Oskar Skarsaune has identified at least three types of Old Testament exegesis developed by the apostolic fathers in the second and third centuries: (1) the “proof from prophecy” approach that seeks to demonstrate from the Old Testament that Jesus is the promised Messiah; (2) the “paraenetic homily” that draws ethical principles from the Old Testament for moral exhortations and application; and (3) the “biblical antiquities” method that seeks to prove that the Old Testament is of greater antiquity, and thus of greater value, than the Greek poets and philosophers.⁵ In this first category, many of the apostolic fathers attempted to “*prove from the Scriptures*” the basic notions that Jesus is the promised Messiah (*de Christo*), that the ritualistic commands of the law are no longer

⁴ Heiko A. Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation: The Shape of Late Medieval Thought Illustrated by Key Documents*, trans. Paul L. Nyhus (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 281. Similar arguments may be found in K. E. Greene-McCreight, *Ad Litteram: How Augustine, Calvin, and Barth Read the “Plain Sense” of Genesis 1–3* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), xiii, 1–5; Muller, *PRRD*, 2:442–524; James S. Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 1–6; David L. Puckett, *John Calvin’s Exegesis of the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 1–4; cf. Gerald Sheppard, “Interpretation of the Old Testament between Reformation and Modernity,” in William Perkins, *A Cloud of Faithful Witnesses: Commentary on Hebrews 11*, ed. J. Augustine (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1991), 46–70; John Henry Stek, “The Modern Problem of the Old Testament in the Light of Reformation Perspective,” *CTJ* 2 (1967): 202–225.

⁵ Oskar Skarsaune, “The Development of Scripture Interpretation in the Second and Third Centuries—Except Clement and Origen,” in *Hebrew Bible, Old Testament: The History of Interpretation, Volume 1: From the Beginnings to the Middle Ages*, ed. Magne Saebø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 375–376.

binding (*de lege*), and that the identity of the people of God is no longer limited to the Jewish people but refers to all followers of Christ (*de ecclesia*).⁶ Skarsaune shows that Justin Martyr (100–c. 165) honed these arguments into the first full-scale articulation of a “proof from prophecy” in his *Dialogue with Trypho*,⁷ a work that Owen simply dubbed the “famous dispute with Trypho.”⁸ The exegetical concerns raised by apostolic fathers like Martyr brought into sharper focus the challenge of how to relate the promises of the Old Testament to Christ and proved to be a perennial problem for biblical interpreters. These types of exegetical issues did not fundamentally change at the Reformation. Owen’s commentary could be described as following in this “proof from prophecy” tradition. However, the question of the relationship of Christ to the Old Testament became particularly acute in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as Protestants sought to develop exegetical methods that were consonant with their commitment to the supreme authority of Scripture.⁹

Benjamin Keach (1640–1704), for example, began his magisterial treatise on biblical figures of speech with an essay on “the Divine Authority of that blessed Book” in order to make the pedagogical point that the principle of *sola Scriptura* not only governed matters of doctrine and devotion but also methods of biblical

⁶ Skarsaune, “The Development of Scripture Interpretation,” 390–391, italics original.

⁷ Skarsaune, “The Development of Scripture Interpretation,” 391. See his expanded argument in *The Proof from Prophecy: A Study in Justin Martyr’s Proof-Text Tradition: Text-Type, Provenance, Theological Profile* (Leiden: Brill, 1987).

⁸ Owen, *Works*, 14:81; cf. 18:230; 19:32.

⁹ Muller, *PRRD*, 2:442; see also Mark D. Thompson, *A Sure Ground on Which to Stand: The Relation of Authority and Interpretive Method in Luther’s Approach to Scripture* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004). Owen identifies the authority and the interpretation of Scripture as the “two springs” of the Christian religion in *The Reason of Faith: or, An Answer unto that Enquiry, Wherefore We Believe the Scripture to Be the Word of God* (London, 1677); *Synesis pneumatike: or, The Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God as Revealed in His Word* (London, 1678), in *Works*, 4:3–115, and 117–234, respectively.

interpretation.¹⁰ In other words, since the “blessed Book” is God’s word, it must be handled with care. Interpreters should neither disregard the Old Testament in a Marcionite attempt to rid the church of the barbaric God of Israel, an act of “blasphemy” in the eyes of Owen, nor “turn the whole word into Allegories” and thus arrest the text from its historical context, as stated by Edward Leigh.¹¹

Reformed theologians like Leigh, Owen, and Keach argued that the exegetical tradition they inherited from the patristic and medieval periods, most notably the *quadrigo*, compromised Scripture’s authority by reading multiple senses of meaning into a biblical passage, even though these methods were often based upon a grammatical-historical interpretation of the text. As William Perkins forcefully states, “This pattern of the fourfold meaning of Scripture must be rejected and destroyed.”¹² In contrast, many Protestants compressed the range of meaning in Scripture into one fundamental sense, namely, the literal.¹³ In the words of William

¹⁰ Keach states, “The main scope of this work, being to offer assistance towards the explaining and finding out the true sense and meaning of the Holy Scripture, it will be convenient . . . to premise something touching *the Divine Authority of that blessed book* . . . we may rely on that Book, as the infallible store-house of heavenly verities, that great and only Revelation, whereby God does inform, rule, and will judge the world . . . It being our great design to endeavour the help and establishment of the unskillful, and to assist weak Christians; knowing, that if Satan can once bring them into a dissidence of the truth and authority of God’s word, he at the same instant shakes the very foundation of all their hope and religion: And if the foundations fail, what shall the righteous do? Psal. 11.3.” Benjamin Keach, *Troposchemalogia: Tropes and Figures: or, A Treatise of the Metaphors, Allegories, and Express Similitudes, &c., Contained in the Bible of the Old and New Testament* (London, 1682), i, emphasis added. For biographical details, see Beth Lynch, “Keach, Benjamin (1640–1704), *ODNB*.

¹¹ Owen, *Sabbath* (1671), p. 404 (*Works*, 19:432); Edward Leigh, “To the Christian and Candid Reader,” in *A Systeme or Body of Divinity Consisting of Ten Books* (London, 1654), n.p. [viii]. Owen raises a similar concern as Leigh in *Works*, 19:64.

¹² William Perkins, *The Arte of Prophecyng: or, A Treatise Concerning the Sacred and Onely True Manner and Methode of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (London, 1607), 31

¹³ On the complex history of Old Testament exegesis in the Christian era, especially as it relates to hermeneutical developments in the Reformation and post-Reformation periods, see Brevard S. Childs, “The *Sensus Literalis* of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem,” in *Beiträge zur alttestamentlichen Theologie*, eds. H. Donner, R. Hanhart, and R. Smend (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), 80–93; Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, trans. M. Sebanc and E. M. Macierowski, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998–2009); C. R. Evans, *The Language and Logic of the Bible*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–1985); 1:72–122; 2:37–65; Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 17–50; S. L. Greenslade, ed., *The Cambridge History of the*

Whitaker (1548–1595), “The sense of Scripture is but one,—the literal.”¹⁴ Owen concurs, “Some think that it belongs unto the fulness of the Scripture that each place in it should have various senses, some say three, some four. But this indeed is to empty it of all fulness. For if it have not everywhere one proper determinate sense, it hath none at all.”¹⁵ Nevertheless, even with widespread agreement within Protestantism on the authority of Scripture and the foundational role of a literal hermeneutic, the solution to the predicament of how best to interpret the Old Testament in reference to Christ

Bible, Volume 3: The West from the Reformation to the Present Day (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson, eds., *A History of Biblical Interpretation. Volume 2: The Medieval through the Reformation Periods* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009); John H. Hayes and Frederick Prussner, *Old Testament Theology: Its History and Development* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), 1–34; O. R. Johnston, “Puritan Use of the Old Testament,” *EQ* 23 (1951): 183–209; Henry M. Knapp, “Understanding the Mind of God: John Owen and Seventeenth-Century Exegetical Methodology” (PhD diss., Calvin Theological Seminary, 2002), 262–275; Emil G. Kraeling, *The Old Testament Since the Reformation* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1955), 7–42; Richard A. Muller, “Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation: The View from the Middle Ages,” in *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation: Essays Presented to David C. Steinmetz in Honor of His Sixtieth Birthday*, eds. R. A. Muller and J. L. Thompson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 3–22; Muller, “Biblical Interpretation in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” in *DMBI*, 22–44; Muller, “The Hermeneutic of Promise and Fulfillment in Calvin’s Exegesis of the Old Testament Prophecies of the Kingdom,” in *The Bible in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. David C. Steinmetz (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 68–82; Muller, *PRRD*, 2:23–148, 442–524; Christopher Ocker, “Medieval Exegesis and the Origin of Hermeneutics,” *SJT* 52 (1999): 328–345; T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 69–82; Preus, *From Shadow to Promise*; Preus, “Old Testament *Promissio* and Luther’s New Hermeneutic,” *HTR* 60 (1967): 145–161; Puckett, *John Calvin’s Exegesis of the Old Testament*; Klaas Runia, “The Hermeneutics of the Reformers,” *CTJ* 19 (1984): 121–152; Magne Saebø, ed., *Hebrew Bible, Old Testament: The History of Interpretation, Volume 2: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008); Jai-Sung Shim, “Biblical Hermeneutics and Hebraism in the Early Seventeenth Century as Reflected in the Work of John Weemse (1579–1636)” (PhD diss., Calvin Theological Seminary, 1998); Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publisher, 1952); David C. Steinmetz, ed., *The Bible in the Sixteenth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990); Steinmetz, “Hermeneutic and Old Testament Interpretation in Staupitz and the Young Martin Luther,” *ARG* 70 (1979): 24–58; Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Precritical Exegesis,” *Theology Today* 37 (1980): 27–38.

¹⁴ While many Protestants rejected earlier scholastic attempts to read more than one sense into the text, they also left ample room for multiple applications of the literal meaning of a biblical passage. Note Whitaker’s nuanced discussion of the “corollaries or consequences” of the literal sense in conjunction with the contribution of Aquinas in William Whitaker, *A Disputation on Holy Scripture* (1588), trans. and ed. William Fitzgerald (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1849), 408; cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (London: Blackfriars, 1963), I, q.1, a.10. See also the similar statement by Perkins, *The Arte of Prophecyng*, 31; cf. the extended discussions in John Weemes, *Exercitacions Divine Containing Diverse Questions and Solutions for the Right Understanding of the Scriptures* (London, 1632), 1.19, pp. 177–183; Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., 3 vols. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1992), 1:149–154.

¹⁵ Owen, *Hebrews* (1674), comm. Heb. 3:15 (*Works*, 21:167; cf. 21:35–36; 23:212).

was not always obvious, as the well-known debate between the Lutheran Aegidius Hunnius (1550–1603) and the reformed David Pareus regarding Calvin’s so-called Judaistic exegesis of the Hebrew Scriptures illustrates.¹⁶ In a similar vein, Owen identifies no less than three different ways to interpret messianic promises and prophecies literally. First, “the strict literal sense” expounded by some Jews who interpret statements of peace and prosperity for Israel in rigid physical terms “without the allowance of any figure or allegory in them.” Second, the spiritual typology of Calvin found “in all his commentaries” where “outward, terrene things” foreshadow “spiritual, heavenly, and eternal things.” Third, the promise-fulfilment scheme of Owen’s whereby predictions are generally understood spiritually (following Calvin) but also entail limited physical or worldly benefits for the church.¹⁷ As these comments reveal, the question of how to read the Old Testament in relationship to Christ proved to be a more difficult task for Protestants than a commitment to a literal hermeneutic would at first glance suggest.

4.2.1 THE DEVELOPMENT OF “WAYS AND MEANS”

A corollary of the Protestant emphasis on the literal reading of Scripture was the development of scholarly and popular handbooks that delineated guidelines for rightly

¹⁶ For details, see G. Sujin Pak, *The Judaizing Calvin: Sixteenth Century Debates over the Messianic Psalms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 103–124; Puckett, *John Calvin’s Exegesis of the Old Testament*, 52–81; Ken Schurb, “Sixteenth-Century Lutheran-Calvinist Conflict on the *Protevangelium*,” *CTQ* 54 (1990): 25–47; Derek Thomas, *Calvin’s Teaching on Job: Proclaiming the Incomprehensible God* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2004), 305–372; cf. Owen’s allusion to this debate in *Works*, 12:636, and 18:177.

¹⁷ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.11.33–35 (*Works*, 18:260–262). He gives three qualifications to the physical benefits of Old Testament messianic promises: (1) they do not apply to the “seed of Abraham according to the flesh” but to all, Jew and Gentile alike, who trust in the promised Messiah. (2) The “accomplishment of these promises is reserved unto an appointed time,—when God shall have accomplished his work of severity on the apostate Jews, and of trial and patience towards the called Gentiles.” (3) The eyes of remnant Jews will be opened, “after which, the Jews and Gentiles, being made one fold under the great Shepherd of our souls, shall enjoy rest and peace in this world.” *Ibid.*

interpreting the word of God.¹⁸ As Susan Hardman Moore has shown, the combination of the Reformation's emphasis on the verbal word along with the rise of literacy rates produced a new genre of Bible study aids.¹⁹ One example of this trend is the treatise by the English nonconformist Henry Lukin titled *An Introduction to the Holy Scripture* (1669), a work adorned with a preface by Owen.²⁰ Published the year after the first volume of *Hebrews*, this book not only serves as a textual cross-reference point for Owen's commentary, it also provides a glimpse into the burgeoning industry of hermeneutic manuals in Britain and the Continent during the mid-seventeenth century. Lukin states,

I determined . . . to reduce what I had done to this method for the use of my own country men, that know not how to serve themselves of another language, supposing it will be most acceptable to them, (who above most other nations are diligent in the study of the Scriptures, and inquisitive into the meaning of them) and most necessary for them, as being less furnished with helps of this kind in their own tongue: divers have with much judgment and industry laboured into this work for the benefit of scholars, especially Salomon Glassus, to whom I acknowledge myself more beholding in the composing of this treatise, than to any other man. Some likewise have done something in this kind in English, yet they have left something to be added by others, and I most freely leave it to those to judge what I have done herein, who have read what others have written on this subject, and shall compare this with it . . . Now the whole scope of this treatise is that we may better understand the Scripture.²¹

The acclamation of the Lutheran scholar Glassius (1593–1656) is undoubtedly a reference to his *Philologia Sacra* (1623), a definitive and commonly cited work that represents a long line of exegetical handbooks produced in the wake of the

¹⁸ On the historical development of these texts, see Muller, *PRRD*, 2:442–524; Knapp, “Understanding the Mind of God,” 40–137, 262–334; Shim, “Biblical Hermeneutics and Hebraism,” 254–316.

¹⁹ Susan Hardman Moore, “For the Mind's Eye Only: Puritan, Images, and ‘The Golden Mines of Scripture,’” *SJT* 59 (2006): 281–296. Hardman Moore focuses on how the use of typology and the development of concordances encouraged readers to draw “mental pictures” from Scripture; cf. Ian M. Green, *Print and Protestantism in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

²⁰ For biographical details, see Jim Spivey, “Lukin, Henry (1628–1719),” in *ODNB*.

²¹ H[enry] Lukin, “To the Reader,” in *An Introduction to the Holy Scripture Containing the Several Tropes, Figures, Proprieties of Speech Used Therein* (London, 1669), n.p.

Reformation.²² In Lukin's words, these books were written with the intention of providing scholars, pastors, and even laymen the requisite hermeneutical tools to "better understand the Scripture." Similarly, Owen's conviction over against Rome that individual believers and not simply the magisterium of the church should interpret the Bible led him to pen his own account of *The Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God* (1678).²³ As Protestant orthodox theologians worked to articulate textually sophisticated, exegetically sound methods of interpreting the grammatical, syntactical, literary, and historical details of the biblical text, specific attention was given to the question of the relationship between Christ and the Old Testament. For example, works such as William Guild's *Moses Unveiled* (1618), Thomas Taylor's *Christ Revealed* (1635), and Samuel Mather's *The Figures or Types of the Old Testament* (1683) are devoted almost entirely to identifying ways in which Christ fulfilled Old Testament shadows, types, and figures.²⁴

²² Salomon Glasius, *Philologiae sacrae, qua totius sacrosanctae veteris et Novi Testamenti scripturae*, 2nd ed. (Jena, 1643). Other significant hermeneutic and homiletical works include, Matthias Flacius Illyricus, *Clavis scripturae sacrae seu de sermone sacrarum literarum* (Basel, 1567); Andreas Hyperius, *The Practise of Preaching, otherwise Called the Pathway to the Pulpit, Conteyning an Excellent Method How to Frame Divine Sermons, and to Interpret the Holy Scriptures according to the Capacitie of the Vulgar People*, 2nd ed. (London, 1577); Whitaker, *Disputation of Holy Scripture* (1588); Perkins, *The Arte of Prophecyng* (1607); John Weemes, *The Christian Synagogue wherein is Contayned the Diverse Reading, the Right Poynting, Translation, and Collation of Scripture with Scripture* (London, 1623); Weemes, *Exercitations Divine* (1632); John White, *A Way to the Tree of Life Discovered in Sundry Directions for the Profitable Reading of the Scriptures* (London, 1647); Roberts, *Clavis Bibliorum* (1648); Thomas Hall, *Vindiciae literarum: The Schools Guarded: or, The Excellency and Usefulness of Humane Learning in Subordination to Divinity, and . . . Rules for the Expounding of the Holy Scriptures* (London, 1655); John Smith, *The Myserie of Rhetorique Unveil'd wherein above 130 the Tropes and Figures Are Severally Derived from the Greek into English . . . Conducing Very Much to the Right Understanding of the Sense of the Letter of the Scripture* (London: 1665). Works after Lukin's include, John Wilson, *The Scriptures Genuine Interpreter Asserted: or, A Discourse Concerning the Right Interpretation of Scripture* (London, 1678); and most notably, Benjamin Keach, *Tropologia: or, A Key to Open Scripture Metaphors* (London, 1681); Keach, *Troposchemalogia* (1682).

²³ On Owen's polemic with Rome, see *The Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God*, in *Works*, 4:121–127; cf. the chapter titled *De Scripturarum interpretatione* in his polemical work against the Quakers titled *Pro Sacris Scripturis Exercitationes Adversus Fantaticos* (London, 1658), in *Works* 16:437–452.

²⁴ William Guild, *Moses Unveiled: or, Those Figures which Served unto the Pattern and Shadow of Heavenly Things, Pointing Out the Messiah Christ Jesus, Briefly Explained*, 2nd ed. (London, 1658); Thomas Taylor, *Christ Revealed: or The Old Testament Explained. A Treatise of the Types and Shadowes of Our Saviour Contained throughout the Whole Scripture: All Opened and Made*

Owen's attempt to articulate principles for interpreting the Old Testament may be found in consolidated form in a chapter in his posthumously published work, *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ* (1684). Here he provides a sevenfold synopsis wherein he "consider[s] briefly some of the ways and means whereby the glory of Christ was represented unto believers under the Old Testament."²⁵ Using the *locus classicus* of Luke 24:27 as a starting point, Owen contends that without an understanding of Christ as the fulfilment of Scripture, the Old Testament is meaningless. He states,

It is therefore manifest that Moses, and the Prophets, and all the Scriptures, do give testimony unto [Christ] and his glory. This is the line of life and light which runs through the whole Old Testament; without the conduct whereof we can understand nothing aright therein: and the neglect hereof is that which makes many as blind in reading the books of it as are the Jews . . . nor can we read, study, or meditate on the writings of the Old Testament unto any advantage, unless we design to find out and behold the glory of Christ, declared and represented in them. For want hereof they are a sealed book to many unto this day.²⁶

Owen's "ways and means" taxonomy provides a succinct summary of his methodological approach to the Old Testament and places him firmly within the hermeneutical tradition of Glassius, Perkins, Whitaker, Leigh, Taylor, Guild, Mather,

Usefull for the Benefit of Gods Church (London, 1635); Samuel Mather, *The Figures or Types of the Old Testament by which Christ and the Heavenly Things of the Gospel Were Preached and Shadowed to the People of God of Old: Explained and Improved in Sundry Sermons* (Dublin, 1683). For biographical details in *ODNB*, see R. P. Wells, "Guild, William (1586–1657)," J. Sears McGee, "Taylor, Thomas (1576–1632)," and Francis J. Bremer, "Mather, Samuel (1626–1671)."

²⁵ Owen's seven "ways and means" whereby Christ was represented in the Old Testament are as follows: (1) "in the institution of the beautiful worship of the law;" (2) "in the mystical account which is given us of his communion with his church in love and grace" (e.g., Song of Solomon); (3) "in his personal appearances on various occasions . . . as a praeludium to his incarnation;" (4) "in prophetic visions;" (5) in the revelation of the incarnation, although it was not made clear until "after the actual accomplishment of the thing itself;" (6) in "promises, prophecies, predictions, concerning his person, his coming, his office, his kingdom, and his glory in them;" and (7) "under metaphorical expressions." John Owen, *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ, in His Person, Office, and Grace with the Differences between Faith and Sight: Applied unto the Use of Them that Believe* (London, 1684), 119–127 (*Works*, 1:348–352).

²⁶ Owen, *Meditations on the Glory of Christ* (1684), pp. 119, 126 (*Works*, 1:348, 351; cf. 1:314–316).

Lukin, and others.²⁷ What is perhaps most telling about his taxonomy is that even a cursory glance at it reveals that the issue of interpreting the Old Testament Christologically is far more complicated than a straightforward reading of the text. To see how Owen answers this problem, we turn to his commentary.

4.2.2 THE CENTRAL DISPUTE: THE MESSIAH HAS LONG SINCE COME

As was discussed in chapter 2, Owen wrote his exercitations as a prolegomena to his exposition on Hebrews. Therefore, they should not be read either as a textbook on federal theology or as a full-orbed Old Testament biblical theology. Owen candidly acknowledges the limitation of these essays.²⁸ His design was not to produce a comprehensive handbook on the Old Testament but to argue that the Messiah who was promised “under the Mosaic veil” of enigmatic types, ceremonies, and shadows is the Christ of the epistle to the Hebrews.²⁹ By focusing on the fulfilment of messianic themes, Owen’s essays provide a unique perspective on the hermeneutical challenge of relating Christ to the Old Testament. On the one hand, they serve as an example of how the methods of biblical interpretation developed by the Protestant orthodox informed the exegetical activities of at least one representative figure. On the other hand, they place the discussion about Christ and the Old Testament into a polemical and apologetical context, since Owen attempts to shape the debate about how best to interpret the Old Testament along the lines of the competing claims of Jews and Christians to the Hebrew Scriptures.

²⁷ For an extended discussion on puritan typology, see Knapp, “Understanding the Mind of God,” 40–137, 262–334; see also, Susan Hardman Moore, “Sacrifice in Puritan Typology,” in *Sacrifice and Redemption*, ed. S. W. Sykes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 182–202.

²⁸ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.33 (*Works*, 18:183; cf. pp. 186, 369).

²⁹ Cf. Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), lib. 2, n.p. [iii] (*Works*, 18:11).

According to Owen, the central dispute between Jews and Christians focuses on the interpretation of the Old Testament. For Christians, the promised Messiah has “long since come.”³⁰ For Jews, the divine promises of old have not been realised. He explains,

This the Jews pertinaciously deny unto this very day, and this denial is the centre wherein all the lies of their unbelief do meet; and hereupon, in a miserable, deplorable condition, do they continue for and expecting his coming who came long since, and was rejected by them. Now, this being the great difference between them and Christians . . . It is about the coming of the Messiah simply that we dispute. This we assert to be long since past. The Jews deny him to be yet come, living in the hope and expectation of him; which at present is in them but as the giving up of the ghost.³¹

Owen contends that while the Hebrew Scriptures serve as “the common acknowledged principle between us,” the controversy between Jews and Christians concerns “not the words themselves, but the things promised.”³² The problem therefore is a hermeneutical one. For Owen the entire debate about the interpretation of the Old Testament hinges on the fulfilment of the messianic promise: “either our Lord Jesus was and is the true Messiah, as coming from God in the season limited for that purpose, or that the whole promise concerning the Messiah is a mere figment, the whole Old Testament a fable; and so both the old and present religion of the Jews a delusion.”³³

The dilemma created by the Old Testament, in Owen’s mind at least, is not that it refers to Christ but that if it does not refer to him, its authority—not to mention the veracity of the entire canon of Scripture—is called into question. It is nothing more than a fable. The real problem therefore arises if Christ is not found in the Old Testament.

³⁰ The second premise of Owen’s “triple foundation” is titled “The Promised Messiah Long Since Come” and consists of exercitations 12–16. See Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), lib. 1, pp. 142–206 (*Works*, 18:262–367).

³¹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.7.1, and 1.18.1 (*Works*, 18:263, 425); see also the similar argument in Thomas Taylor, *Christ Revealed*, 2.

³² Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.12 (*Works*, 18:435–436).

³³ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.17.8 (*Works*, 18:374; cf. p. 352).

4.3 OWEN'S INTERPRETATION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

In an essay titled “Jews’ Objections Against Christian Religion Answered,” Owen enumerates no less than eight “unquestionable principles” for interpreting the messianic promises of the Old Testament. His focus is more concentrated than in his sevenfold “ways and means” taxonomy mentioned above. Owen addresses what he views as the primary criticism of many Jews regarding the fulfilment of temporal statements about the Messiah and his kingdom, namely, that they remain unaccomplished.³⁴ As a counter argument, he sets forth what might be called today an “already-not yet” hermeneutic. He contends that the kingdom of God promised in Scripture was fulfilled and spiritually inaugurated in the first advent of Christ. However, it will not be fully consummated until the final eschaton. In the interim period between the inauguration and consummation of the kingdom, a tension is created between promises about the coming of the Messiah that are fulfilled and those promises about his kingdom that are either in the process of being accomplished or will be accomplished in the future. In his words, “We say that all the promises concerning the coming of the Messiah are actually fulfilled; and those which concern his grace and kingdom are partly already accomplished, and for the remainder shall be so, in the manner, time, and season appointed for them and designed unto the purpose and counsel of God.”³⁵ The following eight principles of interpretation are an elaboration of this basic argument.

The first principle states, “*That the promises concerning the Messiah do principally respect spiritual things, and that eternal salvation which he was to obtain*

³⁴ See Owen’s summary in *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.1 (*Works*, 18:425); he reproduces several Jewish arguments along this line in *ibid.*, 1.11.1–36 (*Works*, 18:233–262, esp. pp. 238–239, 250–251, 258).

³⁵ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.2 (*Works*, 18:426).

for his church.”³⁶ As we saw in chapter 3, Owen placed tremendous emphasis on the promise of deliverance from sin and death by the Messiah, a promise which he viewed as “the greatest good that ever God engaged himself to bestow” upon humanity.³⁷ Deliverance however is only a means not an end. Furthermore, its objective is primarily spiritual not temporal, that is, to restore fellowship with God both in this life and in the next. As Owen states, “The Messiah was promised to be a spiritual Redeemer, to save them [i.e., the Jews] from sin, Satan, death, and hell, to procure for them the favour of God, and to bring them to the enjoyment of him.”³⁸ If then our greatest need, as well as our greatest end, is spiritual why would the principal intendment of the messianic promises be temporal? However, if these promises ultimately refer to spiritual realities, then the assertion can be legitimately and exegetically argued that “there is not one promise concerning grace, mercy, pardon, the love of God, and eternal blessedness by the Messiah,—which contain the whole of his direct and principal work,—but they are all yea and amen in Christ Jesus, [and] are all exactly made good and accomplished.”³⁹

The second principle flows from the first, “*That all the promises concerning temporal things, at his coming or by it, are but accessory and occasional, and such as appertain not directly to his principal work and main design at his coming.*”⁴⁰ Owen does not deny the existence of temporal blessings but argues that they are secondary to the task of redemption. He states, “These promises, then, belong not directly and immediately to the covenant of the Redeemer, but are declarations only of the

³⁶ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.3 (*Works*, 18:426). For clarity here, and in what follows, Owen’s eight principles are italicised as in the original text.

³⁷ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.3 (*Works*, 18:426).

³⁸ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.3 (*Works*, 18:427).

³⁹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.3 (*Works*, 18:427).

⁴⁰ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.4 (*Works*, 18:427–428).

sovereign will and wisdom of God, as to what he would do, in the dispensation of his providence.”⁴¹ At the centre of his argument is a categorical distinction between unconditional promises that apply specifically to the accomplishment of redemption and conditional promises that concern “the dispensation of God’s providence in temporal things.”⁴² In other words, promises that refer to the salvific work of the Messiah serve a unique redemptive-historical purpose and are not dependent on any human action but are entirely sovereign, gracious, and absolute. Statements of temporal blessings however fall under an altogether different category of promise, since their fulfilment is contingent upon personal submission to what Owen calls “the law and rule of the Messiah.”⁴³ More importantly, Owen insists that the fulfilment of these temporal promises is not reserved for one specific time, people, and place, such as a futuristic restoration of Israel and the Temple in a messianic golden age, but is “left unto the design of God’s sovereign will, wisdom, and pleasure, as are those of all other works of his providence” in order to benefit the church in all ages. He criticizes the Jews for being eschatologically myopic in their reduction of the accomplishment of the messianic kingdom to “the business of one age” (*res unius aetatis*).⁴⁴ In contrast, Owen suggests that the fulfilment of these temporal promises spans the entire period between the first and second coming of Christ. This view is a logical by-product of his “already-not yet” hermeneutic. He states,

The real kingdom of Christ being to continue through many generations, even from his first coming unto the end of the world, and that in such a variety of states and conditions as God saw conducing unto his own glory, and the exercise of the

⁴¹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.4 (*Works*, 18:428).

⁴² Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.4 (*Works*, 18:428).

⁴³ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.4 (*Works*, 18:428). He quotes Isaiah 60:12 and its context as an example of this principle. According to Owen, the point of this messianic passage is that “all the happiness intimated [in Isaiah 60] depends on the condition of men’s submitting themselves to the law of the Messiah, without which they are threatened with desolation and utter wasting.” *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.4 (*Works*, 18:428–429).

faith and obedience of his people, the accomplishment of these promises in several ages, and at several seasons, according to the counsel of the will of God, is exceedingly suited unto the nature, glory, and exaltation of it. And this one observation may be easily improved to the frustrating of all the objections of the Jews, from the pretended non-accomplishment of these promises.⁴⁵

Third, “*Whereas spiritual things have the principal place and consideration in the work and kingdom of the Messiah, they are oftentimes promised in words whose first signification denotes things temporal and corporeal.*”⁴⁶ In this section, Owen focuses on figures of speech in Scripture. He specifically investigates the Old Testament’s use of metaphors and allegories as a means of divine accommodation. He opens with a reference to the customary manner in which biblical writers often expressed prophetic visions and revelations “after the way of the people of the east” by using literary devices such as metaphors and allegories “to set forth spiritual things.”⁴⁷ He then offers a general commendation of Jewish expositors for acknowledging that these texts should be “interpreted משל בררר, that is allegorically.”⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.4 (*Works*, 18:429).

⁴⁶ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.5 (*Works*, 18:429).

⁴⁷ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.5 (*Works*, 18:429). In his exegetical manual, Owen elaborates on the challenges that the ancient Near Eastern context of the Old Testament present to the modern interpreter: “There are in the Scripture *Τινὰ δυσερμήνευτα*, some things that are ‘hard to be interpreted;’ not from the nature of the things revealed, but from the manner of their revelation. Such are many allegories, parables, mystical stories, allusions, unfulfilled prophecies and predictions, references unto the then present customs, persons, and places, computation of times, genealogies, the signification of some single words seldom or but once used in the Scripture, the names of divers birds and beasts unknown to us. Such things have a difficulty in them from the manner of their declaration; and it is hard to find out, and it may be in some instances impossible, unto any determinate certainty, the proper, genuine sense of them in the places where they occur. But herein also we have a relief provided, in the wisdom of the Holy Spirit in giving the whole Scripture for our instruction, against any disadvantage unto our faith or obedience.” Owen, *The Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God*, in *Works*, 4:196; cf. pp. 219–223.

⁴⁸ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.5 (*Works*, 18:429). Earlier in his exercises, Owen highlights the work of Maimonides (1135–1204), David Kimchi (1160–1235), and Aben Ezra (1092–1167) in a discussion on Isaiah 11:6 (“The wolf shall dwell with the lamb.”). He also accuses the Remonstrant theologian Hugo Grotius of “Judaizing beyond the Jews” by not interpreting this text as a reference to the Messiah: “[The Jews] call him [i.e., the Messiah] the ‘Son of Jesse’ from this place; which makes it somewhat observable that some Christians, as Grotius, should apply it unto Hezekiah, Judaizing in their interpretations beyond the Jews. Only the Jews are not well agreed in what sense these words, ‘The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid,’ etc., are to be understood. Some would have it that the nature of the brute beasts shall be changed in the days of the Messiah: but this is rejected by the wisest of them, as Maimonides, Kimchi, Aben Ezra, and others;

According to Owen, the benefit of an allegory lies in its capacity to convey seemingly inscrutable truths about the Messiah and his kingdom in compelling, everyday terms. For example, precious objects such as gold, silver, and valuable stones; lifestyle goals such as health, strength, and long life; and civil issues such as wealth, riches, liberty, rule, and dominion are enjoyed and esteemed by people throughout the world. When applied to spiritual realities, common phenomena such as these provided Israel, who lived under the shadowy cloud of the Mosaic covenant, with tangible ways to apprehend otherwise unknowable truths about the coming Messiah. In drawing this parallel, Owen clearly assumes an analogical relationship between temporal and spiritual realities, as can be seen in his example about promised peace in the messianic kingdom.⁴⁹

Now, this rule which we insist upon is especially to be heeded where spiritual and temporal things, though far distant in their natures, yet do usually come under the same appellation. Thus is it with peace that is promised in the days of the Messiah. Peace is either spiritual and eternal, with God; or outward and external, with men in this world. Now these things are not only distinct, and such as may be distinguished one from the other, but such as whose especial nature is absolutely different; yet are they both peace, and so called. The former is that which was chiefly intended in the coming of the Messiah; but this, being peace also, is often promised in those words which in their first signification denote the latter, or outward peace in this world amongst men.⁵⁰

By appealing to familiar items and everyday experiences, an allegory possesses an existential quality that affects the mind and raises the affections of an individual towards the spiritual truth that is represented in the allegory but distinct from it. Owen explains, “For nothing can be more evident unto [men], than that God, in these

and these interpret the words *משל* *ל* *ל* *ל* allegorically, applying them unto that universal peace which shall be in the world in the days of the Messiah. But the peace they fancy is far from answering the words of the prophecy, which express a change in the nature of the worst of men by virtue of the rule and grace of the Messiah.” Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.9.39 (*Works*, 18:208–209; cf. *Works*, 21:34–35).

⁴⁹ See the discussion on analogical language in Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 13, a. 5, 10.

⁵⁰ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.5 (*Works*, 18:430–431).

condescensions unto their capacities, doth declare that the things which he promiseth are indeed the most excellent and desirable that they can be made partakers of.”⁵¹

In short, allegories, metaphors, and similitudes are means of revelation that were given to the prophets of old for the purpose of communicating spiritual truths in temporal terms to motivate the people of God to seek after the Messiah.⁵² Owen states, “But in all these promises there was provision laid in to compel, as it were, the most carnal mind to look principally after spiritual things, and to own an allegory in the expressions of them; for many of them are such, or otherwise have no tolerable signification or sense, nor ever shall have accomplishment unto eternity.” Nevertheless, these mysterious means are not without limitation. For while “this way of instruction” was suitable to arouse messianic expectation, “it did not give [Israel] that clear, distinct apprehension of the things of the kingdom of the Messiah, which was afterwards revealed.”⁵³

⁵¹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.5 (*Works*, 18:429).

⁵² Owen makes a similar point in a discussion about metaphors in his “ways and means” taxonomy mentioned above. He states, “It is usual in the Old Testament to set out the glory of Christ under metaphorical expressions; yea, it aboundeth therein. For such allusions are exceedingly suited to let in a sense into our minds of those things which we cannot distinctly comprehend. And there is an infinite condescension of divine wisdom in this way of instruction, representing unto us the power of things spiritual in what we naturally discern. Instances of this kind, in calling the Lord Christ by the names of those creatures which unto our senses represent that excellency which is spiritually in him, are innumerable. So he is called the rose, for the sweet savour of his love, grace, and obedience;—the lily, for his gracious beauty and amiableness;—the pearl of price, for his worth, for to them that believe he is precious;—the vine, for his fruitfulness;—the lion, for his power;—the lamb, for his meekness and fitness for sacrifice; with other things of the like kind almost innumerable.” Owen, *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ* (1684), p. 126 (*Works*, 1:351–352). The similarities between Owen’s statements on allegory and metaphor, as well as his frequent grouping of the terms, suggests that he viewed allegory as a form of metaphor. Although not explicit in his writings, this point can be inferred from these comments. Cf. Calvin’s well-known definition of allegory as a “continuous metaphor” (*continua metaphora*) in his commentary on Dan. 4:13–16, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, trans. Thomas Myers, Calvin Translation Society, 22 vols. (1845–1855; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 12:257 (*CO*, 40:657). This idea was not original with Calvin but dates back to the rhetorical writings of Cicero and Quintilian, both of whom Owen frequently and favourably cites. See Gary Neal Hansen, “John Calvin’s Non-Literal Interpretation of Scripture: On Allegory,” in *John Calvin and the Interpretation of Scripture*, Calvin Studies X and XI, ed. Charles Raynal (Grand Rapids: Calvin Studies Society, 2006), 345–346; cf. Puckett, *John Calvin’s Exegesis of the Old Testament*, 106–113, 134, n.29; Parker, *Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries*, 70.

⁵³ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.5 (*Works*, 18:430).

Furthermore, Owen is quick to point out that allegories and metaphors must also be interpreted according to their literary genre and not forced into an overly literalistic hermeneutic. Failure to do so would not only be mildly comical but also exegetically disastrous, as Owen contends in this *reductio ad absurdum* argument.

Can any man be so stupidly sottish as to think that in the days of the Messiah, hills shall leap, and trees clap their hands, and waste places sing, and sheep of Kedar and rams of Nebaioth be made ministers, and Jews suck milk from the breasts of kings, and little children play with cockatrices, literally and properly? And yet these things, with innumerable of the like kind, are promised. Do they not openly proclaim to every understanding that all these expressions of them are metaphorical, and that some other thing is to be sought for in them? Some of the Jews, I confess, would fain have them all literally fulfilled unto a tittle. They would have a trumpet to be blown that all the world should hear, mountains to be levelled, seas to be dried up, wildernesses to be filled with springs and roses, the Gentiles carrying the Jews upon their shoulders, and giving them all their gold and silver! But the folly of these imaginations is unspeakable, and the blindness of their authors deplorable: neither, to gratify them, must we expose the word of God to the contempt and scorn of atheistical scoffers; which such expositions and applications of it would undoubtedly do.⁵⁴

Behind this statement lies a common Protestant scholastic distinction between the proper and figurative dimensions of the literal sense.⁵⁵ Thus to interpret an allegory or metaphor figuratively is not to abandon the plain sense of Scripture but to uphold it.

⁵⁴ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.5 (*Works*, 18:430).

⁵⁵ Cf. Turretin, “The literal sense (*literalis sensus*) is not so much that which is derived from proper words (*verbis propriis*) and not figurative (*non figuratis*), as it may be distinguished from the figurative (*figurato*) (and is sometimes so used by the fathers); but that which is intended by the Holy Spirit and is expressed in the words either proper or figurative (*exprimitur verbis vel propriis vel figuratis*.” Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:150; Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae* (Edinburgh, 1847), 2.19.3, p. 135. This distinction had broad-based support among Protestants, as seen by this quote from Arminius: “The legitimate and genuine sense (*sensus legitimus & genuinus*) of the holy Scriptures is, that which the Holy Ghost, the author of them, intended (*intendit*), and which is collected from the words themselves, whether they be received in their proper or in their figurative signification (*sive proprie sive figurate acceptis*); that is, it is the grammatical sense (*grammaticus sensus*), as it is called.” James Arminius, “The Private Disputation of James Arminius on the Principal Articles of the Christian Religion,” in *The Works of James Arminius*, trans. James Nichols, 3 vols. (London, 1828), 2:328–329; Arminius, *Disputationes privatae*, in *Opera theologica* (Leiden, 1629), thes. 9, art. 1, p. 346. See also the comment by Owen where he classifies Scripture into four literary heads: “The discourses in the Scripture may be referred materially to four general heads; for they are either *historical*, or *prophetical*, or *dogmatical*, or *hortatory*. And for the way or form of writing used in them, it is in general either *proper* and *literal*, or *figurative* and *allegorical*, as is the whole book of Canticles, and many other parts or passages in the Scripture. Now these things are duly to be weighed by them who intend to dig deep into this mine of sacred truth.” Owen, *Hebrews* (1674), comm. Heb. 4:7 (*Works*, 21:316), emphasis original.

As Owen elsewhere states, “Indeed the figurative sense of such places is the proper, literal sense of them.”⁵⁶ By distinguishing between the proper and figurative sense of the text, Owen self-consciously draws from a cross-section of patristic, medieval, reformed, and even Arminian sources, as he favourably cites the writings of Augustine, Aquinas, Zanchi, Ames, Whitaker, as well as James Arminius (1560–1609) and Daniel Tilenus (1563–1633) to support his claim.⁵⁷ Far from giving an expositor the hermeneutical license to turn the entire Bible into a giant allegory, Owen insists that this distinction is “the only safe rule” to ensure the correct interpretation of figurative passages.⁵⁸

The next two interpretative principles are linked together and follow from Owen’s emphasis on the spiritual nature of the messianic promises. His fourth point makes a provision for non-ethnic Jews to be included in the fulfilment of these promises: “By ‘the seed of Abraham,’ by ‘Jacob’ and ‘Israel,’ in many places of the

⁵⁶ Owen, *A Sermon Preached to the Honourable House of Commons, in Parliament Assembled: on January 31. A Day of Solemne Humiliation. With a Discourse about Toleration, and the Duty of the Civill Magistrate about Religion, thereunto Annexed. Humbly Presented to Them, and All Peace-loving Men of This Nation* (London, 1649), p. 45 (*Works*, 8:167).

⁵⁷ See Owen’s marginal note in *A Discourse About Toleration* (1649), p. 45 (*Works*, 8:167); cf. William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, trans. John D. Eusden (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), cap. 34, thes. 22, p. 188; Arminius, *Disputationes privatae*, thes. 9, art. 1, p. 346; Augustine, *De utilitate credendi*, cap. 3 [sec. 5–9], in *PL*, 42:68–72 (*NPNF*¹, 3:349–351); Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, q. 1, a. 10; Daniel Tilenus, *Syntagmatis disputationum theologiarum* (Sedan, 1611), thes. 8; Whitaker, *A Disputation on Holy Scripture*, q. 5, cap. 2, pp. 403–410; Jerome Zanchi, *De scriptura sacra* (Heidelberg, 1593), q. 12, cap. 2, reg. 10, pp. 420–426.

⁵⁸ “There are in the Scripture, allegories, apologues, parables, but all of them so plainly, evidently, and professedly such, and so unavoidably requiring a figurative exposition from the nature of the things themselves (as where stones are said to hear, and trees to speak), that there is no danger of any mistake about them, nor difference concerning their figurative acceptation. And *the only safe rule* of ascribing a figurative sense unto anything or expression in the Scripture, is when the nature of things will not bear that which is proper; as where the Lord Christ calls himself a door and a vine, and says that bread is his body. But to make allegories of such discourses as this, founded in the fiction of persons, is a ready way to turn the whole Bible into an allegory,—which may be done with as much ease and probability of trust.” Owen, *Hebrews* (1674), 1.3.12 (*Works*, 19:64; cf. 10:369; 12:56, 64; 21:34–36), emphasis added; cf. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:153. For more discussion on post-Reformation developments of the allegorical method, see Charles K. Cannon, “William Whitaker’s *Disputatio de Sacra Scriptura*: A Sixteenth-Century Theory of Allegory,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 25 (1962): 129–138; Craig S. Farmer, “Wolfgang Musculus and the Allegory of Machus’ Ear,” *WTJ* 56 (1994): 285–301; John T. Thompson, “The Survival of Allegorical Argumentation in Peter Martyr Vermigli’s Old Testament Exegesis,” in *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation*, 255–271.

prophets, not the carnal seed, at least not all the carnal seed, of them is intended, but the children of the faith of Abraham, who are the inheritors of the promise.”⁵⁹ Owen appeals to the apostle Paul’s narrative in Romans 9–11 to support his claim that a line of demarcation exists between “the carnal seed of Abraham” and those who receive the Abrahamic promises by faith. He states, “Those promises, then, which we find recorded concerning Zion, Jerusalem, the seed of Abraham, Jacob, Israel, do respect the elect of God, called unto the faith of Abraham, and worshipping God according to his appointment, be they of what people or nation soever under heaven.” On this point, Owen admits, “The Jews universally differ from us.”⁶⁰ In his fifth principle, Owen provides a qualification regarding the extent of perceived universalistic promises towards Gentile nations: “By ‘all people,’ ‘all nations,’ ‘the Gentiles,’ ‘all the Gentiles,’ not all absolutely, especially at any one time or season, are to be understood, but either the most eminent and most famous of them, or those in whom the church, by reason of their vicinity, is more especially concerned.”⁶¹ The identity of “the most eminent and most famous” is not entirely clear but might refer to prominent individuals such as Moses who place their faith in the Messiah.⁶² Owen’s main concern in this section however is not the identity of the Gentiles, or even the extent of the promises, but the timing of their fulfilment. Once again, he is critical of Jewish interpreters for taking these statements as referring to a futuristic time when literally all the nations of the earth will flood into Jerusalem to pay homage to an

⁵⁹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.6 (*Works*, 18:431).

⁶⁰ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.6 (*Works*, 18:431–432). For more details, Owen refers his readers back to Exercitation VI on the oneness of the church; this essay will be the focus of chapter 5.

⁶¹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.7 (*Works*, 18:432).

⁶² Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.7 (*Works*, 18:432). Cf. the following comments on Moses, notice the link between his eminence, fame, and faith: “None was ever in the old world more signalized by Providence, in his birth, education, and actions, than he was. Hence his renown, both then and in all ages after, was very great in the world. The report and estimation of his acts and wisdom were famous among all the nations of the earth. Yet this person lived and acted and did all his works by faith.” Owen, *Hebrews* (1684), comm. Heb. 11:24–26 (*Works*, 24:141).

earthly Messiah. Owen quotes medieval rabbinic exegetes David Kimchi and Aben Ezra on Isaiah 2:4 (“He [i.e., the Messiah] shall judge among the nations.”) as stating, “That all nations of the earth shall live at peace; for whatever controversies they have among themselves, they shall come and refer the determination of them to the Messiah, living at Jerusalem.” He then satirically responds to these comments, “But how this should be done by all the nations of the earth absolutely, they are not pleased to declare unto us. Certainly the heat of some of their differences will be much abated before they have made a full end of their journey.”⁶³ Owen’s insistence on the spiritual quality of these messianic promises and his refusal to limit their total fulfilment to one time, space, and people reaches a climax in his next principle.

The sixth principle outlines the heart of Owen’s “already-not yet” hermeneutic. He states, “*That whatever is to be done and effected by the Spirit, grace, or power of the Messiah, during the continuance of his kingdom in this world, it is mentioned in the promises as that which was to be accomplished at or by his coming.*”⁶⁴ According to Owen, the promises of the messianic kingdom were originally given in such a way as to create the impression that they would be fulfilled at a singular point in history. The reason for this is simple: “All the things that are foretold about the kingdom of the Messiah are referred unto his coming; because . . . the foundation of them all being perfectly and unchangeably laid in what he did and effected upon his first coming and appearance.”⁶⁵ Thus, the first advent of Christ inaugurated the messianic era but did not complete it. Nevertheless, these promises are continually being fulfilled during the inter-advental period, amongst a multiplicity of people, throughout history, around the globe, and will be entirely fulfilled at the return of Christ. Owen states, “It is no

⁶³ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.7 (*Works*, 18:432).

⁶⁴ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.8 (*Works*, 18:432).

⁶⁵ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.8 (*Works*, 18:433).

wonder, then, that many particular promises seem as yet to be unfulfilled; for they were never designed to be accomplished in a day, a year, an age, one place or season, but in a long tract of time, during the continuance of his kingdom,—that is, from his coming unto the end of the world.”⁶⁶ The answer to the question of the fulfilment of Old Testament promises lies not in an all-at-once moment of eschatological glory but in the progressive unfolding of the inauguration, continuation, and consummation of the messianic kingdom.

Owen’s seventh hermeneutical rule examines “*two ways whereby promises may be said to be accomplished by him who gives them.*”⁶⁷ The first way is considered from the vantage point of human responsibility and the failure of Jews and Gentiles alike to respond to the “outward means, helps, and advantages” given by God for the accomplishment of his promises. Owen returns to the example of peace.

In this sense all the promises contended about are long since accomplished toward all the world. There is plentiful provision made in the doings and doctrine of the Messiah, as to outward means, for the peace of all the nations in the world, for the ruin of all false worship, for the uniting of Jews and Gentiles in one body in peace and unity; and that these things are not actually effected, the whole defect lies in the blindness, unbelief, and obstinacy of the sons of men, who had rather perish in their sins than be saved through obedience to this Captain of salvation.⁶⁸

The problem therefore is not with the promises of God but with the unwillingness of the human heart to respond to the gospel. However, from the second vantage point, “God hath done, doth, and always will effectually fulfil all his promises to his elect.”⁶⁹ Despite sin, blindness, and unbelief, God’s sovereignty guarantees the faithful execution of his promises amongst his chosen people. “And thus are all the promises of God that concern the Messiah, his work, his mediation, with the effects of

⁶⁶ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.8 (*Works*, 18:433).

⁶⁷ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.9 (*Works*, 18:433).

⁶⁸ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.9 (*Works*, 18:433).

⁶⁹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.9 (*Works*, 18:434).

them, his grace and Spirit, at all times, in all ages, absolutely fulfilled in and towards the elect, that seed of Abraham unto whom all the promises do in an especial manner belong.”⁷⁰ From this perspective, Owen leaves room for a future ingathering of Jews who would come to know Christ during the continuation of the messianic kingdom in the inter-advental period.

It is granted that there shall be a time and season, during the continuance of the kingdom of the Messiah in this world, wherein the generality of the nation of the Jews, all the world over, shall be called and effectually brought unto the knowledge of the Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ; with which mercy they shall also receive deliverance from their captivity, restoration unto their own land, with a blessed, flourishing, and happy condition therein. I shall not here engage into a confirmation of this concession or assertion.

As for the timing of this event, Owen refuses to speculate. He continues, “It is only the thing itself that I assert; nor have I any cause, as to the end aimed at, to inquire into the time and manner of its accomplishment. Besides, the event can be the only sure and infallible expositor of these things.”⁷¹ On this point, Owen does not fault Jewish expectation for messianic deliverance, restoration to their own land, and eschatological peace; however, he thinks that their hopes are misguided. The Messiah has long since come, and the only way for these promises to be realised among the Jews is if they come in faith to Christ.

Lastly, Owen makes an unapologetic appeal to the analogy of Scripture by insisting that unclear passages of Scripture must be interpreted in light of the clear. *“Suppose there should be any particular promise or promises, relating unto the time and kingdom of the Messiah, either accomplished or not yet accomplished, the full, clear, and perfect sense and intendment whereof we are not able to arrive unto, shall we therefore reject that faith and persuasion which is built on so many clear, certain,*

⁷⁰ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.9 (*Works*, 18:434).

⁷¹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.8 (*Works*, 18:434).

undoubted testimonies of the Scripture itself, and manifest in the event, as if it were written with the beams of the sun?”⁷² He then abruptly draws this section to a close by stating that the answer to Jewish objections regarding the nature of unfulfilled prophecy rests “on these and the like principles,—which, most of them, are clear in Scripture itself, and the rest deduced immediately from the same fountain of truth.”⁷³

Owen concludes with a test case whereby he applies these eight principles to an exposition of Isaiah 2:2–4, along with the similar passage in Micah 4:1–4.⁷⁴ He again cites Kimchi and concedes that both Jews and Christians agree that this prophecy refers to the Messiah. Owen singles out the promise of universal peace in this passage (e.g., “Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”) as the focal point of his exegetical experiment. (1) The principal point of the passage is the spiritual worship of God not “the temporal, outward peace of the world,” which has been fulfilled in Christ. As for the temporal benefits of peace, it is not necessary to be fulfilled “amongst all nations at once but only amongst them who at any time or in any place effectually receive the laws of God from the Messiah.”⁷⁵ (2) The words are “not to be understood absolutely, according to the strict exigence of the letter,” since Owen believes that part of the passage is obviously metaphorical, such as when the prophet Micah states that “every one shall sit under his own vine and fig-tree” (Mic. 4:4). (3) Universal peace cannot be intended as other

⁷² Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.11 (*Works*, 18:435); cf. the standard definition of the “analogy of Scripture,” in WCF 1.9 and Savoy 1.9. For a definitive study on Owen’s use of the analogy of Scripture, as well as the slightly different analogy of faith, see Knapp, “Understanding the Mind of God,” 62–80; cf. Muller, “*analogia Scripturae*,” in *DLGTT*; Muller, *PRRD*, 2:493–497.

⁷³ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.12 (*Works*, 18:435); cf. WCF 1.6 and Savoy 1.6: “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence set down in Scripture.”

⁷⁴ On Isaiah 2:2–4, see Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.13–14, pp. 250–251 [NB: a typo in the original pagination reads page 249 for page 251] (*Works*, 18:436–439).

⁷⁵ The eight points in this paragraph are taken from Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.15 (*Works*, 18:437–439).

passages, such as the prophecy about Gog and Magog, as well as Jewish tradition, such as the arrival of the anti-Christ figure Armilus, seem to imply that a season of war and conflict will mark the time of the Messiah's arrival.⁷⁶ (4) At the time of the birth of Christ, universal peace was not given literally to all nations, although Owen hints that in God's providence, a reign of peace was temporarily granted to the nations in the reign of Caesar Augustus. (5) Without peace with God, which Christ alone wrought, "all other outward quiet and prosperity is ruinous and destructive." Therefore, even if there are wars and tumults, "perfect peace between God and man" can be enjoyed. (6) This spiritual peace also results in a bond between all the elect. "Although it frees them not from outward troubles, persecutions, oppressions, and afflictions in the earth . . . yet having peace with God and among themselves, they enjoy the promise unto the full satisfaction of their souls." This peace with God and the elect "is that which singly and principally is intended in this prediction, though set out under terms and expressions of the things wherein outward peace in this world doth consist." (7) The Lord Jesus Christ not only offers peace with God and believers but also gives precepts of peace in the form of self-denial and Christian discipleship that are in stark contrast to the war commands that are operative under the old Jewish system. (8) Christ and his apostles "foretold that after his law and doctrine should be received in the world" there will be a season of apostasy, troubles, afflictions, wars, and persecutions. "But after they are all removed, and all his adversaries subdued, he will give peace and rest unto his churches and people all the world over." Owen then closes with a declaration on the effectiveness of a literal hermeneutic to overturn Jewish objections about Christ and the Messiah: "Take, then, this prophecy in what

⁷⁶ For Owen's account of the Jewish tradition surrounding Armilus, see Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.11.12 (*Works*, 18:242–243).

sense soever it may be literally expounded, and there is nothing in it that gives the least countenance unto the Judaical pretence from the words.”

4.4 CONCLUSION

Owen concedes that both Jews and Christians share a common sacred text. The problem however is how to interpret it: “They are not the words themselves, but the things promised, that are in controversy.”⁷⁷ Here Owen assumes a commonly held linguistic principle wherein the meaning of a word is determined by what it signifies. This point is crucial for understanding what he means by the literal or plain sense of Scripture and fits securely within his “proof from prophecy” model. When seeking to determine the plain meaning of a biblical passage, Owen elsewhere states that “It is the thing signified that is to be believed, and not the words only, which are the sign thereof; and, therefore, the plain sense and meaning is that which we must inquire after, and is intended when we speak of believing plain words of the Scripture.” This distinction forms the basis of what Owen generically calls “the rules of interpretation.”⁷⁸ It was frequently employed by Protestant scholastics and finds its origin in the writings of Augustine and Aquinas among others.⁷⁹ The advantage of this signification theory for Owen was that it provided him with a linguistic tool to develop his promise-fulfilment hermeneutic in such a way that upheld a literal reading of the promise (the word) by finding its fulfilment in Christ (the thing signified). Thus

⁷⁷ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.18.12 (*Works*, 18:435–436).

⁷⁸ Owen, *Salus electorum, sanguis Jesu: or, The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (1648), lib. 4, cap. 6, pp. 258–259 (*Works*, 10:369).

⁷⁹ See for example, Perkins, *The Arte of Phophesyng*, 30–33; Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:150–154; Whitaker, *A Disputation on Holy Scripture*, 134, 404; cf. Evans, *The Language and Logic of the Bible: The Road to Reformation*, 42–65; Evans, *The Language and Logic of the Bible: The Earlier Middle Ages*, 75–100; Christopher Ocker, “Medieval Exegesis and the Origin of Hermeneutics,” *SJT* 52 (1999): 328–345.

the purpose of the Old Testament is to signify the person and work of Christ through promises, types, and prophecies. The great design of its historical narratives and doctrinal instructions is to anticipate the arrival of the Messiah, and engender faith in him. “Without an apprehension of this design,” Owen states, “neither can a letter of it be understood, nor can a rational man discover any important excellency in it. Him it promiseth, him it typifieth, him it teacheth and prophesieth about, him it calls all men to desire and expect.”⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.17.3 (*Works*, 18:370).

CHAPTER 5

CHRIST AND ABRAHAM: THE ONENESS OF THE CHURCH

So Abraham by faith saw the day of Christ, and rejoiced; and the saints under the Old Testament saw the King in his beauty.

—John Owen¹

Christ and his apostles professed and taught no new Religion, but the same which the Scriptures of the Old Testament did before instruct. . . . Therefore the believing Jews and the converted Gentiles are stiled the children of faithfull Abraham, being justified by faith as Abraham was. Whence we may conclude, that before, under, and after the Law, since the fall of Adam, there was never but one true Catholic Religion, or way to Heaven and happiness.

—Edward Leigh²

5.1 INTRODUCTION

One of Owen’s most important, as well as concise, exercitations is titled “The Oneness of the Church.”³ In the words of the Scottish theologian Patrick Fairbairn (1805–1874), it is “one of the shortest, but, at the same time, one of the most solid and well-digested of his Preliminary Dissertations to his ‘Commentary on the Hebrews’ (Exer. vi).”⁴ In this discourse, Owen focuses on the central role of the Abrahamic covenant for interpreting both the Old and New Testaments. For Owen, God’s covenant with the patriarch Abraham is pivotal for his reading of the

¹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1684), comm. Heb. 11:1 (*Works*, 24:10).

² Edward Leigh, *A Systeme of Body of Divinity Consisting of Ten Books* (London, 1654), 88.

³ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.6.1–7 (*Works*, 18:119–124).

⁴ Patrick Fairbairn, *Prophecy Viewed in Respect to Its Distinctive Nature, Its Special Function, and Proper Interpretation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1856), 53.

progressive unfolding of redemptive history, especially as he articulates significant biblical-theological principles such as the nature of God's promises, the object of saving faith in the Old Testament, and the relationship of Israel and the Church.

The goal of this chapter is to examine Owen's formulation of the Abrahamic covenant, concentrating in particular on his articulation of the "oneness of the church" as an expression of his belief in the continuity of the covenant of grace between the Old and New Testaments. We will begin with an analysis of Exercitation VI and the broad contours of the Abrahamic covenant as outlined by Owen. We will then explore how these themes are subsequently expounded in his commentary.

5.2 ABRAHAM AND THE ONENESS OF THE CHURCH

Owen begins Exercitation VI by arguing that the rejection of Christ as the promised Messiah by both past and present Jews stems in part from their misconception of the nature of the promises of God as well as their misunderstanding of the true identity of the people of God. He states,

The Jews at the time of writing this Epistle (and their posterity in all succeeding generations follow their example and tradition) were not a little confirmed in their obstinacy and unbelief by a misapprehension of the true sense and nature of the promises of the Old Testament; for whereas they found many glorious promises made unto the church in the days of the Messiah, especially concerning the great access of the Gentiles unto it, they looked upon themselves, the posterity of Abraham, on the account of their being his children according to the flesh, as the first, proper, and indeed only subject of them; unto whom, in their accomplishment, others were to be proselyted and joined, the substance and foundation of the church remaining still with them. But the event answered not their expectation.⁵

According to Owen, the nature of God's promises and the identity of God's people are primarily spiritual, not "carnal," issues. This principle is seen clearly in the

⁵ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.6.1 (*Works*, 18:119).

covenant that God made with Abraham. To prove his point, Owen outlines no less than four aspects of the Abrahamic covenant that can be summarised as follows: (1) the renewal of the messianic promise; (2) the privilege of Abraham in redemptive history; (3) the establishment of a double seed; and (4) the oneness of the church in the Old and New Testaments.⁶

5.2.1 THE RENEWAL OF THE MESSIANIC PROMISE

Owen maintains that there is a biblical-theological link between the Abrahamic covenant that was inaugurated in Genesis 12 and the original promise of the Messiah given in Genesis 3:15. He argues that the Abrahamic administration was a renewal and expansion of the Adamic administration of the covenant of grace.⁷ Both of these covenants, he contends, involved a promise of redemption and a demand of obedience.

As a pure and absolute promise, the *protoevangelium* was based entirely on God's "mere grace and mercy" and so became "the support and encouragement of mankind to seek the Lord." However, this promise also includes in it the nature of a covenant. As a result, it demands not only faith in "the promise of the Messiah given

⁶ Compare the six benefits of the Abrahamic covenant itemized in his earlier work, *Theologoumena* (1661): (1) the Abrahamic covenant provides a fuller explanation of the promised seed as the "foundation of all grace" (*omnis gratiae fundamento*); (2) it expands upon the relationship of faith and obedience within the covenant of grace; (3) the promises of the covenant were confined to Abraham and his family; (4) circumcision is instituted as a sign of the covenant; (5) the privileges of the covenant are given to believers and their children; and (6) God entered into a friendship (*amicitiam*) with Abraham and gave him on occasion "repeated revelations" (*iteratis subinde revelationibus*). Owen, *Theologoumena* (1661), 4.1.12–14 (*Works*, 17:265–266; cf. *BT*, 365–367).

⁷ Throughout his exertions, Owen frequently connects the Adamic and Abrahamic administrations of the covenant of grace. For example, he states, "But we have further expositions of this first promise [in Genesis 3:15] and further confirmations of this grace in the Scripture itself: for in the process of time it was renewed unto Abraham, and the accomplishment of it confined unto his family; for his gratuitous call from superstition and idolatry, with the separation of him and his posterity from all the families of the earth, was subservient only unto the fulfilling of the promise before treated of . . . Now, the especial end of this divine dispensation, of this call and separation of Abraham, was to be a means of accomplishing the former promise, or the bringing forth of Him who was to be the deliverer of mankind from the curse that was come upon them for their sin." Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.29 (*Works*, 18:177–178; cf. pp. 179–180, 182–184, 220–221, 263, 363, 375–377, 399–401, 451, *passim*).

unto Adam” but also obedience by the faithful.⁸ Owen is here highlighting the unilateral and bilateral components of the covenant of grace. He argues that both of these principles are operative in God’s covenant with Abraham.

The promise [in Genesis 3:15] was given unto this end and purpose, that men might have a new bottom and foundation of obedience, that of the first covenant being disannulled [i.e., covenant of works]. Hence, in the following explications of the promise, this condition of obedience is expressly added. So upon its renewal unto Abraham, God required that he should “walk before him, and be upright” [Gen. 17:1]. This promise, then, as it hath the nature of a covenant, including the grace that God would show unto sinners in the Messiah, and the obedience that he required from them, was, from the first giving of it, the foundation of the church, and the whole worship of God therein. Unto this church, so founded and built on this covenant, and by means thereof on the redeeming mediatory Seed promised therein, were all the following promises and the privileges exhibited in them given and annexed.⁹

Owen’s point is not that a relationship with God is based upon, or is even maintained by, personal obedience but rather that the establishment of the covenant of grace does not negate the responsibility of godly living for those in covenant with God. Abraham therefore is not only the recipient of divine favour but also is commanded in Genesis 17:1 to walk before God and be upright.

Owen’s concept of a “condition of obedience” within the context of the covenant of grace in general and Genesis 17 in particular is not a novel one. It finds clear precedent in earlier reformed articulations of the Abrahamic covenant such as those by Zwingli, Bullinger, Musculus, Calvin, Vermigli, Olevianus, among others, as Lyle D. Bierma and Peter A. Lillback have convincingly shown.¹⁰ Rather, Owen’s

⁸ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.6.2 (*Works*, 18:120).

⁹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.6.2 (*Works*, 18:120).

¹⁰ Bierma states, “It is our judgment, then, that there was no fundamental differences in the conception of the covenant in the major first-generation (Zwingli) and second-generation (Musculus, Bullinger, Calvin) Reformed theologians who dealt with the doctrine. . . . All stressed both the conditions of human faith and obedience in the covenant and the divine sovereignty and initiative by which the elect are led to fulfill them. What has not always been recognized is, first, that in each of these thinkers there was both a monopoleuric and a dipoleuric dimension to the covenant of grace and, second, that the dipoleuric dimension was never treated in such a way as to threaten the monergistic soteriology

point is a more basic one: the covenant of grace brings with it both a proclamation of divine promise and a stipulation of human responsibility. But even more significant for Owen is the idea that the covenant of grace provides “a new bottom and foundation” upon which those in covenant with God can confidently stand and offer acts of obedience unto God, despite the fact that they stand as condemned sinners in light of the divine sanction expressed in the first covenant with Adam (cf. Gen. 2:17).¹¹ One difference therefore between this covenant and the covenant of works is that God has now pledged to show his grace, and not his wrath, to these sinners in the promised Messiah. As a result, all the subsequent benefits of the covenant of grace are procured not by means of an individual’s ability to meet the terms and conditions of the covenant but by trusting in the work of the “redeeming mediatory Seed promised.”

5.2.2 THE PRIVILEGE OF ABRAHAM IN REDEMPTIVE HISTORY

For Owen the institution of the church, that is, the people of God, is founded on the covenant of grace. Stated in dogmatic terms, the doctrine of the covenant serves as

that underlay all early Reformed doctrine.” Lyle D. Bierma, *The Covenant Theology of Caspar Olevianus* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2005), 61, see also pp. 31–68 for extensive primary source quotations; cf. Bierma, “Federal Theology in the Sixteenth Century: Two Traditions?” *WTJ* 45 (1983): 304–321. See also the similar discussion by Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin’s Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 110–125; 162–172; cf. Lillback, “The Early Reformed Covenant Paradigm: Vermigli in the Context of Bullinger, Luther and Calvin,” in *Peter Martyr Vermigli and the European Reformations: Semper Reformanda*, ed. Frank A. James, III (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 70–96. Both Bierma and Lillback provide counter proposals to the arguments set forth by scholars such as Trinterud, Baker, and McCoy who have drawn a clear distinction between the Rhineland theologians (such as Zwingli and Bullinger) who supposedly developed a bilateral, conditional view of the covenant as opposed to Calvin who taught a unilateral, unconditional view of the covenant. See Leonard J. Trinterud, “The Origins of Puritanism,” *Church History* 20 (1951): 37–57; J. Wayne Baker, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant: The Other Reformed Tradition* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1980); Baker, “Heinrich Bullinger, the Covenant, and the Reformed Tradition in Retrospect,” *SCJ* 29 (1998): 359–376; and Charles S. McCoy and J. Wayne Baker, *Fountainhead of Federalism: Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenantal Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991). For a historiographical overview of this debate, see J. Mark Beach, *Christ and the Covenant: Francis Turretin’s Federal Theology as a Defense of the Doctrine of Grace* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 19–62.

¹¹ On the divine sanction of the covenant of works, see chapter 3 for more discussion.

the basis for not only soteriology but also ecclesiology. As a result, the formation of God's people coincides with the establishment of God's covenant. He states, "Neither hath, or ever had, any individual person any spiritual right unto, or interest in, any of those promises or privileges, whatever his outward condition were, but only by virtue in the church built on the covenant."¹² While this maxim held true for the people of God in the interim period between Adam and Abraham, "in the process of time, God was pleased to confine this church, as unto the ordinary visible dispensation of his grace, unto the person and posterity of Abraham."¹³ The Jews however, according to Owen, wrongly deduced from this biblical premise that God's covenant blessings were exclusively the prerogative of the biological descendants of Abraham, namely ethnic Israel. Owen maintains,

Upon this restriction of the church covenant and promise, the Jews of old managed a plea in their own justification against the doctrine of the Lord Christ and his apostles. 'We are the children, the seed of Abraham,' was their continual cry; on the account whereof they presumed that all the promises belonged unto them, and upon the matter unto them alone.¹⁴

Owen counters this "woeful and fatal mistake" by asserting that the privileges given to Abraham by God were both physical and spiritual. He reduces these Abrahamic privileges unto two headings. The first concerns the carnality of God's promise to Abraham: "that according to the flesh [Abraham] should be the father of the Messiah, the promised seed; who was the very life of the covenant, the fountain and cause of all the blessings contained in it." Owen accordingly sees the Abrahamic

¹² Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.6.2 (*Works*, 18:120).

¹³ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.6.3 (*Works*, 18:121). At this juncture of his exercitations, Owen makes a passing reference to the timespan between Adam and Abraham and does not see the need to trace the developments of the covenant of grace in the ante- and post-diluvian periods, as he does in *Theologoumena* (1661), lib. 2, cap. 3; and lib. 3, cap. 1 (*Works*, 17:148–167; cf. *BT*, 191–222); cf. Owen, *Hebrews* (1684), comm. Heb. 11:4–7 (*Works*, 24:21–55).

¹⁴ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.6.3 (*Works*, 18:121).

covenant as programmatic for the progression of redemptive history in that God revealed to the patriarch that the promised Seed would be his biological descendant. Following Genesis 12, Owen argues, the entire Old Testament bears witness that someone from the line of Abraham will deliver the nations from the moral and penal consequences of the fall.¹⁵ The special privilege therefore afforded to Abraham and his posterity was that the Messiah would come from the genealogical line of Abraham not that the benefits of the covenant would be limited to it.¹⁶

The second privilege of Abraham, according to Owen, was that he was the father of all who believed, including Jews and Gentiles alike. Building upon Pauline texts such as Galatians 3:7 and Romans 4:11–13, Owen states that the biblical patriarch was the “pattern of the faith of the church in all generations; and that none should ever come to be a member of [the covenant], or a sharer in its blessings, but by the same faith that he had fixed on the Seed that was in the promise, to be brought forth from him into the world.” Stated more succinctly, Owen regarded Abraham’s faith as paradigmatic for Abraham’s children. Therefore, regardless of one’s nationality, all but only those who have faith in the Messiah are considered to be true members of the covenant of grace and are thus given the right of being called Abraham’s “spiritual children.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.30 (*Works*, 18:179; cf. pp. 182–183, 264–265, 375–377, 400, 431–432).

¹⁶ Cf. “In pursuit hereof were [Abraham’s] posterity separated from the rest of the world, and preserved a peculiar people, that through them the promised Seed might be brought forth in the fulness of time, and be of them according unto the flesh, Rom. ix 5.” Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.6.3 (*Works*, 18:121).

¹⁷ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.6.3 (*Works*, 18:121).

5.2.3 THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A DOUBLE SEED

Following from these two Abrahamic privileges is the corresponding reality of what Owen calls a “double seed”: one according to the flesh and the other according to the promise. He states, “Answerably unto this twofold end of the separation of Abraham, there was a double seed allotted unto him;—a seed according to the flesh, separated to the bringing forth of the Messiah according unto the flesh; and a seed according to the promise, that is, such as by faith should have interest in the promise, or all the elect of God.”¹⁸ Owen is adamant that one’s status as a child of the flesh does not guarantee one’s status as a child of promise. Yet he is careful to note that these two categories at times overlap and are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Such is the case for individuals such as Isaac and Jacob. As the “carnal seed” of Abraham, they enjoyed the unique privilege of standing in the physical line of the promised Redeemer, as they were “separated unto the bringing forth of the Messiah after the flesh.” But they were also part of the “spiritual seed” since “by their personal faith, they were interested in the covenant of Abraham their father.”¹⁹ As the record of the Old Testament attests and the epistle to the Hebrews confirms, Owen insists, some were never more than heirs of Abraham according to the flesh.

The biblical witness gives priority to the spiritual seed over the carnal seed, since even those who are not from the physical lineage of Abraham can share in the spiritual privileges of his covenant. Owen states,

And many . . . who were not of the carnal seed of Abraham, nor interested in the privilege of bringing forth the Messiah in the flesh, were yet designed to be made his spiritual seed by faith; that in them he might become “heir of the world,” [Rom. 4:13] and all nations of the earth be blessed in him [cf. Gen.

¹⁸ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.6.4 (*Works*, 18:121).

¹⁹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.6.4 (*Works*, 18:122).

12:3; 22:18]. Now, it is evident that it is the second privilege, or spiritual seed, wherein the church, to whom the promises are made, is founded, and whereof it doth consist,—namely, in them who by faith are interested in the covenant of Abraham, whether they be of the carnal seed or no.²⁰

Owen recognises a significant place for the nation of Israel within the economy of God’s covenant scheme as revealed in Scripture. They are the ethnic group through whom the Abrahamic Seed would enter onto the stage of history. As Owen vividly writes, “through [their] loins God would derive the promised Seed into the world.” However, the great mistake of the Jews, according to Owen, is that “they thought no more was needful to interest them in the covenant of Abraham but that they were his seed according to the flesh; and they constantly pleaded the latter privilege as the ground and reason of the former [i.e., the spiritual].”²¹ Furthermore, since the promised Seed has come in the flesh in the person of Christ, the carnal privilege of the Abrahamic covenant is rendered obsolete and thus cannot serve as the fundamental basis upon which an Israelite is made a beneficiary of God’s covenant mercies. Owen states, “Seeing, therefore, that their other [carnal] privilege was come to an end . . . by the actual coming of the Messiah, whereunto they were subservient, if they did not, by faith in the promised seed, attain an interest in this of the spiritual blessing, it is evident that they could on no account be considered as actual sharers in

²⁰ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.6.4 (*Works*, 18:122); cf. “Now, the seed to whom the [Abrahamic] promise is given, are those only that obtain it by faith . . . Moreover, as those only of the carnal seed of Abraham whom embrace the promise are received in this matter to be his seed, so all that follow the faith of Abraham, and believe unto righteousness, as he did, are his sons and the seed of the promise, although carnally they are not of his offspring.” *Ibid.*, 1.18.6 (*Works*, 18:431; cf. pp. 450–451).

²¹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.6.5 (*Works*, 18:122).

the covenant of God.”²² The legacy of Abraham therefore is ultimately a matter of faith not flesh.²³

5.2.4 THE ONENESS OF THE CHURCH IN THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

One important consequence of Owen’s emphasis on the primacy of faith in the Abrahamic covenant is a strong commitment to the continuity of the covenant of grace as an interpretive framework to explain the transition from the Old to the New Testament. This can be seen in Owen’s insistence that Israel and the Church are not two distinct peoples but are essentially one spiritual community predicated on the same basic covenant. Both have a shared interest in the promised Messiah. He states,

And in the covenant made with [Abraham], as to that which concerns, not the bringing forth of the promised Seed according to the flesh, but as unto faith therein, and in the work of redemption to be performed thereby, lies the foundation of the church in all ages. Wheresoever this covenant is, and with whomsoever it is established, with them is the church; unto whom all the promises and privileges of the church do belong. Hence it was, that at the coming of the Messiah there was not one church taken away, and another set up in the room thereof; but the church continued the same, in those that were the children of Abraham according to the faith. The Christian church is not another church, but the very same that was before the coming of Christ, having the same faith with it, and interested in the same covenant.²⁴

While the spiritual composition of the church is fundamentally the same across the testamental divide, there are clear external differences between the nation of Israel and the Christian church. Owen identifies no less than four “great alterations” in the outward state and condition of the church in the New Testament: (1) the carnal privilege of the Jews ceased with the arrival of Christ as the promised Messiah; (2) the

²² Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.6.5 (*Works*, 18:123).

²³ “We have seen that Abraham, on the account of his faith, and not of his separation according to the flesh, was the father of all that believe, and heir of the world.” Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.6.6 (*Works*, 18:123).

²⁴ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.6.6 (*Works*, 18:123).

ordinances of worship seen most clearly in the Mosaic Law also expired; (3) new ordinances of the church were established, namely, Baptism and the Lord's Supper; and (4) believing Gentiles became fellow-heirs of the Abrahamic covenant along with believing Jews. Despite these changes, Owen insists, "None of these [differences], nor all of them together, made any such alteration in the church but that it was still one and the same. The olive-tree was the same, only some branches were broken off, and others planted in; the Jews fell, and the Gentiles came in their room."²⁵

The phrase "oneness of the church" therefore is a shorthand expression for Owen to refer to the stability and continuity of the covenant of grace founded upon the promise of the Messiah on the one hand and the spiritual progeny of Abraham built upon that covenant on the other. In short, the church is founded upon the covenant. Since the covenant is essentially one, the church also is essentially one.

5.3 ABRAHAM AND HEBREWS

Having surveyed Owen's preliminary exercitation on the oneness of the church, we now turn to his exposition proper to see how the theological principles outlined in his discourse informs his exegesis of Hebrews. We will examine three key passages from his commentary dealing with the promise of the Abrahamic covenant.²⁶ For

²⁵ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.6.7 (*Works*, 18:124; cf. 22:385).

²⁶ Owen makes hundreds of references to Abraham throughout his exercitations and exposition. In the interest of drawing manageable parameters of investigation, we will limit our analysis to those places where the patriarch is explicitly referenced in the epistle and where the scope of the passage impinges on the themes outlined in Exercitation VI: namely, Hebrews 2:16; 6:13–16; and 11:8–19. As a result, a passage such as Hebrews 7:1–10 will be excluded from this discussion, since it focuses primarily on the identification and significance of Melchizedek and not on the nature of the Abrahamic covenant per se. For a meticulous examination of Owen's exegesis of this passage from Hebrews 7, set in the context of puritan typology, see Henry Knapp, "Understanding the Mind of God: John Owen and Seventeenth-Century Exegetical Methodology" (PhD diss., Calvin Theological Seminary, 2002), 302–334; cf. Brian J. Lee, *Johannes Cocceius and the Exegetical Roots of Federal Theology: Reformation Developments in the Interpretation of Hebrews 7–10* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009).

comparative purposes, the commentaries by Chrysostom, Aquinas, Calvin, and William Gouge (1575–1653), along with select annotations on Hebrews, will provide historical cross-references for our study.²⁷

5.3.1 HEBREWS 2:16: “A DISCRETE AXIOM”

Owen’s translates Hebrews 2:16 as follows: “For verily not anywhere doth he take (ἐπιλαμβάνεται) angels, but he taketh (ἐπιλαμβάνεται) the seed of Abraham.” He finds in this verse “a discrete axiom” regarding the person of Christ: that is, Scripture nowhere states that the Messiah would take for himself an angelic nature; but it does say that he will come from the seed of Abraham.²⁸ In fulfilment of the physical privilege of the Abrahamic promise, the Son of God assumed into personal union with himself the nature of man. Owen states,

²⁷ Chrysostom, Aquinas, Calvin, and Gouge are referenced since they are well-known representative figures of the exegetical tradition on the epistle to the Hebrews and were recognized by Owen for their contributions. He makes ample use of Chrysostom, regularly interacts with Aquinas, and explicitly references Calvin’s commentary on several occasions (e.g., *Works*, 18:73; 20:89; 21:349; 24:397). While Owen makes only one passing citation to Gouge’s exposition (*Works*, 23:295; cf. a possible veiled reference in 18:5), it was one of the most substantial treatments of Hebrews prior to Owen’s work. In addition, these four commentaries are registered in the auction catalogue of Owen’s library. A collection of essays on Chrysostom, Aquinas, Calvin, and Owen may be found in Jon C. Laansma and Daniel J. Treier, eds., *Christology, Hermeneutics and Hebrews: Profiles from the History of Interpretation* (London: T&T Clark, 2013), 74–154. For a brief account of the importance of Chrysostom’s homilies, along with other patristic commentators on Hebrews, see Erik M. Heen and Philip D. W. Krey, *Hebrews, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament*, vol. 10 (Downers Grove: IVP, 2005), xvii–xxvi. On Calvin’s commentary, see Kenneth Hagen, *Hebrews Commenting from Erasmus to Bèze, 1516–1598* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1981), 58–65; Gary Neal Hansen, “Calvin as Commentator on Hebrews and the Catholic Epistles,” in *Calvin and the Bible*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 257–281; T. H. L. Parker, “Calvin’s Commentary on Hebrews,” in *Church, Word, and Spirit: Historical and Theological Essays in Honor of Geoffrey W. Bromiley*, eds. James E. Bradley and Richard A. Muller (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 135–140; Parker, “Introduction,” in *Ioannis Calvini Opera Exegetica, Commentarius in Epistolam ad Hebraeos*, ed. T. H. L. Parker (Geneva: Droz, 1996), ix–xxxvii; and Barbara Pitkin, *What Pure Eyes Could See: Calvin’s Doctrine of Faith in Its Exegetical Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 71–90. For biographical information on Gouge, see Brett Ussher, “Gouge, William (1575–1653),” in *ODNB*; see also the comments by Knapp, “Understanding the Mind of God,” 18, 106. For an overview of the various annotations produced in the post-Reformation period, with special reference to the *Westminster Annotations* (1645), see the series of essays by Muller in Richard A. Muller and Rowland S. Ward, *Scripture and Worship: Biblical Interpretation and the Directory for Worship* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2007), 3–82.

²⁸ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), comm. Heb. 2:16 (*Works*, 20:455, 460).

For how doth Christ in the Scripture take the seed of Abraham, in such a sense as that therein nothing is spoken of him in reference unto angels? It is evident that it was in that he was of the posterity of Abraham according to the flesh; that he was promised to Abraham that he should be of his seed, yea, that he should be his seed, as Gal. iii.16. This was the great principle, the great expectation of the Hebrews, that the Messiah should be the seed of Abraham. This was declared unto them in the promise; and this accordingly was accomplished. And he is here said to take the seed of Abraham, because in the Scripture it is so plainly, so often affirmed that he should so do, when not one word is anywhere spoken that he should be an angel, or take their nature upon him. And this, as I said, gives us the true meaning of the words.²⁹

At least two observations are worth noting for our present purposes. First, Owen's promise-fulfilment hermeneutic is a driving force behind his reading of the text. He states, "Nowhere is it spoken in the Scripture that Christ taketh angels. And what is so spoken, he is said to do. And thus also the affirmation clause of [the apostle's] proposition, 'But he taketh the seed of Abraham,' is to be referred to the Scripture. There it is promised, there it is spoken, and therein it is done by him."³⁰ In particular, Owen's account of the carnal privilege of the Abrahamic covenant as developed in his essay governs his understanding of the person of the Messiah and brings a measure of clarity to his articulation of the assumption of Christ's human nature. The point is simple but should not be missed: the Son of God took upon himself flesh and blood to fulfil the promise given to Abraham. Significantly, while Owen elsewhere gives pride of place to the spiritual privilege of the Abrahamic covenant by focusing on the centrality of faith for Abraham's seed, the carnal privilege of the covenant plays a substantial role in his understanding of the human nature of Christ, who for Owen is Abraham's Seed *par excellence*.

Second, Owen's exegesis of this passage further illuminates his understanding of the identity of the Abrahamic Seed. This is seen in his analysis of

²⁹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), comm. Heb. 2:16 (*Works*, 20:455).

³⁰ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), comm. Heb. 2:16 (*Works*, 20:454).

the verb ἐπιλαμβάνω, which he renders “to take hold of” as opposed to those who translate it “to help and relieve.”³¹ He points to the semantic domain of the word and its usage in Hebrews 2:16 as supporting the doctrine of the hypostatic union of Christ, and, in particular, his assuming human flesh as a fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant.³² Owen is quick to point out that the one who “takes hold” of the seed of Abraham is none other than the Son of God. Against Socinian claims to the contrary, Owen cites Chrysostom in support of his interpretation: “Chrysostom . . . expressly referreth this whole verse unto the Lord Christ’s assumption of the nature of man, and not of the nature of angels.”³³ From this text, Owen finds exegetical warrant for the Chalcedonian formula that Christ is both fully God and fully man in one person and deduces no less than eight points in support of his claim.³⁴

³¹ Owen counters the arguments of Protestants such as Sebastian Castellio and John Cameron, the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius, Roman scholars such as Francisco Ribera, Gulielmus Estius, and Cornelius à Lapide, and especially Socinian interpreters such as Jonas Schlichting and Johann Crell, who all argue that the sense of the word means “to help and relieve.” His reasoning is that such a translation fails to give credence to the etymology of the word, the context of Hebrews 2, and the nature of the Abrahamic promise. See Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), comm. Heb. 2:16 (*Works*, 20:455–461). In contrast to Owen, the reformed theologian Edward Leigh follows the exegesis of Grotius and Estius, “‘For verily he tooke not on him the nature of Angels.’ The word in the originall ἐπιλαμβάνω, signifies properly to take a man with thy hand, either to lead him some whether, or to uphold him thereby to help him. See Matth. 14.13. Mark 8.23. and Luke 9.47 and 14.4. Hence figuratively it is translated, to signifie succouring, or helping. For when we would help one from falling, or sinking under some burden, or would raise him being fallen, then we put our hand to him, and take hold of him.” Edward Leigh, *Annotations upon All the New Testament Philologicall and Theologicall* (London, 1650), 346, see marginalia for references to Grotius and Estius.

³² Owen’s interpretation of Hebrews 2:16 is basically the same as the *Dutch Annotations* (1657) on this passage. It states, “For verily he assumeth not the angels, [That is, the Scripture no where saith that he should assume the Angels, but the seed of Abraham, Gen. 12.3. and 22.10. as this actually appeared also in his becoming man,] but he assumeth the seed of Abraham [that is, the humane nature of the seed of Abraham. For that some expound the word assume by help, it is absurd, being the good Angels have no need of help for their deliverance, forasmuch as they have not sinned.]” See also the similar gloss in the *Westminster Annotations* (1645).

³³ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), comm. Heb. 2:16 (*Works*, 20:456); cf. Chrysostom, homily 5, on Heb. 2:16–17, in *NPNF*¹, 14:388–393.

³⁴ Owen states, “The Lord Jesus Christ is truly God and man in one person; and this is fully manifested in these words [of Hebrews 2:16].” He then itemizes eight points in support of this claim; they are summarised as follows: (1) this verse assumes the deity of Christ, “for the subject of this proposition, ‘He took on him,’ etc., denotes a person pre-existing unto the act of taking here ascribed unto him; which was no other than the Son of God.” (2) Nevertheless, while the Son of God remained what he always was, he also became what he was not; that is, he took upon himself another nature. (3)

Aquinas likewise sees in this verse a biblical basis for the hypostatic union, and notes in particular that the Son of God assumed (*assumpsit*) a human nature “not in the abstract (*non tamen idealem*) but in an individual, and from the seed of Abraham.” The purpose of which was so that the Jews “who glory in being of the seed of Abraham, might venerate Christ more (*magis venerentus Christum*).”³⁵ Calvin draws a similar conclusion, and connects the statement that the Son took (*assumit*) upon himself the seed of Abraham with the explicit promise of Scripture. In addition, he also sees this passage as giving credence to the traditional definition of the person of Christ. Calvin states,

And the Apostle speaks of nature, and intimates that Christ, clothed with flesh, was real man, so that there was unity of person in two natures (*duabus naturis sit personae unitas*). For this passage does not favour Nestorius, who imagined a twofold Christ, as though the Son of God was not a real man but only dwelt in man’s flesh. But we see that the Apostle’s meaning was very different, for his object was to teach us that we find in the Son of God a brother, being a partaker of our common nature (*propter societatem communis naturae*). Being

More specifically, according to the divine promise, he took upon himself the seed of Abraham “to be his own nature.” (4) And thus he had to take that nature “into personal subsistence with himself, in the hypostasis of the Son of God” and did not take upon himself another human person (i.e., doctrine of anhypostasis). (5) Christ is therefore truly man, of the seed of Abraham, for his human nature has “a subsistence communicated unto it by the Son of God” (i.e., doctrine of enhypostasis). (6) However, Christ’s taking of another nature is “done without a multiplication of persons in him” (i.e., contra Nestorianism). (7) Neither is there in Christ a mixture or confusion of natures (i.e., contra Monophysitism); “for he took the seed of Abraham to be his human nature, which if mixed with the divine it could not be.” And (8) Christ assumed a human nature “inseparably and for ever.” He concludes by stating that he has handled these things “at large elsewhere.” Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), comm. Heb. 2:16 (*Works*, 20:461–462). For Owen’s extended treatment of Christ’s assuming a human nature in relationship to his hypostatic union, see *Works*, 1:223–251; cf. the discussions in Christopher H. Cleveland, *Thomism in John Owen* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013); Oliver D. Crisp, *Revisioning Christology: Theology in the Reformed Tradition* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 91–110; Richard Daniels, *The Christology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004), 262–308; Stephen R. Holmes, “Reformed Varieties of the *Communicatio Idiomatum*,” in *The Person of Christ*, eds. Stephen R. Holmes and Murray A. Rae (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 70–86; Kelly M. Kapic, *Communion with God: The Divine and the Human in the Theology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 78–83; Bruce L. McCormack, “‘With Loud Cries and Tears’: The Humanity of the Son in the Epistle to the Hebrews,” in *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology*, eds. Richard Bauckham, et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 37–68; Alan Spence, *Incarnation and Inspiration: John Owen and the Coherence of Christology* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 17–42; Carl R. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen’s Trinitarian Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 151–164.

³⁵ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Letter of Saint Paul to the Hebrews*, trans. F. R. Larcher, eds. J. Mortensen and E. Alarcón, in *Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), 41:68.

not therefore satisfied with calling him man, he says that he was begotten of human seed; and he names expressed the seed of Abraham, in order that what he said might have more credit, as being taken from Scripture.³⁶

Gouge also expounds upon the fact that the person of the Son of God did not simply assume a human nature in general but took upon himself the seed of Abraham in particular. He follows the pattern seen especially in Owen and Calvin of tying together the biblical strands of the Abrahamic covenant and Hebrews 2:16 with the theological formulation of Chalcedon.³⁷

5.3.2 HEBREWS 6:13–16: “THE SOLE FOUNDATION”

Owen begins his exposition of this pericope by situating it in the wider context of the earlier parenetic passage in Hebrews 5:11–6:12.³⁸ In particular, he argues that the biblical writer upholds Abraham as a model of one who inherited the promises of God “through faith and patient long-suffering” (Heb. 6:12).³⁹ Whereas the previous verses were aimed at exhortation by means of warning readers of the dangers of unbelief and apostasy, the present text was designed for encouragement by means of reminding them of the saving work of God in Christ. Owen makes two preliminary remarks in this regard. First, he suggests that Hebrews 6:13–16 serves as a

³⁶ Calvin, comm. Heb. 2:16, in CTS, 22:74 (*CO*, 55:34).

³⁷ William Gouge, *A Commentary on the Whole Epistle to the Hebrews*, 3 vols. (1655; repr. Edinburgh, 1866), 1:175–179. The Scottish theologian and biblical commentator David Dickson (c. 1583–1663) follows the same pattern. See his *A Short Explanation of the Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews* (Aberdene [sic], 1635), 33–34. For biographical details on Dickson, see K. D. Holfelder, “Dickson, David (c.1583–1662),” in *ODNB*; and for his commentary on Hebrews, see Carol A. Williams, “The Decree of Redemption is in Effect a Covenant: David Dickson and the Covenant of Redemption” (PhD diss., Calvin Theological Seminary, 2005).

³⁸ For a careful evaluation of Owen’s exegesis of the warning passages in Hebrews, see Knapp, “Understanding the Mind of God,” 335–374; cf. Knapp, “Augustine and Owen on Perseverance,” *WTJ* 62 (2000): 65–88; Knapp, “John Owen’s Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4–6: Eternal Perseverance of the Saints in Puritan Exegesis,” *CTJ* 34 (2003): 29–52.

³⁹ See Owen’s translation of this verse in *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 6:12 (*Works*, 22:202–204; cf. p. 221).

declaration of the promissory nature of the gospel as originally given unto Abraham and later accomplished in Christ; and second, that the promise of the gospel is for all who like the patriarch believe in it.⁴⁰ He states,

In the close of the foregoing verse the apostle expreseth the end of all his exhortations, what they tended unto, and what would be the advantage of all that complied with them in faith and obedience; and this was, the inheriting of the promises, or the enjoyment of the things promised by God unto them that believe and obey. Of all that intercourse that is between God and sinners, the promise on the part of God is the sole foundation. Thereby doth God express his goodness, grace, truth, and sovereign power, unto men. Herein all supernatural religion and all our concernments therein are founded, and not on anything in us. And on our part, the inheritance of the promises, in the effects of these holy properties of God towards us, is the end of what we look for and aim at in all our obedience.⁴¹

As can be seen in this quotation, Owen once again returns to the theme of Christ as the *fundamentum Scripturae*. In this context he uses it as an explanatory tool for expounding “the great promise made unto Abraham” in terms of its fulfilment in the mediatory work of Christ. As he concisely states, “In that promise both the great blessing of Christ himself and the whole work of his mediation were included.”⁴² Later in his exposition of this text, Owen further argues that the Abrahamic promise relates to the person of Christ in two distinct ways: “For the promise which is made concerning Christ in one sense, is made unto him in another.”⁴³ In other words, from the perspective of the historical unfolding of the covenant of grace, this promise was given to Abraham and his spiritual heirs in anticipation of the coming of the Messiah. But understood in light of the covenant of

⁴⁰ See Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 6:13 (*Works*, 22:220–221). For Owen’s argument that the divine promise given to Abraham contains the substance of the gospel, see his *Hebrews* (1674), comm. Heb. 4:1 (*Works*, 21:232–234).

⁴¹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 6:13 (*Works*, 22:219–220).

⁴² Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 6:13 (*Works*, 22:221–222).

⁴³ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 6:13–16 (*Works*, 22:229).

redemption, the promise finds its origin in the eternal pact that the heavenly Father made with the Son. Owen states,

As to the benefit and effects of the coming of Christ, it was made concerning him unto Abraham and all his seed; but as unto the first grant, intention, and stability of the promise, it was made unto Christ himself, with respect unto that everlasting covenant which was between the Father and him, in his undertaking the work of mediation. Or, the Lord Christ may be considered either as the undertaker of the covenant with God, and so the promise was made unto him; or as the accomplishment of the terms of it for us, so the promise was concerning him.⁴⁴

The concept of *fundamentum* therefore helps Owen to explain the full scope of the biblical narrative in at least three ways. First, it brings cohesion to his promise-fulfilment hermeneutic, as we have already seen in chapters 2 and 3. In this instance, Owen applies the *fundamentum* principle directly to the work of Christ and the Abrahamic covenant. Second, it provides a platform for him to speak of both the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace in such a way as to hold together the realms of eternity and time. As we saw in chapter 3, far from removing the point of salvation from the domain of history, Owen's emphasis upon the eternal covenant between the Father and the Son serves as the very basis upon which he can speak of the accomplishment of the Abrahamic promise by the Lord Jesus Christ in his earthly ministry. Third, it supplies him with a theological rationale for the stability of the promises of God throughout redemptive history. God's promises are like God; they are dependable and unchanging. In the words of Owen, "No promise of God shall ever fail, or be of none effect. We may fail, or come short of the promise by our unbelief, but the promises themselves shall never fail."⁴⁵ In the case of Abraham, as

⁴⁴ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 6:13–16 (*Works*, 22:229–230; cf. p. 225).

⁴⁵ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 6:13–16 (*Works*, 22:231); cf. "So unspeakable is the weakness of our faith, that we stand in need of unconceivable divine condescension for its confirmation.—The immutability of God's counsel is the foundation of our faith; until this be manifest, it is impossible that ever faith should be sure and steadfast." Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm.

Owen points out, God swore by himself in order to guarantee the fulfilment of the promise (cf. Heb. 4:14; Gen. 22:16–18) and thereby encourage the people of God to trust in his sovereign provision, even amidst trials and temptations.⁴⁶ For these reasons, Owen can speak of the divine promise given unto Abraham and fulfilled in Christ as the “sole foundation” of the relationship between God and sinners.⁴⁷

Having outlined the biblical and theological contours of the passage, Owen therefore summarises Hebrews 6:13–16 as follows:

There is in the words, observing as near as we can their order in the text, in the distribution, 1. The person unto whom the promises were made, and who is proposed for the example of the Hebrews; which is Abraham. 2. The promise made unto him; which is that of Christ himself and the benefits of his mediation. 3. The confirmation of that promise by the oath of God; “God sware.” 4. The especial nature of that oath; “God sware by himself.” 5. The reason hereof; because he had none greater by whom he might swear. 6. The end of the whole on the part of Abraham; he obtained the promise by patient waiting, or enduring. 7. The assurance of the promise on the part of God as confirmed by his oath, by a general maxim of things among men, grounded on the light of nature and received in their universal practice; “for verily men swear by the greater,” etc.⁴⁸

As Owen unpacks each of these headings, he gives considerable attention to seminal texts such as the self-maledictory oath of God in Genesis 15, the naming of Abraham and the establishment of circumcision in Genesis 17, and the renewal and confirmation of the promises of the covenant in Genesis 22. Furthermore, the same themes developed in Exercitation VI emerge throughout his exposition of these verses in

Heb. 6:17 (*Works*, 22:270; cf. pp. 241, 253, 260, etc.). This is reminiscent of Calvin’s comments on God’s accommodation, “See how kindly God as a gracious Father accommodates (*accommodet*) himself to our slowness to believe; as he sees that we rest not on his simple word, that he might more fully impress it on our hearts he adds an oath.” Calvin, comm. Heb. 2:17, in CTS, 22:150 (*CO*, 55:79); cf. Gouge, comm. Heb. 2:17, in *A Commentary on Hebrews*, 2:77.

⁴⁶ See Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 6:13–16 (*Works*, 22:223, 227, 231, and esp. 235–240, etc.).

⁴⁷ Cf. Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.19.9 (*Works*, 18:454).

⁴⁸ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 6:13 (*Works*, 22:222).

Hebrews, especially concerning the carnal and spiritual privileges of Abraham and his posterity, as well as the corresponding principle of the double seed mentioned above.⁴⁹

Chrysostom focuses on the pastoral context of the passage in providing comfort for those experiencing trial and tribulation, and who like Abraham have yet to benefit from the fulfilment of God's promises. Consolation, he suggests, is found not "from things future" but "from the past" in God's promises.⁵⁰ In a similar vein as Owen, but with far less detail, Aquinas, Calvin, Dickson, Jean Diodati (1576–1649), Gouge, the *Dutch Annotations*, and the *Westminster Annotations* limit their comments more or less to the confines of the text. In doing so, they focus their discussions upon Abraham as a model of faith and also on the immutability of God as the basis of the divine oath.⁵¹ Diodati, for example, links the two in his gloss of Hebrews 2:16,

Hee [Paul] sheweth that Abrahams faith could not be frustrate [sic] of its expectation, being grounded upon Gods promises, confirmed by an oath, to which if there be credit given amongst men, because God is called as a witnesse and a Judge: how much more ought wee to beleeeve it, when it is made use of by God Himselfe, from whom depends the virtue of all oaths?⁵²

Gouge gives a relatively exhaustive account of these two themes. Like Owen and Diodati, he sees the promise of God as the ground of Abraham's faith, "The apostle, to give proof of Abraham's faith and patience, maketh mention of God's promise, to shew that God's promise is the only true ground of faith and patience. . . . God's

⁴⁹ See Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 6:13–16 (*Works*, 22:222–251, esp. pp. 222–235, 250–251, etc.).

⁵⁰ Chrysostom, homily 11, on Heb. 6:13–16, in *NPNF*¹, 14:418.

⁵¹ Calvin, comm. Heb. 6:13–17, in *CTS*, 22:147–151 (*CO*, 55:77–80); Dickson, *A Short Explanation of Hebrews*, 103–105; Jean Diodati, *Pious and Learned Annotations upon the Holy Bible*, 2nd ed. (London, 1648), lib. 2, p. 373; Gouge, comm. Heb. 6:13–15, in *A Commentary on Hebrews*, 2:48–60; *Westminster Annotations*, comm. Heb. 6:13–16; *Dutch Annotations*, comm. Heb. 6:13–16. In addition, Aquinas, Calvin, Gouge, and Owen each take time in their respective expositions of Hebrews 2:16 to argue for the biblical basis and legitimacy of oath-taking.

⁵² Diodati, *Annotations*, lib. 2, p. 373.

promise is as his very essence, which changeth not.”⁵³ However, not one of these commentators use Hebrews 6:13–16 as an occasion to distinguish the relationship of the Abrahamic promise to Christ in terms of the covenants of redemption and grace, as does Owen. Nor do their treatments of these verses explicitly build upon the concept of *fundamentum*, even if Diodati and Gouge anticipate the substance of the idea. This is not to imply that Owen’s exegesis is substantially different than these earlier expositors; his conclusions are nearly identical to theirs. But it does indicate that his commentary represents a refining of the exegetical tradition of this text and serves as an example of how Owen’s federal theology supported his hermeneutics.

5.3.3 HEBREWS 11:8–19: PERSEVERING FAITH

Owen begins his exposition of Hebrews 11 with a sweeping overview of the epistle, and focuses in particular on the call to perseverance in faith: “The general nature of this epistle, as unto the kind of writing, is parenetical or hortatory; which is taken from its end and design. And the exhortation proposed is unto constancy and perseverance in the faith of the Lord Jesus Christ and profession of the gospel, against temptations and persecutions.”⁵⁴ In keeping with this overall design, Owen argues that the faith spoken of in Hebrews 11 is not technically justifying faith but rather the faith of those who are justified. In other words, this is a chapter about persevering faith. He states,

For the apostle treats not in this place of justification, or of faith as justifying, or of its interest in justification; but of its efficacy and operation in them that are justified, with respect unto constancy and perseverance in their

⁵³ Gouge, comm. Heb. 6:13, in *A Commentary on Hebrews*, 2:50; cf. p. 59.

⁵⁴ Owen, *Hebrews* (1684), comm. Heb. 11:1 (*Works*, 24:3).

profession, notwithstanding the difficulties which they have to conflict withal; in the same way as it is treated James ii.⁵⁵

While Owen adamantly affirms the doctrine of *sola fide* in his introduction to the chapter, he is critical of those who argue for it from this text, “The observation of the design of the apostle dischargeth all the disputes of expositors on this place about the nature and definition of faith, seeing he describes only one property of it.”⁵⁶ Calvin likewise makes the same point: “It is hence also evident, that greatly mistaken are they who think that an exact definition of faith is given here; for the Apostle does not speak here of the whole of what faith is, but selects that part of it which was suitable to his purpose, even that it has patience ever connected with it.”⁵⁷ For Owen and Calvin, as well as for other reformed interpreters like Perkins and Gouge, Hebrews 11 records the persevering faith of the saints, not the justifying faith of the ungodly.

Owen gives a preliminary discussion on the nature of persevering faith in his exposition of Hebrews 11:1–3 and surveys several examples from the ante- and post-diluvian periods in his analysis of Hebrews 11:4–7. He notes, however, that with Abraham comes a significant development in the biblical narrative, both programmatically in the covenant established by God and paradigmatically in the faith exhibited by the patriarch. He states, “In Abraham there was a foundation laid of a new state of the church after the flood, more excellent than that which preceded.

. . . He was the progenitor of the Hebrews, from whom they derived all their

⁵⁵ Owen, *Hebrews* (1684), comm. Heb. 11:1 (*Works*, 24:5); cf. “The subject spoken of is ‘faith,’ that faith whereby the just doth live; that is, faith divine, supernatural, justifying, and saving,—the faith of God’s elect, the faith that is not of ourselves, that is of the operation of God, wherewith all true believers are endowed from above. It is therefore justifying faith that the apostle here speaks concerning; but he speaks not of it as justifying, but as it is effectually useful in our whole life unto God, especially as unto constancy and perseverance in profession.” *Ibid.*, p. 7; cf. the same point by Gouge on this passage, *A Commentary on Hebrews*, 3:1–3; both Owen and Gouge follow Perkins in his introduction to Hebrews 11, see William Perkins, *A Cloud of Faithfull Witnesses*, in *Workes*, 3:3.

⁵⁶ Owen, *Hebrews* (1684), comm. Heb. 11:1 (*Works*, 24:7; cf. p. 5).

⁵⁷ Calvin, comm. Heb. 11:1, in CTS, 22:260–261 (*CO*, 55:143).

privileges, in whose person they were initiated into the covenant, with a right unto the promises. He was also by promise ‘the father of all that believe.’”⁵⁸ Owen then proceeds to give a detailed account of the epoch of the Abrahamic covenant in his commentary on Hebrews 11:8–19. Once again, his exposition follows the train of thought originally developed in his exercitations.⁵⁹

Owen maintains that Abraham’s faith and obedience were rooted in the divine call he received in Genesis 12 to leave his native country and embark on a pilgrimage into a land not yet his own in anticipation of becoming the father of a great multitude not yet born.⁶⁰ The promise that God gave Abraham included both temporal blessings (e.g., physical descendants and land) and spiritual benefits (e.g., the promised Seed and a heavenly city) that served as guiding principles in what Owen calls the patriarch’s “life of faith.”⁶¹ Contrary to the claims of Hugo Grotius, Owen contends that the “city” for which Abraham sought in his earthly sojourn was not ultimately Jerusalem but heaven (cf. Heb. 11:10).⁶² For Owen, the promised land was but a typical, and therefore temporary, settlement that pointed to a “heavenly inheritance which is eternal.”⁶³ To limit the land promise to the confines of Canaan is

⁵⁸ Owen, *Hebrews* (1684), comm. Heb. 11:8 (*Works*, 24:57).

⁵⁹ Compare Owen’s commentary on Hebrews 11:8–19 with his essays on Abraham’s calling in *Hebrews* (1668), 1.19.3–12 (*Works*, 18:448–458); cf. “The call of Abraham, which was the foundation whereon all the following administrations of God towards his posterity and his whole worship amongst them were built, is excellently and fully described by our apostle, chap. xi. 8–19” (*Works*, 18:448).

⁶⁰ See Owen, *Hebrews* (1684), comm. Heb. 11:8 (*Works*, 24:55–64, esp. pp. 59–61); and comm. Heb. 11:11 (*Works*, 24:73).

⁶¹ See Owen, *Hebrews* (1684), comm. Heb. 11:8–9 (*Works*, 24:59, 66–67).

⁶² Owen, *Hebrews* (1684), comm. Heb. 11:10 (*Works*, 24:69–73, cf. pp. 85, 97, 112–114). Grotius tersely states, “that is Jerusalem,” referring to the “city” in Hebrews 11:10: “Sperabant aliquando posteros suos illis in locis non vagas domos habituros, sed urbem in bonis fundamentis bene locatam, id est, Hierosolyma.” Hugo Grotius, *Annotationes In Novum Testamentum: Continens Annotationes In Pauli Epistolas Ad Ephesios—Philemonem Et In Epist. Ad Haebraeos*, vol. 7 (Zuidema, 1829), comm. Heb. 11:10, p. 475.

⁶³ Owen, *Hebrews* (1684), comm. Heb. 11:8 (*Works*, 24:62–63; cf. pp. 59, 70–71).

to conflate the temporal and the spiritual benefits of the Abrahamic covenant. The temporal blessing of the land was for a period of “limited perpetuity” in order to prepare Israel for the coming of the promised Seed.⁶⁴ Now that Christ has come, the promise has expanded to include all nations, “which the call and faith of Abraham did principally regard.”⁶⁵ The special right once granted to Israel, as both a land and people, by the Abrahamic covenant has been “cancelled and disannulled.”⁶⁶

Abraham lived his life as a pilgrim. He died “without one foot of an inheritance in this world” and never saw the nations extend “beyond his own family.”⁶⁷ Yet Abraham embraced these distant promises by faith, and rejoiced in their ultimate fulfilment in the promised Seed, as Owen argues by linking together John 8:56 and Hebrews 11:13. He summarises,

This was the great fundamental promise of the blessing Seed [sic] made unto Abraham, which virtually comprised in it all other promises and blessings, temporal and eternal. . . . The due understanding of the whole Old Testament, with the nature of the faith and obedience of all the saints under it, depends on this one truth, that they believed things that were not yet actually exhibited nor enjoyed. . . . It was Christ in the promise, even before his coming, that was the life of the church in all ages.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Owen, *Hebrews* (1684), comm. Heb. 11:8 (*Works*, 24:63).

⁶⁵ Owen, *Hebrews* (1684), comm. Heb. 11:8 (*Works*, 24:63). Commenting on the temporal and spiritual blessings of Abraham’s call in Genesis 12:1–3, Owen states, “It is a thing most absurd, and contrary to the whole design of the Scripture and the dispensation of the covenant, to confine the faith of Abraham unto the land of Canaan, and the glory of his posterity therein. For the life of the promise made unto him on his call, whereby his faith was animated, was in the blessing of all the families of the earth in him; which was in Christ alone, the promised seed, as all but infidels must confess.” Owen, *Hebrews* (1684), comm. Heb. 11:8 (*Works*, 24:59).

⁶⁶ Owen, *Hebrews* (1684), comm. Heb. 11:8 (*Works*, 24:63). Owen also connects these events with the destruction of the Temple in AD 70: “Wherefore the grant of this land, for an inheritance unto Abraham in his posterity, had a season limited unto it. Upon the expiration of that term, their right and title unto it were cancelled and disannulled. And thereon God in his providence sent the armies of the Romans to dispossess them; which they did accordingly, unto this day. Nor have the present Jews any more or better title unto the land of Canaan than unto any other country in the world. Nor shall their title be renewed thereunto upon their conversion unto God. For the limitation of their right was unto that time wherein it was typical of the heavenly inheritance: that now ceasing for ever, there can be no especial title unto it revived.” *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), l.8.30 (*Works*, 18:179, cf. 24:62).

⁶⁸ Owen, *Hebrews* (1684), comm. Heb. 11:13 (*Works*, 24:85–86; cf. pp. 87–88).

The pilgrimage of Abraham made clear to subsequent generations that the life of faith is lived between the gap of promise and fulfilment.⁶⁹ Speaking of the divine command to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22, Owen states, “Abraham still firmly believed the accomplishment of the great promise, although he could not discern the way whereby it would be fulfilled.”⁷⁰

5.4 CONCLUSION

Owen’s analysis of the Abrahamic narrative provides a window on the world of seventeenth century reformed exegesis. Textually, this chapter has demonstrated a clear link between Owen’s exercitations and his exegesis. In Exercitation VI on the oneness of the church, Owen summarises biblical-theological principles concerning the Abrahamic covenant that govern his reading of Scripture. In his exposition, he probes the text of Hebrews by utilizing the hermeneutical principles outlined in his essays. Historically, Owen’s commentary stands within the exegetical tradition of the Abrahamic passages in Hebrews. However, his use of the *fundamentum* principle allows him to apply federal theology within a promise-fulfilment scheme that not only provides a Christological framework for interpretation but also a redemptive-historical hermeneutic that is attentive of the unfolding progression of Scripture. Theologically, Owen’s development of the carnal and spiritual privileges of the Abrahamic covenant supplies him with a basic tool to demarcate lines of continuity and discontinuity within the biblical narrative. The carnal component of the Abrahamic

⁶⁹ Owen argues that even after Christ, the church continues “to live on promises, which in this world cannot be perfectly fulfilled.” Owen, *Hebrews* (1684), comm. Heb. 11:13 (*Works*, 24:86).

⁷⁰ Owen, *Hebrews* (1684), comm. Heb. 11:17–19 (*Works*, 24:116); cf. comm. Heb. 11:9 (*Works*, 24:67).

covenant, while secondary to the spiritual and fiduciary elements of God's promise to Abraham, is still important to the plotline of the Bible, if for no other reason that it casts the Christological shape of redemptive history in a decidedly Jewish mould. Abraham was promised that the Messiah would come from his loins, but not all of his children would be his physical descendants. Only those who trust in the promised Seed can be regarded as the true children of Abraham. As Owen states, "After the giving of this promise, the whole Old Testament beareth witness that a person was to be born, of the posterity of Abraham, in and by whom the nations of the earth should be saved; that is, delivered from sin and curse, and made eternally happy."⁷¹

⁷¹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), l.8.30 (*Works*, 18:179).

CHAPTER 6

CHRIST AND MOSES: THE END OF THE LAW

Here therefore is a blessed field of sacred truth, wherein humble, sober, and judicious persons may exercise themselves to the great benefit and advantage of the church of God. To state, I say, aright the nature of a divine covenant in general, with its essential properties . . . to manifest the true difference that is between the first and second covenant which God hath made with us, in themselves, and their nature, with their different effects and ends, to declare what properties, doctrines, and ends of the first covenant, or Covenant of Works, with that of the nature, power, and efficacy of the second covenant or the Covenant of Grace God brought in and declared in that dispensation under the Old Testament, wherein there was a mixture of both, though one only established in power, to manifest what there was of Christ in the law, and how the whole power and sanction of the first covenant was through the law conferred upon Christ, and in him fulfilled and ended, is a work deserving the most diligent travel of those who are called unto the teaching of the mysteries of the gospel.

—John Owen¹

Most divines hold the old and new covenant to be one in substance and kind, to differ only in degrees: but in setting down the differences they speake so obscurely, that it is hard to find how they consent with themselves.

—John Ball²

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The placement of the Mosaic covenant within the landscape of federal theology has long puzzled reformed theologians. Owen acknowledges that this is “a subject wrapped up in much obscurity, and attended with many difficulties.”³ Likewise, his

¹ John Owen, “Christian Reader,” in Samuel Petto, *The Difference between the Old and New Covenant Stated and Explained* (London, 1674), n.p. [xxxiii–xxxiv].

² John Ball, *A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace* (London, 1645), 95.

³ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:60; cf. pp. 69, 71).

nonconformist colleague, Samuel Petto, calls this issue “a knotty puzzling question in divinity.”⁴ Reflecting on the range of opinions regarding the precise nature of the Mosaic law in relationship to the covenants of works and grace, Francis Roberts laments that “many and learned writers are much perplexed in their notions and expressions about the nature of this Sinai Covenant” and that “it is hard to discover their sense and meaning.”⁵ Even more candidly, Anthony Burgess likens misguided divines to Abraham’s ram with its head “hung in a bush of briars and brambles.” He confesses, “I do not find in any point of Divinity, learned men so confused and perplexed . . . as here.”⁶ No wonder that Jonathan Edwards would later write, “There is perhaps no part of divinity attended with so much intricacy, and wherein orthodox divines do so much differ, as the stating of the precise difference and agreement between the two dispensations of Moses and of Christ.” To loosen this hermeneutical knot, an editor of Edwards’s works inserts a footnote and recommends that readers turn to Owen’s commentary for help: “On this ‘precise agreement and difference,’ Dr. Owen has written with admirable clearness in his Exposition to the Epistle to the Hebrews and the prefixed exercitation.”⁷ Clear, however, may not be the first word that comes to mind when examining Owen on the Mosaic covenant.⁸

⁴ Petto, *The Difference between the Old and New Covenant*, 102; cf. Obadiah Sedgwick’s similar comment, “This is (I confess) somewhat a knotty question, and therefore I speak warily unto it.” *The Bowels of Tender Mercy Sealed in the Everlasting Covenant* (London, 1661), 172.

⁵ Francis Roberts, *Mysterium & Medulla Bibliorum: The Mysterie and Marrow of the Bible* (London, 1657), 738.

⁶ Anthony Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis: or, A Vindication of the Morall Law and the Covenants* (London, 1647), 229.

⁷ Jonathan Edwards, *Inquiry Concerning Qualifications for Communion*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols. (1834; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), 1:465.

⁸ For analysis of the various positions on the Mosaic covenant within reformed orthodoxy, see J. Mark Beach, *Christ and the Covenant: Francis Turretin’s Federal Theology as a Defense of the Doctrine of Grace* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 301–316; Brenton C. Ferry, “Works in the Mosaic Covenant: A Reformed Taxonomy,” in *The Law Is Not of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant*, eds. Bryan D. Estelle, J. V. Fesko, and David VanDrunen

Owen's interpreters have not agreed on how he understood the relationship between Christ and Moses. Sinclair Ferguson argues that Owen developed a unique fourfold federal model: the covenant of works, the covenant of grace, the covenant of redemption, and the covenant at Sinai.⁹ This scheme however presents "a problem of harmonization." Ferguson notes that Owen held that the Mosaic covenant was neither "simply the covenant of works" as William Pemble (c.1591–1623) and John Preston (1587–1628) argued nor a "post-Adamic administration" of the covenant of grace as Calvin, John Ball, Samuel Rutherford, and the Westminster Confession contended.¹⁰ Rather, Ferguson shows that Owen, and others such as Samuel Bolton,¹¹ developed a

(Phillipsburg: P&R, 2009), 76–105; J. V. Fesko, *The Theology of the Westminster Standards: Historical Context and Theological Insights* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 147–158; Mark Jones, "The 'Old' Covenant," in *Drawn into Controversie: Reformed Theological Diversity and Debates within Seventeenth-Century British Puritanism*, eds. Michael A. G. Haykin and Mark Jones (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 182–203; Jones, "The Minority Report: John Owen on Sinai," in Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 293–303. See also the work of Mark Karlberg who provides a survey of various reformed interpretations of the Mosaic covenant from the sixteenth century through the twentieth century. He is especially interested in how reformed theologians understood "the principle of works in the *symbolico-typical sphere* of the Mosaic covenant administration." Mark W. Karlberg, "Reformed Interpretation of the Mosaic Covenant," *WTJ* (1980): 28, emphasis original; cf. Karlberg, *Covenantal Theology in Reformed Perspective* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2000); Karlberg, "The Mosaic Covenant and the Concept of Works in Reformed Hermeneutics: A Historical-Critical Analysis with Particular Attention to Early Covenant Eschatology" (ThD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1980). While Karlberg's symbolico-typical argument may be a useful though anachronistic heuristic category for discussing in what sense the covenant of works is renewed at Sinai, his reading of reformed orthodoxy has been subject to considerable criticism for relying heavily upon the biblical-theological categories of the twentieth century Old Testament scholar Meredith Kline (1922–2007). See Cornelis P. Venema "The Mosaic Covenant: A 'Republication' of the Covenant of Works? A Review Article: *The Law Is Not of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant*," *MAJT* 21 (2010): 42, n. 8; D. Patrick Ramsey, "In Defense of Moses: A Confessional Critique of Kline and Karlberg," *WTJ* 66 (2004): 373–400; Brenton C. Ferry, "Cross-Examining Moses' Defense: An Answer to Ramsey's Critique of Kline and Karlberg," *WTJ* 67 (2005): 163–168; Ferry, "Works in the Mosaic Covenant," in *The Law Is Not of Faith*, 78–79, n. 8.

⁹ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2001), 22, 28.

¹⁰ On the Mosaic covenant as a covenant of works, see William Pemble, *Vindiciae fidei: or A Treatise of Justification by Faith*, 2nd ed. (London, 1629), 151–152; and John Preston, *The New Covenant: or The Saints Portion. A Treatise Unfolding the All-Sufficiencie of God, Mans Uprightness, and the Covenant of Grace*, 5th ed. (London, 1630), 317–320. As a covenant of grace, see Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.10.2, and 2.11.1; John Ball, *A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace* (London, 1645), 93–95; Samuel Rutherford, *The Covenant of Life Opened* (Edinburgh, 1655), 60; and WCF 7.5–6.

¹¹ Samuel Bolton, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom* (London: 1656), 135–150.

third “mediating position.”¹² He summarises, “The *substance* of the covenant of works was renewed in the Sinaitic covenant, but the *form* of that renewal was changed.”¹³ But Sebastian Rehnman criticizes Ferguson for not giving adequate attention to the specific reasons for viewing the covenant at Sinai as distinct from the covenant of grace. He proposes that Owen developed a “trichotomist federal theology” along the lines of the Saumurian theologians, especially John Cameron,¹⁴ who held that the Mosaic covenant was a subservient covenant (*foedus subserviens*) that was technically neither a covenant of works nor a covenant of grace.¹⁵ While affirming that Rehnman is “close to the truth,” Mark Jones questions the accuracy of applying the trichotomist label to Owen, saying that it not only “fails to adequately understand the nuances of Owen’s covenant theology,” but also “places him in a category he would likely have repudiated.” Jones rather focuses on the testamentary component of the covenant at

¹² Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, 28. Ferguson offers this threefold taxonomy as a corrective to the oversimplified twofold classification of Ernest F. Kevan who argues that while the puritans held “varying combinations” of beliefs regarding the placement of the Mosaic covenant, there are essentially two basic positions: “those who regarded [Sinai] as a Covenant of Works, and those who regarded it as a Covenant of Grace.” See *The Grace of Law: A Study in Puritan Theology* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1999), 113–114.

¹³ Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, 53, emphasis original. Similar arguments are found in Michael Brown, “The Covenant of Works Revived: John Owen on Republication in the Mosaic Covenant,” *The Confessional Presbyterian* 4 (2008): 151–161, 310; Brian G. Najapfour, “‘That It Might Lead and Direct Men unto Christ’: John Owen’s View of the Mosaic Covenant,” *SBET* 29 (2011): 196–204.

¹⁴ John Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere thesis*, in *Opera* (Geneva, 1658), 544–551. Bolton provides a translation of this work in *True Bounds of Christian Freedome*, 353–401. On the development of the subservient covenant, Muller notes, “Cameron’s term, *foedus subserviens*, marks a linguistic difference between his formulation and those of predecessors like Olevianus, Perkins, and Rollock, but his teaching is substantially the same, recognizing the positive relationships and continuities between the *foedus subserviens* and legal foundation of the *foedus naturae*, and situating the *foedus subserviens*, understood as the covenant made with the people of Israel, within the historical framework of the *foedus gratiae* and as preparatory to its fulfillment.” Richard A. Muller, “Divine Covenants, Absolute and Conditional: John Cameron and the Early Orthodox Development of Reformed Covenant Theology,” *MAJT* 17 (2006): 11–56; cf. Beach, *Christ and the Covenant*, 301–316.

¹⁵ Sebastian Rehnman, “Is the Narrative of Redemptive History Trichotomous or Dichotomous? A Problem for Federal Theology,” *NAK* 80 (2000): 298, 302; cf. Rehnman, *Divine Discourse: The Theological Methodology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 155–177. Similar arguments may be found in Ferry, “Works in the Mosaic Covenant,” in *The Law Is Not of Faith*, 101; Rowland S. Ward, *God and Adam: Reformed Theology and the Creation Covenant* (Wantirna, Australia: New Melbourne Press, 2003), 126–139.

Sinai and suggests that it is best understood within Owen's more subtle distinction between the old and new covenants.¹⁶ From this perspective, Jones argues, Owen's federal schema could even be considered fivefold.¹⁷ In contrast to Ferguson, Rehnman, and Jones, Jeong Koo Jeon quotes Owen approvingly, stating that the old and new covenants were "not indeed two distinct covenants, as unto their essence and substance, but only different administrations of the same covenant." The problem however is that while Jeon accurately cites Owen, he fails to recognise that this position is one that Owen is opposing not espousing.¹⁸ As the range of opinion within these sources reveals, Owen may have admirably sought to untangle the "precise difference and agreement between the two dispensations of Moses and of Christ," but his treatment of this "knotty" question is not easily discernible.

Most scholarship on Owen's view of the Mosaic covenant has focused almost exclusively on his unwieldy excursus on Hebrews 8:6. However, very little attention has been paid to his wider discussion of the law within his exercitations and exposition. The goal of this chapter is not to revisit the various taxonomies on the Mosaic covenant in Protestant orthodoxy but to evaluate how Owen's interpretation of the biblical narrative informed his commentary and shaped his theology. For context,

¹⁶ Jones, "The 'Old' Covenant," in *Drawn into Controversie*, 189, 199.

¹⁷ He states, "Is Owen's federal theology dichotomous or trichotomous? On one level, Owen posits a distinction between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. However, he also distinguishes between the old and new covenants. These two covenants, unlike the former two, are also testaments. If we accept that for Owen, the covenants of works and of grace, though not testaments, nevertheless, are still covenants, then Owen's covenant schema is actually fourfold or fivefold, if the eternal covenant of redemption is included. Of course the covenant of grace, understood as only promissory, finds its fulfillment and establishment in the new covenant, whereas the covenant of works was not fulfilled in the old, but revived only declaratively, and not covenantally. As a result, Owen may possibly be described as trichotomist. Yet that runs the risk of misunderstanding due to Owen's various nuances, which differentiate his position from the Salmurian theologians who self-consciously adopt a threefold covenant schema (e.g., Cameron)." Jones, "The Minority Report: John Owen on Sinai," in *A Puritan Theology*, 293–303.

¹⁸ Jeong Koo Jeon, *Covenant Theology: John Murray's and Meredith G. Kline's Response to the Historical Development of Federal Theology in Reformed Thought* (New York: University Press of America, 1999), 50; cf. Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:70).

however, we will compare Owen's exposition against several programmatic statements made by John Cameron regarding his unique threefold division of federal theology. We will begin by examining Owen's articulation of the Mosaic administration as outlined in his exercitations and then turn to his exposition of Hebrews 8.¹⁹

6.2 MOSES AND THE LAW

When Owen published the first volume of his commentary on Hebrews in 1668, one of his stated goals was to explain “the whole economy of the Mosaical law, rites, worship, and sacrifices.”²⁰ To achieve this objective, he devotes the last series of his introductory essays to the Mosaic covenant. He states, “I thought meet, in the close of these prolegomena, to present the reader with a brief scheme and delineation of the whole Mosaical economy.”²¹ Owen highlights several biblical-theological themes concerning the Mosaic covenant that are addressed in the epistle to the Hebrews, such as its relationship to the Abrahamic covenant, the observation of Passover, the giving of the law, the building of the tabernacle and temple, the calling of the high priest, and the establishment of the sacrificial system. He develops these topics by tracing “their institution and transaction in the Old Testament” in order to lay the

¹⁹ For other accounts of Owen's view of the Mosaic covenant, see Richard C. Barcellos, *The Family Tree of Reformed Biblical Theology: Geerhardus Vos and John Owen—Their Methods of and Contributions to the Articulation of Redemptive History* (Owensboro, KY: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2010), 212–222; Michael W. Bobick, “Owen's Razor: The Role of Ramist Logic in the Covenant Theology of John Owen (1616–1683)” (PhD diss., Drew University, 1996), 57–61; Carl R. Trueman, “John Owen,” in *The Decalogue through the Centuries*, eds. Jeffrey P. Greenman and Timothy Larsen (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 135–147; Godfrey Noel Vose, “Profile of a Puritan: John Owen (1616–1683)” (PhD diss., State University of Iowa, 1963), 248–305; David Wai-Sing Wong, “The Covenant Theology of John Owen” (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1998), 203–275.

²⁰ See the title page of Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. (*Works*, 18:1).

²¹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.19.1 (*Works*, 18:447).

redemptive historical groundwork for his commentary.²² His synopsis includes three components: (1) the institution of the law; (2) the precepts of the law; and (3) the sanction of the law.

6.2.1 INSTITUTION OF THE LAW

Owen begins by linking the Mosaic and Abrahamic epochs in order to gain a “right understanding of the Epistle.” For Israel, the Abrahamic covenant was “the foundation whereon all the following administrations of God towards his posterity and his whole worship amongst them were built.” He stresses that there is an organic unity between the two biblical covenants: “[the call of Abraham] was the root on which the Judaical church did grow, the stock whereinto all Mosaical institutions of worship were inserted and grafted.”²³ For Owen, each stage of redemptive history adds greater clarity about the identity of the Messiah. The promise of God to Abraham not only established that he would be the “father of our Lord Jesus Christ according to the flesh”²⁴ but also that his posterity would be set apart “to be visibly subservient unto the great design of [God’s] grace, in the accomplishment of the promise of a deliverer made unto our first parents.”²⁵ Citing Exodus 12:40–41 and Galatians 3:16–17, Owen notes that Abraham’s descendants lived for 430 years

²² Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.9.1 (*Works*, 18:447–448). For more detailed analysis of these themes, Owen recommends Josephus, “the later Jewish masters,” and a list of Catholic and Protestant Hebraists, including “Abubensci, Arias Montanus, Villalpandus, Cappellus, Ribera, Constatine l’Empereur, Broughton, Ainsworth, Wemyss, Rivet, and all learned expositors on those parts of holy writ where these things are recorded.” *Ibid.*, p. 448.

²³ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.19.3 (*Works*, 18:448–449). Owen refers his readers to his earlier essay on Abraham (*Works*, 18:450, 454); see chapter 5 for discussion.

²⁴ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.19.5 (*Works*, 18:450).

²⁵ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.19.9 (*Works*, 18:454).

without additional revelation “for the supportment of their faith.”²⁶ That changed with the events surrounding the life of Moses, such as the institution of the Passover and the feast of unleavened bread, the establishment of phylacteries, and the deliverance of God’s people in the Exodus.²⁷ With these new ordinances, Israel left Egypt, crossed the Red Sea, and came to Sinai “where they received the law, and were made perfect in the beauty of typical holiness and worship.”²⁸ With the arrival of Moses, a new era in redemptive history had dawned.

Owen argues that the giving of the law, embodied in the ten commandments, represents another “great and solemn foundation” of the “Judaical church-state.” During the three months between the Red Sea and Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:1), Owen identifies several “remote preparations” of the people for the receiving of the law, such as the events at the waters of Marah (Ex. 15:23–26), the giving of manna (Ex. 16:13–15), and the striking of the rock at Horeb (Ex. 17:1–7). These “great and signal provocations” served a double purpose to show Israel that they did not deserve God’s goodness and to reveal to them that their sins could not “hinder the progress of the counsel of God’s will and the work of his grace” that was promised to Abraham 430 years earlier.²⁹ Once Israel was at the mountain, Owen highlights several “immediate preparations” recorded in Exodus 19, most notably a “treble promise” that Israel would be a peculiar treasure, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.³⁰ In

²⁶ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.19.11–12 (*Works*, 18:456–457).

²⁷ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.19.13–19 (*Works*, 18:458–462). For more on the Passover, he positively cites Buxtorf and Ainsworth; see Johannes Buxtorf, *Synagoga Judaica, auspiciis authoris jam olim latinitate donata, nunc primum in vulgus emissa* (Basil, 1641), 280–315; Henry Ainsworth, *Annotations Upon the Five Books of Moses, the Book of the Psalmes and the Song of Songs* (London, 1639).

²⁸ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.19.23 (*Works*, 18:467).

²⁹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.19.25–28 (*Works*, 18:468–472).

³⁰ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.19.33 (*Works*, 18:474–475).

response, God’s people would need to keep his covenant (Ex. 19:5). At Sinai, Israel was asked to “give up themselves unto the sovereignty and wisdom of God; which is the indispensable duty of all that will enter into covenant with him.”³¹ Throughout this essay, Owen utilizes themes that he has explored elsewhere in his commentary, including the *fundamentum* principle, the progressive unfolding of the biblical narrative, and the divine-human interplay of the unilateral and bilateral nature of the covenant of grace.

6.2.2 PRECEPTS OF THE LAW

Owen maintains that a proper understanding of the law is essential for correctly interpreting the text of Hebrews, especially since the term has a wide semantic domain. Within the context of the letter, references to “law” frequently stand for the giving of the law at Sinai, but can also refer to the regulations for the tabernacle as a “type of Christ.” The term can even be used more generically to designate the Torah, or any precept culled from the “whole five books of Moses.”³²

Owen accepts the classic threefold division of the law into moral, judicial, and ceremonial categories with little qualification. He surmises that “there is no precept but may conveniently be referred unto one or other of these heads.”³³ This classification had widespread agreement within reformed theology as evidenced in the writings of Samuel Bolton, James Durham, Obadiah Sedgwick, and Francis Turretin, among others, and in its use in several reformed confessions.³⁴ Its origin predates the

³¹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.19.34 (*Works*, 18:475; cf. pp. 512–513).

³² Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.20.1 (*Works*, 18:480).

³³ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.20.2 (*Works*, 18:480–481).

³⁴ Bolton, *True Bounds of Christian Freedome*, 68–73; James Durham, *The Law Unsealed: or, A Practical Exposition of the Ten Commandments* (Edinburgh, 1735); Sedgwick, *Bowels of Tender*

Reformation, as Aquinas utilized it, and Calvin refers simply to “ancient writers” who supported the designation, suggesting that its antiquity was undisputed.³⁵ Despite Owen’s approval of this threefold distinction, he acknowledges that Jewish scholarship does not divide the law in this fashion but instead enumerates it into 613 precepts, following the Talmudic teaching popularized by Maimonides.³⁶ These rules are grouped into twelve sections to represent the tribes of Israel and are divided into positive and negative commands. Owen surveys the entire list of precepts but is critical of the tradition for relying too heavily on oral tradition and not on the “written word itself.”³⁷ That he would wade through each of these commands is a reflection of his belief that the book of Hebrews was written largely to help Jews, both past and present, break free from the bondage of the Mosaic covenant, epitomized by the Talmudic code.³⁸ To remove this heavy yoke, Owen offers what he sees as a better, and more biblically faithful, understanding of the law.

6.2.3 SANCTION OF THE LAW

The sanction of the law refers to divine stipulations outlining promises for obedience and penalties for disobedience. Within this context, Owen suggests that the Mosaic covenant should be interpreted according to three interwoven principles. First, the

Mercy Sealed, 646; Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols., trans. George M. Giger, ed. James T. Dennison (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1992), 2:145 (11.24.1). For its use in reformed confessions, see e.g., *Irish Articles of Religion*, art. 84; *Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion*, art. 7; WCF 19.3–4; Savoy 19.3–4.

³⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (London: Blackfriars, 1963), IIa, q.99, a.3–5; Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.14. On the history and catholicity of the threefold division of the law, see Philip S. Ross, *From the Finger of God: The Biblical and Theological Basis for the Threefold Division of the Law* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2010), esp. pp. 1–50.

³⁶ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.20.3 (*Works*, 18:481); cf. David Novak, “Moses Maimonides,” in *The Decalogue through the Centuries*, 81–96.

³⁷ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.20.3, 33 (*Works*, 18:481, 498).

³⁸ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.20.33–35 (*Works*, 18:498–499; cf. 18:10–14; 20:19).

law at Sinai was a “repetition and expression of the law of nature, and the covenant of works established thereon.”³⁹ From a theological perspective, the covenant of works is still operative. “Considered absolutely,” the law of Moses restates the same life and death scenario as the “covenant between God and man” in the garden of Eden.⁴⁰ From a redemptive historical perspective, the “new dispensation” of the law is subservient to the promise given to Abraham (Gal. 3:19–24). The reiteration of the terms of the covenant of works reinforced how much the people needed the covenant of grace. If Israel neglected this new purpose for the law, then “they were left to stand or fall according to the absolute tenor of that first covenant,” a proposition that would prove “fatally ruinous unto all that cleaved unto it” (Rom. 8:3; 9:31).⁴¹ This new redemptive historical purpose of the law leads to the next governing principle.

Second, the law at Sinai represents a repurposing of the law given to Adam in the covenant of works. Owen states, “[the law] had a new end and design put upon the administration of it, to direct the church unto the use and benefit of the promise given of old to Adam, and renewed unto Abraham four hundred and thirty years before.”⁴² The law was no longer “merely preceptive” as it was when originally established in the garden. In addition, divinely given ordinances and institutions were “superadded to the moral commands of the covenant of works” for the purpose of directing Israel to look for salvation “in another and by another way.” While the covenant of works demanded perfect obedience, the Mosaic administration made provisions for Israelites who

³⁹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.21.1 (*Works*, 18:499).

⁴⁰ To support this claim, Owen cites several Scripture texts: Gen. 2:17; Lev. 18:5; Deut. 27:26; Ezek. 20:11; Rom. 6:23, 4:4, 10:5, 11:6; Gal. 3:12, 13. Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.21.2 (*Works*, 18:499–500).

⁴¹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.21.3 (*Works*, 18:500; cf. 8:293; 20:113).

⁴² Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.21.1 (*Works*, 18:499).

acknowledged their sinfulness but also endeavoured to obey God's commands with "perfectness of heart, integrity, and uprightness." Under the unrelenting demands of the first covenant, the guilty must be punished. But in this new arrangement, a "merciful relief" was added to the law with the institution of the sacrificial system "for the supportment and consolation of sinners."⁴³

Third, the law at Sinai "was the instrument of the rule and government of the church and people of Israel with respect unto the covenant made with them in and about the land of Canaan."⁴⁴ As a guide for Israel, the law showcased the holiness of the lawgiver, represented his grace in compensating for sin, established a "righteous rule of obedience," and reinforced the "severity of God against the willful transgressors of his covenant."⁴⁵ It served a specific purpose in shaping Israel as a people who belonged to God. Not only did the Mosaic law reaffirm the eternal stakes of the covenant of works, it also outlined the temporal benefits of adhering to a legal system that governed both ecclesiastical and civil affairs within the nation.⁴⁶ Most importantly, the cultic ceremonies prescribed in the law "represented," "exemplified," and "exhibited" the promise of a "spiritual Redeemer, Savior, Deliver" who would "effect what the ordinances of institution did represent, so to save them eternally . . . in the fullness of time."⁴⁷ These ordinances include the tabernacle and ark of the

⁴³ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.21.4 (*Works*, 18:500; cf. pp. 167–168; 23:113). Petto makes the same point, "Whereas the Sinai covenant includeth the ceremonial law as well as the moral, is plain . . . Although these services did not of themselves expiate sin and purge the conscience, yet they did point out a way wherein they might have an expiation of and freedom from sin, which a covenant of works giveth not the least intimation of." *The Difference between the Old and New Covenant*, p. 107

⁴⁴ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.21.1 (*Works*, 18:499).

⁴⁵ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.21.5 (*Works*, 18:500–501).

⁴⁶ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.21.6–30 (*Works*, 18:501–511). Owen's argument in these essays finds similar expression in Petto, *The Difference between the Old and New Covenant*, pp. 114–119.

⁴⁷ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.21.7 (*Works*, 18:501).

covenant,⁴⁸ the office of the priesthood,⁴⁹ and the sacrificial system.⁵⁰ One of the primary purposes of the legal regulations that characterized Israel's worship was to encourage God's people to look beyond the types and shadows that were encrypted in these ordinances to learn more about the identity and work of the promised Messiah.

Owen's line of reasoning in considering the sanction of the law is similar to Samuel Petto's argument that the Mosaic covenant is "the legal condition of the covenant of grace" that is to be fulfilled by Christ.⁵¹ For Owen, the key to interpreting the role of the Mosaic law is to understand its unique place within redemptive history. His rationale echoes similar notes struck by John Cameron. He states,

The Old Covenant (*foedus vetus*) is that whereby God doth require from the people of Israel obedience of the moral, ceremonial, and judicial law; and to as many as do give it him, he promises all sorts of blessings in the possession of the land of Canaan; on the contrary, to as many as deny him it, he denounces, most severely, curses and death; and that for this end, that he might bring them to the Messiah which was for to come.⁵²

⁴⁸ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.22.1–19 (*Works*, 18:512–520). He concludes this section by describing the typical nature of Israel's worship. "And this was that appearance of [Christ's] glory which the Lord God of Israel granted unto his church of old; which though it was beautiful and excellent, as appointed by himself, yet was it but carnal and worldly in comparison of the heavenly and glorious mysteries of the gospel, especially of Him who, being obscurely shadowed out by all this preparation of glory, was in himself the real 'brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person,' as shall further be declared on Heb. 1:3." *Ibid.*, p. 520.

⁴⁹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.23.1–12 (*Works*, 18:520–527). "The principal glory of all Mosaical worship consisted in the person and office of the high priest. . . . This priest, with his attendants of the same family, was the hinge whereon the whole worship of the Judaical church depended and turned." The purpose for which was to "teach and instructs the whole church in the mysteries of their redemption by the true High Priest, whose person and office were shadowed out hereby." *Ibid.*, pp. 521, 523.

⁵⁰ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.24.1–45 (*Works*, 18:527–548; cf. p. 216). "The principal worship and service of God, both in the tabernacle and temple, consisted in offerings and sacrifices: for these did directly represent, and in their general nature answered, that which was the foundation of the church, and all the worship thereof,—namely, the sacrifice of the Son of God." *Ibid.*, pp. 527–528.

⁵¹ Petto, *The Difference between the Old and New Covenant*, n.p. [v]; cf. pp. 102, 113–114, 124, 127, 185–186, *passim*. While Owen does not use the term "legal condition," he does speak of the law as a "legal administration" to underscore the subservient nature of the Mosaic covenant; cf. *Works*, 6:472; 8:293; 12:369; 16:262; 18:12; 19:421; 22:487; 23:251.

⁵² Cameron, *De triplici Dei*, thesis 81, in *True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, 401; cf. Bolton makes the same point, "The subservient covenant, which is called the Old Covenant, whereby God did require obedience of the Israelites, to the Morall, Ceremoniall, and Judiciall Lawes, upon promise of all blessings in the possession of Canaan, and threatening curses and miseries to them that

According to Owen, as Israel entered the land of Canaan, the law underscored the fact that she was to be “a holy nation.” It did so by rebroadcasting the demands of the covenant of works in order to reinforce the necessity of the covenant of grace. Most of all, the law at Sinai promulgated, through an elaborate system of “superadded” institutions, the way in which the promise given to Adam and Abraham would be ultimately achieved by the Messiah.⁵³

6.3 MOSES AND HEBREWS 8

Owen’s exercitations on the Mosaic administration provide a backdrop for his exposition of Hebrews. He argues that these themes are essential for grasping the context of the epistle. Without a clear knowledge of the “whole Mosaical economy,” the interpreter of Hebrews will be left in “much darkness” and prone to “many mistakes” regarding the relationship between the old covenant under Moses and the new covenant in Christ.⁵⁴ Having reviewed his summary of the Mosaic covenant, we turn to his commentary to examine how he advances these arguments. Since his exposition of Hebrews 8 is his most extensive and controversial handling of these themes, we will focus on it. He divides the chapter into two parts: verses 1–5 on the excellency of the priesthood of Christ, and verses 6–13 on the excellency of the new covenant.⁵⁵

did break it, and this to this end, that he might raise up their hearts to the expectation of the Messiah to come.” *True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, 137–138.

⁵³ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:113).

⁵⁴ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.19.1 (*Works*, 18:447, cf. pp. 10–14, 45–48, 529, 547, passim).

⁵⁵ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:1, 6 (*Works*, 23:1, 49).

6.3.1 THE EXCELLENCY OF THE PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST

Hebrews 8 represents a transition in the overall structure of the epistle, with verse 1 summarising the preceding discussion in chapter 7 on the priestly ministry of Christ. Broadly speaking, Owen sets his exposition within what he sees as the apostle's overall law-gospel framework. He states, "[The apostle] is treating of the very head of all the differences between the law and the gospel, between those who adhered unto Mosaical institutions and those who embraced the faith." Owen defines "law" and "gospel" redemptive historically. *Law* refers to the Mosaic administration under the "old" covenant, seen especially in the Levitical priesthood. In contrast, *gospel* is shorthand for the "new" covenant fulfilled in the mediatorial work of Christ, seen most vividly in his superior priestly ministry.⁵⁶ The consequences of being on the wrong side of this law-gospel divide are fatal, for "herein [the apostle] set life and death before them [Israel], and was zealous for them, and earnest with them, that they would choose life, and not die in their unbelief."⁵⁷

In Hebrews 8:1–5, Owen reviews three facets of the superiority of Christ's priesthood in the new covenant over the old covenant order of the Levitical priesthood. Verse 1 surveys the "dignity and excellency" of the person of Christ in his exalted state in heaven.⁵⁸ As the only mediator between God and man, Christ's present priestly ministry of intercession is based upon the application of benefits that his oblation secured for his people.⁵⁹ Since a satisfactory sacrifice was made on the

⁵⁶ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:1 (*Works*, 23:3).

⁵⁷ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:1 (*Works*, 23:5).

⁵⁸ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:1 (*Works*, 23:4, 9–10).

⁵⁹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:1 (*Works*, 23:10).

cross, Christ is able to represent the elect at the right hand of God.⁶⁰ In verse 2, Owen presents a carefully crafted typological argument for Christ as the “true tabernacle” through whom God “personally and substantially” dwells with his people and about whom the old covenant tabernacle and temple signified.⁶¹ Finally, verses 3–5 show the necessity and finality of the sacrificial work of Christ.⁶² Owen asserts that the main thrust of this pericope proves that “the introduction of this new priesthood under the gospel had put an end unto the old.”⁶³ With the lines of contrast sketched between the old, earthly priesthood of the Mosaic law and the new, heavenly priesthood of Christ, Owen enters into an extended discussion on the difference between the old and new covenants in Hebrews 8:6–13.

6.3.2 THE EXCELLENCY OF THE NEW COVENANT

According to Owen, the primary focus of Hebrews 8:6–13 concerns “the difference between the two covenants, the old and the new, with the pre-eminence of the latter above the former, and of the ministry of Christ above the high priests on that account.” The establishment of a new priesthood abolished the covenant at Sinai, upon which “the whole church-state of the Jews” depended.⁶⁴ This point is reinforced in Owen’s mind by the fact that the bulk of the passage consists of a quotation from the

⁶⁰ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:1 (*Works*, 23:13).

⁶¹ Owen outlines four different ways “true tabernacle” is interpreted: (1) some, such as Grotius, take the phrase to mean “this whole universe, the fabric of heaven and earth.” Owen sees “nothing absurd in this option, nor contradictory unto the analogy of faith” but thinks it does not fit with the context of the epistle. (2) Others argue that the reference is to “the universal spiritual, catholic church.” (3) “Most expositors,” such as the Greek fathers Chrysostom, Theophylact, and Œcumenius, see it as an expression for “heaven itself.” (4) But Owen believes that the best approach is to view the “true tabernacle” as a reference to the human nature of Christ. Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:2 (*Works*, 23:17–21).

⁶² Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:3 (*Works*, 23:23–29, cf. p. 1).

⁶³ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:4 (*Works*, 23:30).

⁶⁴ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:49).

prophet Jeremiah concerning the formation of a new covenant. Within the structure of the epistle, Owen contends that the purpose of Hebrews 8 consists of an assessment of the nature of the old and new covenants. On the one hand, the prophecy of Jeremiah reminded Israel “that besides the covenant made with their fathers in Sinai, God has promised to make another covenant with the church, in his appointed time and season.” On the other hand, this promised new covenant was so radically different that it “should be of another nature than the former [old covenant], and much more excellent, as unto spiritual advantages.” With the arrival of Christ and the establishment of the new covenant, the prophecy of Jeremiah was fulfilled and the first covenant given at Sinai was complete.⁶⁵ To make this case, Owen concentrates his efforts on an extended exposition of Hebrews 8:6, “But now [Christ] hath obtained a more excellent ministry, by how much also he is the mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises.” The crux of Owen’s argument centres on his understanding of the differences between the old and new covenants.

After preliminary remarks about the text, Owen focuses on the meaning of the terms “mediator,” “better covenant,” and “better promises.”⁶⁶ At root, a mediator is someone who is “interposed between God and man, for the doing of all those things whereby a covenant might be established between them, and made effectual.”⁶⁷ In the context of the epistle, the term carries the same meaning as “surety,” so that the new covenant is more stable than the old, since Christ is the “mediator, the surety, the priest, the sacrifice, all in his own person.”⁶⁸ While the presence of a mediator is

⁶⁵ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:49; cf. 18:12).

⁶⁶ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:54).

⁶⁷ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:54).

⁶⁸ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:54); cf. on the term “surety,” see *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 7:22 (*Works*, 22:503).

not necessary for the drafting of a covenant, as witnessed in the original covenant of works between God and Adam, “it was necessary there should be a mediator, to be the surety of this [better] covenant,” given the reality of sin.⁶⁹

Regarding the “better covenant” that Christ as the mediator represented, Owen notes that implied in this designation is the presence of another, lesser covenant. According to Owen, the relationship of these two covenants is the central question raised by Hebrews 8. He states,

In the following verses there are two covenants, a first and a latter, an old and a new, compared together. We must therefore consider what was that other covenant, than which this is said to be better; for upon the determination thereof depends the right understanding of the whole ensuing discourse of the apostle. And because this is a subject wrapped up in much obscurity, and attended with many difficulties, it will be necessary that we use the best of our diligence, both in the investigation of the truth and in the declaration of it, so as that it may be distinctly apprehended.⁷⁰

Owen begins this section with an attempt to identify the first or old covenant. Perhaps the most obvious choice is to take this reference as the “original covenant made with Adam, and all mankind in him.” While the biblical narrative does not expressly call this relationship a covenant, it contains the substance of a covenant with its stipulations of rewards for obedience and punishments for disobedience. Owen contends, “Where there is a law concerning these things, and an agreement upon it by all parties concerned, there is a formal covenant.”⁷¹ However, the covenant of works established in the Garden of Eden is “not the covenant here intended.” When Hebrews speaks of a “first covenant” (e.g., Heb. 9:18), it refers more specifically to the first “testament” (διαθήκη) given at Sinai. By definition, a

⁶⁹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:59).

⁷⁰ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:60).

⁷¹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:60).

testament is secured by death. “But in the making of the covenant with Adam, there was not the death of anything, whence it might be called a testament,” therefore, “it cannot be intended.” While the law given to Adam was not “abolished or abrogated,” the covenant of works ceased to benefit those under it. Instead, God declared a way of salvation in the first promise (Gen. 3:15) and again in the “days of Abraham.” But for those who do not embrace this promise, the demand of obedience and the curse for disobedience stipulated in the law remain in effect.⁷² Based on his exegesis of the text, Owen insists that the first or old covenant (or testament) referenced in Hebrews is not technically the covenant of works but the one made at Sinai.⁷³ Samuel Petto concurs, “I would premise, that in Heb. 8 and also Jer. 31. ver. 31, 32. the opposition is not between the Covenant of Works as with the first Adam and the New, but between the Old (made with Israel came out of Egypt at Sinai) and the New Covenant.”⁷⁴

As for the “better promises” mentioned in Hebrews 8:6, Owen considers “the original and use of divine promises in our relation unto God.” Citing Genesis 9:11, Jeremiah 33:20, and Ephesians 2:12, he argues that “essentially a promise and a covenant are all one,” since every covenant is founded on promises.⁷⁵ Furthermore, the promises of a covenant are intended to give life and thus require obedience. “Unless the precept of the covenant be founded in a promise of giving grace and spiritual strength unto us, whereby we may be enabled to perform those duties, the covenant can be of no benefit or advantage unto us.”⁷⁶ The covenant of works only

⁷² Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:61–62). Owen admits, however, that the term διαθήκη may be translated “covenant” in a qualified sense.

⁷³ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:63).

⁷⁴ Petto, *The Difference between the Old and New Covenant*, p. 195.

⁷⁵ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:65).

⁷⁶ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:67).

promised life and blessing contingent upon perfect obedience; its promises were “only concerning things future.” In contrast the covenant of grace offers better promises, since “all things are founded in promises of present mercy, and continual supplies of grace, as well as of future blessedness.”⁷⁷

Having defined his terms, Owen once again admits that the relationship between the old and new covenant “is not without its difficulties.” He presents some of the challenges as follows:

The apostle doth evidently in this place dispute concerning two covenants, or two testaments, comparing the one with the other, and declaring the disannulling of the one by the introduction and establishment of the other. What are these two covenants in general we have declared,—namely, that made with the church of Israel at mount Sinai, and that made with us in the gospel; not as absolutely the covenant of grace, but as actually established in the death of Christ, with all the worship that belongs unto it. Here then ariseth a difference of no small importance, namely, whether these are indeed two distinct covenants, as to the essence and substance of them, or only different ways of the dispensation and administration of the same covenant. And the reason of the difficulty lieth herein: We must grant one of these three things: 1. That either the covenant of grace was in force under the old testament; or, 2. That the church was saved without it, or any benefit by Jesus Christ, who is the mediator of it alone; or, 3. That they all perished everlastingly. And neither of the two latter can be admitted.⁷⁸

Owen takes for granted that the covenant of grace was operative under the Mosaic era. He asserts that “no man was ever saved but by virtue of the new covenant, and the mediation of Christ therein.” The question then becomes, “How could it be that there should at the same time be another covenant between God and them, or a different nature from this, accompanied with other promises, and other effects?”⁷⁹ If the covenant of grace is always “in force” and the Mosaic covenant has been

⁷⁷ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:68).

⁷⁸ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:69–70).

⁷⁹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:70).

abrogated, then for Owen the Mosaic covenant must be something other than the covenant of grace.

Citing John Calvin, Peter Martyr Vermigli, and Gulielmus Bucanus (d. 1603), Owen acknowledges that “most reformed divines” resolve this issue by stating that the old and new covenants that are referenced in Hebrews 8 are two different administrations of the one covenant of grace.⁸⁰ However, he believes this formula oversimplifies the biblical narrative. The debate concerns neither the central role of *sola fide* in the Old Testament nor the typological role of the cultic ceremonies under the Mosaic covenant in pointing Israel to the Messiah.⁸¹ In contrast to the majority reformed position, Owen commends unnamed “Lutherans” for recognizing that the old and new covenants in Hebrews 8 represent “not a twofold administration of the same covenant, but that two covenants substantially distinct, are intended.”⁸² An example of this teaching can be found in the Lutheran scholastic and reformed critic Jesper Brochmand (1585–1652), who serves as an interlocutor for Francis Turretin in his analysis of the Lutheran view on the difference between the old and new covenants. Brochmand offers a sweeping statement of the Lutheran consensus. “Lutheran theologians,” he asserts, “unanimously teach that by the name of the Old Testament is properly and in Scripture phrase signified that legal covenant (*foedus legale*) which

⁸⁰ Owen *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:71, 73; cf. 97); Gulielmus Bucanus, *Institutiones theologicae: seu locorum communium christianae religionis* (Bern, 1605), loc. 22 (pp. 221–231); Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.11.1–14; Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Loci communes* (London, 1576), 2.16.1–32 (pp. 440–455).

⁸¹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:70–73).

⁸² Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:73). The contrast between the reformed majority position and the Lutherans is also made by Anthony Burgess, who agrees with the standard reformed formula, see Burgess *Vindiciae legis*, 251; cf. Jones, “The ‘Old’ Covenant,” 186.

God made with the Israelites under the ministry of Moses.”⁸³ Brochmand explains that the Lutheran position on the old and new covenants parallels the distinction between law and gospel as well as promise and fulfilment. He states, “There is a great difference between the old covenant of grace and the New Testament, as there is between a promise and the fulfilment of a promise; between signification and exhibition; between a figure and the body itself; between an image and the thing designated by it.”⁸⁴ In an unexpected exegetical twist, Owen distances himself from his reformed colleagues and aligns himself with a more “Lutheran” reading of Hebrews 8. While we cannot know for certain what Lutheran sources Owen had in mind, the consensus statements from Brochmand concur nicely with Owen’s promise-fulfilment scheme.

The remainder of Owen’s excursus on Hebrews 8:6 consists of a defence of his “minority report.”⁸⁵ His line of reasoning involves three parts. He begins by marshalling several arguments against the majority reformed position that sees the Mosaic covenant as an administration of the covenant of grace. Next, Owen outlines reasons why the old covenant is distinct from the covenant of grace. Finally, he stipulates differences between the old and new covenants.

Distancing himself from the traditional federal scheme represented by “our divines” and preferring the law-gospel paradigm of the Lutherans, Owen contends that the old and new covenants in Hebrews 8 are technically distinct from both the

⁸³ Jesper Brochmand, *Universae theologiae systema* (Frankfort, 1658), 2.2.4 (2:114). Turretin cites this quote in *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 12.8.7 (2:234–235); cf. Beach, *Christ and the Covenant*, 265–269.

⁸⁴ Brochmand, *Universae theologia systema*, 2.2.4 (2:115); Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 12.8.11 (2:235–236).

⁸⁵ Jones, “The Minority Report: John Owen on Sinai,” in *A Puritan Theology*, 293–303.

covenants of works and grace.⁸⁶ First, Owen plainly states, “When we speak of the ‘old covenant,’ we intend not the covenant of works made with Adam, and his posterity in him.”⁸⁷ Second, Owen further explains, “When we speak of the ‘new covenant,’ we do not intend the covenant of grace absolutely.” Owen readily admits that the covenant of grace “considered absolutely” consists of the “promise of grace in and by Jesus Christ” and “was the only way and means of salvation unto the church, from the first entrance of sin.”⁸⁸ Why then not call the new covenant an administration of the covenant of grace? The distinction that Owen makes is driven by his desire to underscore the promissory nature of the covenant of grace as opposed to the testamentary nature of the new covenant in the death of Christ. For Owen, the new covenant is more than a promise; it is the procuring cause of the benefits that were promised in the covenant of grace, which explains why the two are often conflated. He states, “Although by ‘the covenant of grace,’ we oftentimes understand no more but the way, life, grace, mercy, and salvation by Christ; yet by ‘new covenant,’ we intend its actual establishment in the death of Christ.”⁸⁹ Third, the covenant of grace in Christ is “eternal, immutable, always the same, obnoxious unto no alteration, no change or abrogation.”⁹⁰ As a result, neither the old nor new covenants can nullify the promise of the covenant of grace. The old covenant under Moses points to the “future establishment of the promise,” while the new covenant in the death of Christ secures the promise for the “present use and advantage unto the church in its present

⁸⁶ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:73).

⁸⁷ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:74).

⁸⁸ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:74).

⁸⁹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:75).

⁹⁰ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:74).

condition.”⁹¹ Fourth, Scripture consistently speaks not of a “twofold administration” but of “two testaments, or covenants.”⁹² Fifth, Owen insists that distinguishing between the old and new covenants does not mean that there are two different ways of salvation. He states, “no reconciliation with God . . . could be obtained by virtue of the old covenant, or the administration of it . . . though all believers were reconciled, justified, and saved, by virtue of the promise, whilst they were under the covenant.”⁹³ In short, Owen believes that by conflating the old and new covenants with the covenant of grace, the promissory nature of the covenant of grace is compromised and the testamentary nature of the old and new covenants is diminished.

Owen furthers his argument against the majority reformed position by offering four reasons why the old covenant is distinct from the covenant of grace and not simply an administration of it. In the first place, the old covenant at Sinai was never intended to be an “absolute rule and law of life and salvation” but was designed with “a particular design, and with respect unto particular ends.” More specifically, the old covenant “revived, declared, and expressed” the demands of the covenant of works in order to accentuate the promise given to Adam and Abraham “as containing the only way and means of salvation.”⁹⁴ Second, the old covenant at Sinai both declared through the commands and sanctions of the law the impossibility of reconciliation by means of the covenant of works and typologically represented “the accomplishment of the promise” through the “offerings and ordinances” of Mosaic

⁹¹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:75).

⁹² Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:76).

⁹³ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:77).

⁹⁴ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:78).

worship.⁹⁵ Third, since the old covenant was not designed either to abrogate the covenant of works or disannul the promise given to Abraham, it functions pedagogically to revive the moral stipulations of the covenant of works, restrain sin, and direct Israel to look for the accomplishment of the promise.⁹⁶ Fourth, the old covenant served a unique redemptive historical purpose to prepare Israel for the Messiah. By definition, it was “not a mere dispensation of the covenant of grace” but “a particular, temporary covenant” that God made with his people.⁹⁷ The old covenant was a “special covenant” that was intended to “expire” upon the arrival of the Messiah.⁹⁸ Given its limited scope, the old covenant inaugurated at Sinai must be something different from the covenant of grace that can never expire. As Cameron states, the old covenant should be regarded as a subservient covenant (*foedus subserviens*) since it was designed “to wax old, and to give place to a better covenant, which is to succeed it, and so itself at length to be abolished.”⁹⁹

In the final portion of his exegesis on Hebrews 8:6, Owen draws upon his exercitations and outlines no less than seventeen differences between the old covenant at Sinai and the new covenant in Christ in order to show both circumstantial and substantial discontinuity between the two covenants.¹⁰⁰ Owen’s

⁹⁵ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:79).

⁹⁶ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:79–82; cf. 18:170).

⁹⁷ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:82–86; cf. 18:355–356).

⁹⁸ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.16.11 (*Works*, 18:354–355).

⁹⁹ Cameron, *De triplici Dei*, thesis 43, in *True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, 381–382.

¹⁰⁰ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:86–97). Owen’s headings in this section give a good synopsis of his argument. He contends that these two covenants differ (1) in the circumstance of time; (2) in the circumstance of place; (3) in the manner of their promulgation and establishment; (4) in their mediators; (5) in their subject-matter; (6) in the manner of their dedication and sanction; (7) in the priests that were to officiate before God in behalf of the people; (8) in the sacrifices whereon the peace and reconciliation with God which is tendered in them doth depend; (9) in the way and manner of their solemn writing or enrolment; (10) in their ends; (11); in their effects; (12) with respect unto the dispensation and grant of the Holy Ghost; (13) in the declaration made in

excessiveness serves the purpose of making clear, at least to him, that those who argue that the old and new covenants are different administrations of the covenant of grace are not only guilty of glossing over significant elements of discontinuity between the old and new testaments but also oversimplifying the narrative of redemptive history. He even goes as far as stating that those who see little to no difference between the old and new covenants “are utterly unacquainted with the nature of spiritual and heavenly things.”¹⁰¹

Owen’s remaining exposition of Hebrews 8 builds on these same themes of continuity and discontinuity. Verse 7 reiterates the insufficiency of the old covenant by showing that the promise of a new covenant for those under the Mosaic code not only indicates that the old covenant would one day be abolished but also that “a new and better covenant” was needed to secure “better promises and more excellent ordinances of worship than the former.”¹⁰² In light of the context of the epistle, Owen is quick to suggest that the mere presence of a prophecy of the new covenant is enough “to overthrow the vain pretences of the Jews,” both past and present, who hold to the “absolute perpetuity” of the Mosaic law and worship, which was by design “imperfect, blameable, and removable.” The old covenant, he states, “could not accomplish the perfect administration of the grace of God . . . nor was [it] ever designed unto that end.”¹⁰³ As Cameron states, “The Old Covenant (*vetus foedus*), or the subservient covenant (*foedus subserviens*), we call that which God entered unto

them of the kingdom of God; (14) in their substance and end; (15) in the extent of their administration, according to the will of God; (16) in their efficacy; and (17) in their duration. Cf. Petto, *The Difference between the Old and New Covenant*, 68–111; 195–261.

¹⁰¹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:6 (*Works*, 23:99–100).

¹⁰² Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:7 (*Works*, 23:100, 104).

¹⁰³ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:7 (*Works*, 23:101, 103).

with the people of Israel in the Mount Sinai, that he might prepare them for faith, and that he might inflame them with a desire of the promise, and of the gospel-covenant (*foederis evangelici*), which otherwise had . . . languished in their minds.”¹⁰⁴

In his analysis of the citation of Jeremiah 31:31–34 in Hebrews 8:8–12, Owen attempts to imbed his distinction between the promissory nature of the covenant of grace and the testamentary nature of the old and new covenants in the rationale of Scripture. In verse 8, Owen returns to his lexical argument that the “proper signification” of the Greek term “covenant” (διαθήκη) is testament; therefore, the prophecy in Jeremiah cannot refer to the establishment of a new administration of the covenant of grace but to the establishment of a new and better testament.¹⁰⁵ Yet by separating the new covenant as testament from the covenant of grace as promise, Owen maintains that they are linked in terms of promise and fulfilment. As a testament, the new covenant “recollects” all the promises of the covenant of grace so that they are “accomplished in the actual exhibition of Christ, and confirmed in his death.” The climax of the covenant of grace is the fulfilment of its promises in the testamentary work of Christ in the new covenant. In verses 9–12, Owen extends his argument that the stability of the new covenant rests on the sufficiency of Christ as its mediator in both securing the demands of the law and fulfilling the promises of grace.¹⁰⁶ Reflecting on verse 13, Owen concludes that the confirmation of the new

¹⁰⁴ Cameron, *De triplici Dei*, thesis 42, in *True Bounds of Christian Freedome*, 381; cf. Bolton likewise states, “And this subservient covenant, or old covenant, is that which God did strike with the people of Israel at Mount Sinai, to prepare them to faith, and to inflame them with the desire of the promise, and the coming of Christ, and to be as it were a bridle of restraint, to cohibite them from sinne.” *True Bounds of Christian Freedome*, 138.

¹⁰⁵ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:8 (*Works*, 23:111).

¹⁰⁶ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:9–12 (*Works*, 23:120–173).

covenant in Christ represents a “total cessation of the first covenant” at Sinai.¹⁰⁷ He states, “All the glorious institutions of the law were at best but as stars in the firmament of the church, and therefore were all to disappear at the rising of the Sun of Righteousness.”¹⁰⁸

6.4 CONCLUSION

Owen states that “the general design of the apostle in these discourses is to manifest and prove that the old covenant made with the church at Sinai, with all the ordinances of worship and privileges thereunto belonging, was taken away, or ceased to be of any force in the church.”¹⁰⁹ Petto makes a similar case, “The great design of the Epistle to the Hebrews is, to shew the excellency of Jesus Christ and his sacrifice above the Levitical; and how much better the New Covenant is than the Old, in the point of the remission of sin.”¹¹⁰ This purported design of the apostle in Hebrews becomes one of Owen’s primary reasons for writing his essays and exposition: to clarify the relationship between the old and new covenants.

Recent examinations of Owen’s commentary on Hebrews 8 have focused on his excursus on verse 6 and have attempted to situate him within the various taxonomies available to him. But as Gatiss explains, “Part of the difficulty with this question is that our taxonomies are often too neat.”¹¹¹ This chapter has concentrated on Owen’s development of the theology of the Mosaic covenant by evaluating the

¹⁰⁷ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:13 (*Works*, 23:173).

¹⁰⁸ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:13 (*Works*, 23:177).

¹⁰⁹ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 9:1 (*Works*, 23:177; cf. 18:45–46; 20:568).

¹¹⁰ Petto, *The Difference between the Old and New Covenant*, p. 227.

¹¹¹ Lee Gatiss, “Adoring the Fullness of the Scriptures in John Owen’s Commentary on Hebrews” (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2013), 191.

relationship between his exercitations on the law and his exposition of Hebrews 8 as a whole. When compared with the statements of Cameron defining the old covenant under Moses as a subservient covenant belonging neither to the covenants of works or grace, Owen's minority view could be reasonably called "Cameronian," as Rehnman has suggested.¹¹² There is little to distinguish their viewpoints. But Owen does not explicitly reference Cameron's position and appears less concerned with developing a trichotomous framework. His interests are more exegetical than programmatic. He believes the majority of reformed divines have misread Scripture. According to Owen, the problem is not with their dichotomous view of the covenants of works and grace but with their failure to identify the old and new covenants as testaments that are distinct in nature and purpose from the covenants of works and grace. Jones therefore is correct to stress Owen's emphasis on the testamentary, as opposed to promissory, character of the old and new covenants, even if his claim that Owen's federal schema could be conceived of as fourfold or fivefold is misleading as it equivocates Owen's use of the term covenant.¹¹³ In many ways, Owen's view of the Mosaic covenant defies simple classification. His exposition of Hebrews 8 is best understood in the context of his commentary, and should be read through the lens of his discourses on the Messiah. His essays outline the basic biblical-theological themes relating to his understanding of the law, and his exposition provides a platform for him to defend his position exegetically. Gatiss rightly notes that Owen

¹¹² Rehnman, "Is the Narrative of Redemptive History Trichotomous or Dichotomous?," *NAK* 80 (2000): 302; cf. Richard A. Muller, "Divine Covenants, Absolute and Conditional," *MAJT* 17 (2006): 11–56.

¹¹³ Jones, "The Minority Report: John Owen on Sinai, in *A Puritan Theology*, 293–303; Jones, "The 'Old' Covenant," in *Drawn into Controversie*, 183–203; cf. Ryan M. McGraw, *A Heavenly Directory: Trinitarian Piety, Public Worship, and a Reassessment of John Owen's Theology* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 166–175.

was “driven by his exegesis” and was unwilling “to follow the mainstream when he felt scripture itself was leading him elsewhere.”¹¹⁴ His functionally “Cameronian” view of the Mosaic covenant allows him to nuance his exegesis in a way that distinguishes himself from the majority position while also maintaining substantial theological agreement. Even more importantly for Owen, his “Lutheran” reading develops what he believes is a more faithful interpretation of the text of Hebrews 8. His reliance on the categories of law and gospel in his commentary dovetail with his overall promise-fulfilment hermeneutic developed in his essays. For Owen, the “accomplishment of grace” in the new covenant by the promised Messiah “was the object of faith of the saints of the old testament” and “is the great foundation of all our present mercies.”¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Gatiss, “Adoring the Fullness of the Scriptures in John Owen’s Commentary on Hebrews,” 138, 192.

¹¹⁵ Owen, *Hebrews* (1680), comm. Heb. 8:8 (*Works*, 23:112–113).

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

This Skiful Architect built sure upon that Chief and Fundamental Cornerstone.

—Anon¹

A full proof of his concern for the Christian religion in general, in opposition to its enemies of every sort, he published [in 1668] his Exercitations on the epistle to the Hebrews; with an Exposition on the two first chapters of the epistle. The value of that work, and of the succeeding parts, are so well known in the church of God, that we need say little of them, for they are admired by all men of learning, but especially by such as have their senses exercised to discern between good and evil. . . . These learned Exercitations met with a general acceptance; nor indeed could they fail of it by any who had the interest of the Christian religion at heart; for here the Doctor vindicates the canonical authority of that epistle against the Jews, and other enemies of Christianity, with so much strength from Scripture, the authority of the ancients, and reason, as those who are enemies to the deity of the Son of God, never have been, nor ever will be able to answer.

—Anon²

The English bibliographer William Crowe (1616–1675) once noted that a person who possesses a faithful commentary holds “a key whereby you may unlock to yourself all the treasuries of holy Scripture.”³ A commentary however can do more than explain Scripture, it can also unlock for readers information about its author and the times he wrote it. Owen’s choice to produce such an extensive commentary on

¹ Anonymous, *An Elegy on the Death of that Learned, Pious, and Famous Divine, Doctor John Owen, Who Dyed the 24th of August, 1683* (London, 1683).

² Anonymous, “The Life of that Late Reverend and Learned John Owen, D. D.,” in *Seventeen Sermons Preach’d by the Late and Learned John Owen, D. D.*, 2 vols. (London: William and Joseph Marshall, 1720), 1:xxvii–xxviii.

³ William Crowe, *An Exact Collection or Catalogue of Our English Writers on the Old and New Testament, either in Whole, or in Part* (London, 1663), n.p. [vi].

Hebrews reflects his personal interests, education, commitment to Scripture, and cultural moment. As the Lutheran theologian Gerhard Ebeling (1912–2001) has argued, “church history is the history of the exposition of Scripture.”⁴ In the case of Owen, the value of his commentary lies not only in his treatment of the New Testament epistle but also in the fact that it serves as a textual artefact that describes in part his life and thought, something his interpreters have largely ignored. Owen’s work therefore is best understood against the backdrop of the history of reformed exegesis in seventeenth century England. Throughout this thesis, we have identified at least five overlapping contexts that help explain the origin and significance of Owen’s commentary.

First, Owen’s commentary is the product of his social-political context. Crawford Gribben has recently suggested that Owen may have viewed the first-century setting of Hebrews with the potential of Jewish converts to Christianity backsliding into former patterns of unbelief as analogous to the seventeenth-century setting of Owen’s commentary with the temptation of his godly brethren to forsake the cause of nonconformity. “Declension was,” Gribben contends, “an important theme in Hebrews, and Owen may have figured his readers as being tempted, like the addressees of the epistle about which he was also thinking, to slip back into an easier pattern of religious conformity.”⁵ Owen was clearly concerned about the need for persevering faith amidst growing persecution. For those tempted to seek easier paths, the example of Old Testament saints such as Abraham and Moses recorded in Hebrews 11 was a natural source of application. Commenting on the “reproach of

⁴ Gerhard Ebeling, *The Word of God and Tradition*, trans. S. H. Hooke (London: Collins, 1968), 11–31.

⁵ Crawford Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 237.

Christ” that brings “greater riches than the treasures of Egypt” in Hebrews 11:26, Owen makes a veiled reference to the plight some of his readers were facing. “For as in such a season we do stand in need of that view and consideration of the future reward which we may lay in the balance against all our present sufferings.”⁶ As some experienced “evil, loss, and trouble” due to their faithfulness to Christ, their consolation is that their reward will be “incomparably greater in goodness and blessedness than what they can suffer” and vengeance “shall befall their wicked persecutors.”⁷ While direct references to the historical setting of his work are few, he frequently expresses his general desire for his commentary to be an encouragement to his readers. He believed the subject-matter of the epistle, with its emphasis on the person and work of Christ, to be well suited to sustain the needs of the church in any age. He states, “For my part, I can truly say that I know not any portion of holy writ that will more effectually raise up the heart of an understanding reader to a holy admiration of the goodness, love, and wisdom of God, than this Epistle doth.”⁸ For defeated nonconformists like Owen, few biblical books could provide a more hopeful and eternal perspective than the book of Hebrews. He therefore saw it as his duty to commit his thoughts on Hebrews to writing in order to benefit “those that shall survive in the church of God and profession of the truth” in order that they may attain “knowledge in the mystery of the gospel.”⁹

Second, Owen’s commentary is the product of his biographical context. William Gould calls Owen’s four-volume work “his dying bequest to the Church of

⁶ Owen, *Hebrews* (1684), comm. Heb. 11:24–26 (*Works*, 24:158).

⁷ Owen, *Hebrews* (1684), comm. Heb. 11:24–26 (*Works*, 24:159).

⁸ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.1.24 (*Works*, 18:47).

⁹ Owen, “The Preface to the Reader,” *Hebrews* (1680), n.p. (*Works*, 18:19).

Christ.”¹⁰ With the release of the first instalment of the commentary in 1668, Owen was already complaining about the difficulties he encountered when working on the project. Owen voices his hope that the “learned reader” will never know the personal struggles he faced while writing his commentary. “I pray . . . that he may never know by experience what impressions of failings, mistakes, and several defects in exactness, uncertainties, straits, and exclusion from the use of books, will bring and leave upon endeavours of this kind.”¹¹ In the preface to his second volume in 1674, Owen informs his readers once again of his ailing circumstances. “I must acknowledge that I have not been able to compass the whole of what I did design. Not only continued indisposition as to health, but frequent relapses into dangerous distempers forced [me] . . . to take off my hand from that work before I had finished the whole of what I aimed at.”¹² The story continues with the publication of the third volume. This tome marked the first-time Owen did not begin his work with a series of exercitations to preface his exposition. His reasoning for the omission was his declining health. He conveys that “continued infirmities and weaknesses, in my near approach unto the grave, rendered me insufficient for that labour.”¹³ Owen died before the last volume was published in 1684. An unknown admirer of his commentary pens the final preface noting that while Owen finished the work, its publication was due to the “importunity of some worthy persons” who wanted to ensure that the church would be “furnished with a most complete Exposition on this

¹⁰ William H. Goold, “John Owen,” in *The Evangelical Succession*, third series (Edinburgh: Macniven & Wallace, 1884), 30.

¹¹ Owen, “To the Christian Reader,” *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. (*Works*, 18:9).

¹² Owen, “To the Christian Reader,” *Hebrews* (1674), n.p. (*Works*, 18:16–17).

¹³ Owen, “The Preface to the Reader,” *Hebrews* (1680), n.p. (*Works*, 18:19).

mysterious Epistle.”¹⁴ Whatever the extent of the obstacles Owen faced, his four-volume set represents the capstone of his literary career and the culmination of a near-lifelong interest in the epistle to the Hebrews.

Third, Owen’s commentary is the product of his intellectual context. Drawing upon the insights of David Steinmetz’s work on the history of precritical exegesis, Paul Lim has suggested that “Owen certainly stands as a leading Protestant exegete in early modern England.”¹⁵ This was certainly the estimation of the unknown author of the final preface to Owen’s commentary. He commends Owen for examining “every word and phrase of the writer,” analysing Old Testament quotations and allusions, and considering the life setting of the audience and original intent of the author.¹⁶ While some writers have faulted Owen for his “exegetical deficiencies,” his work anticipates the kind of questions that later scholars will hone in developing more critical methods of biblical interpretation.¹⁷ As Kelly Kopic notes, “Owen, living between the time of the Reformation and the growth of textual criticism, took difficult textual questions seriously, but also assumed that particular passages must be read within the context of the entire canon of scripture, and not in isolation.”¹⁸ Owen’s quest to understand the “mind and meaning” of the author of Hebrews and “keep close to his design” not only reflects his belief in the inspiration and authority

¹⁴ H.G., “The Preface to the Reader,” *Hebrews* (1684), n.p. (*Works*, 18:22). The author of the preface signs his name with only his initials. The identity of “H.G.” is unknown.

¹⁵ Paul C. H. Lim, *Mystery Unveiled: The Crisis of the Trinity in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 193; cf. David C. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of the Pre-Critical Exegesis,” *Theology Today* 37 (1980): 27–38.

¹⁶ H.G., “The Preface to the Reader,” *Hebrews* (1684), n.p. (*Works*, 18:22).

¹⁷ Nathan MacDonald, “By Faith Moses,” in *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology*, eds. Richard Bauckham, et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 381.

¹⁸ Kelly M. Kopic, “Typology, the Messiah, and John Owen’s Theological Reading of Hebrews,” in *Christology, Hermeneutics, and Hebrews: Profiles from the History of Interpretation*, eds. Jon C. Laansma and Daniel J. Treier (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 154.

of Scripture but also his commitment to draw upon the best available scholarship in order to explain more accurately the biblical text.¹⁹ Throughout his career, Owen engaged in the task of interpreting Scripture. However, his work as an exegete and biblical scholar has been mostly overlooked. Further analysis of the relationship of his commentary to his other writings could help reassess the importance of biblical exegesis in Owen's life and thought.

Fourth, Owen's commentary is the product of his polemical context. Lee Gatiss has drawn attention to Owen's interaction with "heretics, Jews, the Reformed, and Roman Catholics" to show that his commentary is "more than just dry and dusty logomachy" but the product of "his particular age and context."²⁰ His concern with the dangers of Socinian and Jewish rejection of the divinity of Christ caused him to reassess the need for a more up-to-date analysis of Hebrews that built upon the insights of previous commentators but also utilised current Jewish and Hebraic scholarship to address the original polemical context of the epistle. Owen's purported skill with "rabbinic learning," at least in the estimation of one of his supporters, gave him an "advantage above others" in explaining the "prejudices, customs, and traditions" of the Jewish understanding of the Messiah.²¹ Reflecting on Owen's use of humanistic methods in his exegesis, Henry Knapp explains, "Owen's humanism is found in his progressive approach to the incorporation and application of Judaistic insights into biblical studies. . . . His knowledge and use of ancient and medieval

¹⁹ Owen, "To the Christian Reader," *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. (*Works*, 18:9).

²⁰ Lee Gatiss, "Adoring the Fullness of the Scriptures in John Owen's Commentary on Hebrews" (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2013), 262.

²¹ H.G., "The Preface to the Reader," *Hebrews* (1684), n.p. (*Works*, 18:22).

Jewish culture has few parallels in the seventeenth century.”²² The lack of fully understanding the Jewish background of the epistle was one of the chief reasons that led Owen to write his commentary.

Fifth, Owen’s commentary is the product of his Christological context. In one of his introductory essays, Owen’s interest in the original setting of Hebrews led him to make four brief observations about the subject-matter of the epistle. In the first place, he argues “that the principal things treated of in it are matters of the greatest importance in Christian religion, and such as concern the very foundation of faith.” For Owen, the importance of Hebrews lies chiefly in its description of how what was promised concerning the person, office, and work of the Messiah is fulfilled in Christ. Next, he states, “. . . some things of great moment unto the faith, obedience, and consolation of the church, that are obscurely or sparingly taught in any other places of holy writ, are here plainly, fully, and excellently taught and improved.” According to Owen, without the book of Hebrews, our knowledge of key doctrines such as the priesthood of Christ, the nature of the atonement, and the typological structure of the Old Testament would be greatly impoverished. Owen insists, “He that understands aright the importance of these things . . . will be ready to conclude that the world may as well want the sun in the firmament as the church this Epistle.” Building on this point, Owen draws attention to the importance of Hebrews for understanding the Mosaic covenant. He states, “God’s way in teaching the church of the old testament, with the use and end of all the operose pedagogy of Moses, manifesting it to be full of wisdom, grace, and love, is here fully revealed.” In other words, what is hidden in the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament can only

²² Henry M. Knapp, “Understanding the Mind of God: John Owen and Seventeenth Century Exegetical Methodology” (PhD diss., Calvin Theological Seminary, 2002), 378.

be found when believers “pass safely through all the turnings and windings of them unto rest and truth in Jesus Christ.” Finally, Owen explains that the book of Hebrews is essential for grasping “the great alternation” between the worship regulated in the Mosaic covenant and the worship instituted under the new covenant in Christ.²³ For Owen, these biblical themes are important not simply for considering the Jewish background of Hebrews but also for knowing “the very fundamental principles of our Christian profession.” The Christology of Hebrews is vital for the people of God because it discloses “the grand principles of supernatural revelation,” without which no one can understand the meaning of Scripture or attain saving faith. Owen’s commentary represents the practical outworking of these Christological, covenantal, and hermeneutical themes in his attempt to prove to anyone who will pick up his work that Christ is the foundation and fulfilment of Scripture. “I doubt not,” Owen states, “but our endeavours on [this] subject will be able to secure their own station as to their usefulness, both by the importance of the matters treated of in them, as also from the necessity of laying them as a sure foundation unto the ensuing Exposition of the Epistle itself.”²⁴

²³ Owen, *Hebrews* (1668), 1.1.24 (*Works*, 18:45–46).

²⁴ Owen, “To the Christian Reader,” *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. (*Works*, 18:7).

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