

THE HERMENEUTICS OF JOHN OWEN

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“Our belief of the Scriptures to be the word of God, or a divine revelation, 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.”¹ So begins John Owen’s (1616–1683) treatise on biblical interpretation. In his preaching, teaching, and writing ministry Owen occupied himself with divine revelation, which ordinary believers were capable of interpreting. Further, this divine revelation held supreme authority over the church. This Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura* did not go unchallenged. On one hand, Roman Catholic apologists set forth sustained challenges against *sola Scriptura*. On the other hand, a new challenge came from Socinian rationalism. This dual threat led Owen to affirm and defend the literal sense of Scripture as well as assert the need for divine illumination in the interpretation of Scripture.

While scholarship on Owen tends to focus on his theological treatises,² recent studies have considered his exegetical and interpretive principles.³ However, these studies generally sympathize with Owen’s theological starting point. Therefore, this paper approaches the subject from an interpretive method that can be characterized as “Biblicist”⁴ and grammatical-historical. By approaching Owen from this angle, this paper seeks to demonstrate that he possessed a literal hermeneutic, which was both grounded in an emphasis on the divine authorship of Scripture and governed by his biblical theology. This paper will examine the principles and emphases of Owen’s hermeneutics in his own words from his works on Scripture and interpretation. In addition, other works will be consulted at several points to provide examples and illustrations of his interpretive principles at work.

The Nature of Scripture

Studying any interpreter’s hermeneutical principles calls for understanding his statements

¹ John Owen, *The Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God as Revealed in His Word*, ed. Andrew S. Ballitch, vol. 7, *The Complete Works of John Owen* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), 219; John Owen, *The Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God as Revealed in His Word*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 4, *The Works of John Owen* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1967), 121. As of this writing, only volume 7 in Crossway’s *Complete Works of John Owen* is available. Where this volume is cited, the two versions will be distinguished by reference to their respective editors.

² See the extensive bibliography in Crawford Gribben, *An Introduction to John Owen: A Christian Vision for Every Stage of Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

³ Henry M. Knapp, “Understanding the Mind of God: John Owen and Seventeenth-Century Exegetical Methodology” (Calvin Theological Seminary, 2002); Henry M. Knapp, “Revealing the Mind of God: Exegetical Method in the Seventeenth Century,” in *Church and School in Early Modern Protestantism: Studies in Honor of Richard A. Muller on the Maturation of a Theological Tradition*, ed. Jordan J. Ballor, David S. Sytsma, and Jason Zuidema (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 533–549; Carl 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* (Nottingham: Apollos, 1997), 147–162; Carl R. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen’s Trinitarian Theology*, Reformed Historical-Theological Studies (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2021); John W. Tweeddale, *John Owen and Hebrews: The Foundation of Biblical Interpretation*, T & T Clark Studies in English Theology (London: T & T Clark, 2019).

⁴ By “Biblicist” this author means the view that stresses confluence in divine inspiration (cf. 2 Pet. 1:20–21) and understands the analogy of faith to have a negative role in interpretation by serving as an exegetical check for validating an interpretation.

about the nature of the Bible. In his work *Of the Divine Original of the Scriptures*, Owen calls the doctrine of Scripture a first principle of biblical Christianity.⁵ For Owen, this is due to its divine origin: “The Scripture hath all its authority from its Author.”⁶ Further, “When the authority of the Scripture is inquired after, strictly *its power to command and require obedience, in the name of God*, is intended.”⁷ Finally, drawing on an observation about the prophets’ words to Israel, the doctrine of Scripture as first principle means that as the prophets’ words were to be believed, so now God’s written word is to be believed.⁸ Stated differently, since the Bible is authoritative, it functions as the sole source for and determiner of sound doctrine.⁹ This section considers Owen’s understanding of bibliology, including Scripture as divine revelation, its inspiration, and perspicuity. It concludes with Owen’s implications about the nature of Scripture.

Revelation

Owen recognizes that the nature of the Bible is one form of divine revelation. In one place, he summarizes the biblical teaching regarding the manner of God’s revelation, outlining three points: God reveals Himself by His works, by the light of nature in man’s conscience, and by His word.¹⁰ While there are different forms of revelation, God’s word holds the highest significance and authority because, according to Psalm 138:2, “‘over all thy name, thy Word’ [which] thou hast spoken. The name of God is all that whereby he makes himself known. Over all this God magnifies his Word. It all lies in a subserviency thereunto.”¹¹ In another work, Owen takes up the question of how one knows that God is three persons, yet one in essence. He argues that God has revealed it to be so. The next question is where He has revealed it. He answers, “It is the Scripture and that only.”¹² By this argument, Owen implies a presupposition that the Bible is divine revelation. Later, he makes this presupposition explicit: “God requires us to believe the Scripture for no other reason but because it is his word, or a divine revelation from him.”¹³ In other words, the Scriptures are a special revelation from God and they ought to be received on the basis of His authority.

Inspiration

Owen understands the Bible’s inspiration to be verbal plenary inspiration. Commenting on 2 Timothy 3:16, he writes, “Not only the doctrine in [the Bible], but the *γραφή* itself, or the

⁵ John Owen, *Of the Divine Original of the Scriptures*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 16, *The Works of John Owen* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1968), 304. Translating the leading words in 2 Peter 1:20–21 as “knowing this first,” he writes, “This is a principle to be owned and acknowledged by every one that will believe any thing else. ... This, then, in our religion, is to be owned, acknowledged, submitted unto, as a principle, without further dispute.”

⁶ *Ibid.*, 16:309.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 16:308 (emphasis in original).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 16:319.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 16:318.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16:309–10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16:311.

¹² John Owen, *The Reason of Faith*, ed. Andrew S. Ballitch, vol. 7, *The Complete Works of John Owen* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), 154; John Owen, *The Reason of Faith*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 4, *The Works of John Owen* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1967), 70.

¹³ *Works* 7:157 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:73 (Goold).

‘doctrine as written,’ is so from him.”¹⁴ Again, “Not only the *doctrine* they taught was the word of truth—truth itself, (John 17:17)—but the *words* whereby they taught it were words of truth from God himself.”¹⁵ Owen claims that it is not simply the doctrines derived from Scripture that are inspired. The words themselves were God-breathed.

The revelation the prophets received was also through verbal communication. Owen writes, “. . . every apex of the written Word is equally divine, and as immediately from God as the voice where with, or whereby, he spake to or in the prophets.”¹⁶ This statement implies that Owen would deny the assertion that the revelation given to the prophets were ideas and concepts without verbal content to them. Instead, it possessed divine and authoritative content.¹⁷

While Owen affirmed the prophets’ vital role in producing Scripture, he nevertheless described the manner of inspiration as a “passive concurrence.”¹⁸ This led him to prioritize Scripture’s divine authorship. Although the prophets played a role in revelation, “God was so with them, and by the Holy Ghost so spake in them . . . as that they were not themselves enabled, by any habitual light, knowledge, or conviction of truth, to declare his mind and will, but only acted as they were immediately moved by him.”¹⁹ Owen is careful to keep the human writer as a necessary participant in the formation of Scripture, but his passivity is stressed so that God’s authorship is accentuated.²⁰

Perspicuity

Owen asserts that the Bible is inherently clear. He writes, “The Holy Spirit has so disposed of the Scripture that the mind of God in all things concerning our faith and obedience, in the knowledge whereof our illumination does consist, is clearly revealed therein.”²¹ This claim highlights God’s authorship of Scripture, its content as divine revelation for Christian doctrine and life, while adding the implication that illumination is needed for interpretation. While filling in this sketch of perspicuity, Owen includes a discussion of what is presupposed about this doctrine, while also identifying several factors involved in obscure places.

Owen counts the Scripture’s divine origin as a guarantee of its clarity. He writes, “There is that plainness and perspicuity in it which become the holy, wise God to make use of.”²² The certainty of its clarity for believers is such that “everything in the Scripture is so plain as that the meanest believer may understand all that belongs unto his duty or is necessary unto his happiness.”²³ This guarantee and certainty of clarity for believers is a result of divine

¹⁴ Owen, *Works*, 16:300.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 305 (emphasis in original).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ That the revelation is verbal communication carrying God’s authority leads Owen to consider two implications. First, because the Scriptures are divinely inspired revelation, they should be received as the word of God. Second, receiving the Bible as God’s word is a straightforward matter. See *ibid.*, 16:315–16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 16:298. The prophets made known laws and doctrines, but the revelation was “immediately from God—there being only a passive concurrence of their rational faculties in their reception . . .”

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 16:299. “Thus, the word that came unto them was a book which they took *in* and gave *out* without any alteration of one tittle or syllable” (emphasis in original).

²¹ *Works* 7:300 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:192 (Goold).

²² *Works* 7:301 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:193 (Goold).

²³ *Works* 7:301 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:193 (Goold).

illumination. In fact, this illumination is a non-negotiable necessity for understanding Scripture. Owen writes, “Without this [aid and assistance of the Spirit of God] the clearest revelations of divine supernatural things will appear as wrapped up in darkness and obscurity: not for want of light in them, but for want of light in us.”²⁴ These presuppositions of the divine origin and the need for divine illumination of the Scriptures guarantee its clarity.

Having asserted its inherent perspicuity, Owen acknowledges the existence of obscurity when it comes to the Bible. However, he explains that there are various sources of obscurity that do not negate Scripture’s clarity. One source of obscurity is in men who “are prepossessed with opinions, dogmas, principles, and practices in religion, received by tradition from their fathers” and who “have vehement and corrupt inclinations” toward such preunderstandings.²⁵ Contrary to this source of obscurity stands the suitability of Scripture for destroying these presuppositions and speculations. A second source of obscurity is only apparent. When interpreters approach the Bible without divine illumination “it will appear obscure unto all men who come to the reading and study of it in the mere strength of their own natural abilities.” Accordingly, Owen is unsurprised that “some have esteemed St Paul one of the obscurest writers that ever they read.”²⁶ Obscurity because of unbelief and pride are not the fault of the Bible but the interpreter.

In contrast to the former two sources of obscurity, the next two sources involve obscurities that are common to believing interpreters. First, the Scriptures have things that are difficult to understand because of their subject matter. This includes doctrines such as the Trinity, incarnation, eternal decrees, resurrection, and regeneration. However, these doctrines are not inherently obscure. Instead, following Luther, the revelation of these teachings is clear because God revealed them to be so, even though we do not know how they work. Owen writes, “Whatever is necessary for us to believe concerning these things is plainly and clearly revealed in the Scripture And propositions may be clear unto us in their sense when their subject-matter is incomprehensible.” Further, “The reason of our believing, if we believe at all is God’s revelation of the truth, and not our understanding of the nature of the things revealed.”²⁷

A second category of obscurity that are common to regenerate interpreters concern manners of expression. These include “allegories, parables, mystical stories, allusions, unfulfilled prophecies and predictions, references unto [cultural, historical, and chronological background].” These things and more are “hard to find out,” while some are “impossible” to determine with any certainty.²⁸ However, these gaps may be bridged by the analogy of faith.²⁹

Implications for the Nature of Scripture

In addition to these teachings, Owen draws out several implications about the nature of

²⁴ *Works* 7:302 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:194 (Goold).

²⁵ *Works* 7:301 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:193 (Goold).

²⁶ *Works* 7:301–02 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:193 (Goold). Here Owen has in mind the Socinians who will not believe anything that their reason cannot grasp (*Works* 7:303–04 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:195–96 (Goold)).

²⁷ *Works* 7:303 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:195 (Goold). Cf. Martin Luther, “On the Bondage of the Will,” in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, ed. E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson, The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1969), 112: “Scripture simply confesses the Trinity of God and the humanity of Christ and the unforgivable sin, and there is nothing here of obscurity or ambiguity. But *how* these things can be, scripture does not say . . . nor is it necessary to know.”

²⁸ *Works* 7:304–05 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:196 (Goold).

²⁹ *Works* 7:305 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:196 (Goold). Owen’s understanding of the analogy of faith will be discussed below.

Scripture. First, the Bible harmonizes with itself: “The consent of parts, or harmony of the Scripture in itself, and every part of it with each other and with the whole, is commonly pleaded as an evidence of its divine original.”³⁰ In other words, the whole of Scripture has a harmonious design because of its divine authorship and origination. Second, as revelation from God, Scripture predicates a relationship between God and man. Owen categorizes this relationship into two parts. In part one, “God’s gracious communication of his love, goodness, etc., with the fruits of them, unto man.”³¹ In part two, “The obedience of man unto God, in a way of gratitude for that love, according to the mind and will of God revealed to him.”³² Scripture’s harmony and use as an instrument of establishing a relationship between God and man carries a third implication, which is foundational to every other implication and, by extension, to the very existence of the Bible. This implication is the Trinitarian God Himself. Owen states:

Now, when the mind of man is exercised about [God’s gracious communication and man’s grateful obedience], he finds at last that they are so wrapped up in the doctrine of the Trinity, that without the belief, receiving, and acceptance of it, it is utterly impossible that any interest in them should be obtained or preserved. ... Take away, then, the doctrine of the Trinity, and both [communication and obedience] are gone; there can be no purpose of grace by the Father in the Son—no covenant for the putting of that purpose in execution: and so the foundation of all fruits of love and goodness is lost to soul.³³

Pertaining specifically to the Bible, the Trinity is the foundation for God’s communication with man. Put bluntly, without the Trinity there would be no Scripture.

In sum, Owen’s doctrine of Scripture emphasizes its nature as special revelation from God that inherently carries divine authority. As divine revelation, the Bible’s inspiration covers each written word. However, Owen’s stress on divine authorship led him to a muted form of confluence whereby the writers acted as passive instruments in the process. Divine authorship also guarantees Scripture’s intrinsic clarity in things necessary for faith, obedience, and joy. In attenuating divine authorship of Scripture, Owen understands the Bible to be internally harmonious, to function as God’s communication to man, and to exist because of God’s triune nature. This teaching on the nature of Scripture flows into Owen’s essentials for interpretation.

Essentials of Interpretation

When considering Owen’s essentials of interpretation, it is necessary to remember his historical situation. There were two primary fronts involved in the conflict over interpretation. On one hand, the Puritans and Reformed Orthodox continued to distinguish themselves from Roman Catholic doctrine and practice, simultaneously finding it necessary to make a case for sound doctrine based solely on the authority of Scripture. Richard Muller summarizes the challenge set before the protestant orthodox:

[They] were left with the task of reconstructing a churchly and confessionally

³⁰ Owen, *Works*, 16:343–44.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 16:341.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

governed dogmatics in the context of a hermeneutical revolution. Doctrines like the Trinity, the Person of Christ, the fall, and original sin, which had developed over centuries and with the assistance of an easy mingling of theological and exegetical traditions and of an exegetical method designed to find more in a text than [*sic*] what was given directly by a grammatical reading, would now have to be explicated and exegetically justified—all in the face of a Roman Catholic polemic against the sole authority of Scripture as defined by the Reformers over against the tradition and the churchly magisterium³⁴

To put it another way, the Reformed Orthodox could not appeal to hermeneutical methods like the quadriga in the articulation and affirmation of sound doctrine. They had to do it from the text of Scripture based upon the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura*.

On the other hand, there were certain radicals that also had to be refuted. The rationalistic Socinians sought to take the Reformation Scripture principle to its logical end. Carl Trueman reviews the situation:

In the early Reformation, a simple appeal to the principle of Scripture's perspicuity had been considered enough in itself to provide a framework for sound doctrine. ... By the mid-seventeenth century, however, mere adherence to the shibboleth of Scripture alone was no safeguard against rationalism. In the development of Socinian thought, the Scripture principle was vigorously asserted, but within an interpretive framework that stressed human rationality as the criteria for interpretation. In this context, the Reformed Orthodox such as Owen had to clarify the theological framework of interpretation in a way that delimited human reason and allowed them to preserve the central tenets of Reformed faith without surrendering the Scripture principle.³⁵

In sum, Owen found himself continuing to defend *sola Scriptura* against Roman Catholic interpretive principles, while also distinguishing that same principle from the Socinians. He sought to do this by using interpretive tools such as the analogy of faith, scope, and other means of interpretation. He also maintained certain preunderstandings for the interpretive task. This section deals with these essential tools and preunderstandings for interpretation after first setting forth how Owen understood the meaning of words in the first place.

The Meaning of Words

In *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, Owen follows other interpreters in how to know the meaning of words as a “rule of interpretation.”³⁶ He writes, “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

³⁴ Richard A. Muller, *Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology*, Second., vol. 2, Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 433–34.

³⁵ Trueman, *The Claims of Truth*, 92–93.

³⁶ John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 10, The Works of John Owen (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967), 369. See Augustine’s discussion of signs, words, and things signified in Books 2 and 3 of *On Christian Teaching* (R. P. H. Green, trans., *Saint Augustine: On Christian Teaching*, Oxford World’s Classics [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997]).

believing plain words of the Scripture.”³⁷ He proceeds to explain that “plain words” may have a “figurative” meaning “capable of extension or restriction in the interpretation.” This explanation is set in contrast to “the literal importance of words.”³⁸ That is, there is a difference between understanding a text for its literal sense and reading a text in a literalistic way. With this understanding in place, Owen sets the stage for all interpretation, enabling him to assert that he interprets the biblical text according to its literal sense. At the same time, it gives him hermeneutical flexibility in view of his other stated essentials of interpretation.³⁹

Analogy of Faith

In his treatise on interpretation, Owen lists two basic principles that accompany his method of interpretation. The first is “a due consideration of the *analogy of faith* always to be retained.”⁴⁰ In his *Hebrews* commentary, he comments on the analogy of faith: “This ‘proportion of faith,’ this ‘form of sound words,’ is continually to be remembered in our inquiry after the mind of God in any particular place of the Scripture” because “the things that are of greatest importance are delivered in it plainly, clearly, and frequently.”⁴¹ This links the analogy of faith with the perspicuity of Scripture. He acknowledges that there are places difficult to interpret because of obscurities in the manner of revelation. However, because of the overall clarity of Scripture, if the obscure passage contains something necessary for believers to believe and obey, then that truth or duty will be plainly revealed elsewhere in Scripture. This clarity of certain passages informs the obscurity of some passages.⁴² Trueman comments, “The analogy of faith, then, embodies on one level the Reformation principle of *Scripture alone*, along with the rule that obscure passages are to be understood in the light of passages where the meaning is clear.”⁴³ Therefore, for Owen the analogy of faith is given to faithful believers and interpreters because of Scripture’s inherent clarity and unity.

Owen understood the analogy of faith to be the “overall doctrinal content of the Christian faith.”⁴⁴ In his own words, he writes, “This analogy or proportion of faith is what is taught plainly and uniformly in the whole Scripture as the rule of our faith and practice.”⁴⁵ He used this tool in interpretation in two primary ways. First, consideration of the analogy of faith serves

³⁷ *Works* 10:369 (emphasis in original).

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ In discussing Owen’s “promise-fulfillment hermeneutic” applied to prophetic passages, Tweeddale explains that this “signification theory ... provided him with a linguistic tool ... that upheld a literal reading of the promise (the word) by finding its fulfillment in Christ (the thing signified).” Tweeddale, *John Owen and Hebrews*, 102.

⁴⁰ *Works* 7:311 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:201 (Goold).

⁴¹ John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. W. H. Goold, vol. 21, Works of John Owen (Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, 1854), 315–16. This assertion is supported by appeal to divine inspiration and the Bible’s internal harmony.

⁴² *Works* 7:304–07 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:196–99 (Goold).

⁴³ Trueman, *The Claims of Truth*, 93 (emphasis in original).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Works* 7:306 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:198 (Goold). This means that, for Owen, there is little discernable difference between the analogy of faith and the analogy of scripture. Where there is a difference is in the collation of texts for the clarification of the meaning of obscure texts on the same subject-matter. See Henry M. Knapp, “Understanding the Mind of God: John Owen and Seventeenth-Century Exegetical Methodology” (PhD diss., Calvin Theological Seminary, 2002), 76–80, and Muller, *PRRD*, 2:494.

interpretation by comparing the interpretive options of one passage with the rest of the Bible. This is necessary because, as noted above, there are obscure and uncertain passages in Scripture that make them difficult to interpret. When these places are encountered, the analogy of faith helps to direct interpretations to the truth.⁴⁶ This is so, Owen writes, because “there is no place which doth not afford a sense fairly reconcilable unto the analogy of faith.”⁴⁷ Grounded as it is in Scripture’s clarity, the analogy of faith prevents the interpreter from corrupting biblical truth even if the meaning of every passage cannot be adequately explained.⁴⁸

Second, the analogy of faith reminds the interpreter of Scripture’s usefulness and necessity for the faith and practice of believers. Owen asserts that obedience and faith require clarity. Since Scripture is clear as a rule, believers can normally understand what God requires of them regarding what they should believe and how they should live. However, when the truth of a passage is obscure, the analogy of faith clarifies that truth because “there can be no instance given of any obscure place or passage in the Scripture, concerning which a man may rationally suppose or conjecture that there is any doctrinal truth requiring our obedience contained in it, which is not elsewhere explained.”⁴⁹ Therefore, because of Scripture’s clarity and because of the responsibility of believers to believe and obey God, obscure places must be clarified in some way. The analogy of faith provides that way to clarity.

Analyzing how the analogy of faith is used by interpreters usually includes questions revolving around its *role*, *content*, and *timing* in interpretation.⁵⁰ Its *role* will either only allow for a negative check or allow for both negative and positive uses. Its *content* will consider whether it only includes Scripture or allows for extra content (e.g., creeds, traditions, etc.). Its *timing* asks whether it is used as a check on exegesis or a driver of exegesis.

As reflected above, Owen’s position on the *content* of the analogy of faith is that it includes only Scripture. His position on the *role* and *timing* questions can be illustrated from two passages in his *Causes, Ways, and Means*. In discussing what to do when an interpreter is unable to discover the precise meaning of a passage and its implications for doctrine, he writes, “The rule in this case is that we *affix no sense unto any obscure or difficult passage of Scripture but what is materially true and consonant unto other express and plain testimonies*. For men to raise peculiar sense from such places, not confirmed elsewhere, is a dangerous curiosity.”⁵¹ In other words, the *role* of the analogy of faith is both negative check and positive confirmation in that an obscure passage cannot contribute a meaning that is not plainly expressed in another passage.⁵²

⁴⁶ Knapp writes that the analogy of faith was useful for “helping guide the interpreter to the truth” (“Understanding the Mind of God,” 69).

⁴⁷ Owen, *Exposition of Hebrews*, 21:316.

⁴⁸ *Works* 7:306 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:198 (Goold). Owen writes, “While we sincerely attend unto [the analogy of faith] we are in no danger of sinfully corrupting the word of God, although we should not arrive unto its proper meaning in every particular place.”

⁴⁹ *Works* 7:305 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:196–97 (Goold).

⁵⁰ See D. A. Carson, “Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology,” in *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 91–92; Henri Blocher, “The ‘Analogy of Faith’ in the Study of Scripture: In Search of Justification and Guide-Lines,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 5 (1987): 37; Walter C. Jr. Kaiser and Moisés Silva, *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 241–42; Walter C. Jr. Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 136.

⁵¹ *Works* 7:306 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:197 (Goold) (emphasis in original).

⁵² Knapp affirms this analysis: “In Owen’s writings, the analogy of faith not only plays a negative role, excluding interpretations which are contrary to accepted Christian belief, but it also functions positively, helping

Concerning *timing*, Owen writes about prophetic books, specifically Revelation:

As to sundry prophecies of future revolutions in the church and the world, like those in the Revelation, there was an indispensable necessity of giving them out in that obscurity of allegorical expressions and representations wherein we find them; for I could easily manifest that as the clear and determinate declaration of future events in plain historical expressions is contrary to the nature of prophecy, so in this case it would have been a means of bringing confusion on the works of God in the world, and of turning all men out of the way of their obedience.⁵³

For Owen, the timing of the analogy of faith is introduced early in the process, particularly in prophetic books, limiting their interpretation to symbolic and allegorical methods that promote usefulness to the contemporary church. To interpret them as future events of history (i.e., their literal sense) is to introduce confusion to the people.⁵⁴

However, this is not to suggest that Owen abused the analogy of faith in his interpretive method. He did not consider an interpretation which corresponds to the analogy of faith to be necessarily an accurate interpretation. For example, when Owen considers the phrase “the radiance of His glory” in Hebrews 1:3, he does not consider it to be a place where the relationship within the Trinity is being described as the sun to its rays. Therefore, while an interpreter may not be wrong in his conclusion about the Trinity in his interpretation since it accords with the analogy of faith, Owen does not consider the text to warrant this interpretive conclusion since he is “not persuaded that the apostle intended any such comparison or allusion, or aimed at our information or instruction by them.”⁵⁵ Knapp observes, “Owen is at his exegetical best here when he refuses to opt for a popular dogmatic exposition simply because it fits the analogy of faith, and instead, works within the analogy of faith to find an exposition which faithfully flows from the use of all exegetical techniques.”⁵⁶

Scope

Owen identifies his second basic principle of interpretation as “a due examination of the design and scope of the place.”⁵⁷ In considering scope, Owen joins other Reformed interpreters of the seventeenth century when he can use this term to apply to two different hermeneutical spheres. These are scope according to a specific passage or book and scope according to a

guide the interpreter to the truth” (“Understanding the Mind of God,” 69).

⁵³ *Works* 7:306 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:197–98 (Goold).

⁵⁴ In his commentary on Hebrews, Owen rejects the possibility of a future earthly kingdom because of its uncertainty and lack of place in the analogy of faith. He writes, “The coming of Christ to *reign on earth a thousand years* is, if not a groundless opinion, yet so dubious and uncertain as not to be admitted a place in the analogy of faith to regulate our interpretation of Scripture in places that may fairly admit of another application.” (John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. W. H. Goold, vol. 20 [Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, 1854], 154 [emphasis in original]). NB: the positive use of the analogy of faith.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 20:92; Knapp, “Understanding the Mind of God,” 72.

⁵⁶ Knapp, “Understanding the Mind of God,” 68.

⁵⁷ *Works* 7:311 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:201 (Goold). Muller further defines the term in a way that distinguishes it from contemporary English usage when he writes, “It is particularly important that the contemporary English meaning of ‘scope,’ the full extent, range, or intention of a thing, be excluded. . . . The term is rightly understood, therefore, *not* as the full extent, range or intention of the meaning of Scripture, but as the aim, purpose, goal, and center, indeed, the ‘bull’s eye’ of the biblical target” (*PRRD*, 2:209; emphasis in original).

general theme of the Bible.⁵⁸ Considering first scope in terms of a specific passage, Owen refers to it as discerning “the design of him that writes or speaks.”⁵⁹ Put another way, to examine the scope of a passage is to seek the meaning of the author.⁶⁰ In Owen’s polemic against the Socinian John Biddle, authorial intent is at the center of the dispute. He writes, “By [Biddle’s] leading questions, and application of the Scripture to them, he hath utterly perverted the scope and intendment of the places urged.”⁶¹ That the author’s intent is accessible in his writing, Owen states, “In the interpretation of the mind of any one, it is necessary that the words he speaks or writes be rightly understood.”⁶² Further, the language an author uses can convey meaning since his words signify the type of expression to be understood. Understanding the figure will open the literal sense of the text.⁶³ Authorial intent, as determined by language and grammar, is part of the scope of a passage.

While scope primarily focuses on the intent of an author in a specific passage, Owen’s use of the term occasionally expands to consider the entire Bible. For example, he writes that the doctrine of justification by faith “represents the whole scope of the Scripture, and is witnessed unto by particular testimonies occasionally given unto the same truth, without number.”⁶⁴ For Owen, the doctrine of justification before God is, on a broad level, the scope or aim of the Bible.⁶⁵ Another example is found in his commentary on Hebrews, “That the whole Scripture

⁵⁸ Muller explains that this flexible understanding of scope built on the work of the Reformers in the years prior to Reformed Orthodoxy. He writes, “In one sense, *scopus* can indicate a general doctrinal center or focus not unlike the christologically determined *fundamentum*. In another application, however, it can be virtually synonymous with *argumentum*, indicating the basic thrust or intention, including the general authorial intention of a particular passage in Scripture” (*PRRD*, 2:207; emphasis in original). Given that scope is used with different referents, Muller concludes, “The basic meaning of the term does not change from usage to usage, but only the breadth of its hermeneutical application” (*ibid.*, 2:208). However, Muller also notes that Puritan and Reformed Orthodox exegetes, and even theologians, used scope primarily to refer to “individual chapters or textual units” (*ibid.*, 2:221). See below for Owen’s habit to use the term in a restricted sense, while still referring to its more general sense even in the same context.

⁵⁹ *Works* 7:337 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:223 (Goold).

⁶⁰ Knapp writes (“Understanding the Mind of God,” 85), “Owen agrees with (and even commends) Biddle’s use of Scripture and his lexical analysis, but the men part ways over whether the bare letter, or the intention of the author (i.e., the scope), is to guide the meaning of the text.”

⁶¹ John Owen, *The Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated and Socinianism Examined*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 12, *The Works of John Owen* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1966), 62.

⁶² *Works* 7:327 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:215 (Goold).

⁶³ Owen, *Works* 12:64. “It is true, we do affirm that there are figurative expressions in the Scripture ... and that they are accordingly to be interpreted; not that they are to have a mystical sense put upon them, but that the literal sense is to be received, according to the direction of the figure which is in the words. ... Interpret them according to the figurative import of them, and that interpretation gives you the literal, and not mystical sense.”

⁶⁴ John Owen, “The Doctrine of Justification by Faith,” in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 5 (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1965), 385 (emphasis in original). Two pages later, while discussing the apparent disagreement between Paul and James on the issue of justification, Owen refers to both writers’ scope or design in their respective epistles (*ibid.*, 387). This shows Owen’s flexibility with the term, but also his preference to use it in reference to a specific passage.

⁶⁵ Contra. Richard C. Barcellos, “Seventeenth-Century Reformed Orthodoxy, The Theological Methodology of High Orthodoxy, John Owen, and Federal Theology,” *Reformed Baptist Theological Review* 5, no. 2 (2008): 109–10; Martin Williams, “Learning to Do Biblical Exegesis with the Puritans,” *Puritan Reformed Journal* 9, no. 2 (2017): 177; Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 31. These scholars suggest that Owen’s concept of scope included Christological or Christocentric interpretation. In support, they cite Muller’s analysis that focuses on the federal theology of Johannes Cocceius (1603–1669), which “was far more open to allegorical and typological exegesis than

hath an *especial end* ... is evident unto all that do seriously consider it. This *end* ... is the glory of that God who is the author of it. This is the *centre* where all the lines do meet, the *scope* and mark toward which all things are directed.”⁶⁶ These examples show that, with other Reformed exegetes of his time, Owen has a category for scope to refer to the message of the whole Bible. However, he seems to demonstrate a preference for scope to refer to a biblical writer’s intention in the passage.⁶⁷

Owen’s two basic principles for biblical interpretation are attention to the analogy of faith, which protects interpretation from contradicting the whole of biblical truth, and the scope of a passage, which promotes accuracy in interpretation. How these principles are put to work in interpretation are considered next under the means of interpretation.

Means of Interpretation

At the conclusion of his *Causes, Ways, and Means*, Owen outlines three ways the work of interpretation is carried out: spiritual, “discipline” or technical skill, and ecclesiastical. He clarifies that these are “means designed for the improvement hereof, or our profitable use of” interpretive principles.⁶⁸ That is, rather than expanding upon his interpretive principles, these are three general tools that lend aid to faithful interpretation.⁶⁹

the other varieties of Reformed thought and, therefore, far more liable to have recourse to christological readings of the Old Testament” (*PRRD*, 2:222; cf. 218–19). However, Muller immediately contrasts Cocceius with the consensus of Reformed hermeneutics after the Reformation through the seventeenth century:

The development of hermeneutics ... was toward an increasingly literal, textual, and comparative linguistic method that increasingly excluded the allegorical and typological approach not only of the middle ages but also of the early Reformers. In this altered hermeneutical context, it became impossible to claim that the goal or direction of each text was Christ, but quite acceptable to affirm that the goal of Scripture in whole and in part was the redemption of believers (*ibid.*, 222–23).

While Owen’s Christocentric interpretation of Old Testament prophecy is explicit (see below on his preunderstandings), it seems that these scholars confuse Owen’s use of “foundation” as scope when he identifies Christ as the foundational doctrine of the church, meaning, apart from faith in Him, no person belongs to the church (John Owen, *Christologia or A Declaration of the Glorious Mystery of the Person of Christ in The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 1 [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, n.d.], 34). See further *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ* in *Works* 1:314–15, where Owen identifies Christ as “the foundation whereon all other instructions of the prophets and apostles for the edification of the church are built, and whereinto they are resolved.” Rather than Christ being the scope of Scripture, Owen suggests Christ is related to everything in Scripture as a foundation is to a building.

⁶⁶ John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. W. H. Goold, vol. 18 (Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, 1854), 48 (emphasis in original).

⁶⁷ Commenting on the early Puritan writer William Perkins, Muller writes, “Perkins, like many of his contemporaries, appears to reserve the term ‘scope’ for its more restrictive exegetical use as a synonym for *argumentum*” (*PRRD*, 2:217). See also *ibid.*, 223, “This reading of the issue corresponded ... with the increasingly literal or grammatical reading of the text The more purely exegetical usage of *scopus* as a virtual synonym of *argumentum*, accordingly did not pass away as quickly and, indeed, remained characteristic of Protestant exegesis through the seventeenth and into the eighteenth century” (emphasis in original).

⁶⁸ *Works* 7:311 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:201 (Goold).

⁶⁹ Many of the individual elements of these tools are also found in his *Hebrews* commentary. See Owen, *Exposition of Hebrews*, 21:310–15.

Spiritual Means

Owen asserts that prayer holds the chief position of all the following means. He writes, "... constant and fervent prayer for the divine assistance of the Holy Spirit is such an indispensable means for the attaining of the mind of God in the Scripture as that without it all others will not be available."⁷⁰ Further, disregard of prayer is the "reason why so many that are skillful enough in the disciplinary means of knowledge are yet such strangers to the true knowledge of the mind of God."⁷¹ On one hand, lack of prayer keeps interpretive prejudices and errors in place, while the interpreter will also lack assurance and conviction that his conclusions are right. On the other hand, engaging in prayer ensures faithful interpretation and ultimately protects from a final prevalence of error.⁷² Still further, there are particular passages where understanding requires prayer.⁷³ For this reason the interpreter looks to the Holy Spirit for help so that "he would enlighten our minds and lead us into the knowledge of the truth."⁷⁴ To put it another way, prayer for illumination acknowledges that right methods are not enough to understand the Scriptures.

Prayer as chief of the spiritual means of interpretation both instills and gives voice to a humble, teachable heart that loves the truth. Owen claims that prayer works "in the mind those gracious qualifications of humility and meekness."⁷⁵ In another place he writes that searching the Scriptures require "a peculiarly humble frame of spirit, which is teachable."⁷⁶ At the same time, an interpreter with a mind for understanding the Scriptures will seek "a constant design for growth and a progress in knowledge, out of love to the truth and experience of its excellency."⁷⁷ Humility and love for the truth serve as instruments for sound interpretation.

A final spiritual means for interpretation is the purity and godliness of the interpreter. Owen stresses holy conduct and watchful thinking as vital for understanding divine revelation. In conduct, "Practical obedience in the course of our walking before God is another means unto the same end."⁷⁸ Interpreters must be "practically conversant about the things" the Scriptures reveal, showing by their living the truths that they are studying.⁷⁹ In thinking, interpreters "ought to take care that they entertain no corrupt lusts in their hearts or minds."⁸⁰ Put bluntly, "Love of sin will make all study of the Scripture to be mere lost labour."⁸¹ On the other hand, a "pure and undefiled" inner life cultivates thinking that is "able to discern the mind of God in his word."⁸² For Owen, the spiritual means of dependent prayer, humble love of the truth, and godly living

⁷⁰ *Works* 7:312 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:203 (Goold).

⁷¹ *Works* 7:312 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:202 (Goold).

⁷² *Works* 7:221–22, 312–13 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:122–23, 202–03 (Goold); Owen, *Exposition of Hebrews*, 21:311–12.

⁷³ *Works* 7:313–14 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:204–05 (Goold).

⁷⁴ *Works* 7:312 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:202 (Goold). On illumination, see *Works* 7:221–93 (Ballitch) and *Works* 4:122–73 (Goold).

⁷⁵ *Works* 7:313 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:203 (Goold).

⁷⁶ Owen, *Exposition of Hebrews*, 21:310 (emphasis in original).

⁷⁷ *Works* 7:316 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:206 (Goold).

⁷⁸ *Works* 7:316 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:206 (Goold).

⁷⁹ *Works* 7:316 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:206 (Goold).

⁸⁰ Owen, *Exposition of Hebrews*, 21:314 (emphasis in original).

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 21:315.

⁸² *Ibid.*

prepare the interpreter for faithful interpretation.

Technical Means

What Owen calls “disciplinarian” means is better known today as “technical skills.”⁸³ He identifies these as neutral disciplines, having “no moral good in themselves, but being indifferent in their own nature.”⁸⁴ Being neutral, the only issue in their employment is whether they are used rightly or wrongly. If used rightly, “they receive a blessing from the Spirit of God.” If used wrongly, “they are efficacious to seduce men unto a trust in their own understandings.”⁸⁵ The technical skills Owen identifies are knowledge of the Bible’s original languages, a familiarity of its history, geography, and chronology, and the use of sound, logical reasoning.

First, knowledge of the languages provides the interpreter with several advantages. One of these is the precision in interpretation that may come with the right use of the knowledge of Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. Owen writes, “There is in the originals of the Scripture a peculiar emphasis of words and expressions, and in them a special energy, . . . which cannot be traduced into other languages by translations, so as to obtain the same power and efficacy.”⁸⁶ Another advantage here is the ability to compare lexical and grammatical forms to that which is used outside the Bible. He explains, “The whole course of speech, especially in the New Testament, is accommodated unto the nature, use, and propriety of that language, as expressed in other authors who wrote therein, and had a perfect understanding of it. From them, therefore, is the proper use and sense of the words, phrases, and expressions . . . much to be learned.”⁸⁷ Learning and discerning “proper use” is only possible by the interpreter “that is skilled in that language.”⁸⁸ Proficiency and ability in the original languages are of great value for sound interpretation.

Second, Owen considers “an acquaintance with the history and geography of the world and with chronology” to be a technical skill for use in interpretation.⁸⁹ The Bible establishes and recounts the history of redemption and notes fulfilled prophecies. With this knowledge of history, especially prophecy, interpreters will be kept from turning still unfulfilled prophecies into “senseless and fulsome allegories.”⁹⁰ Having said this, Owen is careful to warn of unnecessary inquiry into minute “chronological computations” since “it is most probable that the Scripture never intended” such searches.⁹¹ Instead, the Bible’s chronology is given to show that it comports with history.⁹² When used within these guardrails, the historical references serve interpreters in the search for the meaning of the Scriptures.

⁸³ Trueman, *The Claims of Truth*, 84.

⁸⁴ *Works* 7:321 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:209 (Goold).

⁸⁵ *Works* 7:321 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:210 (Goold).

⁸⁶ *Works* 7:326 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:214 (Goold).

⁸⁷ *Works* 7:326 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:214 (Goold).

⁸⁸ *Works* 7:327 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:215 (Goold). NB: Owen is also concerned to point out that while there is great advantage in knowing the languages, it is not a requirement that they be learned: “This skill, and the exercise of it in the way mentioned, is no duty in itself, nor enjoined unto any for its own sake” (*Works* 7:329 [Ballitch]; *Works* 4:216 [Goold]). Further it is only one tool for interpretation, and it is useless without the spiritual means of interpretation (*Works* 7:332 [Ballitch]; *Works* 4:219 [Goold]).

⁸⁹ *Works* 7:332 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:219 (Goold).

⁹⁰ *Works* 7:334 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:221 (Goold).

⁹¹ *Works* 7:334 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:221 (Goold).

⁹² *Works* 7:336 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:222 (Goold).

Third, Owen counts the use of sound reasoning to be a technical aid in interpretation. By this he has in mind the “ability to judge of the sense of propositions, how one thing depends on another, how it is deduced from it, follows upon it, or is proved by it.”⁹³ Owen is referring to rhetorical and logical analysis. Whatever label one puts on this skill, this kind of reasoning still calls for subjection to the Holy Spirit: “But this must be admitted with its limitations; for whatever perfection there seems to be in our art of reasoning, it is to be subject to the wisdom of the Holy Ghost in the Scripture.”⁹⁴ The wisdom he has in mind is the analogy of faith, to which interpretation must ultimately yield. As important and helpful as these technical skills are, they do not supplant the decisive place that Scripture’s own interpretation of itself holds.

Ecclesiastical Means

Owen’s third general aid in interpretation is what he calls “ecclesiastical.” That is, “Those I intend which we are supplied withal by the ministry of the church in all ages.”⁹⁵ Owen uses the least space in explaining this aid and most of what he writes is to say what he does not mean. First, he does not mean that the Bible is “to be interpreted according to catholic tradition, and not otherwise.”⁹⁶ While Owen would acknowledge his indebtedness to the church’s heritage of biblical interpretation and theological reflection, he denies that such tradition should bind and determine interpretive conclusions. In fact, he states that the existence of interpretive traditions as they stand apart from Scripture can only find their origination point in the “light of nature” or the “reason of mankind.”⁹⁷ As such, they lack authority over interpretive decisions. On the other hand, whatever traditions exist that claim Scripture as their source either result in a logical redundancy or simply serve as another term for the analogy of faith. In other words, tradition cannot be used to interpret Scripture. If it plays any role in interpretation, it is still subservient to the analogy of faith.⁹⁸

Second, by ecclesiastical helps, Owen does not intend to appeal to the consensus of the apostolic and church fathers as a rule for interpretation. While acknowledging that they may agree in the articles of orthodox faith, he denies that any interpretive consensus among the fathers exists. Further, he also denies that there is a middle way between the fathers’ unity in orthodox faith and their differing interpretive conclusions. Put differently, there is no changing the reality that the fathers were mere men in their handling of the Scriptures. Authority still rests in the Scriptures.⁹⁹

If the fathers and interpretive traditions are not useful for authority in interpretation, what are they good for? Owen finds them useful for comparing interpretations and serving as either good or bad models in interpretive practices. Of the latter, Owen specifically identifies Origen as

⁹³ *Works* 7:337 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:223 (Goold).

⁹⁴ *Works* 7:338 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:224 (Goold).

⁹⁵ *Works* 7:341 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:226 (Goold).

⁹⁶ *Works* 7:341 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:226 (Goold).

⁹⁷ *Works* 7:341 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:226 (Goold).

⁹⁸ *Works* 7:341–42 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:226–27 (Goold).

⁹⁹ *Works* 7:342 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:227 (Goold). Owen’s view aligns with what is called the “ancillary” view of the relationship between Scripture and tradition. See A. N. S. Lane, “Scripture, Tradition and Church: An Historical Survey,” *Vox Evangelica* 9 (1975): 37–55. That is, “it did not involve the unqualified acceptance of any tradition” and “while ... not despise[ing] tradition [it was] only accepted if it was scriptural, Scripture remaining the final arbiter” (43).

someone not to follow. He comments, “[Origen was full of] fooleries and mistakes, occasioned by the prepossession of his mind with platonic philosophy, [and] confidence of his own great abilities . . . , with the curiosity of a speculative mind.”¹⁰⁰ Those who did not follow in Origen’s steps are worthy models of imitation, such as Chrysostom, Theodoret, Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine in this category.¹⁰¹ Still more helpful are those of the Reformation generation: Bucer, Calvin, Martyr, and Beza.¹⁰² However, none of these men hold authority to bind an interpreter’s conscience. Instead, they should be held as conversation partners.¹⁰³ In the end, the history of interpretation’s profitability for contemporary interpreters depends on their own application of the principles and means that Owen has identified and explained throughout his discourse since they studied the same Scriptures with the same limitations and needs as every other generation.¹⁰⁴ In this way, Owen turns the interpreter seeking certainty and assurance away from the technical and ecclesiastical means to dependence upon the Spirit through the spiritual means of prayer and the objectivity of the analogy of faith.

Preunderstandings in Interpretation

Added to Owen’s principles and means for interpretation is a third precept, which is an expansion of the analogy of faith. He approaches interpretation with three areas of what is now called preunderstanding. Preunderstandings involve doctrinal or application content that are allowed to control interpretive conclusions.¹⁰⁵ These areas are the New Testament’s (NT) priority and Christocentric interpretation of Old Testament (OT) prophecy that establish biblical theology as the starting point for exegesis.

New Testament Priority

In *Causes, Ways, and Means*, Owen addresses a potential objection to the necessity for the Spirit’s illumination in interpretation that is based upon an assumption of NT priority. Framing the objection, he writes, “Now, it is confessed that there was in [the Old Testament] a darkness and obscurity, and such as needed new revelations for the understanding of them; but since all things are ‘brought to light by the gospel,’ there is no need of any special aid or assistance of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰⁶ In other words, the OT is obscure in comparison to the NT. In response, Owen sets forth 2 Corinthians 3:13–18, explaining that there were two veils that hindered the Israelites understanding. The two veils include one covering the hearts of the people and the other covering the face of Moses. When Owen explains the veil over Moses’ face, he writes, “[It] was the obscurity of the instructions given them, as wrapped up in types, shadows, and dark parables. . . . This veil is quite taken off in the revelation or doctrine of the gospel.”

¹⁰⁰ *Works* 7:343 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:228 (Goold).

¹⁰¹ *Works* 7:343 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:228 (Goold).

¹⁰² *Works* 7:344 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:229 (Goold).

¹⁰³ *Works* 7:343 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:228 (Goold).

¹⁰⁴ *Works* 7:344 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:228–29 (Goold).

¹⁰⁵ Walter C. Jr. Kaiser, “The Single Intent of Scripture,” in *Evangelical Roots: A Tribute to Wilbur Smith*, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978), 139–40; Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology*, 26; Robert L. Thomas, “The Origin of Preunderstanding: From Explanation to Obfuscation,” in *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 44.

¹⁰⁶ *Works* 7:230 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:130 (Goold).

Considering this veil, Owen concedes that NT revelation is different from the Old: “It is acknowledged that there is a great difference between those under the Old Testament and those under the New.”¹⁰⁷ He affirms this favorable position toward NT priority in interpretation when he frames the result of removing this veil of obscurity for the sake of NT clarity. He writes, “That as unto the doctrine itself concerning the mystery of God in Christ, it is no more represented unto us in types, shadows, and dark parables, but in the clear glass of the gospel.”¹⁰⁸ That is, while the OT was obscure, the coming of Christ has brought light and clarity.

Christocentric Interpretation of Old Testament Prophecy

That Owen’s NT priority argument rests upon a foundational Christocentric presupposition is evident from the immediately preceding. However, “Exercitation XVII” in the *Hebrews* commentary makes this explicit. He writes that “the great design” of the OT “is the bringing forth of the Messiah.” He continues, “Without an apprehension of this design and faith therein, 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.”¹⁰⁹ On this Christocentric foundation, Owen formulates eight principles for interpreting prophecies and promises, the first of which is that they are fulfilled spiritually and eternally because they “*principally respect spiritual things, and that eternal salvation which he was to obtain for his church.*”¹¹⁰ Second, “temporal” (i.e., physical) promises are “accessory” and conditioned upon submission to Messiah’s “law and rule.”¹¹¹ Third, promises “whose first signification denotes things temporal” are “metaphors and allegories” for “spiritual things.”¹¹² Fourth, messianic promises are inherited by Jewish and Gentile believers.¹¹³ Fifth, Owen qualifies the previous principle by expanding the timing necessary for fulfillment of these promises to depend on the geographical proximity of the gospel and the church’s ministry.¹¹⁴ Sixth—and corresponding to the fifth principle—these promises are fulfilled continually throughout the era since “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

¹⁰⁷ *Works* 7:231 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:131 (Goold).

¹⁰⁸ *Works* 7:231 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:132 (Goold).

¹⁰⁹ Owen, *Exposition of Hebrews*, 18:370 (emphasis in original).

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 18:426 (emphasis in original). For a discussion of Owen’s eight principles, see Tweeddale, *John Owen and Hebrews*, 91–102.

¹¹¹ Owen, *Exposition of Hebrews*, 18:427–28.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 18:429. The principle states “*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.*” One reason this for this was due to “the very way and manner of the prophets’ expression of their visions and revelations,— wherein, after the way of the people of the east, they made use of many metaphors and allegories,—led them so to set forth spiritual things” (emphasis in original). NB: Owen acknowledges that certain promises may have a “signification” that require temporal or physical fulfillment.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 18:431. “*By the ‘seed of Abraham,’ by ‘Jacob’ and ‘Israel,’ in many places of the 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 inheritors of the promise*” (emphasis in original).

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 18:432. “*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*” (emphasis in original). Tweeddale suggests that the “eminent” and “famous” refers to such biblical people as Moses (*John Owen and Hebrews*, 98).

kingdom,—that is, from his coming unto the end of the world.”¹¹⁵ Seventh, promises are fulfilled in two ways, either by men who are accountable to God for carrying out their fulfillment, or by God through the Messiah’s work and accomplishments.¹¹⁶ Finally, the positive use of the analogy of faith is given as an interpretive tool of obscure passages that suggest interpretive conclusions contrary to these hermeneutical principles.¹¹⁷

In sum, Owen understands the OT to be inherently obscure without the NT. Further, the design of OT prophecy was to find spiritual fulfillment in Christ. These positions allow him to develop a biblical theology that serves as an exegetical starting point.

Biblical Theology as Exegetical Starting Point

For Owen, a consequence of the nature of Scripture as God’s word is the profound doctrine it reveals.¹¹⁸ Among the most profound of doctrines is the trinity of God, which “is delivered unto us in the Scripture.”¹¹⁹ To establish this truth he appeals to no orthodox creed, only the Bible. This is a significant point for Owen’s hermeneutical outlook because the Trinity is the foundation for God’s communion with man and man’s obedience to God. To put it negatively, without the Trinity there is no relationship between God and man and no doctrine to interpret with Scripture.¹²⁰ That is:

The Scripture speaks not of any thing *between God and us* but what is founded on this account. The Father worketh, the Son worketh, and the Holy Ghost worketh. ... Upon this discovery, the soul that was before startled at the doctrine in the notion of it, is fully convinced that all the satisfaction it hath sought after, in its seeking unto God, is utterly lost if this be not admitted.¹²¹

Trueman comments that this passage from Owen “would appear to reveal the fundamental content of the analogy of faith, *the foundation of all interpretation* The point of departure for this discussion is the doctrine of the Trinity.”¹²² That is, Owen’s theology begins and ends with the Trinity. Trueman continues, “[Owen’s] message is clear: if the Trinity is rejected, it will quickly become apparent that nothing of value can be derived from the Scriptures. The Trinitarian economy of salvation thus provides the hermeneutical key for unlocking the meaning

¹¹⁵ Owen, *Exposition of Hebrews*, 18:432, 433. “*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*” (emphasis in original). Tweeddale identifies this principle as the “heart of Owen’s ‘already-not yet’ hermeneutic” (*John Owen and Hebrews*, 99).

¹¹⁶ Owen, *Exposition of Hebrews*, 18:433–34.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 18:435. Owen writes,

Suppose there should be any particular promise or promises, relating unto the times 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, undoubted testimonies of the Scripture itself, and manifest in the event, as if it were written with the beams of the sun? (emphasis in original)

¹¹⁸ Owen, *Works*, 16:337.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16:340.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 16:341.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 342 (emphasis in original).

¹²² Trueman, *The Claims of Truth*, 94 (emphasis added).

of the Scriptures.”¹²³ Owen’s Trinitarian theology provided a consistent interpretive grid.

This consistency is central to Owen’s view of the exegetical task. He writes, “The Holy Spirit has not in the Scripture reduced and disposed its doctrines or supernatural truths into any system, order, or method.”¹²⁴ In other words, Scripture does not present a theological system. However, as claimed by Owen above, Scripture does reveal God’s triune nature and His relationship with humanity. Therefore, although he was not the first to employ the concept of covenant for explaining God’s relations with man, he “was among the first to organize a system of theology according to the economical development of biblical covenants.”¹²⁵ Owen explicitly states this in *Theologoumena Pantodapa*, “All theology is . . . based on a covenant.”¹²⁶ Also, as noted above, in *Divine Original* Owen developed this system on the basis of the doctrine of revelation as established by the Trinity.

Commenting on this same viewpoint from Owen’s *Hebrews* commentary, John Tweeddale argues, “When Owen wrote his commentary on Hebrews, his commitment to federal theology [i.e., covenant theology] as the foundation of biblical interpretation provided him with a coherent hermeneutic to exegete, defend, and apply the text of Scripture . . .”¹²⁷ Further, “To borrow Benjamin Warfield’s phrase, federal theology is unquestionably an ‘architectonic principle’ in Owen’s writings and commentary. *It grounds his theology and structures his exegesis.*”¹²⁸ This observation about the role of covenant theology is consistent with Trueman’s observation about Owen’s Trinitarian theology. In sum, Owen sees the Trinity as necessary for revelation and Scripture. He also considers his covenant theology to be an *exegetical theology*.

When these insights are combined, three conclusions about Owen’s interpretive method may be drawn. First, his theological method presupposes Scripture has a Trinitarian foundation. Second, that foundation grounds his biblical theology. Third, his biblical theology informs and directs his exegesis. Put simply, his covenant theology is the starting point for his interpretation of Scripture.¹²⁹

Evaluation

Owen’s hermeneutics model grammatical-historical presuppositions and principles for

¹²³ Ibid., 95.

¹²⁴ *Works* 7:295 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:188 (Goold).

¹²⁵ Tweeddale, *John Owen and Hebrews*, 68.

¹²⁶ John Owen, *Theologoumena Pantodapa*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 17 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, n.d.), 44; Quote taken from John Owen, *Biblical Theology: The History of Theology from Adam to Christ*, trans. Stephen P. Westcott (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1994), 28.

¹²⁷ Tweeddale, *John Owen and Hebrews*, 70. Tweeddale notes that in his work, he makes no distinction between “covenant theology” and “federal theology” (54n3).

¹²⁸ Ibid., 71 (emphasis in original). Cf. *ibid.*, 55, 61–62, 69, 70.

¹²⁹ These conclusions confirm J. I. Packer’s claims about Covenant Theology’s relationship to interpretation (J. I. Packer, *Revelations of the Cross* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998], 9–10):

The straightforward, if provocative answer to that question is that it is what is nowadays called a hermeneutic—that is, a way of reading the whole Bible that is itself part of the overall interpretation of the Bible that undergirds it. A successful hermeneutic is a consistent interpretive procedure yielding a consistent understanding of Scripture that in turn confirms the propriety of the procedure itself. . . . Once Christians have got this far, covenant theology of the Scriptures is something they can hardly miss.

interpretation. At the same time, his understanding of the passive role of the inspired writers emphasizes divine authorship, which leads to his biblical theology becoming a starting point for interpretation. As a result, his interpretive method tends to place the analogy of faith in a dominant position. This section evaluates both of these points.

Advocate for Grammatical-Historical Presuppositions and Principles of Interpretation

Grammatical-historical hermeneutics stresses a text ought to be interpreted according to authorial intent for a singular meaning that is accessible through its language and grammar.¹³⁰ These principles are grounded in presuppositions about the nature of Scripture that affirm the verbal plenary inspiration of the biblical text (2 Tim. 3:16).¹³¹ The analysis above shows that Owen affirmed these presuppositions about the nature of Scripture. His interpretive method shows he practiced principles in accord with grammatical-historical hermeneutics. He makes this explicit when he writes, “Careful I have been . . . to bring no prejudicated 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.”¹³² This assertion is supported throughout his *Hebrews* commentary as he models grammatical-historical principles such as single meaning,¹³³ authorial intent,¹³⁴ attention to grammar,¹³⁵ context,¹³⁶ and historical background.¹³⁷ For these reasons, contemporary grammatical-historical interpreters will profit from observing Owen’s handling of the text.

¹³⁰ Abner Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers: Learning to Interpret Scripture from the Prophets and Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2018), 26–27, 200–06; Kaiser and Silva, *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*, 34–35.

¹³¹ John S. Feinberg, *Light in a Dark Place: The Doctrine of Scripture*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 111–12.

¹³² Owen, *Exposition of Hebrews*, 18:9. Muller’s conclusion about the hermeneutical landscape in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries shows that Owen was not alone in this pursuit of meaning. That is, the move “was toward an increasingly literal, textual, and comparative linguistic method . . .” Further, there was an “increasingly literal or grammatical reading of the text” amongst Protestant interpreters (*PRRD*, 2:222–23).

¹³³ Owen, *Exposition of Hebrews*, 21:35. “Now this doth not arise hence, that the same place of Scripture, or the same words in any piece, have a diverse sense, a literal sense and that which is mystical or allegorical; for the words which have not one determinate sense have no sense at all.” See similar statements on 21:167 and *Exposition of Hebrews*, 20:367. NB: Owen’s explanation includes a distinction between *allegory* and *allegorical*: “But the truth is, he doth not call the things themselves an allegory, for they had a reality, the story of them was true; but the exposition and application which he makes of the Scripture in that place is allegorical,—that is, what was spoken of one thing he expounds of another, because of their proportion one to another, or the similitude between them.” Contra. David C. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” *Theology Today* 37, no. 1 (1980): 27–38; Richard C. Barcellos, “Seventeenth-Century Reformed Orthodoxy, The Theological Methodology of High Orthodoxy, John Owen, and Federal Theology,” *Reformed Baptist Theological Review* 5, no. 2 (2008): 112.

¹³⁴ Owen, *Exposition of Hebrews*, 20:319. “The apostle in [Hebrews 2:5–9] proceeds in the pursuit of his former design.”

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 20:323. Here Owen considers the “*subject*,” “*limitations*,” and “*predicate*” of Hebrews 2:5 (emphasis in original).

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ Owen, *Exposition of Hebrews*, 18:9. “I still kept in my eye the time and season of writing this Epistle; the state and condition of them to whom it was written,—their persuasions, prejudices, customs, light, and traditions.”

Divine Authorship and Theological Preunderstanding Dictate Interpretation

As noted earlier, Owen holds what can be described as a muted form of confluence. While writing with intent, the biblical writers remained passive. He makes this case based upon a faulty exegesis of 2 Peter 1:21. Rather than “men spoke from God,” Owen understands the text to say, “God spoke by men.” This understanding allows him to emphasize God’s authorship. Furthermore, Owen’s employment of the principle that a word’s meaning is determined by what the word signifies allows his interpretations to appeal to something beyond the text for legitimacy, even if the words “first signification denotes things temporal and corporeal.”¹³⁸ Finally, his Trinitarian biblical theology is laid as the foundation for his exegesis and theology. These three positions pave the way for the analogy of faith to dictate his interpretive conclusions. In other words, the early entry of the analogy of faith and its positive use arbitrate interpretation. On this Owen is explicit:

What sense soever any man supposes or judges this or that particular place of Scripture to yield and give out to the best of his rational intelligence is immediately to give place unto the analogy of faith, that is, the Scripture’s own declaration of its sense in other places to another purpose, or contrary thereunto.¹³⁹

In other words, exegetical findings can be undermined by the analogy of faith even if they do not contradict other biblical passages. Thus, the analogy of faith plays a dominate role in interpretation and effectively silences the contribution that a text offers to the revelation of God in His word. A better way limits preunderstanding and follows an *exegetical* theological method. Concerning preunderstanding, God’s self-revelation in the Scriptures and the ability of language to convey meaning are presupposed. Concerning theological method, exegesis serves as the foundation for interpretation and provides the building blocks for theology. Thus, the analogy of faith serves only as an exegetical check after the meaning of a passage has been determined.¹⁴⁰

Conclusion

In many ways, John Owen’s devotion to Scripture as the word of God and his convictions concerning its interpretation have benefited the church since his death. He desired to convince and equip pastors and congregants with the knowledge that the Bible is inspired, coherent, and accessible. It was according to that desire that he wrote several works on Scripture and interpretation. Overall, Owen’s emphasis on the Bible as divine and authoritative revelation serves the church as another voice that calls people to know God through His word. Further, his stress on the capability of Spirit-illuminated believers to interpret the Scriptures for themselves countered the challenges that faced the seventeenth century English church. Finally, his doctrine of Scripture follows the Bible’s testimony of itself and its demands to discover the singular meaning of its author.

However, Owen’s accent on the divine authorship of Scripture undermined the role of the human writer. As a result of this unbalanced view of inspiration, and in accordance with his anchoring of interpretation in the Triune nature of God, he promoted a role for the analogy of

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 18:429.

¹³⁹ *Works* 7:338 (Ballitch); *Works* 4:224 (Goold).

¹⁴⁰ Kaiser, “The Single Intent of Scripture,” 139–40.

faith in interpretation that appeared early in the interpretive process and that was allowed to dictate exegetical conclusions. While motivated by demonstrating the unity of the Bible's message, his interpretive method allowed for a silencing of the contribution of inspired writings that did not already conform with his theological preunderstandings. For proponents and practitioners of the grammatical-historical method of biblical interpretation, Owen's approach demonstrates a potential pitfall for interpretive method when a passive human writer allows for the preservation of theological preunderstanding. These elements introduce the analogy of faith too early in interpretation so that it plays a positive role in determining the meaning of a passage.