

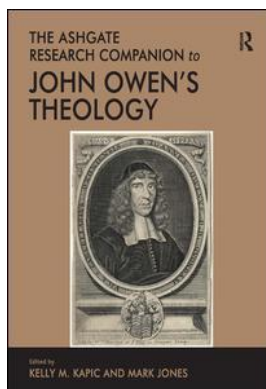
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John Owen's Commentary on Hebrews in Context

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John Owen's Commentary on Hebrews in Context

John W. Tweeddale

Then appeared 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 Thompson¹

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

Introduction

John Owen is frequently acknowledged as a leading figure of the Puritan and nonconformist movements of the seventeenth century. For example, historian Richard Greaves 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 precedent or justification. Owen's distinguished life warrants his importance for understanding the history and theology of "high Calvinism" in the post-Reformation period. His advisory role to Oliver Cromwell, educational reform at Oxford, leadership at the Savoy Assembly, advocacy of toleration, promotion of spiritual holiness and communion with God, defense of Protestant orthodoxy against heretical, heterodoxical, and "popish" errors, and voluminous,

¹ Thompson, "Life of Dr Owen," *The Works of John Owen*, ed. Goold (London, 1850), 1:xxxiv.

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

³ Greaves, "Owen, John (1616–1683)," *ODNB*.

if sometimes cumbersome, writings represent only a sample of his achievements. Nevertheless, while Owen's reputation as an ecclesiastical statesman, educator, pastor, polemicist, and theologian is 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 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 that introduce the main interpretive and theological themes of Hebrews and an exposition of the first two chapters of the epistle. He continued writing the commentary, despite ill-health, until he completed the work just before his death in 1683.⁴ When finished it consisted of four hefty tomes exceeding 2,000 folio pages and over two million words, making it one of the largest expositions of the post-Reformation era if not the entire history of biblical interpretation.

The significance of Owen's *Hebrews* lies not only with its size, as can be attested by the multiple editions and abridgments of it to surface every century since its original publication.⁵ His commentary not only saw widespread recognition within Britain and North America but was also translated into Dutch in the eighteenth century.⁶ Furthermore, the German bibliographer Johann Georg Walch, along with nonconformist church historians William Orme and William H. Goold, reported

⁴ *Exercitations on the epistle to the Hebrews ... with an exposition and discourses on the two first chapters of the said epistle to the Hebrews* (London, 1668). The subsequent volumes were published in 1674, 1680, and posthumously in 1684. All citations will refer to these volumes along with the corresponding reference to the standard 24-volume Goold edition of Owen's works in parenthesis. E.g. *Hebrews* (1668), 1.1.1 (*Works*, 18:25) equates to book 1, exercitation 1, section 1 of the 1668 volume of Owen's commentary (this reference corresponds to volume 18, page 25 of the Goold edition). However, the Goold edition will be the basis of all quotations, since Goold, as opposed to previous editors of Owen's works, left the language of Owen "untouched and unmodified" (*Works*, 18:xii). Comparison of Goold's volumes with the original has confirmed that his edition is indeed unabridged. On Owen's health, see P. Toon, *God's Statesman* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1971), 171.

⁵ *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev., 4 vols, ed. Williams (London, 1790); *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 7 vols, ed. Wright (Edinburgh, 1812–14); *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 7 vols, ed. Goold (London, 1854–5); *Hebrews: The Epistle of Warning*, ed. Tryon (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1953); *Hebrews*, ed. McGrath and Packer (Wheaton: Crossway, 1988); *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 7 vols, ed. Goold (reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991); *The Works of John Owen*, CD-ROM (Rio, WI: Ages Digital Library, 2000); *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Bellingham: Logos Bible Software, 2009). NB: this list only consists of the first printing of each edition.

⁶ Owen, *Eene uitlegginge van den sendbrief van Paulus den apostel aen de Hebreënen*, 4 vols, ed. Commincq (Rotterdam, 1733–40). Jonathan Edwards, for example, owned a set of *Hebrews* and even lent two volumes to Cotton Smith on November 4, 1753; see *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: Catalogue of Books*, ed. Thuesen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 26:339. Likewise, Samuel Mather owned a copy of volume one of *Hebrews* that may have been inherited from his grandfather Increase Mather, who seems to have owned at least two volumes. See J. Tuttle, *Libraries of the Mathers* (Worcester, MA: The Davis Press, 1910), 15, 75. Increase, in fact, records in his diary that he read from Owen's exposition on Hebrews

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.⁷ The commentary was finally collected into seven volumes by Goold in the nineteenth century to form the final part of the standard 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).

Owen's Commentary in Context

Social-Political Context: A Post-Restoration Publication

The production of a commentary of the magnitude of *Hebrews* is itself noteworthy. Owen's exposition however was not his only work during this period. 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. 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 also 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."⁸ Owen's commentary was one of many outstanding accomplishments 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.

Owen sought to take full advantage of the resources 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

2 and 4, as well as his discourse on the Sabbath. See *Diary by Increase Mather*, ed. Green (Cambridge: John Wilson & Son, 1900), 33–4.

⁷ Walch, *Bibliotheca theologica selecta litterariis adnotationibus instructa* (Jena, 1765), 4:733; cf. Orme, "Memoirs of Dr. John Owen," *Works*, ed. Russell, 1:254; Goold, *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* (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 *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 1:809.

⁸ Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity in Later Seventeenth Century England* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1987), 22.

Morrice, Charles II's secretary of state, 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 Morrice's good graces, "It was also through the countenance of your favor that this and some other treatises have received warrant to pass freely 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. With connections to men such as Morrice, Owen was enabled to devote himself to writing books that would hopefully encourage a splintered and beleaguered nonconformist church. Unlike some of his colleagues, he had the time and contacts to engage in massive writing projects like *Hebrews*.

In addition to his commentary, Owen wrote during this period a variety of other works on topics as wide ranging as worship, toleration, justification, Christology, and a massive multi-volume project on the Holy Spirit. Even if Owen never produced his commentary, his literary accomplishments during this period alone would 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.

Biographical Context: "The Whole Course of My Studies"

Owen wrote more than half of his works during the final 23 years of his life. While this period saw the publication of several of his best 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.*¹⁰

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 work on theological prolegomena entitled *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

⁹ *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. [ii–iii] (*Works*, 18:3–4).

¹⁰ *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. [v, ix] (*Works*, 18:5, 8, 9).

lectures given to his students at Oxford.¹¹ In a discussion on the inception of the covenant of grace, Owen makes a passing statement about his intention to write a commentary. Reflecting on Hebrews, 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."¹² 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 of his entitled *Tractatu de Sacerdotio Christi, contra Armin. Socin. et Papistas* (*Tractate on the Priesthood of Christ, against Arminians, Socinians, and Papists*).¹³ Unfortunately, he gives little if 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 exercitations on the priesthood of Christ prefixed to the Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews."¹⁴ At the very least, Owen's vague reference to his unpublished work indicates that from the onset of his ministry he devoted himself to a subject that he would later argue is central to understanding Hebrews, namely, the priesthood of Christ.¹⁵ 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.

Owen turned to the epistle throughout the early years of his ministry. For example, when he was called by the House of Commons to preach at St. Margaret's, Westminster, on April 19, 1649 for a day set apart for fasting, Owen choose as his text Hebrews 12:26–7 on the "shaking and translating of heaven and earth."¹⁶ The sermon is perhaps best known for beginning a series of events that led to Owen's first encounter with Cromwell in the home of Lord Thomas Fairfax. 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,

¹¹ S. Rehnman, *Divine Discourse* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 18.

¹² *Theologoumena Pantadapa* (1661), 2.1.5 (*Works*, 17:137), all Latin translations are mine.

¹³ See the marginal note in *The duty of pastors and people distinguished* (London, 1644), 16 (*Works*, 13:18). While the publication date is 1644, Owen elsewhere states that it was written in 1643, see *A review of the true nature of schism* (London, 1657), 33 (*Works*, 13:222).

¹⁴ Goold, *Works*, 13:2.

¹⁵ Cf. *Hebrews* (1674), 1.1.1 (*Works*, 19:3). On the role of the priesthood of Christ in Owen's critique of these groups, see C. Trueman, *John Owen* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 17–33.

¹⁶ *The shaking and translating of heaven and earth* (London, 1649), *Works*, 8:243–79.

expounding the wider biblical context of the letter, and interacting with differing commentators on the passage. He then takes his own slant on these verses by interpreting the shaking of heaven and earth as referring to the then present-day undoing of "political heights, the splendour and strength of the nations of the earth" and the ultimate "full bringing in of his [Christ's] own peaceable kingdom."¹⁷ At the end of Owen's life, the exegetical legwork done for this sermon finds expression in the last volume to his commentary. The same line of interpretation remains even if the political fervor of his sermon is less apparent.¹⁸

Similar traces of Owen's interest in the epistle can be found throughout his writings. Henry Knapp, for example, has demonstrated that Owen's exposition of Hebrews 6:4–6 provided the basis for his treatise on apostasy.¹⁹ Likewise, Owen explicitly states that his discourse on the Sabbath developed out of his exegetical work on the epistle and functioned as a supplement to his exposition of Hebrews 4.²⁰ While these selections represent only a fraction of Owen's writings, they demonstrate a pattern of personal, pastoral, polemical, and exegetical interests in the letter to the Hebrews from the early days of his ministry in the 1640s until his death in 1683.

Within Owen's lifetime *Hebrews* gained a level of international acclaim. In the sermon preached at Owen's funeral, David Clarkson 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.*²¹

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

¹⁷ *The shaking and translating of heaven and earth*, 12, 17 (*Works*, 8:256, 260). Owen references the interpretations of Rollock, Piscator, Junius, Pareus, and Grotius, *Works*, 8:251–3.

¹⁸ See Owen, *Hebrews* (1684), comm. Heb. 12:25–27 (*Works*, 24:368); cf. P. Toon, *The Correspondence of John Owen* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1970), 29–31.

¹⁹ Knapp, "John Owen's Interpretation of Hebrews 6:4–6," *SCJ* 34 (2003):44; cf. Owen, *The nature of apostasy* (1676), *Works*, 7:2–40; and *Hebrews* (1680), 38–52 (*Works*, 21:67–91).

²⁰ *Exercitations concerning ... a day of sacred rest* (London, 1671), 5–6 (*Works*, 18:267); cf. *Hebrews* (1674), n.p. [ii–iii] (*Works*, 18:16).

²¹ Clarkson, "A Funeral Sermon ..." in *Seventeen Sermons Preach'd by the Late Reverend and Learned John Owen, D. D.* (London, 1720), 1:lxviii. 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, *Works*, 18:xi; and Toon, *God's Statesman*, 168. The source for this rendering of the quote is unknown. Most likely, Clarkson's sermon is the printed source for this reference and the quotation has been modified.

Exposition as the 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."²²

If the range of publication dates of *Hebrews* is considered in light of the "sundry" and "many years" of preparation preceding its publication, Owen's commentary emerges as the product of no less than 22 years of research and the result of nearly a lifetime of investigation into the epistle of the Hebrews. Indeed, the "whole course" of his ministry was directed toward the writing of this commentary. The final 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.

Intellectual Context: Scripture as the Cognitive Foundation of Theology

Unlike many of his Reformed forebears and colleagues, *Hebrews* was Owen's only full-length commentary. But this fact makes him no less of a biblical exegete. Throughout Owen's writings, he actively engaged in the task of interpreting the Bible. Even a cursory reading of his works will demonstrate the highest commitment to Scripture as the epistemological foundation for dogmatics, the final authority in polemics, and the normative standard for piety.²³ His exegetical endeavors are a reflection of the Reformed orthodox principle that Scripture is the cognitive foundation of theology (*principium cognoscendi theologiae*).²⁴

Owen believed that the only way to apprehend the "mind of God" was to expound the written word of God.²⁵ Consequently, his belief in the divine inspiration and authority of Scripture necessitated the careful study, explanation, defense, and application of biblical revelation (*necessitatem interpretationis*).²⁶ All of his works, therefore, could be broadly categorized as exegetical, as the explication

²² Goold, *Works*, 18:xi.

²³ See e.g. Owen's devotional work, *A practical exposition upon Psalm CXXX* (London, 1669), n.p. [v–vi] (*Works*, 6:325–6); his polemical work, *The doctrine of the saint's perseverance* (1654), n.p. [li] (*Works*, 11:74); and his doctrinal work, *The doctrine of justification by faith* (London, 1677), n.p. [i] (*Works*, 5:5).

²⁴ Cf. *The doctrine of the saint's perseverance* (London, 1654), p. 96 (*Works*, 11:205); see Muller, *PRRD*, 2:151–223; Knapp, "Understanding the Mind of God: John Owen and Seventeenth Century Exegetical Methodology" (PhD dissertation, Calvin Theological Seminary, 2002), 40, 100, 108; Trueman, *The Claims of Truth* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 64–71, 89.

²⁵ *The causes, ways, and means of understanding the mind of God as revealed in his word* (London, 1678), *Works*, 4:118–234. See Knapp, "Understanding the Mind of God," 40–137; 375–90; Trueman, *The Claims of Truth*, 64–101; Trueman, "Faith Seeking Understanding: Some Neglected Aspects of John Owen's Understanding of Scriptural Interpretation," *Interpreting the Bible*, ed. A.N.S. Lane (Leicester: Apollon, 1997), 147–62.

²⁶ *Pro sacris Scripturis adversus hujus temporis fanaticos* (London, 1658), *Works*, 16:450.

of biblical texts was the most basic activity he engaged in throughout the entirety of his writing ministry.

From a methodological perspective, Owen outlines his principles for biblical exegesis in *The Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God* (1678). The opening words of this work clearly demonstrate the foundational role of Scripture in his theological program. Here 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, 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.”²⁷ Owen further delineates three necessary means for correctly interpreting sacred writ: (1) spiritual, (2) disciplinary, and (3) ecclesiastical. 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. Secondly, Owens advocates the use of scholarly disciplines, such as a working knowledge of the original biblical languages, an acquaintance with 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. 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, Theodoret, Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine, as well as Reformers such as Bucer, Calvin, Vermigli, and Beza. While Owen argues that church tradition is not inherently trustworthy and evidences minimal doctrinal consensus, he recognizes that exegesis does not occur in a historical vacuum. Yet he insists that the final authority in matters of faith and practice is Scripture alone. Ecclesiastical tradition is therefore ancillary to divine revelation, not supplementary to it.

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 occasionally expressed.²⁸ In the preface to the first volume of *Hebrews*, Owen delineates his exegetical method. Central to his concern is the grammatical-historical interpretation of the text and the avoidance of eisegesis. He states, “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.”²⁹

Out of context, Owen's statement about always going “nakedly to the word itself” may give the impression that he, in a proto-fundamentalistic fashion, was espousing a “no-creed-but-the-bible” hermeneutic. His point however was not disparage the critical appropriation of past and present commentators but to unambiguously assert the primacy of exegesis for theological deliberation.

²⁷ *Works*, 4:121.

²⁸ E.g. *Works*, 19:273–7, 474; and esp. 21:310–317.

²⁹ *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. [ix] (*Works*, 18:9).

Owen readily admits his indebtedness to previous commentaries, and refers to his "perusal of all the comments, expositions, annotations, or observations on the Epistle, which by any means I could obtain."³⁰ He also unequivocally states that his exertions and exposition should not be seen as a replacement of the exegetical tradition on the epistle but as an addition to it.³¹

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

Christological Context: The "Triple Foundation" of the Epistle to the Hebrews

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 other background details about the epistle in a series of introductory exertions. Owen claims that these 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.³²

The exertions to *Hebrews* (1668) are divided into three series of essays: concerning the epistle to the Hebrews (exertions 1–7); the messiah (exertions 8–18); and the institutions of the Jewish church (exertions 19–24). A summary of the overall argument of these essays 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

³⁰ *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. [vi] (*Works*, 18:6).

³¹ *Hebrews* (1668) [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, Ambrose, Chrysostom, Augustine, Theodoret, Oecumenius, Theophylact, and Nicolas of Lyra; Roman expositors such as Aquinas, Erasmus, T. Cajetan, F. Ribera, Estius, à Lapide, and de Tena; Arminian and Socinian expositors such as Grotius, Crellius, and Schlichtingius; and Protestant expositors such as Brentius, Marlorat, Calvin, Beza, Piscator, Paraeus, Gomarus, Cameron, and Poole. 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 50 commentaries on Hebrews, see "Understanding the Mind of God," 106, n.221.

³² *Hebrews* (1668), lib. 2, n.p. [i] (*Works*, 18:9; cf. 18:8, 14, 447; 20:12, 276, 424, 543).

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 exertions in this volume are located in the second series of essays "concerning the messiah" (i.e. exertions 8–18). These discourses are subdivided into three "dissertations" and are united by one central argument.

Owen asserts that underlying the letter to the Hebrews is a three-fold Christological foundation upon which every theological assertion and parenthetical exhortation in the epistle rests. In addition, the importance of this "triple foundation" goes beyond even the epistle. He contends that "the very fundamental principles of our Christian profession" are built upon this three-fold 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.³³

Each of the three "dissertations" in the second series of essays "concerning the messiah" corresponds with a premise in Owen's triple foundation argument.³⁴ 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 them be understood."³⁵ In other words, this three-fold foundation is not something he believes that he imposed upon the text; rather, he argues that these

³³ *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.1 (*Works*, 18:142).

³⁴ Thus the first dissertation comprises exertions 8–11; the second dissertation comprises exertions 12–16; and the third dissertation comprises exertions 17–18.

³⁵ *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. [vii] (*Works*, 18:7).

"first maxims" are presupposed by the apostle.³⁶ He unambiguously states, "There is not a line in the Epistle to the Hebrews that doth not virtually begin and end in these principles."³⁷

Owen's triple foundation bears resemblance to the Christological syllogism of William Perkins in *The Art of Prophesying* (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 summarizes 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."³⁸ These statements by Owen and Perkins 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*).³⁹

An early example of the principle of Christ as the *fundamentum Scripturae* is found in Calvin's discussion on biblical covenants. While granting discontinuities between various 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*).⁴⁰ 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 amen."⁴¹ Likewise, Owen's colleague at Oxford, Thomas Goodwin, applies the concept of *fundamentum* to personal faith in the Christ of Scripture: "faith must pitch [itself] upon our mediator as a corner-stone

³⁶ *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.1 (*Works*, 18:142).

³⁷ *Hebrews* (1668), 1.8.1 (*Works*, 18:142).

³⁸ *The arte of prophesying* (London, 1607), 7; the bracketed headings are taken from the marginalia.

³⁹ See Muller, *PRRD*, 2:206–23; Muller, "fundamentum Scripturae," *DLGTT*, 126; H. Heppel, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. Thomson, ed. Bizer (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950), 42–6.

⁴⁰ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. McNeill, trans. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2.11.1 (*CO*, 2:329); cf. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.6.2 (*CO*, 2:247); Owen, *Works*, 1:29–35.

⁴¹ *The Workes of ... Mr. Perkins* (London, 1612), 1:165; cited in Muller, *PRRD*, 2:217.

laid by God, as a sure foundation."⁴² Finally, Owen provides a basic summary of this teaching, "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."⁴³

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 said to be the declaration of God's goodness in Christ. Over a century later, the Westminster Confession (1646) and Savoy Declaration (1658) similarly stated that "the scope of the whole" of Scripture was the glory of God.⁴⁴ Owen likewise applies this principle to the overall design of the epistle to the Hebrews, which he declared is "the demonstration of [the] glory of God in and by Jesus Christ." This, according to Owen, is the "end," "center," and "scope" of the epistle.⁴⁵

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, the end to which every promise of salvation is aimed.⁴⁶ But as the *fundamentum Scripturae*, Christ is also the bedrock of biblical revelation, the starting point of the redemptive narrative, 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 fulfillment in Scripture in Owen's triple foundation. Herein lies the hinge of his overall argument in his exercitations.⁴⁷ From the pronouncement of the *protoevangelium* to the close of the canon, Christ is understood as the ultimate

⁴² *Of Christ the Mediator*, in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* (Edinburgh, 1863), 5:39.

⁴³ *Meditations and discourses on the glory of Christ* (London, 1684), 54–5 (*Works*, 1:314–15). Similar statements are found in a host of Reformed orthodox writings and are often developed in the context of discussions on what doctrines comprise the fundamental articles of the Christian faith. See Muller, *PRRD*, 1:414–18; 2:208–22; cf. Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 42–6; W. van Asselt, *The Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius*, trans. R. Blacketer (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 131–32. Owen uses this concept of foundation in *Hebrews* (1668), 1.1.24 (*Works*, 18:45–8).

⁴⁴ E.F.K. Müller, *Die bekennnisschriften der Reformierten kirche* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1903), 102; cf. P. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 3:212–13. The reference to "the glory of God" is from WCF 1.5 and Savoy 1.5.

⁴⁵ *Hebrews* (1668), 1.1.25, p. 14 (*Works*, 18:48). Owen's comments are set within a larger context whereby he elucidates upon three principles drawn from Eusebius's discussion on the canon of Scripture: (1) the φράσεως χαρακτήρ, or the character of speech of the writer; (2) the γνώμη, or subject matter of the writing; and (3) the προαίρεσις, or the purpose and design of the writer. See *Works*, 18:42–51; cf. Eusebius, *Church History*, 3.25.7, *NPNF2*, 1:157 (*PG*, vol. 20, col. 269, 272).

⁴⁶ On the various uses of *scopus*, see G. Sheppard, "Between Reformation and Modern Commentary," in Perkins, *A Commentary on Galatians*, ed. Sheppard (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), xlvii–lxxvii; Muller, *PRRD*, 2:207–208.

⁴⁷ *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. [vii] (*Works*, 18:7, cf. p. 142).

fulfillment of the divine promise of redemption. For Owen, redemptive-history turns on this promise and fulfillment axis. His three-fold 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 three-fold 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.

Polemical Context: Jewish and Socinian Errors

Throughout his commentary, Owen regularly refutes Jewish and Socinian interpretations of Scripture. In an essay on the priesthood of Christ, for example, 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."⁴⁸ Both groups held to a belief in the authority of Scripture; however, neither affirmed the creedal Chalcedonian formula of the person of Christ. The Jews denied that Christ was the promised messiah, and consequently rejected the New Testament, while the Socinians denied that Jesus was the divine Son of God, and consequently reinterpreted the New Testament. The structure of Owen's exertions in his commentary evidences these polemical concerns, with the largest series of essays focusing upon the promised messiah in volume one (1668) and the priesthood of Christ in volume two (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.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, he delineates at least three reasons that compelled him to join the long list of commentators on the epistle, two of which directly impinge upon the polemical context.

The first reason Owen gives is the inexhaustibility of the theology of Hebrews and the indispensability of its usefulness to the life of the church.⁵⁰ Secondly, he expresses pastoral concern about the emerging threat of Socinianism as "the greatest opposition of Christ"—a matter not nearly as pressing for earlier Reformers and expositors of the epistle.⁵¹

⁴⁸ *Hebrews* (1674), 1.3.6 (*Works*, 19:46).

⁴⁹ *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. [v] (*Works*, 18:5).

⁵⁰ See *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. [vi] (*Works*, 18:6).

⁵¹ *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. [vi] (*Works*, 18:6); *Hebrews* (1674), n.p. [iv–v] (*Works*, 18:17). On Socinianism, see S. Mortimer, *Reason and Religion in the English Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), esp. 194–232.

Thirdly, and most importantly for Owen, was the lack of adequate consideration of the authorial intent of Hebrews in addressing the “past, present, and future condition of the Hebrews, or church of the Jews.” He believed that in order to rightly understand the “mind of the Holy Ghost” he had to understand the mind of the author (who for Owen was the Apostle Paul). For Owen, recognition of the Jewishness of the epistle was crucial for rightly dividing it. He states, “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.”⁵²

But why was Owen so concerned with the Jewish context of Hebrews? The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw a renaissance of biblical humanism, including knowledge of the Hebrew language and Jewish studies. From the contributions of Hebrew and rabbinical scholars such as Johannes Reuchlin and John Lightfoot to the efforts of Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel and the petition for readmission of Jews to England in 1655, a heightened awareness of Jewish life and thought pervaded the atmosphere Owen breathed. David Katz states, “There is no question that the precondition for the readmission of the Jews to England was the revival of Hebrews studies in the first half of the sixteenth century, as a result of the Protestant emphasis on reading the Word of God in the original languages.”⁵³

When Owen goes to write his commentary, he is the beneficiary of nearly two centuries worth of humanistic and Protestant reflection on Jewish thought. Thus for example, Owen’s tutor at Oxford, Thomas Barlow, 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.”⁵⁴ It comes then 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 and Targums and other rabbinical literature. Nevertheless, his use of Jewish scholarship was not an end in itself. His employment of Jewish texts and traditions was ultimately a result of his desire to better explain 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 in Hebraic studies—as well as to defend the claims of Christ against Jewish critics, both past and present.

⁵² *Hebrews* (1668), n.p. [vii] (*Works*, 18:6–7).

⁵³ Katz, *The Jews in the History of England 1485–1850* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 110.

⁵⁴ Barlow, *Autoschediasmata, De studio theologiae: or, Directions for the choice of books in the study of divinity* (Oxford, 1699), 14.

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 fulfillment 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 of a biblical book, *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.

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