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"The Spiritual Man Discerns All Things": Watchman Nee, Theological Interpretation, and the Retrieval of a Classical Hermeneutic

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Abstract: Though not well-known within the Western academy, Watchman Nee (1903–1972) offers a robust, pneumatologically-governed hermeneutic that merits serious scholarly consideration within the burgeoning line of inquiry into the theological interpretation of Scripture (TIS). Positioned at the intersection of postliberal theology, patristic retrieval, and global Christianity, Nee's interpretive methodology emerges as a sustained retrieval of pre-critical exegesis that is grounded in testamental unity and figural exegesis. The article begins by surveying the emergence of TIS in evangelical circles, the postliberal critique of historical criticism, and constructive proposals advanced by Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, Ephraim Radner, and others. Thereafter, I provide a brief overview of Nee's life, both to highlight his key doctrinal commitments and to identify potentially formative influences upon his theological outlook. The essay then narrows focus to Nee's hermeneutical methodology, which incorporates his trichotomistic anthropology, prioritization of the *person* of interpreters above exegetical *methods*, rejection of higher criticism, and governing principles related to figural and typological interpretations. Lastly, we engage in a close reading of *The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*. In this volume, Nee engages in an extended reflection upon the tripartite divine name utilizing typology and figural exegesis to articulate a model of trinitarian relations, an experiential theology of believers' spiritual transformation, and a biblically grounded ecclesiological vision. The

article concludes by arguing that Nee's hermeneutic constitutes a vital, global expression of theological interpretation that should be integrated into the ongoing reconfiguration of biblical interpretation in the Western academy.

Keywords: Watchman Nee, theological interpretation of Scripture, figural exegesis, testamental unity, pneumatology, postliberal theology, historical criticism, hermeneutics, trinitarian typology, pre-critical interpretation

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The ascendancy of Theological Interpretation of Scripture (TIS) as a discrete sphere of inquiry is best understood within the context of growing discontentment with an unfortunate methodological ferment that has ideologically captured biblical studies within the Western academy since the Enlightenment. Indeed, it was in response to the ever-increasing chasm between academic exegesis and the church's use of Scripture that TIS emerged as a retrieval-oriented movement grounded in the creedal and theological commitments of the patristic era. Exponents of the movement—Joel Green, Kevin Vanhoozer, Stephen Fowl, Daniel Treier, and many others—have sought to reorient biblical interpretation around the theological rule of faith, prioritizing the trinitarian and christological contours of Scripture over the atomized readings promoted by historiocentric approaches to Scripture. Green, for instance, implores interpreters to "read Scripture through the prism of the creeds" to properly apprehend theological or narratival insights that are otherwise obscured by purely historical lenses.[1] The project of theological interpretation can thus be

[1] Joel B. Green, "'He Ascended into Heaven': Jesus' Ascension in Lukan Perspective, and Beyond," in *Ears That Hear: Explorations in Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Joel B. Green and Tim Meadowcroft (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013), 133.

accurately cast as a much-needed corrective to the legacy of higher criticism—an umbrella concept describing various methodological approaches that aim to interrogate Scripture with the same analytic tools as any other sacred or secular text. The retrieval of a pre-critical hermeneutic, therefore, functions not as antiquarian nostalgia but as an intentional reentry into the interpretive practices of the early church where Scripture was both as a unified, Spirit-breathed witness to the Triune God and the divine, eternal economy centered on Christ.

It is within this interpretive landscape that we discuss the hermeneutic approach of Watchman Nee (1903–1972). Nee's writings—though long neglected by the Western academy—offer profound resonance with the aims of TIS, and as we shall see, postliberal theology. In line with both patristic interpreters and postliberal theologians, Nee approached Scripture not as a fragmented anthology but as a cohesive, Spirit-governed whole. He upheld a figural and Christocentric reading of the biblical narrative, contended for the necessity of the Holy Spirit in the act of interpretation, and insisted that exegetes must first be the proper persons—e.g., regenerated, sanctified, consecrated—to properly apprehend the deepest, most intrinsic layers of Scripture. These convictions place Nee in conceptual continuity with thinkers such as Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, Ephraim Radner, John David Dawson, Paul Ricouer, and Erich Auerbach, each of whom are important figures within postliberal theology.

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to demonstrate that Nee's interpretive project both challenges the methodological assumptions of the historical-critical paradigm and offers a constructive vision for theological interpretation today. To that end, I wrote this essay in four movements. First, I discuss the postliberal project, both in terms of its diagnosis of the exegetical crisis plaguing the academy and its constructive proposals for addressing it. Thereafter, I provide a brief historical and theological biography of Watchman Nee, with special attention given to formative interlocutors in his intellectual topography. Third, I analyze

Nee's hermeneutical principles in both method and practice, with particular attention to figural/typological exegesis, testamental unity, and the role of the Holy Spirit in interpretation. The final movement of the article, by far the longest, is devoted to a close reading of Nee's *The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*—a volume that serves as a paradigmatic example of his interpretative approach.

The Postliberal Project

In *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative,* Hans Frei argues that two theological convictions were central to all "pre-critical" hermeneutics:

> (1) The Old Testament, though comprised of literal historical events, is simultaneously filled with a panoply of typologies, shadows, and figures that articulate, clarify, or find their fulfillment in New Testament realities.[1] On this view, pre-critical interpreters approached the Bible as a holistic entity, not a collection of discrete units studied in isolation.
>
> (2) The Holy Spirit is a necessary agent for accurate and multivalent exegesis.[2]

The rise of higher criticism, the roots of which can be directly traced to Baruch Spinoza's highly influential 1670 publication *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, rejected these pre-critical commitments in favor of generalized historical-critical methods—source criticism, redaction criticism, form criticism, and so on—all of which are emblematic of Paul Ricouer's aptly named "hermeneutics of suspicion."

The Western academy's subsequent privileging of these interpretative approaches as inherently scientific and/or methodologically normative, along with the newly instantiated division of biblical studies from theology within institutions of higher learning in the 18th century, has received scrutiny during the past century, spanning from Karl Barth and "neo-orthodoxy" to the total rejection

[1] Hans W. Frei, *The eclipse of biblical narrative: a study in eighteenth and nineteenth century hermeneutics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), 2.

[2] ibid, 21-22.

of higher criticism in broad swatches of modern Evangelicalism.[1] The exact circumstances surrounding the displacement of a pre-critical, "classical hermeneutic" within Christian academia are contested. Kevin Vanhoozer, for example, argues that 14th-century nominalism shifted Christian theology away from pre-critical Scriptural commitments.[2] Radner, on the other hand, blames the "intra-Christian ecclesial implosion" [3] that took place during and after the Reformation. He is not alone in this reading of history: Frei and Lindbeck similarly suggest that the hyper-fragmentation of the post-Reformation Church was the death knell of pre-critical Scriptural engagement.[4]

Importantly, Frei, Lindbeck, and Radner decisively locate the pivotal historical discontinuity between the pre-critical and critical eras in the mid-eighteenth century. The decoupling of the narrative meaning of Scripture from the literal subject matter of Scripture—"whether historical, ideal, or all at once"—caused pre-critical exegesis, inclusive of figural readings and theological interpretation, to be set aside in favor of an inordinate obsession with the historicity of Scripture.[5] Speaking on this issue, Radner note that:

> Much theological debate in our day is founded on the question "did it happen?" From this question, many other questions can be answered. But this basic issue of happening has become the entry way into almost all other interpretative discussions.[6]
>
> This brief insight characterizes much of present-day biblical studies, which relies upon proof texts to ensure historical facticity of passages while

[1] Ephraim Radner, *Time and the word: Figural Reading of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 72-82.

[2] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Ascending The Mountain, Singing The Rock: Biblical Interpretation Earthed, Typed, And Transfigured," *Modern Theology* 28, no. 4 (2012): doi:10.1111/j.1468-0025.2012.01784.x.

[3] ibid, 116.

[4] George Lindbeck, "Scripture, Consensus, and Community," in *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus. (Grand Rapids, Michighan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 85; Frei, *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative,* 42.

[5] Frei, *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative,* 51.

[6] Radner, *Time and the Word,* 17 (emphasis added).

missing the spiritual, layered, multivalent "allness of Scripture."[1]

Proponents of TIS and postliberal theology posit an identical exegetical crisis: academic biblical scholarship overemphasizes the importance of historical-critical methodology to the detriment of the Scriptural world inhabited by pre-critical interpreters. Many scholars, while acknowledging this problematic trajectory, insist that there cannot be a full-fledged return to pre-critical exegesis. I myself am unconvinced that this is the case—in fact, I am highly skeptical of it being so and firmly believe that the health of the church universal would be immensely benefitted by setting aside the bulk of methodologies subsumed under the umbrella of higher criticism—but if we assume that these scholars are indeed right, the following statement drawn from Lewis Mudge's introduction to Ricouer's *Essays of Biblical Interpretation* articulates the only viable option for theologically minded interpreters: their "new articulation[s] of faith must pass through and beyond the 'hermeneutic of suspicion,' not slide around it."[2]

At the turn of the twentieth century, influential figures in the academy ranging from Barth to Balthasar endeavored to align with this option to counter what they perceived as a great deficiency within biblical scholarship. Simultaneously, literary critics such as Erich Auerbach began to retrieve ancient hermeneutics methods for their own purposes through close examination of early Christians thinkers such as Tertullian, Origen, and Augustine.[3] It was upon these shoulders that the so-called "Yale school" emerged, led by, Frei, Lindbeck, Radner, Stanley Hauerwas, and others. Two passages from Radner's *Time and the Word* summarize key propositions of postliberal (theological) interpretation:

> All of this can be summed up concisely. Figural reading, in this light, emerges from the Scripture, in its parts and whole, as God's own active Word,

[1] ibid, 220.

[2] Mudge, introduction to Paul Ricouer's *Essays of Biblical Interpretation*, 5.

[3] For further reading on Auerbach's figural approach to ancient texts, see Erich Auerbach, "Figura," in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

> that is the prior agent of all that we are to think and be. It is not a human method of reading brought to bear upon an inert text. And it thus involves an openness, or being opened to this priority of divine agency in the ordering of our reading. More specifically, the coherence of our reading is bound to the fact that the Word is the Word of Jesus Christ, and speaks of always of him somehow, in the Old and New.[1]
>
> All traditional discussions of figural reading, from Origen on—but I would argue, from the formative character of the New Testament on—have stressed a key point: the reading of Scripture is a Holy-Spirit led activity. The Holy Spirit "speaks" as we read—not in some primarily interior space of personal cognition, but in ordering texts, and leading us into the path of this ordering.[2]

With the historical context of TIS and post-liberalism in hand, we now turn to the task of examining Watchman Nee's hermeneutic methodology. As previously noted, the above hermeneutical assumptions shared by proponents of TIS and postliberalism—(1) the unity of Scripture, as tied together by figuration with both testaments read christocentrically and (2) the necessary role of the Holy Spirit in exegetical engagement—are central to Nee's theological outlook.

Introducing Watchman Nee

Nee Shu-tsu, better known as Watchman Nee, was born on November 4, 1903 in Foochow, China to Nee Wen-shui and Lin Ho-ping. At the age of 17 he had a dynamic conversion experience after attending a gospel meeting led by female evangelist Dora Yu. He thereafter implemented a strict personal budget, apportioning one-third of his income for Christian books, one-third for charity, and the remaining amount for personal needs. As a result of his frugality, he acquired over 3,000 Christian volumes during his lifetime—an especially impressive feat within the context of China in the early twentieth century.[3] From this library, we can discern some of Nee's theological influences: (1) Holiness

[1] Radner, *Time and the Word,* 285.

[2] ibid, 279.

[3] From the introduction to *The Normal Christian Life* "Concerning Watchman Nee," ix.

movement figures such as Andrew Murray, Charles Finney, F.B. Meyer, and Evan Roberts; (2) European mystics, including Jesse Penn-Lewis, Madame Guyon, Francois Fenelon, Miguel de Molinos, and Brother Lawrence; (3) Brethren writers, particularly John Nelson Darby and C.A. Coates; and (4) Keswick attendees, as well as other thinkers popular in practical spirituality circles, such as D.M. Panton, Robert Govett, and G.H. Pember.[1] Additionally, Nee's library reveals that he was familiar with patristic writings.[2] Dongsheng John Wu highlights this fact in *Understanding Watchman Nee,* noting that Nee's library demonstrates his acquaintance with the writings of Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, the Didache, and the edicts of Constantine.[3]

Between 1920 and 1922, Nee's understanding of scriptural authority informed two significant life decisions: his baptism and his complete rejection of the system of denominationalism that was imported into China by Western missionaries. Nee cites 1 Corinthians 1:12 as grounds for the latter outlook: "Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ." According to Nee,

> It is not a question of arguing with others about baptism by immersion or about leaving the denominations. The only question is whether or not men are willing to obey the Scriptures. To be baptized by immersion and to leave the denominations are not great things; they are but two items among thousands that require our obedience. The main thing in the Scriptures is obedience.[4]

This strict understanding of scriptural authority is crucial to contextualizing Nee's

[1] The impact of each of these writers upon Nee's theological commitments is variegated among them and goes beyond beyond the scope of this essay. For more thorough treatments regarding their individual roles in forming Nee's theological outlook, see: (1) Lee, *Watchman Nee: A Seer of the Divine Revelation in the Present Age* and (2) Wu, *Understanding Watchman Nee,* 13-80.

[2] Watchman Nee, *Messages for Building up New Believers (1),* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1994) 223-226.

[3] Wu, *Understanding Watchman Nee,* 74-79.

[4] Lee, *Watchman Nee: A Seer of the Divine Revelation in the Present Age*, 43.

retrieval of a classical hermeneutic. Unlike Reformation and post-Reformation thinkers who prioritized doctrinal concerns, Nee considered systematic theology to be of secondary importance within his hermeneutic methodology; for Nee, Scripture possesses an innate and absolute authority that must be matched by the subjective submission of the expositor not merely for accurate exegesis, but for scriptural revelations to be continuously received by the interpreter.

In 1924 Nee wrote *The Spiritual Man,* a three-volume work that details his trichotomistic anthropology.[1] According to Nee, human beings—comprised of a body, soul, and spirit—have three consciousnesses related to their tripartite constitution, and *only* the human spirit (as opposed to the body or soul) possesses "God-consciousness." [2] This is a core concern in his hermeneutic approach: genuine exegesis can only be accomplished when the human spirit cooperates with the Holy Spirit. Hence, in line with pre-critical exegetes and postliberal interpreters Nee argues that engagement with Scripture is a "Spirit-led activity."

Apart from his library, much of Nee's spiritual formation can be directly traced to Margaret E. Barber—an Anglican missionary sent to Fukien, China during the latter part of the 19th-century.[3] Barber is mentioned by Nee throughout his corpus as a pivotal figure in his early ministry, and at her passing he published an open letter in the March 1930 issue of *The Present Testimony.* An excerpt from this letter reads:

> We feel most sorrowful concerning the news of the passing away of Miss Barber in Lo-Hsing Pagoda, Fukien. She was one who was very deep in the Lord, and in my opinion, the kind of fellowship she had with the Lord and the kind of faithfulness she expressed to the Lord are rarely found on this earth.[4]

[1] ibid, 91.

[2] ibid, 8.

[3] ibid, 16.

[4] ibid, 18-19.

During the early years of his ministry, Nee raised up dozens of churches across China, Indonesia, and Malaysia.[1] In 1928 the church in Shanghai had 30 congregants; by 1932, this number exceeded more than 4,000 congregants spanning 20 additional localities; and by 1949 this number swelled to over 70,000 Chinese Christians raised up through his ministry.[2]

Nee is especially unique among early 20th-century Chinese Christians due to his relationships with and influence upon figures in Western Christianity. In 1932 he met with members of the Exclusive Brethren, but was excommunicated only three years later due to breaking bread with non-Brethren believers. Six years later, he met Theodore Austin-Sparks[3]—a prominent figure in European spirituality at the time—attended the Keswick Convention, and gave a series of messages in Denmark that were later compiled and published as *The Normal Christian Life*. This went on to become Nee's most popular book, selling over one million copies and being translated into over 50 languages.[4] In 1952, Nee was secretly arrested by the Chinese government for his faith, and in 1956 he sentenced to fifteen years in prison. Despite completing his sentence in 1967, the government refused to release him; rather, they transferred him to a labor camp. It was there that he died in 1972.[5] We do not know many details surrounding his death; prison officials cremated his body before informing his family. Once family was informed, however, a relative sent to collect his few belongings found a note hidden underneath the pillow in his prison cell:

Christ is the Son of God who died for the redemption of sinners and

[1] ibid, 203.

[2] Wu, *Understanding Watchman Nee,* 41.

[3] Alexander Chow, *Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment,* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 186.

[4] The full Congressional address can be accessed at https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CREC-2009-07-31/pdf/CREC-2009-07-31-pt1-PgE2110-2.pdf

[5] Lee, *Watchman Nee: A Seer of the Divine Revelation in the Present Age,* 181.

> resurrected after three days. This is the greatest truth in the universe. I die because of my belief in Christ. Watchman Nee.[1]

In 2009, Nee's legacy was formally recognized in the United States Congressional Record by Congressman Christopher H. Smith. Among several accolades, Smith notes that "by the late 1940s, Nee had become the most influential Chinese Christian writer, evangelist, and church builder," and "was the first Chinese Christian to exercise an influence on Western Christians."[2] Today, Nee;s influence lives on within the underground Chinese house church movement comprised of an estimated 80-160 million Christians, as well as in thousands of congregations spanning six continents that directly benefit from his ministry.

An Overview of Nee's Hermeneutic Methodology

Nee published an article in the early years of his ministry entitled "Is the Higher Criticism of Modern Theology Believable?" This brief but dense essay offers a window into Nee's thought-space concerning the legitimacy of higher criticism—especially in respect to its widespread promotion by Western missionaries in China.[3] He begins by strongly critiquing what he perceives to be an embedded arrogance within historical-critical methodology:

> The critics think that because they live in the twentieth century they know more than the Jewish historians who lived a few thousand years ago and that they know the way God revealed Himself to these ancient men! They also think that the ancient writers have the same mentality as the critics, and that language itself has never changed! Is it true the ancient men were the same in their mentality? Is it true that there has never been a change in language?[4]

Nee's concern about historical criticism, based upon the evolution of language and

[1] Ibid, 190.

[2] ibid.

[3] This article was published in February 1926.

[4] Watchman Nee, "Is the Higher Criticism of Modern Theology Believable?," *CWWN* vol. 2 (Anaheim, California: Living Stream Ministry, 1992), 126.

skepticism surrounding the possibility of reconstructing ancient worldviews, finds resonance in Ricouer, as well as with Romanticists like Wilhelm Dilthey and Fredrich Schleiermacher. Each of these thinkers question "the assumption that to understand a text is to understand the intention of the author, or alternatively, to grasp the text's meaning as it was grasped by the first hearers or readers who shared the author's cultural situation." [1] They are not alone in this concern; Frei also highlights the limitations of higher criticism in an important essay entitled "Theology and Interpretation of the Narrative: Some Hermeneutical Considerations." For Frei, groping for authorial intent hinders interpreters from locating meaning behind the text due to an acquired, yet unwarranted, contentedness with satisfactorily expounding issues related to grammar, syntax, and style.[2] He further argues that:

> The truth to which we refer we cannot state apart from the biblical language which we employ to do so. And belief in the divine authority of Scripture is for me simply that we do not need more. The narrative description is adequate. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" is an adequate statement for what we refer to, though we cannot say univocally how we refer to it.[3]

Frei's ultimate assertion is that interpretation is not tied to the retrieval of authorial intent or historical context. Instead, it is intrinsically related to locating meaning within the text itself—i.e., the narrative of Scripture. This portrayal of biblical interpretation aligns with Nee's dual emphases on Scriptural authority and the location of meaning in Scripture. In the aforementioned article, Nee goes on to assail both source and redaction criticism:

> The history of higher critics proves that they are the very ones that the Lord Jesus referred to in one of His stories: "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead"

[1] Mudge, introduction to Paul Ricouer, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation,* 16-18.

[2] Hans Frei, *Theology and Narrative: selected essays*. Edited by George Hunsinger and William C. Placher. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 102-103.

[3] ibid, 210.

> (Luke 16:31). The critics try to prove their own theories by quoting the Pentateuch. They then begin to question the word of the prophets, suspecting that Isaiah was not written by one man, that Daniel was not written by Daniel, and that the story of Jonah is just an allegory. Finally, they doubt the words of the Gospels. They have not heard the words of Moses and the prophets, and they are not persuaded by Christ who rose from the dead![1]

A note is warranted at this juncture: Nee does not reject source criticism in a wholesale manner. For example, he is aware of textual discrepancies between manuscripts and argues elsewhere in his corpus that their existence is evidence that the Bible is not a document contrived or assembled by human minds, but genuinely a product of divine inspiration.[2]

Given the near-universal acceptance of historical-criticism within mainline Protestant denominations evangelizing China during the 20th-century, as well as its employment by Nee's indigenous Chinese contemporaries such as T.C. Chao (1888-1979), Nee, much like theological interpreters within the present-day Western academy, pushed against historical criticism with a high degree of intentionality. This fact, coupled with Nee's familiarity with patristic, mystical, and Brethren writings, clarifies Nee's hermeneutical outlook—in brief, an intentional rejection of modern, critical interpretative strategies in favor of employing typological and figural interpretative strategies, upholding testamental unity, and incorporating additional elements intrinsic to pre-critical scriptural engagement.

The Holy Spirit's Role in Biblical Interpretation

In *How to Study the Bible,* Nee devotes the first 73 of 146 pages not to interpretative methods; rather, his focus is on the "person" of the exegete. The volume's introduction states the following:

[1] *CWWN* vol. 2, 128.

[2] ibid.

> Some people have a misguided concept that very few people can study the Bible. Others have a mistaken notion that anyone can study the Bible. Both are wrong. It is wrong to think that very few people can study the Bible, and it is equally wrong to think that everyone can study the Bible. Only one kind of person can study the Bible, and we have to be that kind of the person before we can study the Bible. We have to see that the person is first; the methods second. If the person is wrong, nothing will work even if one has all the right methods…First, we have to be right in our person, and then we can speak about the best methods of Bible study.[1]

Regarding the "right person," Nee posits that only regenerated individuals, Christians, can render proper interpretation of the Scriptures.[2] While an alien concept within modern biblical studies departments, this notion aligns with Ricouer's "hermeneutic circle"— i.e., to truly understand a text, it is necessary to believe the text, and to believe the text requires understanding of it.[3] On one hand, Nee's assertion is more intelligible when viewed through this phenomenological lens; on the other hand, it is dissimilar in a significant respect. While Ricouer understands faith and understanding as psychological constructs, Nee contends that Scripture must be approached *in spirit* and read *with the spirit* because the nature of the Bible *is spirit* which, according to his trichotomistic anthropology, is distinct from the intellect domiciled in the soul.[4] Here it is important note that Nee is not speaking *only* of the human spirit, nor *only* the Holy Spirit—based upon 1 Corinthians 6:17 Nee is speaking of the human spirit being united and mingled with the Holy Spirit.[5] Concerning this, Nee states:

> No matter how clever and well educated a man is, as long as he is not regenerated, this book is a mystery to him. A regenerated person may not be that cultivated, but he is more qualified to read the Bible than an unregenerated college professor…The Bible is not understood by talent, research, or intelligence. Since God's word is spirit, only a man with a

[1] Nee, *How to study the Bible* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1993), 8.

[2] ibid, 10.

[3] Paul Ricouer, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation,* 58.

[4] For Nee, the soul is comprised of the mind, emotion, and will (Nee, *The Spiritual Man,* 8-9).

[5] Nee, *How to Study the Bible* 9-10.

> regenerated spirit can understand it. The root, the very nature, of the Bible is spiritual. If a man does not have a regenerated spirit, he cannot understand this book; it will be a closed book to him.[1]

Nee goes on to assert that an interpreter's heart must be consecrated, single toward God, and purged of numerous soulish tendencies to allow for proper exegesis.[2] For example, Nee contends that subjectivity must annulled; otherwise, readers will impose their own views on the text, leading to eisegetical imaginations rather than objective exegesis.[3]

At this juncture, it is worthwhile to underscore that Nee's prioritization of divine pneumatic action upon and within interpreters is a core concern of significant pre-critical interpreters: Origen, [4] Augustine, [5] Maximus, [6] Bonaventure,[7] Luther,[8] and Calvin[9] being among them. Still, there exists a subtle distinction between many of these thinkers and Nee. Nee does not advocate merely for interpretation being "Holy-Spirit *led*." Rather, he argues that interpreters must actively participate in the Holy Spirit in order to enter into the thought of the Holy Spirit, which for Nee, is contained within the words of Scripture.

Testamental unity and figural reading

In a chapter entitled "Keys to Studying the Bible," Nee lists four rudimentary

[1] Ibid, 10.

[2] ibid 17-19.

[3] ibid, 26. To illustrate the problem of subjectivity, Nee reflects upon 1 Samuel 3:4-10, a passage in which he suggests that Samuel's subjectivity led him to believe that the voice he was hearing was from Eli and not from God. Drawing from this narrative, Nee argues that soulish subjectivity can mislead biblical interpreters.

[4] Radner, *Time and the Word*, 279.

[5] ibid, 266.

[6] Wu, *Understanding Watchman Nee, 115-118.*

[7] Ibid.

[8] Frei, *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative* 21-22.

[9] Ibid.

ways to engage with Scripture: "by searching", "by memorizing", "by comparing", and "by meditating." With respect to components embedded within pre-critical hermeneutics, Nee's discussion of memorization and comparison are particularly noteworthy. Nee exhorts readers to memorize at least one verse a day and suggests that those with better memories should memorize ten verses a day.[1] His rationale for this admonition is as follows:

> While we seize every available opportunity to memorize the Scriptures, the word of Christ will dwell in us richly. If we do not allow the Scriptures to dwell in our heart, it will be hard for the Holy Spirit to speak to us. Whenever God grants us a revelation, He does so through the words of the Bible…Memorizing the Scriptures is not for memorization alone; it is to lay the groundwork for us to receive revelation. If we memorize the Scriptures often and well, it will be easy for us to receive revelation and enlightenment, and the Holy Spirit will find it easier to speak to our spirit.[2]

For Nee, it is not the mere act of memorization that is valuable; rather, it is the role memorization plays in allowing the Holy Spirit to speak. To be sure, positing a link between memorization and receiving spiritual illumination is well-established in the pre-critical interpretative tradition. Concerning this, Radner states:

> The subversion of memorization is relatively recent. In fact, memorizing the Bible had been central to Christian concepts of basic scriptural meaning since before Augustine. For the latter, allowing Scripture to enter the memory was foundational for their understanding…The problem of course is that memorization of Scripture is itself a widely abandoned discipline for most Christians today. Whether or not it is in fact a precondition for the figural reading of Scripture is something I cannot say; but it is certainly something that has been historically necessary for its pursuit.[3]

While memorization provides a "historically necessary" framework to engage with figural reading, comparative readings of Scripture are a primary vehicle that such readings have historically been carried out. On this issue, Nee

[1] ibid, 81.

[2] ibid, 82.

[3] Radner, *Time and the Word*, 232-233.

states the following:

> God's speaking is not completed through just one text. In the book of the prophets we are told that God's word is "here a little, there a little" (Isa. 28:13). Therefore, no Bible student should interpret a passage according to that passage alone…Many heresies in Christianity have resulted from men holding on to one or two passages of the Bible without consulting related passages. Satan also quotes Scriptures here and there, but he quotes them to tempt men. We must remember that the more we compare, the less we will be liable to private interpretation.[1]

After clarifying his rationale for comparison of biblical texts, he goes on to offer an example of how comparative reading can be utilized to interpret metaphorical images in Scripture:

> Revelation 19 says that when the Lord descends from heaven to fight, He will remove all His enemies by the sword of His mouth. If we interpret this text by itself, we may conclude that the Lord's mouth contains a sword, and we may even say that this sword is quick, sharp, and shining. If we realize that no Scripture should be interpreted by its own interpretation, we immediately will look for the meaning of "sharp sword" when we come to this passage, and from Ephesians 6:17 we will find that the sharp sword refers to the Word of God.[2]

It should be noted that the Word as a "sword" holds at least three significances in Nee's corpus: (1) it divides soul from spirit (Heb 4:12); (2) it is the only offensive weapon against Satan (Eph 6:17); and as the passage above states (3) it is the power by which the Lord in His second coming slays those in rebellion. More pertinent to the discussion at hand, however, is that the above passage is illustrative of Nee's canonical reading of the New Testament. Although Revelation and Ephesians were written in different geographic locations by different authors at different times with no historically documented relationship between their textual origins, Nee believes that they are crucial interpretative lenses for one another. His commitment to scriptural unity extends across the Old and New

[1] Nee, *How to Study the Bible,* 84.

[2] ibid, 84-85.

Testaments as well:

> It is also important to compare the Old Testament with the New Testament…For example, without the book of Daniel, there cannot be the book of Revelation…When we compare these passages one with another and interpret one according to the other, we will see many things which we have previously not seen.[1]

In the next chapter of his volume, "Various Plans for Studying the Bible," Nee delineates twenty-eight hermeneutical lens.[2] Intriguingly, by maintaining unity between the ostensive and literal senses of the text, the majority of his hermeneutic approaches are fully integrated with figural exegesis. The nomenclature of the third hermeutical lens "types," for instance, may be misleading for those unfamiliar with Nee, since he does not consider it as *one way* of interpretation; rather it refers to a prolonged engagement with Scripture that *only* utilizes typology. The incorporation of figural interpretation across lenses is plainly evidenced in his discussion of the innocuously named "main characters" hermeneutic. For Nee, the narrative of Adam, although historically located in Genesis 2 and 3 is not distinguished from later type/antitype relationships

[1] ibid, 85.

[2] The full list of Nee's twenty-eight ways of studying Scripture: (1) Main characters; (2) Women; (3) Types; (4) Prophecies; (5) Dispensations; (6) Topical Studies; (7) God's relationship to man, specifically referencing His oikonomia; (8) Chronology; (9) Numerology; (10) Parables; (11) Miracles; (12) Jesus' earthly teachings; (13) a side-by-side comparison of the four Gospels; (14) "crucial chapters" (e.g., Numbers 21, Deuteronomy 8, Psalms 22, Isaiah 53, John 14-16); (15) studying according to "past, present, future"—i.e., according to human conceptions of what has already occurred, what is the present reality, and future scriptural promises; (16) "salvation, sanctification, and ministry"—i.e., items tied to stages in one's spiritual life; (17) Minerals; (18) Geography: specifically, assigning spiritual significance to geographical features; (19) Names of persons, specifically in reference to their meanings in Hebrew or Greek; (20) Choruses in poetic passages; (21) Prayers, such as Abraham's intercession for Sodom, Jesus' prayer in John 17, or Paul's prayers in Ephesians 1 and 3; (22) Difficult passages, such as that Genesis 3 and 6 where man sins in Gen. 3 but becomes flesh only in Gen 6; (23) individual book-by-book studies; (24) in-depth studies of key books such as Song of Songs, Leviticus, Ephesians, etc.; (25) Christ, in typology; (26) word studies—
i.e., tracing key words through the Bible, of which Nee offers 50 examples; (27) particular doctrines; and (28) the progression of doctrines across the canon. For further reading, see Nee, *How to Study the Bible,* 101-146.

between the Old and New Testaments. Concerning this he states the following:

> The common impression is that Adam's history is found only in chapters two and three of Genesis. But upon careful reading we find that the books of Romans and 1 Corinthians also speak about Adam, and what they say is quite crucial. More about Adam can be found in Ephesians 5. In studying Adam's history, we have to know about his place in God's plan, his creation, his initial innocence and sinlessness, his relationship with Eve, his judgment from God and the promise he received from God after the fall, his expulsion from the garden of Eden, his life outside Eden, and finally his relation to the last Adam.[1]

While Nee preserves the historical referent of Adam in his narratival presentation, he seamlessly inserts the figural Adam into the narrative. We may thus rightly say that Nee's understanding of narrative history via Scripture is not predicated merely on events concretely located in time and space; rather, his conception of the historical narrative is simply the all-encompassing world that the Scriptures present. Radner argues for a similar approach to Scripture in *Time and the Word*: "Scripture speaks of the order of that which God creates." Thus, the world that creatures encounter is "according to the Scriptures,"[2] regardless of concretely observable historical events that modernity equates with valid scriptural interpretation.

Nee employs similar methodology to narrate numerous biblical figures and at times uses their overarching narratives to develop doctrinal propositions. For example, when discussing the narrative of Abel, he states the following:

> We should read his history not only in Genesis but also in Hebrews 11. We have to go through all the passages in the Bible that speak of Abel in order to find the basic message that God has for us through him. What is the reason behind God's acceptance of Abel and rejection of Cain? Many people think that Abel's sacrifice was accepted because it had blood. But this is too heavily biased toward the New Testament; it does not bring out the root cause of God's acceptance of Abel's sacrifice. Man's responsibility in the

[1] ibid, 101.

[2] Radner, *Time and the Word*, 92.

> Garden of Eden was to dress and keep it. After man sinned, he could till the ground for his sustenance, but in his sinful state it was wrong to offer a sacrifice to God of his sustenance. Cain offered the produce of the land to God, as if he had forgotten the fall of sin…Abel, however, acknowledged the fact of sin. Only after the flood did men begin to take meat (Gen. 9:3). The purpose of keeping sheep was strictly for offering them as sacrifices to God. The sheep were killed, and their skin was used as covering (Gen. 3:21). God requires man to acknowledge that he is a sinner. Abel came to God according to this requirement, and God accepted him.[1]

Two aspects of the above narrative are noteworthy. First, although Nee presupposes testamental unity, he still maintains testamental particularities. This is apparent in his desire to explain the root of God's acceptance of Abel's sacrifice as not being directly related to blood as it would be too biased toward the New Testament.

Nee's construction of these theological narratives aligns with the interpretative trajectory of better-known Western interpreters. Frei, for example, describes Barth's exegetical method as being composed of three levels of interpretation: (1) explication: the sheer retelling of a story; (2) meditation: the conceptual redescription as refracted through the structure of our minds; (3) application: the rendering of the narrative to the community in which it has functioned since its initial telling.[2] Nee's discussion of Abel adheres to a similar formula. First, he retells the entire narrative of Abel, inclusive of its New Testament artifacts. Thereafter, he conceptually redescribes the story of Abel, locating its explanatory power in what he posits as God's message for the reader. Finally, he addresses one of the primary lessons conveyed by Abel's narrative to the church community—being accepted or rejected by God. Ultimately, this narrative understood through Nee's interpretative lens suggests that individuals must acknowledge that they are sinners to be accepted by God; such

[1] Nee, *How to Study the Bible*, 101-102.

[2] Frei, *Theology and Narrative,* 113-114.

acknowledgement is of supreme soteriological import.

A. Two typological readings

Framing Nee's presentation of typological reading are "four great spiritual things"— Christ, redemption, the church, and the Holy Spirit. Each of these items, he asserts, are what the Old Testament's chief types refer to.[1] Though numerous examples of typological interpretations exist in Nee's corpus, two are especially noteworthy: his typological reading of the land of Cannan in the book of Joshua and his interpretation of various conditions of Israel's Temple(s) after Solomon's kingship. He offers the following remarks about the land of Canaan:

> In order to understand the significance of the Israelites entering Canaan and the warfare in Canaan, we must first know what Canaan typifies. Some think that Canaan typifies heaven. But if Canaan typifies heaven, will there be warfare in heaven? If we are careful in our reading, we will conclude that Canaan cannot be a type of heaven. It is a type of our heavenly position. It is the equivalent of the heavenlies spoken of in Ephesians. On the one hand, we are seated with Christ in the heavenlies. On the other hand, we wrestle against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenlies (Eph. 6:12).[2]

By explicitly rejecting interpretations of Canaan as typifying heaven Nee demonstrates his knowledge of typological interpretations advanced during the Reformation, most forcefully by Calvin.[3] He reimagines this typology by proposing that two spiritual aspects of Canaan exist: that of "spiritual warfare" found in Ephesians and that of "rest" found in Hebrews. Nee engages these two passages in light of the narrated experiences of the Israelites in Canaan and concludes that some experiences of the Israelites in the book of Joshua refer to a Christian's present-day spiritual warfare, whereas others point to the future experience of reigning with Christ in the kingdom age.

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[1] Nee, *How to Study the Bible*, 103.

[2] ibid, 105.

[3] Frei, *Eclipse of the Narrative,* 35-36.

A far more interesting departure from Calvin in Nee's interpretation is this: for Calvin, a division "between us and these persons"[1]—in other words, he denigrates Israel's earthly blessing of land and exalts the Christian's spiritual blessing of heaven. Nee, however, grounds his hermeneutic in the literal narrative of Israel and aligns every experience of Israel with congruent experiences of Christians. For Nee, it is significant that although all Israelites were saved from the tenth plague and partook of the Passover lamb, only *two* entered the good land; based upon this fact, he argues that of those who are saved by the blood of Christ and take Christ as the Passover Lamb, "many are called by few are chosen" to enter into the kingdom age.[2] In this and many other instances, Nee's retrieval of a classical hermeneutic results in positing an explicit continuity of the divine *oikonomia* between Israel and the church.

Nee's figural connection between the condition of the Temple and the church is similarly striking:

> Solomon's building of the temple is again a type of Christ building the church. The temple was in Jerusalem, typifying the church meeting and worshipping in the Lord's name, because God placed His name in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the only place which God recognized and in which place He put His own name (1 Kings 14:21). When Jeroboam rose up, he set up two altars in Bethel and Dan for worship, and God condemned this. God wants man to worship only at the place where his name is established. He does not want man to worship anywhere else. During times of revival, the kings removed the altars. But some kings did not remove them. This is a type of the many revivals that have happened in the church. Later, the temple was destroyed; this is a type of the church becoming desolated. Afterwards, Nehemiah, Zechariah, and Zerubbabel returned to rebuild the temple. Although the rebuilt temple was not as glorious as the one that had been destroyed, this was a beginning of the recovery back to the original ground. This is a type of the recovery of the church. This recovery will be completed at the Lord's second coming. Then the church will a glorious church.[3]

[1] ibid, 35.

[2] Nee, *How to Study the Bible,* 105.

[3] ibid, 106.

This figural understanding of the condition of the Temple(s) is intriguing for three reasons. First, as implied in Nee's figural reading of Canaan, this passage presents Nee's strong "Israel-ecclesiology"—a term not used by Nee, but which I have coined to describe his commitment to the figural reading of the historical events of the Israelites as pertaining to the universal church. In drawing an explicit continuity between the two peoples of God, Nee stands within a long tradition of pre-critical exegetes as well as postliberal scholars.

Second, Nee extends the implications of his reading beyond the New Testament, through the present-day, and locates its endpoint in the eschaton. While uncommon, this type of interpretative extension is not without precedent. The Jansenists, for instance, engaged Scripture in a manner which presupposed that "the figures of the Scripture actually shape the world; they have historical substance, from a divine perspective, and thus describe what human history is all about."[1] Among modern scholars, Radner makes an especially bold claim when discussing his schematic approach and logic to figural reading—that although the name "Napoleon" does not appear in Scripture, historical figure referred to as Napoleon *is* indeed present in Scripture, and properly executed figural reading can unearth this embedded reality.[2]

The third item—Nee's proposition of a "desolate" church that is undergoing continual "recovery" until the second coming of Christ—may be his most controversial claim, insofar as it seemingly contradicts the Nicene maxim of "one holy, catholic, apostolic church." However, in *The Glorious Church* Nee explicitly states that the church is without sin from God's eternal viewpoint.[3] He goes on to

[1] Radner, *Time and the Word,* 10.

[2] ibid, 103.

[3] *CWWN* vol. 35, 57: "The church according to God's will and the church in experience are two entirely different things. The church in God's plan is completely without sin; it has never known sin, nor had any history of sin. It is transcendent far above sin, without even a trace of sin. It is altogether spiritual and wholly out of Christ. However, the church in history has failed and is fallen. Today the Lord is working among fallen

employ a forty-page figural exegesis of Eve as a type of the church to undergird this assertion. The following portion drawn from this interpretative exercise is particularly instructive in relation to Nee's overall theological outlook:

> The fact that Eve was made from Adam signifies that the church is made from Christ. Eve was made from Adam's rib. Since Eve came out from Adam, she was still Adam. Then what is the church? The church is another form of Christ, just as Eve was another form of Adam. The church is just Christ. Oh, there are many people who think that the church is the coming together of the "people" who believe in the Lord and are saved. No, this is not true! Then who constitutes the church? The church is only that portion which has been taken out of Christ. In other words, it is the man which God has made by using Christ as the material. It is not a man made of clay…Man's talent, ability, thought, strength, and all that he has are outside the church. Everything that comes from the natural life is outside the church, and anything that is brought into the church of the natural life will only result in a tearing down, not a building up.[1]

While Nee's ecclesiology is stated simplistically, the implications of his statement are profound. Nee's reading of the rebuilding of the Temple as linked to the church being produced as "glorious" is predicated upon the notion that the church *cannot* be constituted with anything other than Christ. Hence, for Nee, the church as an entity constituted of fallen human beings in time and space is *being* produced as "glorious"[2] through the individual experiences of each member of the Body of Christ willingly submitting themselves to the discipline of the Holy Spirit and the work of the cross. Nee posits that as each member of the Body of Christ goes through the process of having their old man crucified while simultaneously being reconstituted with Christ through the "washing of the water of the Word," these

men to bring them back to the church of His original will. The Lord desires to work among people who are fallen, corrupted, and desolate, full of sin and filthiness, so that He may obtain a church from among them. He intends to restore and recover them to what He purposed in eternity past, so that He might have that which fulfills His desire in eternity future."

[1] ibid, 28-29 (emphasis added).

[2] Nee uses this term for the church based on Eph. 5:27 – "That he might present to Himself the church *glorious…*"

individuals are sanctified, transformed, and built up by the pneumatic power of the Scriptures to be constituted as the "glorious" church.

The salvific transformation of individuals to produce the church is so central to Nee's ministry that an honest appraisal of his hermeneutic engagement with Scripture necessarily must broach the topic. Hence, the remainder of this essay is devoted to discussion and analysis of Nee's figural and allegorical scriptural engagement in *The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,* as this volume offers a cursory introduction to Nee's theology of salvific transformation while simultaneously showcasing an example of his extensive figural engagement with Scripture.[1]

B. Analysis of *The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*

Nee begins his volume by introducing his controlling hermeneutic:

> First Corinthians 10:11 says, "Now these things happened to them as an example…" The Bible records the history of the Israelites as an example to us. It is for the purpose of our edification. Although there is an outward difference between God's work in the Old Testament and His work in the New Testament, they are the same in principle. The principle of God's work is the same today as it was in the past. God chose the Israelites to be His people, and He also chosen men from among the Gentiles to be His people (Acts 15:14). The Bible says that we are fellow citizens and members of the household of God (Eph. 2:19). It also says that we are the true Jews (Rom. 2:29). Hence, the history of the Israelites is a pattern to us.[2]

As noted earlier, Nee prioritizes testamental unity whenever possible. Hence, his use of 1 Corinthians 10:11 is not surprising as Paul unequivocally argues for an explicit relationship between Israel and the present Christian community. This

[1]For further reading about Nee's theology of transformation, see: *The Breaking of the Outer Man and the Release of the Spirit; The Word of the Cross; The Song of Songs: The Divine Romance between God and man; The Character of the Lord's Worker;* and *Miscellaneous Records of the Kuling Training* (1) and (2) which is a compilation of several messages given during the final four years of his ministry.

[2] *CWWN* vol. 35, 5.

"Israel-ecclesiology" is not uncommon in modern interpretative practices of the academy, yet for Nee, the linking of theological similarities between Israel and the church is not as crucial as detailing the relationship between the historical events of Israel and the subjective, pneumatically-oriented lived experience of believers today. As noted earlier, this emphasis upon linking biblical narratives to the subjective experience of believers finds resonance in figures such as Jesse Penn-Lewis, Andrew Murray, Madame Guyon, T. Austin Sparks, and others associated with Quietist, Keswick, or Holiness circles.

Nee addresses the "why" of his interpretative exercise in *The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob* by arguing that the presence of the tripartite divine name both in the Old and New Testaments (Exo. 3:6; Psa. 105:8-11; Matt. 22:32; Mark 12:26; Luke 20:37; cf. Matt. 8:11) demands careful consideration. For him, an understanding of the inclusion of these three human names within God's self-revelation reveals a transformative process involving the Divine Trinity that engenders a particularly outstanding result of the three patriarchs—the nation of Israel.[1] Concerning this, he states:

> [God] also told the Israelites, "I will bring you in unto the land, concerning that which I did swear to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; I will give it you for a heritage" (Exo. 6:8). This shows us that the Israelites entered into the inheritance of the three men, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They did not have any inheritance of their own…Each of these men occupies a particular position before God. Their different spiritual experiences typify three different kinds of spiritual principles.[2]

Given Nee's interest in constructing overarching scriptural narratives utilizing typological and/or figural methodologies, his intense focus on the particularities of these three human individuals is unsurprising. For Nee, even the progressive expansion of this tripartite name as each patriarch meets God for themselves is

[1] Ibid., 6.

[2] Ibid., 7.

significant: to remain only with the title of the "God of Abraham" is inadequate because of Ishmael; the "God of Abraham and Isaac" similarly falls short due to Esau and his descendants; and thus, it is only the threefold title, according to Nee, that adequately articulates the divine source of Israel as God's chosen people. As mentioned, he places great significance on the historical experiences of the Israelites, and his engagement with the "spiritual experiences" of each of the three patriarchs bears the same hermeneutic predilection:

> In other words, all the people of God should have the element of Abraham, the element of Isaac, and the element of Jacob in them. Without these elements, we cannot become God's people. God's people must have the element of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.[1]

This passage establishes the following schematic: (1) the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob produced Israel; (2) their experiences were *required* to produce Israel; (3) there exists continuity between Israel and the church; (4) God's chosen people *today* should "pattern" their formation similar to the Old Testament. With this in mind, Nee goes on to place the narratival experiences of the patriarchs in dialogue with what they reveal about the economic missions of the Divine Persons and applies these economic trinitarian missions to the practical, daily spirituality of his readers.

Nee begins analyzing Abraham by focusing on the Hebrew root of his name (אָב), best translated as "father." He goes on to argue that all of Abraham's experiences led him to learn one lesson—God the Father is the unique source and initiator of all things.[2] Two experiences from Abraham's life are offered in support of this claim. First, Abraham did not volunteer to go to the promised land independently. Rather, God spoke and Abraham went to possess it. Second, Abraham did not know he would have a son but was promised one by God.[3] Nee

[1] Ibid., 7.

[2] Ibid., 8.

[3] Ibid., 9.

summarizes his interpretation of Abraham's experience as follows:

> Abraham knew God as the Father. This kind of knowledge is not a knowledge of doctrine. It is a knowledge in which one is brought to the point of confessing, "God, I am not the source. You are the source of everything, and You are my source. Without you, I cannot have a beginning." This was Abraham. If we do not have Abraham's realization, we cannot be God's people. The first lesson we have to learn is to realize that we can do nothing and that everything depends on God. He is the Father, and He is the Initiator of everything.[1]

The above summary, while adequate to elucidate a figural understanding of Abraham's spiritual experience with God the Father, is expanded upon by Nee for an additional 70 pages. In these chapters, Nee carefully integrates all elements of Abraham's overarching narrative from Genesis, Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews to arrive a totality of the subjective experiences of God the Father, that collectively, were necessary to produce Israel. Although many of Nee's interpretative strategies related to Abraham's narrative are novel, two—the birth of Ishmael[2] and knowing God as the God of resurrection[3]—deserve further attention, as they are formative elements informing Nee's "Christ-only" ecclesiology (i.e., the church is only Christ) predicated on the transformation of believers.

Nee interprets the birth of Ishmael allegorically to function as a lesson for Christians. According to Nee, Abraham's failure related to bringing forth Ishmael was not sin, but an implicit negligence regarding God the Father as the unique source:

> Abraham was a believer. He tried to please God and fulfill God's goal. God wanted him to have a son, and he tried to have a son by himself. Was this not according to God's will, and did he not do it to please God? Could it be wrong? However, Paul said, "The one of the maidservant was born according to the flesh." It is true that God's will should be done…Abraham was wrong, not in his goal but in his source. His goal was to see God's promise being fulfilled, but he was wrong to

[1] ibid, 8-9.

[2] ibid, 53-61.

[3] ibid, 83-86.

fulfill it by his own strength.[1]

Speaking further on the application of this lesson to believers, he asserts:

> The greatest test to God's children is the choosing of the source for their work. Many of God's children often say that such and such a thing is "good," "right," or "according to God's will." But behind these "good" and "right" things that are "according to God's will," the self is doing all the work, and there is no realization of the cross and no ground given to God to deal with the fleshly life…The most regrettable thing that we can do is teach God's Word, preach God's truth, and exercise God's gift by ourselves. If we have done this, we should bow down our head and confess our sins. We have to realize that the works done "for His sake," which are not of Him, and which are done without recognizing Him as the Father, have no spiritual value at all.[2]

These two passages illustrate a distinct concern for the interior spiritual condition of interpreters versus required external actions. The result of knowing God as one's unique source, for Nee, is the negation of both the "self" and "fleshly life"—two negative results of the Fall which he expands on elsewhere in his corpus, notably in *The Spiritual Man*.

Given Nee's overriding interest in interpreters securing the proper "source" of activity, it would be easy to assume that he promotes passivity or is influenced by Quietist sensibilities. However, Nee's reading of the sacrifice of Isaac as intrinsic to Abraham's experience of God as the God of Resurrection underscores not interior silence or passivity, but voluntary, active cooperation of human agents with God's commands.[3]

[1] ibid, 57.

[2] ibid, 54-55.

[3] A similar emphasis on the right relationship between humans and God being contingent upon voluntary submission to God's commands can be found in the fragments of *Church Dogmatics IV/4*, where Barth argues that the Christian ethic is not centered upon regulations, but wholly predicated upon a life of calling upon God and awaiting His command (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/4: Reconciliation Ethics* (Bloomsbury T&T Clark 2010), 1-37).

For Nee, everything, including items freely given by God, must pass through death and resurrection to be useful in one's ecclesial service. In Abraham's experience, this meant that Isaac, though a gift from God, had to be completely consecrated to God:

> Before the Lord, we have to realize that even the commission we have received, the work we are doing, and the will of God that we know, must be dropped…We have to learn to thank the Lord for calling us to His work and also to learn to thank Him for calling us not to work. We are not directly related to God's work, but to God Himself. Everything should pass through death and resurrection.[1]

Ultimately, Nee avers that Abraham's voluntary act of obedience indicated that he matured to the point that he intimately knew God the Father as the unique Initiator and unique source of all things. Nevertheless, he goes on to suggest that Abraham's narrative was incomplete to bring forth God's people; the experiences of Isaac and Jacob were necessary for God's ultimate desire to be realized.[2]

Nee's interpretative engagement with Isaac occurs on three levels. The first two levels deal with Isaac in the same manner as Abraham—Nee discusses how historical events from Isaac's life can be allegorically applied to believers. Nee's third interpretative level of Isaac's narrative is typological, and more specifically christological—Nee argues for a type/antitype relationship between Isaac and Christ, stating that that "no one's history depicts the Lord Jesus as the Son as much as Isaac's history."[3]

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[1] *CWWN* vol. 35, 84.

[2] ibid, 87.

[3] ibid, 89. To support this assertion, Nee offers the following proofs: (1) Isaac's birth was not according to the flesh but according to God's promise just as Jesus' birth was not according to the flesh but according to God's promise; (2) Isaac was placed on an altar and received back as One who had come back from the dead (Heb. 11:19), and likewise, Jesus was crucified and resurrected from the dead; (3) the Holy Spirit is seeking out the church for Christ; the church is according to the Lord's will, is begotten of God, and of the same household as the Lord Jesus. Eleazar was sent to seek out Rebekah for Isaac, and she was of the same household as Isaac;

When articulating this typological relationship, Nee contends that the historical Isaac prefigures the historical Jesus—though to be sure, he maintains the literal historicity of both individuals. Nee's approach aligns with Auerbach's investigation of ancient literary techniques in which he defines "figura [as] something real and historical which announces something else that is also real and historical." [1] Moreover, when evaluating the entirety of Nee's threefold interpretation of Isaac, it is striking how closely it dovetails with patristic hermeneutical sensibilities. As one of many examples, Nee's exegetical strategy closely resembles Origen's three levels of scriptural understanding: historical, moral, and mystical.[2]

In Nee's further discussion of Isaac's narrative, two items are worthy of our brief attention: Isaac's relationship with God and Isaac's relationship with Abraham. In both contexts, Nee argues for the same relational paradigm: Isaac freely receives and enjoys what both God and Abraham provide him. There is, however, a significant difference between these two receptions:

> The Bible shows us that Isaac's characteristic was to inherit. Everything he had was from his father. He did not have to do anything. His father came to Canaan; he was born in Canaan. He did not have to worry about anything. Isaac's relationship with Abraham was one of receiving. What was Isaac's relationship to God?...God did not bless Isaac because of himself, but because of his father Abraham. God's oath was given to Isaac's father. Now God was blessing Isaac as a confirmation of the covenant…He did not give anything new to Isaac. He gave to Isaac what had already been given to Abraham… From these two relationships, we can see Isaac's characteristics. Throughout his entire life, everything he had was a matter of enjoyment and receiving.[3]

(4) Although Abraham and Jacob both spent time in Egypt, yet Isaac was the son who was born, lived, and died in Canaan; Jesus as the Son of Man was one who although descending out of heaven in incarnation (John 3:13) never left His spiritual location, that is, the bosom of the Father (John 1:18).

[1] Erich Auerbach, "Figura," 29.

[2] Origen, *Spirit and Fire,* 103.

[3] *CWWN* vol. 35, 92-93.

According to Nee, Isaac simply maintained his position as an heir of promises given to Abraham and even of Abraham's attainments. The difference between them was that Isaac's relationship with God was based upon God's relationship with Abraham. In a truly novel rendering of trinitarian relations, he avers:

> What does it mean to know the God of Isaac? Knowing the God of Isaac means only one thing: Knowing God as the Supplier and that everything comes from Him. If we want to know God the Father, we have to know the Son. In order to know the God of Abraham, we have to know the God of Isaac. We are helpless if we only know the God of Abraham because He dwells in unapproachable light (1 Tim. 6:16). But thank the Lord that He is also the God of Isaac. This means that everything that Abraham had was Isaac's. It also means that everything comes from receiving.[1]

While the Son/Father paradigm of trinitarian accessibility is scripturally attested,[2] the utilization of figural readings of Abraham and Isaac to formulate intratrinitarian relational propositions is an especially unique feature of Nee's theological outlook. His allegorical explication of this proposition as applied to expositors is of even greater import, as it continues to be tethered to his "Christ-only" ecclesiology:

> Those who do not know Isaac in life and do not express Isaac in living possess nothing but the law. When God has a demand, they try to do it by themselves. When God wants something, they try to offer it according to themselves. This is not Isaac. This kind of Christian eventually can only sigh and say "For I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but to work out the good is not" (Rom. 7:18). This person in Romans 7 was willing to do good, he was very desirous of being good. But he himself was doing the work; he did not see that God must deliver him…He did not see the inheritance in Isaac. He did not realize that the secret to victory is in receiving. He did not realize that Christians are Christians by virtue of who they are; they do not act out the Christian life.[3]

[1] *CWWN* vol. 35, 93.

[2] Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; *no one comes to the Father but through Me"* (John 14:6, NASB).

[3] *CWWN* vol. 35, 93-94.

Nee does not regard human morality as the end goal of God's work within humankind. So-called ethical categories that label actions as "good" or "bad" are entirely secondary to his overarching concerns. Rather, humans are completely incapable of pleasing God in themselves; as Abraham, believers must know God as their Father, and like Isaac, they must know God as the Son, who is the location of their inheritance and even the inheritance itself.[1] As foreshadowed by the tripartite divine name (as well as the book's title), however, Nee contends that a final spiritual experience was necessary to produce Israel historically and continues to be necessary to produce the "glorious" church—the life of Jacob.

As evidenced throughout his corpus, Nee's primary commitment in biblical interpretation is for pneumatically-infused exegesis to engender spiritual transformation in believers. This hermeneutical concern is explicitly articulated in his rendition of Jacob's narrative. First, Nee recounts various historical events from Jacob's early life—striving in the womb, obtaining Esau's birthright, deceptively stealing Esau's blessing, and so on—and allegorically applies each act to believers who, per Nee, possess the same "nature" and "natural life" as Jacob.[2] Thereafter, he exhibits particular interest in two events which occurred during Jacob's experience at Peniel—Jacob's wrestling and the subsequent touching of his thigh:

> God wrestled with Jacob in order to subdue him, strip him of his strength, and pin him down so that he would not struggle any longer…The Bible shows that God wrestled with Jacob and did not prevail over him. Jacob was indeed strong! What is the significance of God being unable to prevail over Jacob? When we do not trust in God and when we contrive by ourselves and are satisfied with ourselves, we have to admit that God cannot prevail over us. When we try to do God's will by our own strength and try to deliver ourselves by all kinds of natural means, we have to say that God has not

[1] ibid, 95. Concerning this Nee states that "the proper way is to do things by the life that God has given us in Christ. This life spontaneously does what God wants us to do; it does not force us to do anything. At the same time, this life turns away from things that God does not want us to do…"

[2] ibid, 115-118.

prevailed over us.[1]

Once again, Nee argues that human naturalness must be completely dealt with by God as believers undergo their salvific journey. Importantly, this robust theology of the cross is intrinsically embedded within both Nee's "Christ-only" and Israel-church ecclesiological outlooks. On the latter point, however, Nee differentiates between Israel-past and church-present in a key respect: whereas Israel-past required the lives of three individuals to produce their nation, each individual believer is called to pass through the *aggregate* of these spiritual experiences for the building up of the Body of Christ. By making this interpretative move, Nee directly ties individual spirituality to ecclesiology, with a greater emphasis upon the latter as the *telic* consummation of the former.

The final aspect of Jacob's life that Nee discusses is the touching of the hollow of his thigh:

> The sinew of the hollow of the thigh is the strongest sinew in the body. It represents the strongest part of a person, the seat of man's natural strength. God touched the seat of Jacob's natural strength…Every Christian has his own thigh hollow. With some their natural strength is lodged in their conniving…Some Christians have their natural life hidden in their strong mentality. They always think and reason when others speak to them; they always judge whether or not something is rational or justifiable.[2]

Once more, Nee applies his allegorical interpretation to believers:

> The name Peniel means "the face of God" in the original language. God's face is God's light. In the past, God touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh with His hand. Today He is touching our natural life with His light. Once we are enlightened by God's light, we will realize that the things we once considered to be good, glorious, and outstanding are but shameful and foolish things. This light will give us a mortal blow and deplete us of all our strength.[3]

Nee considers this "touching of the thigh" as the beginning of Jacob's

[1] ibid, 132.

[2] ibid, 136.

[3] ibid, 137-138.

transformation despite the fact that Jacob's ethical or moral behavior did not immediately change thereafter. Concerning the rest of Jacob's narrative, he correlates Jacob's spiritual progress with various geographic destinations[1] and contends that Jacob's spiritual maturity is increasingly observable when exegetes compare his reactions to the assumed losses of Joseph and Benjamin. For him, the consummation of his spiritual maturity is made apparent when he blesses Pharaoh—a contention he advances based upon his reading of Hebrews 7:7—"the lesser is blessed by the greater." Ultimately, he concludes his allegorical engagement with the title "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" in the following manner:

> May God open our eyes to see that in His holy way and according to His plan, He wants to gain some vessels to fulfill His goal. These vessels must know the God of Abraham; they must know that all things are of God. They must also know the God of Isaac; they must know that everything for our enjoyment and inheritance is given to us by Him. They must know that everything depends on our being in Christ and Christ being in us. They must also know the God of Jacob; they must know that God deals with our natural life and constitutes Christ into our being through the Spirit. May God bless us, and may He lead us to the knowledge of the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob so that we may become vessels for His testimony.[2]

Conclusion

Over the course of this essay, I have argued that Watchman Nee stands as a compelling theological interpreter whose engagement with Scripture is emblematic of a sustained retrieval of a classical, pre-critical hermeneutic. Far from representing an antiquarian or sectarian curiosity, Nee's interpretive posture—centered on figural reading, testamental unity, spiritual transformation, and the necessary role of the Holy Spirit—places him in meaningful dialogue with postliberal and TIS trajectories. Nee's rejection of the epistemic priorities of

[1] ibid, 153.

[2] ibid, 175

historical criticism, his insistence on the unity and christocentricity of Scripture, and his call for interpreters to first consider their "person" as opposed to their "methods" deeply resonates with figures such as Ephraim Radner, George Lindbeck, Hans Frei, Kevin Vanhoozer, Paul Ricoeur, and many more. These shared commitments suggest that Nee, though largely unrecognized in Western academic discourse, deserves a serious consideration in ongoing conversations surrounding theological interpretation of Scripture (TIS).

Additionally, I have also argued that Nee's hermeneutic exhibits significant continuity with pre-modern exegetes ranging from Origen to Augustine, while simultaneously engaging modern concerns through a pneumatological and ecclesial lens. His readings are not merely spiritualized glosses or moralistic abstractions; they are theologically robust, rooted in Scripture's narrative structure, and aimed at the consummate transformation of the present-day universal church into a "glorious" one through the inward, salvific transformation of believers. Indeed, In our extended analysis of *The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*, we saw that Nee develops a figural, trinitarian theology of spiritual growth that transforms the lives of the three patriarchs into a typological map for the Christian life. By doing so, he not only retrieves classical interpretive strategies but revitalizes them within the context of Christian formation and ecclesial identity.

Lastly, I aimed to use this essay to reposition Nee—not simply as a revivalist or ecclesial founder in the Chinese context, but as a theologically serious and interpretively rigorous voice within global Christian thought. Future research could investigate the intersections between Nee's theology and broader currents in postliberalism, patristics, and global ecclesiology, with special attention given to the further development of his hermeneutic philosophy in the voluminous corpus of Witness Lee and how Lee integrates Nee's intepretative principles into his broader soteriological and ecclesiological frameworks, many of which precede

the contemporary revival of interest in deification and practical spirituality.

In sum, highlighting Nee's hermeneutical outlook is not merely a scholarly exercise; it is a theological necessity. In an era marked by the fragmentation of the church, flattening of Scripture, and marginalization of non-Western theological perspectives, Nee's insistence that Scripture be read with spiritual attentiveness, figural imagination, and ecclesial purpose provides a vital corrective. If the theological interpretation movement is to fully embrace its global, Spirit-led, and transformative mandate, figures such as Nee must be moved to the forefront of ongoing academic dialogue.

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