

JONATHAN EDWARDS AS MULTI-DIMENSION BIBLE INTERPRETER: A CASE STUDY FROM ISAIAH 40–55

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“Resolved, to study the Scriptures so steadily, constantly, and frequently, as that I may find, and plainly perceive myself to grow in the knowledge of the same.”¹ Did Jonathan Edwards live out this resolution that he made as an idealistic twenty-year old? More than twelve hundred collected sermons, over five hundred “notes on Scripture,” in excess of fifty-five hundred observations along the canon, and his other theological writings reveal a lifetime commitment to the Bible.² It is surprising, then, to hear a similar refrain by scholars:

It is a real irony and curiosity, then, that his Biblical interpretation has received so little attention.³

Despite this early recognition of the centrality of the Bible in Edwards’s life and thought, subsequent disciples and scholars focused more attention on other aspects of his biography and theology. Only in recent decades has this oversight begun to be corrected.⁴

Three hundred years after Edwards’s birth, and half a century into what some have called the Edwards renaissance, few have bothered to study Edwards’s extensive exegetical writings.⁵

Though these sentiments still ring true, this void is receiving more attention of late.⁶

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¹ This resolution was made in 1722 in his first year of pastoral ministry in New York City. Stephen J. Stein, “Editors Introduction,” in *The “Blank Bible,”* ed. Stephen J. Stein, vol. 24, part 1 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006) 4–5.

² On sermon total, see Stephen J. Stein, “Edwards as Biblical Exegete,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Edwards* (ed. Stephen J. Stein; Cambridge: Cambridge, 2007) 188. See also *Notes on Scripture*, ed. Stephen J. Stein, vol. 15 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). These observations date to 1724–1758. For observations along the canon, see *The “Blank Bible.”* For a helpful overview of his theological writings, such as *Images of Divine Things* or *Notes on the Apocalypse*, see Stein, “Edwards as Biblical Exegete” 188–95.

³ Robert E. Brown, “The Bible,” in *The Princeton Companion to Jonathan Edwards* (ed. Sang Hyun Lee; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) 87.

⁴ Stein, “Edwards as Biblical Exegete” 182.

⁵ Douglas A. Sweeney, ““Longing for More and More of it?,”” in *Jonathan Edwards at 300: Essays on the Tercentenary of His Birth* (ed. Harry S. Stout, Kenneth P. Minkema, and Caleb J. D. Maskell; Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005) 26.

⁶ For a summary of scholarship on Edwards as exegete, see Jeongmo Yoo, “Jonathan Edwards’s Interpretation of the Major Prophets: The Books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel,” *Puritan Reformed Journal* 3 (2011) 161–62, n. 7.

There are two notable emphases in recent work on Edwards's interpretive practice. First, previous labels for defining Edwards's exegetical method, such as spiritual or literal, typological or Christological, do not do justice to Edwards's diverse handling of Scripture.⁷ In one recent work on the topic, David Barshinger argues that it is better to categorize Edwards's methodological complexity within a broader, descriptive label: "redemptive-historical."⁸ This accommodates the variety of methods and themes Barshinger identifies in his work on Edwards and the Psalms. Notably, this descriptive label is theological in nature, pushing for the recognition that Edwards had a great concern for redemptive history, not simply Christology.⁹ Jeongmo Yoo also makes a similar case, as he exposes how the literal versus spiritual divide is not sufficient and how along with a Christological focus Edwards also has ecclesial and eschatological interests.¹⁰ Thus, scholars are finding that Edwards's interpretive strategy is not as monolithic as previously assumed.

A second emphasis in recent scholarship on Edwards as interpreter is a recognition of the need to focus on Edwards's treatment of particular biblical texts, rather than just his comments about biblical interpretation.¹¹ This is most evident with Barshinger, who looks at Isaiah and the Psalms as case studies in two different articles.¹² Yoo focuses on the Major Prophets as a sample for Edwards's interpretive practice.

These recent trends—acknowledging methodological complexity and focusing on cross-sections of Edwards's practice—are a move in a helpful direction toward better understanding Edwards's approach to the Bible. This study builds upon these emphases by focusing even more narrowly on Isaiah 40–55.¹³ While both Barshinger and Yoo treat Isaiah 40–55, there is more work to be done. Yoo only

⁷ Stein, "Editor's Introduction," in *Notes on Scripture* 2, 8. Stein suggests that typology is the unifying dimension of Edwards's "notes." In another article by Stein, he does recognize multiple levels of meaning for Edwards. He identifies the literal and the spiritual levels of meaning, giving primacy to the spiritual level. Cf. Stephen J. Stein, "The Quest for the Spiritual Sense: the Biblical Hermeneutics of Jonathan Edwards," *HTR* 70 (1977) 99–113.

⁸ "Making the Psalter One's 'Own Language': Jonathan Edwards Engages the Psalms," *Jonathan Edwards Studies* 2 (2012) 28.

⁹ Barshinger identifies seven major themes in Edwards's use of the Psalms: God's glory, human depravity, Christ and his broad work, the heralding of the gospel by the Spirit, the Church, vital piety, and eschatological judgment, and hope.

¹⁰ Yoo, "Jonathan Edwards's Interpretation" 183–92.

¹¹ The cross-section approach will be helpful as most examinations of Edwards's interpretation are general in nature. For general approaches, see Stein, "Edwards as Biblical Exegete"; "Editor's Introduction," *Notes on Scripture*; Ralph G. Turnbull, "Jonathan Edwards: Bible Interpreter," *Int* 6 (1952) 422–35. Exceptions to this have been Glenn R. Kreider, *Jonathan Edwards's Interpretation of Revelation 4:1–8:1* (Dallas: University Press of America, 2004); Stephen J. Stein, "'Like Apples of Gold in Pictures of Silver': The Portrait of Wisdom in Jonathan Edwards Commentary on the Book of Proverbs," *CH* 54 (1985) 324–37.

¹² "The Only Rule of Our Faith and Practice': Jonathan Edwards's Interpretation of the Book of Isaiah as a Case Study of His Exegetical Boundaries," *JETS* 52 (2009) 811–29.

¹³ Admittedly, Isaiah 40–55 is a modern division of the text of Isaiah. One should note, however, that Edwards (quoting Henry) recognizes a shift from Isaiah 39 to Isaiah 40–66 (*The "Blank Bible"* 672). This section of Isaiah has been selected based upon my own interest in the book of Isaiah and the diversity of texts evident in Isaiah 40–55.

touches on Edwards's handling of three texts from Isaiah 40–55.¹⁴ Barshinger engages more extensively with Edwards on Isaiah 40–55, citing ten uses by Edwards.¹⁵ By not including Edwards's sermons on Isaiah 40–55 in his study, Barshinger's study is limited and can be supplemented by the work below, which leads to differing categories from the ones he suggests.

In addition to acknowledging Edwards's diversity as an exegete and focusing on cross-sections of his practice, there is an additional area, in my estimation, that deserves more focus—circumstance. It seems to be worthwhile to inquire as to how the various contexts where Edwards expresses his views on biblical texts reveal different foci. For example, when H. G. M. Williamson, a prominent biblical scholar on Isaiah from Oxford, lectures to postgraduate students on Isaiah, his emphases will differ from when he preaches a sermon on Isaiah. In a similar way, it will be helpful to be mindful of how different contexts might lead Edwards to employ one dimension of his methodology more prominently than others.

While a limited focus on Isaiah 40–55 will not lead to a conclusive and overarching construction of Edwards's interpretive practice, this sample leads to a conclusion similar to recent work on Edwards as exegete; it evidences a multi-dimensional handling of the text. More precisely, Edwards recognizes multiple dimensions of meaning within the biblical text, and his ministerial context (e.g. church, public, private study) at times determines which dimension of meaning he appropriates.

The argument will proceed in several stages. (1) Several examples of Edwards as a multi-dimensional thinker establish a foundation for our argument that he was multi-dimensional in his interpretation. (2) Four dimensions of textual meaning that Edwards engages with will be suggested in light of his interpretations and uses of Isaiah 40–55. (3) There will be reflections on how Edwards's use of the immediate literary context in detecting various dimensions of meaning illumine our understanding of his exegetical practice. Finally, a conclusion will be made that Edwards skillfully draws upon various dimensions of meaning in the Bible as is suitable for his own context.

I. A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL LIFE

Jonathan Edwards evidences mental agility in his approach to topics amidst various contexts. Born in 1703, Edwards grew up in New England where Puritan exegesis was prominent. The strongest influence on his approach to biblical interpretation was certainly within his own family. With his father, Timothy Edwards, and his maternal grandfather, Solomon Stoddard (“Pope Stoddard”), delivering puritan style sermons, it is no surprise that the same style characterizes Jonathan's

¹⁴ Yoo, “Jonathan Edwards's Interpretation” 165 (Isa 53:2), 167 (Isa 51:4), and 168 (Isaiah 40).

¹⁵ “The Only Rule” 820 (Isa 42:1; 55:10), 821 (Isa 47:11; 43:21–28), 822 (Isa 52:7), 824 (Isa 51:8; 53:1–2), 827 (Isa 40:1; 42:8; 43).

sermons.¹⁶ In fact, the twelve hundred collected sermons from Edwards display the typical pattern of Scripture explained, derived Doctrine, and Application.¹⁷ While using this traditional form, Edwards often exercised great freedom in his sermon construction. For example, in a sermon on Deut 32:13, he offers three different doctrines.¹⁸ Additionally, according to Kinnach, Edwards considered “every sermon to be occasional,” so he regularly adjusted his sermons to best serve the needs of the ministerial context.¹⁹ Not only did Edwards show flexibility in his preaching, as Robert E. Brown helpfully argues, Edwards was willing to incorporate some ideas from historical-critical scholarship in his exegetical practice. While doing so, he upholds theological tradition while allowing historical critical concerns to benefit him too.²⁰ Thus, as a preacher, Edwards manifests a typical Puritan style; as an interpreter, he holds to traditional exegetical beliefs. He was, however, free to adjust sermonic structure and benefit from scholarship to cater to different circumstances.

As a student and writer, Edwards demonstrates the same ability to be a champion of theological “tradition” while packaging it in innovative and nuanced ways. One finds this in *Freedom of the Will*. In it he offers an innovative definition of the “will” that enables him to maintain a traditional Calvinistic model of “freedom.”²¹ In his dissertation “The Nature of True Virtue,” he offers a very unique, nuanced articulation of “self-love” as it relates to “benevolent affection,” while defending a traditional call for love.²² In his treatise on *Original Sin*, he supports a traditional Calvinist doctrine of inherited sin and guilt but nuances it by introducing the distinction between “inferior” (natural) and “superior” (divine) principles.²³ Thus Edwards’s life and works display how he operates. He is a man able to think in multi-dimensional ways in order to take into account the breadth and implications of a particular subject in the light of the circumstances he is operating within.

If Jonathan Edwards’s life reveals that he was a man capable of reflecting philosophically at a variety of levels, is this not the case with his exegesis? Is Edwards simply a one dimensional exegete, moving directly from OT (literal) to Christ (spiritual)? The burden of this article is to highlight Edwards’s sensitivity to many

¹⁶ Wilson H. Kinnach, “General Introduction to the Sermons: Jonathan Edwards’ Art of Prophecy-ing,” in *Sermons and Discourses 1720–1723*, ed. Wilson Kinnach, vol. 10 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 11, 12–15; Wilson Kinnach, “The Sermons: Concept and Execution,” in *The Princeton Companion to Jonathan Edwards* (ed. Sang Hyun Lee. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) 244.

¹⁷ Kinnach, “Sermons” 243.

¹⁸ Jonathan Edwards, “Honey from the Rock,” in *Sermons and Discourses 1730–1733*, ed. Mark Valeri, vol. 17 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) 121–38.

¹⁹ Kinnach, “Sermons,” 245. In my opinion, this is also evident in how his sermons in Stockbridge differ from those in Northampton.

²⁰ *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002) 88–128.

²¹ *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey, vol. 1 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957) 137–40.

²² “The Nature of True Virtue” in *A Jonathan Edwards Reader* (ed. John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 258–65.

²³ “Original Sin,” in *A Jonathan Edwards Reader* (ed. John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 232–35.

dimensions of meaning in the text. While Edwards is concerned with an ultimate unity of meaning in life, one must not neglect his multi-dimensionality in considering textual meaning.²⁴

II. MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS OF MEANING IN ISAIAH 40–55

There are three types of sources that provide insight into Edwards's interpretation of Isaiah 40–55. First, there are forty-two sermons that use verses from Isaiah 40–55 as the base text. Twenty-two of these have been transcribed of which thirteen are published.²⁵ The Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale graciously made the nine transcribed, yet unpublished sermons available to me electronically.²⁶ These provide insight into how he moved from exegesis to sermon. Second, his reflections on Isaiah 40–55 in *The Blank Bible* and his references to *Notes on Scripture* from *The Blank Bible* provide helpful clues regarding Edwards's exegesis. Third, that Edwards uses Isaiah 40–55 in his other sermons to support his main points is illuminating as well. I have limited my investigation in this area to all of the published sermons referring to Isaiah 40–55 in the Yale Edition of Edwards's Sermons

²⁴ See Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, ed. John F. Wilson, vol. 9 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); "Concerning the End for which God Created the World," in *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey, vol. 8 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). Stein's approach to looking at the various dimensions of meaning in Edwards is by using the categories of "literal" and "spiritual." While his approach is helpful at exposing dynamics at work in the interpretation of Edwards, approaching the topic with different categories and with a cross-section approach will provide additional insights. See Stein, "Quest for the Spiritual Sense."

²⁵ It should be noted that of these thirteen sermons, twelve of them come from *The History of the Work of Redemption*. In that work, Edwards offers exegetical reflection on Isa 51:8 in the first sermon of the series. The only other sermon published is "Glorying in the Savior," in *Sermons and Discourses 1723–1729*, ed. Kenneth P. Minkema, vol. 14 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997) 460–70. Throughout this article, the transcribed copy will be referenced rather than the published work under: Sermon 120 on Isa 45:25.

²⁶ The unpublished, transcribed sermons are listed according to the Schafer list with the sermon text and doctrine included. 216. Isa 53:10(a). "That Christ should see sinners converted and saved, was part of the reward that God promised him for his sufferings"; 312. Isa 53:7(a). "The meekness of Jesus Christ was especially manifested in his behavior under his last sufferings." Feb. 1734; 414. Isa 53:3(b). "Our Lord Jesus Christ, when he dwelt here on the earth, was one that was very much used to affliction." Nov. 1736. Repreached July 1753 to the Stockbridge Indians, and May 1755; 597. Isa 40:29–31(a). "Obs. 1. Those that have the greatest strength have no strength of their own sufficient to carry 'em on in that way which God calls 'em to travel." Mar. 1741. (Continued in nos. 598–99); 598. Isa 40:29–31(b). "Obs. 4. The degrees in which God gives strength and grace to those that wait upon him are very diverse." 599. Isa 40:29–31(c). "Obs. 6 . . . To wait on God in the improvement of what strength we have is the way to receive more and more strength." Completed Mar. 29, 1741. 713. Isa 47:4. "I would first show how Christ is the Lord of hosts and he Lord of armies, and then secondly show what is implied in its being said that this is his name." Oct. 13, 1743. "Thanksgiving for the king's preservation and victory at the River Maine in Germany"; 937. Isa 44:3–4. "Observation: The pouring out of the Spirit after a long withholding of its influences is like the giving showers of rain after a great drought." Aug. 1749. "Thanksgiving for rain"; 941. Isa 47:3–4. "When God's time comes to take vengeance on his enemies, he will not meet them as a man." Sept. 1749. Lecture. Repreached Feb. 1753. These sermons may be found in the Beinecke Library at Yale. Because these sermons are not officially published, the corrections, abbreviations, and spelling by Edwards have been retained to preserve the transcribed material.

and Discourses from 1723–1742. Drawing upon these resources, we offer four dimensions of meaning that Edwards takes into account in his exegesis. These categories are by no means exhaustive nor are they “non-overlapping.” Edwards did not create these categories. Instead, they simply serve our purposes of developing a more nuanced understanding of Edwards as an exegete.

1. *Isaiah 40–55 and meaning for “gospel times.”*²⁷ All scholars recognize that for Edwards a major dimension of OT textual meaning speaks directly to “gospel times.” “Gospel times” refers to the person and work of Christ and the implications for the church and the future. What follows are a few ways that Edwards interprets Isaiah 40–55 as referring directly to these “gospel times.”

Jonathan Edwards understands Isaiah 40–66 in general to be referring to the “gospel times.” This is especially apparent in his reflections on Isaiah 40–66 in *The Blank Bible*.²⁸ As he quotes Matthew Henry’s historical observations on Isaiah 1–39, Edwards inserts his own comments to connect the dots to “gospel times” through typology.²⁸ His insertions are in parenthesis.

“There [Isaiah 1–39] the distress of the people of God were in by the Assyrian, and their deliverance out of that, were chiefly prophesied” (and the future distresses of the church of God, and their great deliverance and prosperity in the days of the gospel are spoken of chiefly under these types). “But these things are here spoken of as things past (Is. 52:4); and the captivity in Babylon, and their deliverance out of that, where much greater events, of more extensive and abiding concern, are here largely foretold” (and the future distresses, and glorious deliverances, and prosperity of the church in gospel times prophesied of under these types.)²⁹

By means of typology, Edwards roots the anticipation of God’s actions within salvation history to “gospel times” which brings coherence and purpose to the universe.³⁰ Thus, as shown by Edwards’s comments, he is not content in this instance with only making sixth-century BC links; he is careful to clarify that Isaiah 40–66 also speaks of “the days of the gospel” and “gospel times.”

This typological approach that links Isaiah 40–55 with “gospel times” surfaces elsewhere as well. He begins a sermon on Isa 40:29–31 suggesting that “we have in this chapter a Prophecy of the . . . Introduction and Commencement of the Glorious Times of the Gospel.”³¹ In a sermon on Isa 45:25 (“In the Lord shall all the seed of Israel be Justified and shall Glory”), he uses typology to explain how this word to Israel is for the Church. Edwards states, “[B]ut tis the spiritual Israel that is spoken of not those that Are of the Loins but those that are of the faith of Abra-

²⁷ This dimension emphasizes a primary movement from text to the NT.

²⁸ Most emphasize typology as the prominent way that Edwards moves from OT text to Christ. Robert E. Brown’s statement is representative of many Edwards scholars: “The most notable aspect of his exposition of Biblical texts is undoubtedly his typology” (“Bible” 97). Cf. Stein, “Editor’s Introduction,” in *Notes on Scripture* 2, 8.

²⁹ *The “Blank Bible”* 672.

³⁰ Douglas A. Sweeney, “Edwards and the Bible,” in *Understanding Jonathan Edwards: An Introduction to America’s Theologian* (ed. Gerald R. McDermott; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) 74–77.

³¹ Sermon 597 on Isa 40:29–31, L. 1.

ham if they are X^s then are they Abrahams and Israels seed. the nation of Israel was a typical nation they were a type of the invisible Church the true ~~spiritual seed of X~~ People of J. X in all ages.”³² He then argues based upon the use of a hithpael verb form (reflexive) for glory (ללה) that all Christians are the true Israel who should boast in their position as being “privileged of G.”³³ Thus, Edwards uses typology to explain how Isaiah 40–55 speaks of and to “gospel times.”

In addition to typology, Edwards moves from the OT text to “gospel times” through his handling of prophecy as predictive. As would be expected, Edwards has no struggle in understanding Isaiah 53 as predictive of Jesus Christ. In his four transcribed sermons on Isaiah 53,³⁴ they begin with similar statements: “this Chap. is the Plainest & fullest Prophecy of X^s sufferings that is in all the old Test”;³⁵ “this Chapter is the Plainest Prophecy & most Particular Prophecy of X sufferings in the Whole Old Testament”;³⁶ “this Chap is the Plainest & fullest ~~account pr~~ Ac-count of the sufferings of X that there is in all the O .T.”;³⁷ and “Isaiah was a prophet that spoke most of X of any of the Proph. & this Chap is the plainest & fullest ~~suff~~ sufferings Prophecy of Xs of any in ~~all the~~ this Book and in-deed ~~of any~~ in all the Old Testament.”³⁸ For him, there is no dispute that these prophecies speak of Christ.

Edwards would often use verses from Isaiah 53 to focus upon a particular attribute of Jesus. After highlighting an attribute, he would then proceed to show how this is the case from the New Testament. For example, in his sermon on Isa 53:7a, he begins generally by observing that Christ suffered from his incarnation to his last sufferings.³⁹ He then focuses specifically upon Christ’s “meek behav. under these suffering Particularly under his Last and Greatest suff.” He supports this statement by again quoting Isa 53:7: “he Openeth not his mouth.” Now he is ready to state his doctrine: “The meekn. of J. X was Especially manifest in his behavior under his Last sufferings.” To develop this doctrine for his congregation, he displays Christ’s meekness in his earthly life and then highlights his heightened meekness in his last sufferings by pulling together a catena of reflections from the Gospels. This all climaxes in an application where the congregation is invited to contemplate the excellencies of Christ who was meek because he was “on a Kind and Gracious Errand one of Good will to men to ~~save~~ make way for ---Etern. salva.” This exemplifies Edwards’s approach to Isaiah 53 in his preaching. He focuses

³² Sermon 120 on Isa 45:25, L1v. Israel-Church typology is manifest throughout the entire sermon (cf. L 2v).

³³ Sermon 120 on Isa 45:25, L. 3r.

³⁴ There are seven sermons on Isaiah 53 that have yet to be transcribed.

³⁵ Sermon 414 on Isa 53:3, L. 1.

³⁶ Sermon 093 on Isa 53:3a, L. 1.

³⁷ Sermon 216 on Isa 53:10a, L. 1.

³⁸ Sermon 312 on Isa 53:7a, L. 1.

³⁹ Sermon 312 on Isa 53:7a, L.1. In Edwards’s manuscript the text reads: “He was oppressed, he was afflicted yet he opened not his (mouth). He is brought as a Lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before his shearers is dumb so he Openeth not his mouth.”

Christologically upon an aspect from the text and then paints a picture of Christ from the Gospels through that lens.⁴⁰

While Edwards's sermons on Isaiah 53 often move in a soteriological direction, he also saw Christ's meekness and reproach as a "moral example" for his audience. In applying his sermon on Isa 53:7a, after inviting his congregation to contemplate Christ's excellencies in his meekness to suffer for salvation, Edwards says: "[T]his should influence us to meekn. under ~~in~~ sufferings. Here is ---Example for us to foll.---this shows how we should behave ourselves."⁴¹ Similarly, in another sermon, after emphasizing Christ's reproach, he admonishes his listeners not to be surprised when they themselves face reproach.

If you are Ready to think it a Great thing ~~that~~ to suffer Contempt Who are but a meer sinfull man. how Great a thing was it for him Who was the Great & Glorious God you Cant bear to be dispised by them You think your Inferiours how Could X bear to be so ~~dispai~~ despised by his own Creatures and by ~~his~~ the vilest of men who was the King of Kings. If it be very Greivous to you because you think that you ~~ders~~ Deserved better at their hands Consider how unreasonable the Contempt was that was Cast on X who never wronged any man [-]) who did nothing but Good to Any.⁴²

Thus, while Edwards understood Isaiah 53 to be referring directly to Jesus Christ, the passage was not only soteriologically pointing to Christ, it also serves as a moral example.

While typology and Christological prophecy are the chief ways Jonathan Edwards construes Isaiah's message as speaking to gospel times, he also presents Christ himself as the one speaking words from Isaiah to the Church. This is evident in his use of Isaiah 55 ("come all who thirst").⁴³ In one sermon, as Edwards admonishes the audience to "consider how earnestly Jesus Christ invites you to come

⁴⁰ In sermon 093 on Isa 53:3a, he develops a doctrine about Christ's reproach both in his life and in his death. In sermon 414, another sermon on Isa 53:3, he focuses upon Christ's affliction here on earth. He does so by looking at Christ's affliction in his infancy, private life, public life, and at the end of his life. In sermon 216 on Isa 53:10, he develops the idea a little differently, focusing upon Christ's reward for his suffering—seeing sinners saved and converted. He develops his argument here more theoretically than in his other sermons. For example, he speaks of the eternal covenant of redemption within the Trinity as he develops this sermon. See also "True Repentance Required," in *Sermons and Discourses 1720–1723*, ed. Wilson H. Kinnach, vol. 10 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 511. There he uses Isa 53:5 as predictive support for Christ's purpose of coming into the world for sinners.

⁴¹ Sermon 312 on Isa 53:7a, L.8v.

⁴² Sermon 093 on Isa 53:3a, L. 11v.

⁴³ Jonathan Edwards, "The Spiritual Blessings of the Gospel Represented by a Feast," in *Sermons and Discourses 1723–1729*, ed. Kenneth P. Minkema, vol. 14 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997) 285. See also "The Preciousness of Time," in *Sermons and Discourses 1734–1738*, ed. M. X. Lesser, vol. 19 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) 259; "Pressing into the Kingdom of God," in *Sermons and Discourses 1734–1738*, ed. M. X. Lesser, vol. 19 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) 291; "The Excellency of Christ," in *Sermons and Discourses 1734–1738*, ed. M. X. Lesser, vol. 19 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) 586. In the last sermon, he mentions that this is Christ's voice itself.

to him and trust in him,” he quotes from Isa 55:1. “Ho, everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come buy wine and milk without money and without price.”⁴⁴ He treats this passage as a word by Christ for those living in gospel times.

In conclusion, it is evident that Edwards finds a dimension of meaning in Isaiah 40–55 that speaks directly to “gospel times.” In these instances, he often directly moves from OT text to the NT. He does this in a variety of ways—through typology, prophecies of Christ, and through treating Isaiah’s words as Christ’s own to the church. This leads to a variety of applications pertaining to salvation, moral example, encouragement, and invitations to boast in Christ.

Why did Edwards so often emphasize a dimension of meaning that speaks directly to “gospel times”? This clearly stems from his worldview, but we must also note that the “gospel times” emphasis that emerges is closely related to Edwards’s calling as a “minister” of the gospel within a Christian church. As a minister of the gospel, he necessarily develops this “gospel times” dimension of meaning in nearly all of his sermons and in many of his writings when interpreting and applying Isaiah 40–55 for the church. It will be apparent below, however, that he does not always develop this dimension of meaning.

2. *Isaiah 40–55 and a redemptive-historical dimension of meaning.*⁴⁵ Jonathan Edwards’s most publicized writings relating to Isaiah 40–55 are found in *A History of the Work of Redemption*. This collection of a twelve sermons uses Isa 51:8 as its initial text.⁴⁶ It is only in Edwards’s first sermon that he spends much time developing it. He spends several pages reflecting upon the nature of this verse, but eventually he focuses upon the portion of this verse which serves as the launching pad for the entire series: “My salvation from generation to generation.”⁴⁷ This reference to God’s salvation for Edwards does not simply look forward but it leads him to the doctrine that “the Work of Redemption is a work that God carries on from the fall of man to the end of the world.”⁴⁸ Edwards himself wants to make it explicit that while some understand the work of redemption as referring only to Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection, he broadens this understanding by relating redemption to all of God’s works which played a preparatory role in the process of bringing about the ultimate redemption in Christ.⁴⁹ So, then, while Edwards’s understanding of redemptive history finds its climax in Christ, Edwards is thorough in

⁴⁴ Jonathan Edwards, “Christ’s Sacrifice,” in *Sermons and Discourses 1720–1723*, ed. Wilson H. Kinnach, vol. 10 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 603.

⁴⁵ The emphasis in this section is upon a movement from text to Genesis through Revelation (backward and forward). For the use of “redemptive-historical” to summarize Edwards’s work on Psalms, see Barshinger, “Making the Psalter” 28.

⁴⁶ These sermons were first published under this name in Edinburgh by John Erskine in 1774. John F. Wilson, “Editor’s Introduction,” in *A History of the Work of Redemption*, ed. John F. Wilson, vol. 9 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 21.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 115–16.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 116.

⁴⁹ He uses the example of how redemption of Israel out of Egypt includes all the preparatory steps such as calling Moses, addressing Pharaoh, etc. Thus he suggests that God’s work of ultimate redemption is carried out from the fall to Christ.

taking into account the variety of ways in which God's work of redemption was being carried out. Edwards, then, does not simply look forward to Jesus Christ when he reflects upon Isa 51:8; he looks both backward and forward to the entirety of God's work of redemption.⁵⁰

3. *Isaiah 40–55 and a general-theological dimension of meaning.*⁵¹ Jonathan Edwards did not always use Isaiah 40–55 to make explicitly Christological or redemptive-historical observations. He is often content to tap into a more general-theological dimension of textual meaning. This is most evident in a handful of his sermons where he uses verses from Isaiah 40–55 to support general theological concepts.

This general-theological dimension of meaning is particularly noticeable when Edwards delivers sermons addressing public issues. Preaching during a season of great drought, Edwards preached a sermon from Ps 65:9 entitled "God's All-Sufficiency for the Supply of Our Wants." He makes the case that God is powerful enough to meet the needs of his people. In doing so, he appeals to Isa 41:22, which depicts God's power over all things.⁵² His focus in this sermon is not Christological. Rather, he wants to remind people of God's sovereign ability to provide for them amidst drought. In a sermon about one month later, Edwards delivered a "fast-day" sermon where he develops the doctrine that "the prevailing of sin and wickedness does exceedingly tend to bring calamity and misery upon any people."⁵³ In developing his case that God is bringing reversal to circumstances, he alludes to Isa 44:25, a statement about God's ability to bring reversal to the wise and the foolish. Again, his concern in this sermon is not Christological. It is concerned with providing a general view of God as one who brings calamity upon the rebellious.

During another period of great turmoil in Massachusetts between 1731 and 1732, he again addresses a public situation with a general-theological sermon.⁵⁴ One of the two doctrines that he develops is that "an unsettled state of people's public affairs is a token of God's anger against them for their sins."⁵⁵ To apply this doctrine, Edwards appeals to Isa 45:7, which describes God as the sovereign one who creates light and darkness, good and calamity.⁵⁶ His use of Isa 45:7 takes on a general theological emphasis rather than a Christological emphasis. It appears then that

⁵⁰ Admittedly, this section could have been included in the previous section of "gospel times." The benefit of treating it separately is that his treatment of Isa 51:8 includes reflections along the entire flow of redemptive-history; it does not simply point forward.

⁵¹ The emphasis in this section is upon a movement from text to a general theological idea.

⁵² "God's All-Sufficiency for the Supply of Our Wants," in *Sermons and Discourses 1723–1729*, ed. Kenneth P. Minkema, vol. 14 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997) 475.

⁵³ "Sin and Wickedness Bring Calamity and Misery on a People," *Sermons and Discourses 1723–1729*, ed. Kenneth P. Minkema, vol. 14 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997) 488.

⁵⁴ Mark Valeri, "Editors Note on 'The State of Public Affairs,'" in *Sermons and Discourses 1730–1733*, ed. Mark Valeri, vol. 17 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) 349.

⁵⁵ Jonathan Edwards, "The State of Public Affairs," in *Sermons and Discourses 1730–1733*, ed. Mark Valeri, vol. 17 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) 353.

⁵⁶ Edwards, "State of Public Affairs" 359.

in these sermons Edwards offers to the people of Northampton general-theological instruction to help them cope during times of despair.

Edwards not only taps into a general-theological dimension of meaning to address situations of public upheaval, he also uses it to help his people understand God's ways toward those seeking him. In a sermon entitled "Blessed Struggle," Edwards suggests that God often puts trials before his people as they seek him before he blesses them. In developing this, he references Isa 45:15, which speaks of God as one who hides himself to support his case that God may hide himself from his people as they seek him.⁵⁷

In all of these sermons, Edwards is not primarily concerned with how passages from Isaiah 40–55 speak of "gospel times" or "Christ." He is interested, instead, in the general insight into God's ways that these verses provide to make his case. If one were to ask Edwards if he recognizes a "Christological" dimension of meaning in these passages, he most certainly would have answered affirmatively. At times, however, he leaves the Christological dimension of meaning in the background so that he can address situations which would be better ministered to by a general-theological dimension of meaning from the text.

4. *Isaiah 40–55 and an OT contextual dimension of meaning.*⁵⁸ Jonathan Edwards often limits his observations on passages from Isaiah 40–55 to their meaning within the context of the OT. This suggests that Edwards recognizes that the OT itself has a dimension of meaning. This manifests itself in a variety of ways in his writings.

Jonathan Edwards does not always run forward from Isaiah 40–55 to Christ. He regularly looks backward within the OT to allow the theology there to bring understanding to a particular text. For example, in Isa 41:2 there is an ambiguous reference to "the righteous man." Knowing Hebrew, Edwards recognizes this as an ambiguous nominative-adjective that could have a variety of referents. One may expect Edwards to make a link forward to Jesus Christ as the "righteous man." Edwards, however, does just the opposite. He refers backwards saying, "[T]he 'righteous man' here spoken of is Abraham."⁵⁹ He offers several references to Genesis and says no more. In reflecting upon Isa 41:8 ("Jacob whom I have chosen"), Edwards makes the case for why Jacob receives this designation rather than Abraham or Isaac. He roots it in the battle between Jacob and Esau.⁶⁰ He again makes no links with the NT. When reflecting upon Isa 41:18–20, which pictures a flourishing wilderness, he appeals to the God who is able to feed his people in the wilderness and who can bring water from the rock. Thus, he points to the theological portrait of God emerging from the Exodus narrative to bring understanding regarding the God who can work such reversal in Isaiah.⁶¹ There is no appeal forward here to the NT, rather he appeals backward. In trying to make sense out of an

⁵⁷ Edwards, "Blessed Struggle," in *Sermons and Discourses 1734–1738*, ed. M. X. Lesser, vol. 19 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) 427.

⁵⁸ The emphasis of this section is upon the movement from text to the OT context.

⁵⁹ *The "Blank Bible"* 673.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 674.

⁶¹ *Notes on Scripture* 437.

obscure reference to “Ethiopia and Seba for thee” in Isa 43:3, he refers to 2 Chr 14:9–15 (an account about Ethiopia and Seba).⁶² Commenting on Isa 45:19’s reference to “the seed of Jacob,” Edwards was content simply to say: “[T]he seed of him that wrestled with God, and as a prince had power with God, and prevailed.”⁶³ Thus, Edwards regularly looks backward in the OT to understand ideas in Isaiah 40–55.

The approach of drawing upon the OT for understanding is seen in his use of the OT as a context for understanding various idioms. Commenting on the phrase “ye shall lie down in sorrow” (50:11), Edwards says, “I can’t think of any other lying down that can reasonably be supposed to be here intended than lying down in the grave (and so in hell), the same lying down that is spoken of, Deut. 31:16. ‘Thou shalt lie down with thy fathers.’” He then quotes three similar verses in Job and one from Jeremiah to prove the case that “lying down” in the OT means “dying.”⁶⁴ In another instance, he offers some comments on the phrase “in the shadow of his hand hath he hid me” (49:2), which he calls an Hebraism “that seems to signify no more than this, viz. he had held me, or grasped me, within his hand, as one grasps a sword or shaft in his hand. What is covered round in the grasp of the hand is said to be hid ‘in the shadow of the hand.’ See Ps. 17:8.”⁶⁵ Another example of Edwards attempting to make sense out of an idiom by appealing to the OT context is in Isa 52:8. The expression is “see eye to eye.” He suggests through appealing to its uses in Jer 32:4 and 34:3 that it is referring to saying one would see someone “face to face.”⁶⁶ Thus, Edwards found meaning for these idioms within the OT context itself. He did not always need the NT or reflective allegory to bring understanding to a difficult expression.

Third, Edwards even appeals to extrabiblical historical information to make sense of the text within its original context. In commenting upon Isa 46:1–7, he observes how the gods of Babylon were carried off by the Medes and the Persians. He contrasts this scene of Babylon’s gods with the God of Israel saying, “[I]t was quite otherwise with the God of Israel. He did not need to be supported and borne by his people, much less by their beasts. But on the contrary, his people were supported by him.”⁶⁷ In trying to make sense of the expression “made bare his holy arm” (52:10), he quotes from a commentator (Doddridge), “‘This may allude to the habit generally worn by the Easterns, and especially by persons of rank, which was a long robe without sleeves, so that when the arm was stretched out to perform any action which required strength, it would appear uncovered.’”⁶⁸ Thus, Edwards found benefit in making historical observations to make sense of a text in its original OT context.

⁶² *The “Blank Bible”* 676.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 680.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 683.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 682.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 685.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 681.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 685–86.

Finally, Edwards even has a place for seeing prophecy and prediction fulfilled in the OT itself. In *Freedom of the Will*, Edwards is making the case for God's foreknowledge. In doing so, he uses Isa 44:28 and 45:13 as proof of God's foreknowledge of moral conduct and qualities. He says, "The moral conduct of Cyrus is foretold, long before he had a being, in his mercy to God's people, and regarding to the true God, in turning the captivity of the Jews, and promoting the building of the Temple."⁶⁹ So then, Edwards is content to allow the OT message to speak for itself without having to make Christological links.

In summary, Edwards is often content to limit his observations on texts from the OT to understanding them in their OT context. He allows the preceding theology of the OT to provide a rich context for understanding particular utterances. He also uses comparative analysis and other historical information to better understand a particular expression. This practice may support Brown's claims that Edwards was interested in historical critical concerns, though reformers like Calvin operated similarly.⁷⁰ It is significant to note, however, that these instances are entirely limited to his comments in the *The "Blank Bible," Notes on Scripture*, and *Freedom of the Will*. As non-Church contexts, he is content to limit his observations to an OT dimension of meaning. While these writings likely were to serve as a seedbed for "gospel times" reflections in sermons, it is noteworthy that he did not feel compelled in his reflections to develop the Christological dimension of meaning.

III. ISAIAH 40–55 AND IMMEDIATE CONTEXT

Jonathan Edwards's appeal to the immediate literary context exposes an often neglected way of how he arrives at some of the dimensions of meaning discussed above. Edwards's "gospel times" focus in many of his sermons could lead one to believe that he was not concerned with immediate context as he launches from an OT verse into the NT world. There are ample examples of Edwards recognizing the importance of an immediate literary context for understanding a particular verse. His sensitivity to the immediate context will be displayed by examples from several of his sermons and in his comments within *The "Blank Bible."*

Several sermons reveal Edwards's awareness of how the surrounding literary context influences interpretation. In a sermon on Isa 53:3, immediately after indicating how this chapter contains "the Plainest Prophecy & most Particular Prophecy of X sufferings in the Whole Old Testament," he appeals to the immediate context. He states, "[I]n order to an right understanding of it we must look into the former Chapter—foregoing Chapter this Chapter is only a Continuation of a Prophe-

⁶⁹ *Freedom of the Will* 241. While this article has not explored his use of Isaiah 40–55 in all of his writings, it is interesting to note that Edwards makes more references to Isaiah 40–55 than he does to any other book of the Bible in *Freedom of the Will*. Consideration of his uses of Scripture in these doctrinal and philosophical treatises will likely display even more fully recognition of a "general-theological" dimension of meaning in the OT.

⁷⁰ Brown, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible* 88–128. See Yoo, "Jonathan Edwards's Interpretation" 189 for his critique of Brown; Yoo thinks Edwards is pre-critical like Calvin.

by a dis Prophecy begun in that Chapter the foregoing.”⁷¹ From here he sets out to demonstrate for a variety of reasons how the preceding chapter informs Isaiah 53. Isaiah 53, he notes, begins with “who hath believed our report?” (53:1). So the question would be: “[W]hat report?” He suggests that “this Report is thus spoken of in 7v of the Preceding Chapter. How beautifull upon the mountains Are the feet of him that bringeth Good tidings.” So to whom has this report been revealed, (53:1b), Edwards asks? Isaiah 52:10 makes it clear that “the Lord hath made bare his Arm in the Eyes of the nations.”⁷² Thus context clarifies that the nations have believed the message, but the Jews have not come to believe it.⁷³ This provides a context for understanding how the Jews were expected to be contemptuous toward the Messiah. With this context established, he is able to make his doctrine understandable: “That Our Lord Jesus X When Upon Earth Met with Abundance of Contempts & Reproach.”⁷⁴ This example exposes how the immediate context (whether correctly understood or not) assists Edwards in constructing the meaning of a particular verse leading to his doctrine.

Edwards demonstrates a similar concern in his other sermons on Isaiah 53. In a sermon on Isa 53:10, he wants his hearers to understand that the phrase “he shall prolong his days” refers to resurrection. In order for an ambiguous expression like “prolong his days” to be understood as resurrection and not simply longevity of life, Pastor Edwards appeals to verses 7, 8, and 9 to make it clear that an account of his death precedes the prospect of prolonged days. Thus, he reasons that Isa 53:10 “is a plain prophecy of his Resurrection.”⁷⁵ Thus, Edwards recognizes how the immediate context brings understanding to a text.

In a sermon on Isa 44:3–4, the first words of his sermon following the reading of the initial verses are “in the last verse of the Preceding Chap.”⁷⁶ This statement is immediately followed by “But here in this Chap. we have a Promise of mercy & Help.”⁷⁷ He does not develop what he would say about the preceding chapter, but one could imagine that when delivering his sermon he appeals to the prospect of the destruction of Israel (Isa 43:28) to contrast it with the prospect of hope in Isa 44:3–4. Thus, this is yet another example of how Edwards finds literary setting to be a helpful in discerning the meaning of a text. As the examples above manifest themselves in sermons, it could be that Edwards is modeling a way of reading Scripture as he exposit it.

Edwards manifests this concern for the immediate context on a number of occasions in *The “Blank Bible.”* Several examples of this will be sufficient to display his concern for context. When commenting on Isa 41:22 (“former things”), he is aware of the polemic against idolatry in its surroundings. He appeals to Isa 41:4’s

⁷¹ Sermon 093 on Isa 53:3a, L. 1.

⁷² Sermon 093 on Isa 53:3a, L. 1–1v.

⁷³ He makes a similar appeal to context to make this same argument in *The “Blank Bible”* 686 when commenting on Isa 53:1.

⁷⁴ Sermon 092 on Isa 53:3a, L. 2r.

⁷⁵ Sermon 216 on Isa 53:10a, L. 1.

⁷⁶ Sermon 937 on Isa 44:3–4, L. 1.

⁷⁷ Sermon 937 on Isa 44:3–4, L. 1.

representation of the Lord as “the first, and with the last” as being in rhetorical interplay with idols which are unable to speak of the “former things” in 41:22.⁷⁸ In commenting on Isa 42:1, he begins by saying “this is to be connected with the last verse of the preceding chapter.”⁷⁹ Reflecting on a passage from Isaiah 43, he makes a reference “see Isa. 48:9–11 with the context.”⁸⁰ In another instance, after listing a plethora of reference verses, he says “compare what is there said with these passages in Isaiah and their contexts.”⁸¹ When reflecting on the meaning of Christ being a “tender plant” in Isa 53:2, he refers to a list of passages which develops the idea of “trees.” Next to one of those passages listed he states “with context.”⁸² These are just a handful of representative entries which demonstrate Edwards’s concern for the immediate literary context.

In summary, both in Edwards’s sermons and in *The “Blank Bible,”* he regularly demonstrates a concern for the immediate context. For Edwards, immediate context informs meaning. Not all of his sermons or works explicitly display this concern; however, one must wonder if much of his reflection on immediate context remains hidden from the audience.⁸³

IV. CONCLUSION

The study above offers some preliminary insight into Edwards’s interpretive practice by focusing on Isaiah 40–55. A more thorough investigation of Edwards’s handling of other parts of Scripture and of how this is similar and different from other interpreters of his time will be required before my conclusions can be more than tentative. Nevertheless, several observations can be made regarding the various dimensions of meaning developed above.

In some instances, Pastor Edwards regularly moves from text immediately forward to emphasize a “gospel times” dimension of meaning. This took place through the use of typology, Christology, and prediction and fulfillment. At other times, he not only looks forward, but also looks both backward and forward to the big picture of redemption to explain the meaning of texts. In other instances, he sets the Christological and redemptive-historical dimensions of meaning aside in Isaiah 40–55 to emphasize general theological truths about God’s ways in the world. At yet another level, he is content to limit his observations to the OT context without linking such thoughts to the NT or the contemporary world.

What accounts for these various dimensions of textual meaning with which Edwards operates? While a variety of explanations may be given, it seems that contextual necessity plays an important role regarding what “dimension of meaning” receives emphasis in his works. Regarding his “gospel times” emphases, one must

⁷⁸ *The “Blank Bible”* 675.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 677.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* 678.

⁸² *Ibid.* 686.

⁸³ As with all preachers and writers, the audience is not always given access to the textual reflection that leads to the public product. Stein, “Quest” 99–113.

note its prominence within his sermons. This is not surprising since Edwards was a Christian minister in a Christian church. In addition, Edwards often brings out a general-theological emphasis from Isaiah 40–55 when addressing political and cultural crises (drought and political turmoil) to present a more general theological picture of God’s ways with the world. Finally, in his reflections that limit themselves to the OT context, one finds these predominately in *The “Blank Bible.”* In that Edwards had no intentions of publishing such a work, Edwards likely did not feel any compulsion to develop many of his observations to a “gospel times” landing point.⁸⁴ Due to his context (a private notebook), he was content with leaving many of his observations at a dimension of meaning confined to the OT and akin to historical critical concerns. While he surely would have viewed such a dimension of meaning as insufficient for a church context, there was no contextual necessity for him to move in a Christological direction. This OT dimension of meaning was likely a matrix from which other dimensions of meaning could be birthed. So then, it appears that a factor in Edwards emphasizing a particular dimension of meaning relates to contextual necessity.

In conclusion, one finds that the exegetical crumbs left by Edwards do not always lead down a straight path. Instead, Edwards recognizes a variety of dimensions of textual meaning. In considering particular dimensions of textual meaning, like a spider, he developed many webs—some more fully developed than others depending on what the context necessitates. For Edwards all of these dimensions of meaning are meaningful, to some extent. Otherwise, he would never have taken the time to make his observations. While surely Edwards would likely emphasize the “gospel times” in conjunction with redemptive history as the ultimate dimension of meaning in text and life, he interprets the text at multiple levels and utilizes them as needed. Like a symphony conductor who activates different sections of the orchestra at various times and in various combinations, Edwards skillfully activates various dimensions of textual meaning as he plays his role in the end for which God created him.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Stein, “Editor’s Introduction,” in *Notes on Scripture* 24.

⁸⁵ Thanks go to Douglas Sweeney, David Barshinger, and Rhys Bezzant for their helpful feedback and encouragement on this article. All deficiencies in this article are my own.