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The Bible in John Owen’s Early Writings¹

Dr. John W. Tweeddale

*Academic Dean and Professor of Theology
Reformation Bible College*

John Owen (1616–1683) devoted his life to the Bible. In this sense, he was a man of his age. As the historian Christopher Hill has argued, “The Bible was central to all intellectual as well as moral life in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.”² More specifically, for “most men and women” who lived during the English Revolution, including Owen, “the Bible was their point of reference in all their thinking.”³ In keeping with the teaching of the Reformation, Owen believed that the sixty-six books of the Protestant canon formed the epistemological foundation for matters of theology and practice.⁴ The principle of *sola Scriptura*, in other words, provided the intellectual and moral framework for English dissenters like Owen to view the world. In particular, Owen’s literary output was a product of the biblical culture of English Puritanism.⁵ His commitment to Scripture served as the normative baseline for his voluminous writings and gave shape to his over-eight-million-word corpus.⁶ For Owen, the Bible was not merely a “polemical weapon” but also a “devotional aid” and “theological resource.”⁷ Whether writing doctrinal treatises, polemical diatribes, political tracts, or practical handbooks, interpreting Scripture was the most basic characteristic of Owen’s prolific writing career. In what follows, we will survey a cross-section of Owen’s early writings (from before his most prolific period of writing after the Restoration), to illustrate his development as a biblical interpreter and scholar.

¹ This essay draws upon, develops, and extends arguments made in John W. Tweeddale, *John Owen and Hebrews: The Foundation of Biblical Interpretation*, T&T Clark Studies in English Theology (London: T&T Clark, 2019) and in the author’s forthcoming chapter, “Exercitations on the Epistle to the Hebrews (1668),” *The T&T Clark Handbook of John Owen*, eds. Crawford Gribben and John W. Tweeddale (London: T&T Clark, 2022), 364–383. For titles and quotes from Owen’s works, I have cited the original texts and kept the original spelling.

² Christopher Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (London: The Penguin Press, 1993), 20; cf. David Daniell, *The Bible in English* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 461–486.

³ Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution*, 34.

⁴ Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520–1725*, volume 2: *Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology*, second edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003); Tweeddale, *John Owen and Hebrews*, 35–41, 62.

⁵ N. H. Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity in Later Seventeenth Century England* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1987).

⁶ John Coffey, “The Bible and Theology,” *The Oxford History of Protestant Dissenting Traditions*, volume 1: *The Post-Reformation Era, c. 1559–c. 1689* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 392.

⁷ Coffey, “The Bible and Theology,” 376.

Pastor and Polemicist

Owen published his first book in 1643 with the title *A Display of Arminianisme*.⁸ While “no masterpiece” and lacking in “literary elegance,” in the judgment of Peter Toon, the book was designed to expose what Owen believed was the unbiblical teaching of Arminian theology.⁹ Owen used a straightforward method whereby he “laid open” Arminian teachings “discovered out of their owne [*sic*] writings and confessions, and confuted by the Word of God.”¹⁰ Relying on anti-Remonstrant sourcebooks, as Richard Snoddy has perceptively shown, Owen marshals scholastic distinctions and biblical proof texts to demonstrate Arminian errors on issues such as divine foreknowledge, human sinfulness, and the nature of the atonement.¹¹ The book’s main thrust is unmistakable: the debate between Reformed and Arminian theology is fundamentally a matter of biblical fidelity.

The other major anti-Arminian work from this period is Owen’s well-known *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (1648).¹² In it, Owen constructed his doctrine of definite atonement, in order to discern “the end of the death of Christ, as it is in the Scripture proposed.”¹³ Owen’s classic work stands out for at least three reasons. First, Owen uses a litany of exegetical arguments to defend the doctrine of definitive atonement.¹⁴ In doing so, he focuses on Christ’s work of oblation and intercession in his states of humiliation and exaltation to support his view. Second, Owen’s defense of what has come to be known as limited atonement prompted a series of debates with Richard Baxter on Scripture’s teaching on the nature and extent of the death of Christ.¹⁵ Third, *The Death of Death* represents Owen’s development as a theologian. Within five years, Owen would ultimately change his mind from arguing that the atonement was a matter of hypothetical necessity according to God’s sovereign will, a position he held in *The Death of Death*, to arguing that the atonement was a matter of consequent absolute necessity to satisfy divine justice, a position he defended in *Diatriba de justitia divina* (1653).¹⁶

⁸ For a survey of this work, see the forthcoming chapter by Christopher Cleveland, “*Θεομαχία ἀντεξουσιαστική*, or, *A Display of Arminianisme* (1643), *The T&T Clark Handbook of John Owen*, eds. Crawford Gribben and John W. Tweeddale (London: T&T Clark, 2022), 275–302.

⁹ Peter Toon, *God’s Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen—Pastor, Educator, Theologian* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1971), 15.

¹⁰ John Owen, *Θεομαχία ἀντεξουσιαστική*, or, *A Display of Arminianisme* (London, 1643), title page.

¹¹ Richard Snoddy, “A Display of Learning? Citations and Shortcuts in John Owen’s *Display of Arminianisme* (1643),” *Westminster Theological Journal* 82 (2020): 319–335.

¹² For a survey of this work, see the forthcoming chapter by Timothy Robert Baylor, “*Salus electorum, sanguis Jesu*, or, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (1648), *The T&T Clark Handbook of John Owen*, eds. Crawford Gribben and John W. Tweeddale (London: T&T Clark, 2022), 303–335.

¹³ Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (1648), lib. 1, p. 1.

¹⁴ For example, in the opening chapter alone, Owen strings together the following texts: Matt. 18:11; Luke 19:10; 1 Tim. 1:15; Matt. 20:28; Gal. 1:4; Eph. 5:25–27; Titus 2:14; Rom. 5:2, 10; 2 Cor. 5:18–19; Eph. 2:14–16; Heb. 9:12; Gal. 3:13; 1 Pet. 2:24; Rom. 3:23–25; Col. 1:14; Heb. 9:14; 1 John 1:7; Heb. 1:3; 13:12; Eph. 5:25–27; Phil. 1:29; Eph. 1:13; Gal. 4:4–5; Eph. 1:14; Heb. 9:15. His point is to “declare what the Scripture holds out” concerning the nature and purpose of the atonement. See John Owen, *Salus electorum, sanguis Jesu*, or, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (London, 1648), lib. 1, p. 4.

¹⁵ For details, see Tim Cooper, *John Owen, Richard Baxter, and the Formation of Nonconformity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011); Edwin E. M. Tay, *The Priesthood of Christ: Atonement in the Theology of John Owen (1616–1683)*, Studies in Christian History and Thought (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2014).

¹⁶ Carl R. Trueman, “John Owen’s *Dissertation on Divine Justice*: An Exercise in Christological Scholasticism,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 33 (1988): 87–103; Trueman, “The Necessity of the Atonement,” *Drawn into Controversie: Reformed Theological Diversity and Debates within Seventeenth-Century British Puritanism*, eds. Michael A. G. Haykin and Mark Jones, Reformed Historical Theology (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 204–222. For a summary of

Owen's early writings emerged not only out of a polemical context but also a pastoral one. Several of these works bear the marks of a busy pastor who sought to apply biblical concepts to his congregants and fellow countrymen. In *The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished* (1644), Owen considers the formative role of Scripture in the life of ministers and the people they serve. Owen draws from Old Testament precepts to impress upon his readers the importance of public worship and private devotion. Like other puritans, Owen understood that pastoral ministry includes faithful biblical exposition in the pulpit and catechesis in the home. This conviction led to the publication of one of Owen's most accessible works, *The Principles of the Doctrine of Christ: Unfolded in Two Short Catechismes* (1645). This pastoral resource was designed "for the use of the congregation at Fordham, in the county of Essex," where Owen pastored.¹⁷ It was written to supplement his preaching as he visited the homes of his congregants, and is a work which reveals Owen the pastor. He opens this pastoral guide by stating, "My hearts desire and request unto God for you is, that yee may bee saved."¹⁸ As Owen cared for his "loving neighbors and Christian friends," he would travel from "house to house" to instruct his congregation in the basics of the Christian faith, especially concerning the person and offices of Christ. Next to biblical preaching, Owen believed that catechizing the church was his most important work as a pastor. He states, "Now, amongst my indevours [sic] in this kinde, after the Ordinance of publick Preaching the Word, there is not, I conceive, any[thing] more needfull . . . than catechising."¹⁹ As the title suggests, the work consists of two catechisms—the "lesser" catechism for children and the "greater" catechism for their older siblings and parents. As a pastor, Owen wanted to ensure that his entire congregation received a regular diet of the milk and meat of the Word of God.

Owen's preaching is epitomized in a memorable sermon preached on Hebrews 12:27 before the House of Commons on April 19, 1649, titled *The Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth*. Several scholars have noted its importance for providing, among other things, the occasion for Owen meeting Oliver Cromwell, an early synopsis of the epistle to the Hebrews, and a model of the prophetic and political cast of his preaching.²⁰ He opens the sermon with a summary of Hebrews,

The main designe of the Apostle in this Scripture to the Hebrews, is to prevail with his Country-men who had undertaken the Profession of the Gospel, to abide constant and faithful therein, without any Apostasie unto, or mixture with Judaisme, which God and themselves had forsaken, fully manifesting, that in such backsliders the soul of the Lord hath no pleasure, chap. 10:38.²¹

As Crawford Gribben has noted, Owen's allusion to backsliding was an explicit attempt to draw biblical principles from the experiences of first-century Jewish Christians to warn English Protestants of the dangers of neglecting the Christian faith.²²

hypothetical necessity and consequent absolute necessity, see John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 11–13.

¹⁷ John Owen, *The Principles of the Doctrine of Christ: Unfolded in Two Short Catechismes* (London, 1645), title page.

¹⁸ Owen, *Two Short Catechismes* (1645), A2r.

¹⁹ Owen, *Two Short Catechismes* (1645), A2v–A3r.

²⁰ See, respectively, Cooper, *John Owen, Richard Baxter, and the Formation of Nonconformity*, 106–107; Tweeddale, *John Owen and Hebrews*, 33–34; Martyn C. Cowan, *John Owen and the Civil War Apocalypse: Preaching, Prophecy, and Politics*, *Religious Cultures in the Early Modern World* (London: Routledge, 2018), 54–56.

²¹ John Owen, *Οὐρανὸν οὐραῖα: The Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth* (London, 1649), 1.

²² Crawford Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism: Experiences of Defeat*, *Oxford Studies in Historical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 237. On the way the story of Israel informs

Another pastoral resource, and Owen's last attempt at a catechism, is his much-neglected handbook simply titled *The Primer* (1652). It offers Christian parents, especially those who shared Owen's republican and independent sympathies, a rudimentary strategy for teaching their children the fundamentals of the Christian religion.²³ The work includes the English alphabet, selections from the Psalms and Gospels, a simple catechism, names of the books of the Bible and key figures, and a sampling of morning and evening prayers.²⁴ As Gribben observes, Owen's primer "showed that he could handle Scripture in as straightforward a manner as the most confirmed biblicist."²⁵ Bible reading in English was a way of life for godly puritans like Owen.²⁶ The goal was to get children reading Scripture from their earliest days. "As soon as children learnt their ABC," Coffey maintains, "they graduated to reading the Bible."²⁷

The Oxford Years

The next phase of Owen's literary career spans his years as dean of Christ Church and vice-chancellor at the University of Oxford. Several of his works during this period illustrate his emerging status as a theologian and biblical scholar.

Three works hang together for their anti-Arminian and anti-Socinian polemic.²⁸ In 1651, an English theologian named John Goodwin wrote a book titled *Redemption Redeemed*, where he attempts to articulate a form of Arminianism within a puritan framework and challenges Reformed doctrines such as the perseverance of the saints.²⁹ The following year, in 1652, Owen was named vice-chancellor of Oxford. One of his tasks was to reform the curriculum of the university according to biblical teaching.³⁰ Another major project was the publication on an extensive critique of Goodwin's book. In *The Doctrine of the Saints Perseverance Explained and Confirmed* (1654), Owen grounds his teaching on the inability of true believers to lose their salvation in the doctrine of God's immutability, in covenant theology, in the mediatorial work of Christ, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit.³¹ Owen's primary concern was to defend biblical

the imagination of English dissent, especially after the Restoration, see Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity in Later Seventeenth-Century England*, 263–282, especially p. 275 on the place of the epistle of Hebrews.

²³ John Owen, *The Primer: or, An Easie Way to Teach Children the True Reading of English. With a Necessary Catechisme, to Instruct Uouth in the Grounds of Christian Religion. Also Choice Places of Scripture for that Purpose. Composed by John Owen, Minister of the Gospel. Approved and Allowed by a Committee of Parliament* (London, 1652). This volume is not included in the standard 24-volume collection of Owen's works edited by William Goold.

²⁴ For the prayers for children, see the appendix in Crawford Gribben, *An Introduction to John Owen: A Christian Vision for Every Stage of Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 155–157.

²⁵ Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*, 141.

²⁶ Andrew Camber, *Godly Reading: Print, Manuscript and Puritanism in English, 1580–1720*, Cambridge Studies in Early Modern British History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Ian Green, *Print and Protestantism in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

²⁷ Coffey, "The Bible and Theology," 382–383.

²⁸ For background on Socinianism, see Paul C. H. Lim, *Mystery Unveiled: The Crisis of the Trinity in Early Modern England*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Sarah Mortimer, *Reason and Religion in the English Revolution: The Challenge of Socinianism*, Cambridge Studies in Early Modern British History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

²⁹ John Coffey, *John Goodwin and the Puritan Revolution: Religion and Intellectual Change in Seventeenth Century England* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2006).

³⁰ Toon, *God's Statesman*, 54; see also the forthcoming chapter by Eric Newton, "Owen and education," *The T&T Clark Handbook of John Owen*, eds. Crawford Gribben and John W. Tweeddale (London: T&T Clark, 2022), 146–169.

³¹ Jay T. Collier, *Debating Perseverance: The Augustinian Heritage in Post-Reformation England*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

teaching. He states, “The confutation of Mr. Goodwin was but secondarily in my eye; and the best way for that I judged to consist in a full scriptural confirmation of the truth he opposed. That I chiefly intended.”³² In *Vindicae evangelicae* (1655), Owen levels a devastating critique against Socinian teaching. Of particular interest is his extensive use of the epistle of Hebrews to counter Socinian revisions to the doctrine of the priesthood of Christ. The arguments made in this work anticipate Owen’s later commentary on Hebrews, where he will contend that the errors of the Socinians undermine the biblical understanding of the person and work of Christ.³³ The following year, Owen published *A Review of the Annotations of Hugo Grotius* (1656). Owen believed that Grotius, a Dutch jurist and biblical scholar who was imprisoned and tried in the aftermath of the Synod of Dort for his Remonstrant sympathies, countenanced the overly literalistic interpretation of the Old Testament that characterized Socinian exegesis. Grotius had little concern for Messianic readings of the Hebrew Scripture and was more interested in a historical-critical analysis of the Old Testament. As alternatives to Reformed approaches to Scripture like these developed with greater complexity, Owen realized there was need for more sophisticated readings of the biblical text.

Owen continued his preaching ministry amidst his administrative duties, the fruit of which are two of his most popular works. In *Of the Mortification of Sinne in Believers* (1656), Owen offers a practical exposition of Romans 8:13 based on a series of sermons preached to students at Oxford. In this work, Owen outlines biblical strategies for identifying and defeating besetting sin in the life of believers. Waging war on sin is not optional. He states, “The vigour and power and comfort of our spiritual life, depends on the mortification of the deeds of the flesh.”³⁴ The Christian’s fight against sin is a lifelong endeavor. “The choicest believers,” Owen contends, “who are assuredly freed from the condemning power of sin, ought yet to make it their businesse all their days to mortify the indwelling power of sinne.”³⁵ Echoing Colossians 3:5, Owen explains why the work of killing sin is necessary for Christians. “Do you mortify? Do you make it your dayly worke? Be always at it whilst you live. Cease not a day from this worke. Be killing sinne, or it will be killing you. Your being dead with Christ virtually, your being quickened with him, will not excuse you from this worke.”³⁶

The following year, Owen published *Of Communion with God* (1657).³⁷ The work offers an extended reflection on Ephesians 2:18 to explain how Christians relate to the distinct persons of the Trinity. As a result of the work of Christ, believers can enjoy fellowship with God. Owen states, “God and the saints ... walke together in a covenant of peace, ratified in the blood of Jesus.”³⁸ The Christian life for Owen is an exercise in reciprocal love that flows from union with Christ and culminates in communion with the triune God. This leads to his definition of what it means to commune with God: “Our communion then with God, consisteth in his communication of himselfe unto us, with our returnall unto him, of that which he requireth and accepteth, flowing

³² John Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saints Perseverance Explained and Confirmed* (London, 1654), F4v.

³³ See Tweeddale, *John Owen and Hebrews*, 48–49; Tweeddale, “*Exercitations on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (1668),” 371.

³⁴ John Owen, *Of the Mortification of Sinne in Believers* (Oxford, 1656), 12. For a survey of this work, see the forthcoming chapter by Joel R. Beeke, “*Of the Mortification of Sinne in Believers* (1656),” in *The T&T Clark Handbook of John Owen*, eds. Crawford Gribben and John W. Tweeddale (London: T&T Clark, 2022), 336–363.

³⁵ Owen, *Of the Mortification of Sinne in Believers*, 13–14.

³⁶ Owen, *Of the Mortification of Sinne in Believers*, 14, edited.

³⁷ For analysis, see Kelly M. Kopic, *Communion with God: The Divine and the Human in the Theology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007); Ryan M. McGraw, *A Heavenly Directory: Trinitarian Piety, Public Worship, and a Reassessment of John Owen’s Theology*, Reformed Historical Theology (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014).

³⁸ John Owen, *Of Communion with God* (Oxford, 1657), 5.

from that union which in Jesus Christ we have with him.”³⁹ While the themes of these classic devotional works are well known, one of the striking features of Owen’s practical writings that is often overlooked is how he attempts to ground the experience of Christians in the text of Scripture.

Conclusion

Toward the end of his tenure at Oxford, Owen published three works that perhaps signaled an increased focus on producing biblical scholarship that would serve the needs of his puritan cause. In *Pro Sacris Scripturis* (1658) offers a stinging critique of the “fanatical” methods of Quakers. The book also provides Owen with an occasion to reflect on the principles of biblical interpretation.⁴⁰ In *Of the Divine Originall* and *A Vindication of the Purity and Integrity of the Hebrew and Greek Texts of the Old and New Testament*, published together in 1659, Owen raises the question of “how we know the Scriptures to be the Word of God.”⁴¹ With these works, he sets the trajectory of his literary arc that will occupy his efforts for the remaining years of his life. After the Restoration, the stage is now set for Owen to produce his most significant works of biblical scholarship, seen most clearly in his commentary on Hebrews. Cast in this light, Owen’s early writings are important for evaluating his development as one of the leading exegetes and theologians of seventeenth century England.

³⁹ Owen, *Of Communion with God*, 5.

⁴⁰ John Owen, *Pro Sacris Scripturis adversus hujus tempom Fanaticos exercitationes apologeticae Quatuor fanaticos* (London, 1658). For the English translation of this work, see *A Defense of Sacred Scripture Against Modern Fanaticism*, in *Biblical Theology: The History of Theology from Adam to Christ*, trans. Stephen P. Westcott (Grand Rapids: Soli Deo Gloria, 2009), 769–861.

⁴¹ John Owen, *Of the divine originall, authority, self-evidencing light, and power of the Scriptures. With an answer to that enquiry, how we know the Scriptures to be the Word of God. Also a vindication of the purity and integrity of the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Old and New Testament; in some considerations on the prolegomena, & appendix to the late Biblia polyglotta. Whereunto are subjoynd some exercitations about the nature and perfection of the Scripture, the right of interpretation, internall Light, revelation, &c.* (Oxford, 1659).