

Blessings in the Prophets and the Wisdom: A Response to Charismatic Christian Hermeneutics, and a General Application for Christian Living^{*}

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KEY WORDS

Blessings. Prosperity Teachings. Health and Wealth Gospel. Charismaticism. Conservative Hermeneutics.

ABSTRACT

In the Old Testament Prophetic and Wisdom Books, blessings include both temporal and spiritual well-being, and are particularly associated with God's gracious favor on the people's earthly, temporal, and economic life. The earthly, temporal, and economic blessings from God follows God's pronouncement of blessings and curses in Pentateuch (Deut. 28). However, the Old Testament teaching on blessings may pose a problem for the New Testament believer seeking God's favor and blessings, if the overall understanding of 'blessing' is not qualified: after all, the New Testament (in focusing more on spiritual blessings, poverty, and suffering) downplays material wealth and comfort without totally eradicating material blessings. This paper presents hermeneutical principles for interpreting and applying the blessings of God, particularly taught in the Prophets and the Wisdom literature, to the contemporary believer caught in a culture of wealth and affluence. In particular, the essay responds to some contemporary Charismatic Christian hermeneutics, which emphasizes health and prosperity as God's blessings. In the final analysis, prosperity is 'a' rather than 'the' blessing and it is not to be applied as a universal rule for Christians seeking to follow God.

INTRODUCTION

Blessings include both temporal and spiritual well-being in the Old Testament Prophetic and Wisdom Books, but it is particularly associated more with God's gracious favor on the people's earthly, temporal, and economic life, which has ripple effects throughout the generations. God will bless the righteous and curse the wicked. This understanding of earthly, temporal, and economic blessings follows God's pronouncement of blessings and curses in Pentateuch (Deut. 28). The Old Testament teaching on blessings may pose a problem for

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the New Testament believer seeking God's favor and blessings, if the concept of blessing is not qualified; this is because the New Testament (in focusing more on spiritual blessings, poverty, and suffering) downplays material wealth and comfort without totally eradicating material blessings. This paper presents hermeneutical principles for interpreting and applying the blessings of God, particularly taught in the Prophets and the Wisdom literature, to the contemporary believer caught in a culture of wealth and affluence. In particular, the essay responds to a cross-section of contemporary Charismatic Christian hermeneutics on health and affluence as God's blessings.

The paper begins with a short survey of 'blessings' in the Old Testament, particularly from the Pentateuch. This introductory survey sets the contexts for our perusal, followed by a study of the subject matter recorded in the Prophetic and Wisdom books. Thereupon, the problems of unqualified interpretation and application of Old Testament passages will be stated, with particular reference to the contemporary prosperity tendency in certain Charismatic Christian hermeneutics. The investigation concludes with some biblical hermeneutical considerations as guidelines, for interpreting and applying "blessings" passages to the contemporary believer, though not limited to only Charismatic Christians.

SURVEY OF 'BLESSING(S)' IN THE OLD TESTAMENT PENTATEUCH

The Old Testament portrays Yahweh as the sovereign God pronouncing blessing on the faithful and obedient. The pronouncement of unequivocal blessings at creation was incapacitated following the pronouncement of curses after Adam and Eve's rebellion. Hitherto, the blessing of enjoying intimacy with God (declared at the inception of the creation of mankind) was revoked. Henceforth, God's blessing became conditional; it depended upon man's obedience to God, demonstrated in the Mosaic conception of blessing-curses in the Pentateuch.¹

1 Unless otherwise stated, the introductory survey on 'blessings' in the Pentateuch draws largely from J. McKeow's "Blessings and Cursing," in T.D. Alexander, David W. Baker (ed.), *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downer Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2003), pp. 83-87.

In the Pentateuch, blessing contains efficacious power to help one succeed, change situations, and alter circumstances, whereas cursing is known for the harmful power that prevents and hinders success or brings disaster.² The Hebrew root for blessing, *brk*, occurred frequently as an idiomatic practice to highlight its importance.³ While it infers the pronouncement of happiness, praise, adoration, kneel/worship, and/or greetings, the context *brk* occurs will usually determine the precise meaning of the word.⁴ We are interested in the use of *berakah* as blessing in this paper. Essentially, *brk* as blessings are usually expressed in tangible and measurable terms, such as fertility, fecundity, and material prosperity. More importantly, God bestows blessings on those who are in right relationship with him. For example, Noah's obedience (Gen 6:22) and sacrifice (Gen 8:20) provide the context to understand God's blessing on the post-flood world (Gen 8:21-9:17).⁵ God's blessing to Abram was closely tied to nationhood and fame (Gen 12:2a). Abraham embodied the blessed covenantal life (cf. Gen 12:2-3) if he would walk blameless before God (Gen 17:1). However, the Abrahamic covenant is not necessarily to be applied across time and space for Christians as that of empowering for life and the accumulation of life, explains William Dumbrell.⁶ And to be sure, in the Old Testament, *brk* denotes blessings as a product of divine initiative, although humans sometimes act as agents of blessings (cf. Gen 27:27-29).

Deuteronomy explains that living in obedience to the covenant stipulations is necessary for God's people to continually enjoy the blessings (Deut 7:11-15; 11:8-15; 28:1-14). Disobedience on the other hand, would reverse the blessings via curses (Deut 28:15-68). The concept of blessing and cursing was highlighted in the symbolism of Mount Ebal – curses, and Mount Gerizim – blessings (Deut 11:26-32; 27:1-10). The effects of blessings included fertility teeming with life, prosperity, authority to subjugate (but not to exploit), and

2 J. McKeow explains that blessing may be understood also as an honorary praise of the person addressed, such as "blessed be God". I did not elaborate on this second category in this paper as it is not directly relevant and neither does it affect our investigation nor the conclusion.

3 McKeow, "Blessings and Cursing," p. 83.

4 Michael L. Brown, "Brk II, 1385," Willem A. VanGemeren (ed.) *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, NIDOTTE (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1997), vol. 1, pp. 757-67.

5 Ibid., and McKeow, p. 84.

6 W.J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: An Old Testament Covenantal Theology* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster, 1984), pp. 67, 73.

security.⁷ In Deuteronomy, along with the other books in the Pentateuch, blessing follows a designated formula for recipients to go to “the place which Yahweh your God will choose,” and in accordance to “the structures of covenant life” for God’s people’s stability and wellbeing (cf. Deut 5:33).⁸

In blessing man, W. J. Cameron explains, God bestows His gracious favor including both temporal and spiritual well-being in the OT (Gen 26:12-13; 1 Chron 4:10; Ps 32:1-2; 65:4; 94:12; 112:1).⁹ Blessing – Berakah is opposed to the divine curse (Deut 23:5; 28:2; 33:23). Curses are the opposite of blessings for survival, wellbeing and continuation of one’s lineage in posterity, and are not limited to sickness, barrenness, miscarriage, short-lived lives, and the experience of sorrow (rather than happiness) in all, or some of one’s activities.¹⁰ Sometimes it represents the good ensured by God’s favor (Gen 28:4; 45:25; Exod 32:29).¹¹

This survey sets the context for our study. Whether Christians can literally interpret the pronouncement of blessings and curses into their contemporary contexts will be discussed later in this paper. For now, let us examine if the Pentateuch’s conception of blessings changes in the Prophetic and Wisdom books.

7 McKeow, p.85-86. For more on the associations of God’s blessings with fertility, prosperity, and security in the Pentateuch, see T. D. Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Main Themes of the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999), pp. 41-47.

8 Bruce C. Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence E. Fretheim, and David L. Petersen, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2005), pp. 127-71.

9 In contrast, blessing is more particularly associated with spiritual benefit in the NT. With a few exceptions, the word stands for spiritual blessing in the NT. In addition to the eight beatitudes (Matt 5:3-10), the frequent occurrence of single sayings in this form shows the prominence of blessedness in the teachings of Jesus (Matt 11:6; 13:16; 16:17; Luke 11:28; 12:37; John 13:17; RV 20:29). See Walter A-Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book, 1984), p.162. For a more sustained treatment, see Reggie M. Kidd, *Wealth and Beneficence in the Pastoral Epistles*, SBL Dissertations 122 (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1990), as well as sources in n. 12.

10 Brown, “Brk II, 1385,” in NIDOTTE, I:762-763.

11 In addition, Eulogia, the parallel term in the NT, generally means saving blessing (Eph 1:3; 1 Pet 3:9). Two exceptions occur in Hebrews 6:7; and 12:17.

STUDY OF ‘BLESSING(S)’¹² IN THE BIBLICAL PROPHETS¹³ AND WISDOM BOOKS¹⁴

Collectively, the Prophets and the Wisdom Books form approximately two thirds of the Old Testament. There are many trajectories to understand these writings. I will engage a broad thematic (though not necessarily canonical) study of ‘blessings’ in these books, without an in-depth discussion on the historical-critical-grammatical and editorial aspects to these books.¹⁵

The prophetic oracle, as the main genre or literary form found in the prophets, clarifies the prophet’s role as a messenger of God.¹⁶ Generally,

12 For more extensive treatment, I heartily recommend Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 7 (Leicester: Apollos, 1999), and John Schneider, *The Good of Affluence: Seeking God in a Culture of Wealth* (Grand Rapid: Eerdmann, 2002). Both Blomberg and Schneider have differing stances on biblical blessings, backed by good research. For shorter versions, consider Walter C. Kaiser Jr., “The Old Testament Promise of Material Blessings and the Contemporary Believer,” *Trinity Journal* 9, 1988, pp.151-170, and Robert Jackson, “Prosperity Theology & the Faith Movement,” *Themelios* October 1999, pp. 16-23.

13 Short cap on the Prophetic Books from NDBT: The Prophet writings consist of the major and the minor prophets. The distinction in grouping is based on length and not on significance, and the sequence of the books is largely determined by length and chronology. The Prophets or the *Nevi'im* makes up a third of Jewish Bible, which has been further re-arranged to form the present Christian Old Testament. ‘The Prophets’ now form a third of the Christian Old Testament, having 17 books. The Jewish Bible’s *Nevi'im* included the books of the former prophets of Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings, which were rearranged in the Christian Old Testament. These 6 books now form part of the Law or *Torah* in the Old Testament. There were also rearrangements in the major and minor prophets, adding Daniel, and Lamentations, to the Jewish *Nevi'im*’s list of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and the twelve minor prophets. See NDBT, p. 126.

14 Applied to the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures, scholars understand the Wisdom literature to comprise of the books of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and certain “Wisdom” Psalms (e.g. Ps 4, 10, 14, 19, 37, 49, 73, 90, and 112). The Septuagint definitely included further Wisdom books that do not form part of the Jewish Bible. These other literature included some of the Apocrypha books, notably Ecclesiasticus (Ben Sirach) and the Wisdom of Solomon. See Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 1985), James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2010), and R.E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, Word Biblical Commentary vol. 22 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998) for a more thorough treatment.

15 An exhaustive investigation is impossible within the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, this study will significantly contribute to our understanding of the Old Testament and/or Biblical conception of ‘blessings,’ as the two categorical writings (i.e. the Prophets and the Wisdom literature) comprises of more than two thirds of the Old Testament. Also, it may be fitting to claim that I am using a canonical approach, but it implies much more than I am prepared to defend in this paper, especially since the term “canonical approach” has been used variously by Brevard Childs and more recently, by William Abraham among others. Thus, I locate this study as merely a thematic investigation.

16 Prophetic Oracles are often marked by an introductory formula such as ‘Thus says Yahweh.’ See NDBT, p. 123.

scholars agree that each prophetic book contains a distinctive message, with some themes repeated throughout all of the prophetic books. This stands, nonetheless when conservative scholars admit that some of the books contain fairly clear signs of later editorial activity.¹⁷ In the broader field of text-linguistics (discourse analysis), the meaning of the written and oral texts (of the prophetic books) resides in larger textual elements than simply the morphological and syntactic study.¹⁸ There is unity among diverse trajectories as to the distinctive message of the Prophets. The theological message(s) of the prophets,¹⁹ has been aptly summarized by S. Dempster. He writes: “The prophetic books record both the largely unheeded prophetic announcement of divine judgment, made to a sinful and self-confident people, and the prediction of salvation beyond the judgment, made to a chastened and discouraged people.”²⁰

Reading the Prophets individually and/or collectively, the message(s) of these prophets contained flashbacks of God’s blessings and curses constituted in the Pentateuch. An element of God’s blessings and curses in the Old Testament is one of

“... conditionality, in that God in his mercy chooses to lessen or delay the impact of judgment or even, inexplicably, to bring blessing when judgment is deserved. Similarly, promised blessings (temporal and spiritual, which included effects of fertility, prosperity, authority to subjugate [but not to exploit], and security) depend on a continuing relationship. One cannot be out of relationship with God and receive the blessing of being in relationship with God, nor being in relationship with God and miss out on that blessings. God himself, not the blessing or the curse as such, is sovereign.”²¹

This distinctive recurring theme is among the many themes that stand out in the Prophets; it arrays the constitutive of God’s blessings and curses as in the Pentateuch. Another important theme pertains to an eschatological

17 Tremper Longman III, *Making Sense of the Old Testament; 3 Questions* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1998), p. 27.

18 David W. Baker, “Israelite Prophets and Prophecy,” in David W. Baker & Bill T. Arnold (ed.), *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999), p. 282.

19 Baker, “Israelite Prophets and Prophecy,” p. 285.

20 NDBT, p. 122.

21 NDBT, p. 400.

reading of Blessings in the Apocalyptic Prophets, especially among postexilic prophets living in times of national, economic, and social crises and when the people in despair wondered “how long” they would have to endure evil, shattered hopes, and their shalom dislocated by war, and the longing for their homeland (e.g., Jer 23:18; Dan 7:13-18; Isa 40:27): that blessings connote the transformation of prophecy into an apocalyptic message of comfort and hope in God’s justice and triumph over the forces of evil.²² In a time when the Davidic era was no more, and when the temple was destroyed (cf. Ps 89:38-51), Second Isaiah announces that Jerusalem and its temple will be rebuilt (Isa 44:26-28), but through a foreign ruler, Cyrus of Persia (Isa 45:1-7). The overarching blessing is that God remembers his covenant (Isa 54-55). In the Third Isaiah tradition, nations like Assyria or Babylonian, which were formerly God’s instruments of chastening Israel, now bow at the mercy of God and his vindication of the elect (Isa 65-66).

But, the contours of blessing(s) delineated in the Pentateuch and the Prophetic Books does not incontestably match with the blessings depicted in the Wisdom literature. In the latter, the blessing refers to having wisdom, the fear of the Lord, diligence, etc. If one has wisdom, fears the Lord, and is diligent, then, the effects would be fertility, success, and material possessions, in other words, blessings. However, these attributes cannot be considered infallible signs pointing towards blessings/prosperity.²³ A trace of perplexity exists about the blessing(s) depicted in the Wisdom literature. The blessing(s) depicted in one passage is not always symmetrical with the other blessings painted in the same book, and/or within the larger collection of the Wisdom literature itself. It appears that there are contradictions, or even an abandonment of the axiomatic characteristic of God’s blessings outlined in the Pentateuch and the Prophets. Bartholomew illustrates the perplexing problem pointedly: “Wisdom does teach that wise acts generally lead to success and blessings. This is clear from Proverbs 1-9... However, this general truth is not worked out in every individual case, and in the later chapters the

22 Bernhard W. Anderson, *Contours of Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), pp.302-311; cf. Paul Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973).

23 Roland E. Murphy, “Excursus on The Fear of the Lord,” in Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, Word Biblical Commentary vol. 22 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), p. 256.

exceptions come more clearly into focus (cf. Prov 15:16; 16:8)...²⁴

For instance, in Proverbs and in parts of Psalms, God rewards justice and mercy, and repays wickedness and folly. But God is also silent when the righteous suffers and when the wicked prospers (Ps 10:1,12; 37, 49, 73). Even the Psalter and Job pointed to God for the sufferings of the righteous (Ps 14,19.90).²⁵ Ecclesiastes records this perplexity of the godly man affecting his perception of life and its vanity.²⁶

In the wider context, there appears to be two distinguishable sets of wisdom within OT Wisdom Literature: practical and reflective wisdom, even though the lines of demarcation between the two are usually not as striking. Proverbial sayings (expressed in pithy terms) observe regularities of nature and/or human conduct. The reflective wisdom deals with the problems such as the meaning of existence and the suffering of the innocent.²⁷ Hence, it is often said that the Wisdom literature was humanistic, international, non-historical, and eudaemonistic²⁸ (i.e. a system of ethics that stresses that goodness, happiness, and material rewards always comes from satisfactory ethical behavior).²⁹ The blessing(s) in the Wisdom literature is clearly not normative, nor is it similar or axiomatic with the understanding of the blessing(s) of the Pentateuch and the Prophets. It would seem that as of now, we are confronted with two challenges, the wisdom versus prophetic view of blessings, and the Old Testament versus the New Testament perspectives.³⁰

24 NDBT, p. 121.

25 The question of who grants the reality behind Job's suffering is made clear when we consider the dialogue between God and Satan in the heavenly court. When Satan insinuated that Job honors God for a "fair-weather service in order to obtain the blessing of health, reputation [by implication, wealth], family, and long life," God not only allows Job's experience of suffering, but also spoken at the end, through a whirlwind that corrects Job's lament of innocence. See Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1986), p. 595.

26 F. F. Bruce, 'Introduction to the Wisdom Literature', in F.F. Bruce (ed.), *The International Bible Commentary* (Marshall, Pickering: Zondervan, 1979, rev., 1986), p. 98-99.

27 Bruce, 1986, p. 96.

28 Bruce K. Waltke & David Diewert, "Wisdom Literature," in David W. Baker & Bill T. Arnold (ed.), *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999), p. 296.

29 The definitive summary of Eudaemonism is taken from Kaiser Jr., 1999, p.154. For a more extensive treatment of Eudaemonism in the Old Testament, see same article by Kaiser.

30 I am unable to provide any substantive treatment reconciling the perspectives between the Old and the New Testaments in this paper. See n. 4 and n. 12 of this paper for additional sources.

Having painted a broad picture of biblical ‘blessings’ in the Pentateuch, the Prophets, and the Wisdom literature, let us consider the problems of unqualified interpretation cum application of biblical ‘blessings’ construed above, with particular reference to the contemporary prosperity tendency within some segments in the contemporary Charismatic churches.

SUMMARY OF ‘BLESSING(S)’ IN CONTEMPORARY CHARISMATIC CHRISTIANITY

Kenneth Copeland, John Avanzini, John Lim, and Brian Houston each holds slightly varied perspectives, and yet they concur on most major points widely held by some within the Charismatic community. Some have suggested that after a series of knee-jerk reactions to some criticisms (by Dave Hunt, John MacArthur, and et al), leaders such as Kenneth Copeland and Kenneth Hagin Jr. have since revised their teachings; still, and without entering into variations by second and third generation proponents of the Word of Life and Word of Faith movements, the authors (mentioned above, which I will examine herein) remain authoritative, and whose teachings continue to gain wide acceptance and influence.³¹ And, in choosing to discuss their perspective on blessings, I am not also suggesting that they preach only on blessings in terms of health and wealth. Each of these ministries has published and/or recorded innumerable biblically sound teachings on other subjects, and these other materials has aided many people, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

Generally, these Charismatic pastors and preachers believed that God had called them to preach “the uncompromised Word of God...” The quintessence of their message on blessings and the Scriptural basis for their position are as follows:

31 See recent reviews: Henry I. Lederle, “The Third Wave: New Independent Charismatic Churches, Part 2 of 2,” *The Pneuma Review* (Spring 2012): 15:2, pp. 22-45, and especially pp. 35-45; and Paul L. King, “Claiming God’s Promises Today: Classic and Modern Word of Faith Views Compared and Contrasted,” *The Pneuma Review* (Fall 2012): 15:4, pp. 24-36. See also n. 68 for other resources.

- a. God wants to bless his people (particular reference to the Christians) with abundance, regardless of their vocation.³² The blessing is understood to encompass all areas of life, including eternal salvation, personal, emotional, physical health, relationship, job/career promotions, and successes, material and financial prosperity. This “full-gospel” message adds to their traditional emphasis on eternal salvation, spiritual blessings, and glossolalia for the believer.³³ An identical perspective reads: “It is definitely God’s will for all of His children to prosper! ³⁴ (3 John 2)...” John tied financial prosperity to the maturation of the mind, will and emotions.”³⁵
- b. God’s will is that believers are physically healthy since Christ has by his stripes healed every form of sickness, disease, and affliction (Isaiah, and the Gospels and Acts).³⁶
- c. God wills for believers to be materially and financially prosperous. He delights in the prosperity of His people. “God is never against His people having money. God is against His people allowing themselves to be enslaved by the love of money and the materialistic spirit.” (Ps 35:27; Luke 16:10-14; 1 Tim 6:10).³⁷ In fact, God has given every believer a measure of power to gain wealth (Deut 8:17-18, Jos 1:8; Matt 25:14-30).³⁸
- d. God wants believers to experience the providence of God in abundance. But believers are not to covet or seek for wealth. “It is God’s will for us to

32 John Lim, *Stewardship: Principles for Increase* (Singapore: JLMI Services, 1999). According to him, the Bible records three groups of stewards whom God’s favor and anointing rested, causing them to succeed; the priests and levities, the businessmen (e.g. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Job, Boaz) and the employees (Joseph, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, Abbednego, etc), pp. 3-5.

33 Their concept of “full-gospel” moves beyond the tenets of full-gospel assembly/movement which emphasizes the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and even though these Charismatics share with the “Full-Gospel” movement a conviction on the necessity of Spirit-baptism for the victorious Christian life.

34 Gloria Copeland, ‘Prepare to Prosper’ in *Believer’s Voice of Victory*, Special Partnership Issue of Kenneth Copeland’s Ministries, March 2003, p.24. See also John Avanzini, *Answers Your Questions About Biblical Economics* (Tulsa, Ok: Harrison House, 1992), p. 122 – citing 1 Cor 8:9.

35 *Ibid.*, p.25. See also Brian Houston, Brian Houston, *You Need More Money: Discovering God’s Financial Plan for Your Life* (Castle Hill, Australia: Brian Houston Ministries, 1999), pp. 10, 12, 55-59.

36 John Lim, 1999, pp. 75-79.

37 John Lim, 1999, p. 19.

38 John Lim, 1999, p. 14. See Brian Houston, 1999, pp. 10,12, 55-59.

trust Him to care for us. As believers, we are not to seek after material riches. We are not to pursue money like people who are without God. They have to pursue it. They don't have a covenant with God, so if they don't seek material goods, they won't get them! ... God has assured us in His word that He will not only meet our needs, but give us in abundance." (Matt 6:25-33).³⁹

e. Essential ingredients for believers to receive God's blessings are:

i. Devotion to God. A Godly lifestyle is the requisite foundation that positions the believer to receive all forms of blessings and financial abundance from God. (1 Cor 2:9; 1 Chron 16:9; Ps 145:8).⁴⁰ "Every right action you take, every godly decision you make, every time you go love's way instead of the selfish way, you're putting another block on your foundation for prosperity... when you see things in your life that you know aren't right and you correct them according to the Word of God, you're preparing yourself to handle greater financial abundance."⁴¹

ii. Serve God. God blesses financially those who serve Him. "Prosperity and pleasure come to the one who serves God. (Job 36:11; Ps 35:27; Deut 11:13-15)."⁴²

iii. Faith is necessary (Matt 17:20; 1 Thes 1:3; Mark 4:30-32).⁴³ "Therefore, believers have to step out in faith, step into the 'works' part of the faith⁴⁴. ... Don't sit back and wait for finances to fall from the 'money tree'.⁴⁵

iv. Right thinking. The believer can miss out on God's blessings when they hold wrong belief and thinking (Ps 33:5; Prov 23:7; Eccles 2:26;

39 Gloria Copeland, March 2003, p. 25.

40 Gloria Copeland, 'Looking for a Receiver', in *Believer's Voice of Victory*, August 2002, p. 29.

41 Gloria Copeland, March 2003, p. 26.

42 John Lim, 1999, pp. 30-34.

43 John Avanzini, *What Jesus Taught About Manifesting Abundance* (Tulsa, OK: Harrison House, 1996), p. 27.

44 John Copeland, "Money Doesn't Fall out of Faith Trees," *Believer's Voice of Victory*, December 2002, p. 19.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Isa 45:2-3; Phil 4:8).⁴⁶ Their orthopraxy is best reprinted in full here: “Although they’ve continually applied the principles of God’s Word and become prime candidates for great prosperity, they’ve unwittingly passed it by because religious tradition has taught them that God wants them in poverty.”⁴⁷ According to their propositions, “if you were raised in traditional religion that might surprise you. Religion [in the context, most probably refers to traditional non-Charismatic Christianity] has taught us that God is our greatest problem. He’s the one who’s making us sick and keeping us poor. It’s taught us that He’s very touchy and if you make Him mad – which is easy to do – He’ll punish you in a hurry.”⁴⁸

v. Tithing⁴⁹ is a necessary factor for God to prosper the believer financially. “The Tithe is a key because it opens the windows of heaven for you. Remember, God’s word clearly directs you to (do so). (Mal 3:10-11; Prov 3:9-10; Matt 22:17-21; Rom 11:16).”⁵⁰ In addition, it has to be given first – and ideally, on gross income (and not on one’s income after tax) before paying your bills (Lev 27:30-31; Prov 3:9; Cain & Abel’s giving).⁵¹

vi. Giving/offering sows seeds for God’s blessings (2 Cor 9:6,7; 1 Kings 17:12-16).⁵² Mark 4 is also often cited as biblical principles of seedtime and harvest time, so that a sower will receive a thirty, sixty and hundred fold returns for their giving.⁵³ Luke’s comment on blessing running over was cited as basis for giving so as to prosper (Luke 6:38).⁵⁴ One can never out-give God. The more one gives to God, the more God’s blessings will be multiplied and returned to the generous giver.

46 John Lim, 1999, p.85-90. See also Brian Houston, 1999, pp. 10, 12, 17, 15-24.

47 Gloria Copeland, March 2003, p. 27.

48 Gloria Copeland, August 2002, p. 29.

49 Although there are variations on tithing in Jewish-Christian interpretations, for these Charismatic preachers and teachers, tithing is the act of giving back, ten percent of the believer’s income to God, into the house of God.

50 Avanzini, 1992, pp. 19, 23, 24, 25, 41-45. See also Brian Houston, 1999, pp. 67-76.

51 Avanzini, 1992, pp. 47-51.

52 Avanzini, 1992, pp. 20, 33. See Brian Houston, 1999, pp. 61-66.

53 Avanzini, 1996, chapter 1-3.

54 Avanzini, 1996, p. 35.

vii. Only acceptable giving. Offerings are acceptable in God's eyes when the giver gives willingly, gratefully, and generously (2 Cor 8:12; Mark 12:41-44; 1 Cor 9:7; 1 Cor 8:12).⁵⁵ For the offering to be acceptable, the giver must also give that which is significant to him/her (Mark 12:41-44); and giving towards evangelistic projects, which accomplishes God's purpose.⁵⁶

viii. Giving to the poor is distinguished from tithing, and offering, because God regards it as lending to the Lord (Prov 19:17).⁵⁷

ix. Double pay your minister who is worthy of his wages, and as He experiences God's abundance, so will you experience God's abundance (1 Tim 5:17-18; Deut 25:4; Luke 10:7; Matt 15:14).⁵⁸ One example of double pay is to, on occasions, double the monthly income of pastors by taking up spontaneous love-offerings (*in addition* to their regular salary).

x. Cultivate good/wise habits.⁵⁹

1. "If we lay hold of and walk in the powerful stewardship principles recorded in the Bible, we will truly see the total prosperity of God in our lives."⁶⁰

2. Faithfulness comes to be closely related with material blessing. "In Proverbs you'll find out, for example, that the quality of faithfulness and the blessing of prosperity are tied together very closely.... E.g. Prov 28:20 says 'A faithful man shall abound with blessings...'"⁶¹

3. Faithfulness that commensurate with abilities will sustain prosperity whereas ability without faithfulness results in only

55 Avanzini, 1992, p. 27-34. See Brian Houston, 1999, pp. 77-86.

56 Avanzini, 1992, p. 27-34. See Brian Houston, 1999, pp. 19, 58.

57 Avanzini, 1992, p. 42.

58 Avanzini, 1992, pp. 69-73.

59 For more on wise financial habits, see John Lim, *Reversing Financial Adversities: Keys to Abundance and a Joyful Debt-Free Life* (Singapore: JLM Service, 1998). See also Houston, 1999.

60 John Lim, 1999, p. 5.

61 Gloria Copeland, March 2003, p. 26.

short-term success (Matt 25:20-21; Songs 2:15). “You have to be faithful in the little that you have in order to receive much more than what you have. That is the way the kingdom principle of increase operates. Only when you are faithful in the little, and are able to multiply that little will you then receive much more from the Lord.” (p.16)⁶² “Faithfulness in the little that you have will result in promotions and receiving more from the Master (Luke 19:26).”⁶³

4. Diligence and blessings are also closely related. Diligence attracts riches, promotions, and honor (Gen 24:15-22; Deut 28:1; 1 Kings 19:19; 2 Kings 4:1-7; Prov 6:6-11; 10:4; 11:16; 13:4; 14:23; 20:4; 22:29; 24:3-4; 26:16; 27:23-27; Matt 25:24-25; Matt 5:41; 17:24-27; Luke 17:7-10; Luke 5:4-7; Heb 11:6; 2 Thess 3:10)⁶⁴

5. Do not get into habit of borrowing and holding huge mortgages, because the borrower is a slave to the lender (Prov 22:7).⁶⁵

6. Do not become sureties for others, i.e. don't co-sign a loan for a friend or family member (Prov 6:1-5; 17:18).⁶⁶

7. Be thrifty and save (Deut 28:5; Prov 13:22; 6:6-8; Luke 12:16-21).⁶⁷

Having collated the prosperity teachings of four charismatic leaders, we turn now to an analysis.

62 John Lim, 1999, p. 16.

63 John Lim, 1999, p. 17.

64 John Lim, 1999, pp. 35-59.

65 Avanzini, 1992, p. 84.

66 Avanzini, 1992, pp. 91-95.

67 Avanzini, 1992, pp. 109-114.

ASSESSMENTS⁶⁸ OF ‘BLESSING(S)’ IN CONTEMPORARY CHARISMATIC CHRISTIANITY

Problems of Unqualified Interpretation and Application of ‘Blessing(s)’ Passages in the Old Testament

Although, “what they believe about the basic doctrines of the faith is well within the parameters of orthodoxy”,⁶⁹ but in many ways, the blessing(s) understood by the contemporary Charismatic tradition as represented by the aforementioned proponents does challenge the conventional conception of God, faith, blessings and the relevance of Christianity to people’s life’s concerns. There are areas to affirm and areas to revise for it to be considered biblically sound teaching.

Indeed, the God of the Bible is a God who wants to bless His people and mankind abundantly. God’s blessing is holistic rather than piecemeal, crossing all areas of life. God provides for the needs of His people and He assures His elect through the Word that He is faithful. Moreover, there is nothing secular that is not supposed to be holy for a believer. In this sense, God is not against people having money or, owning possessions, as long as believers seek and worship God, instead of fame or riches. Money is not the root of evil, but evil is that which takes the place of God in a believer’s heart/life (Deut 8:18;

68 My methodology for this section of the paper: I began with an independent assessment of the Charismatic teaching on blessings. This is done initially without reference to an evangelical scholar’s critique. I believe this would provide a more objective and fair critique without any biased factor to influence my assessment. Thereafter, I read into other evangelical responses, and show where my review aligns or differs from mainstream responses. For a more thorough assessment by respectable evangelical scholars (whom I may not necessary agree with on all points), see Dennis Hollinger, “Enjoying God Forever: An Historical/Sociological Profile of the Health & Wealth Gospel,” *Trinity Journal* 9, NS, 1988, pp. 131-149 (Note: I do not agree with his sociological analysis). See also Douglas Moo, “Divine Healing in the Health and Wealth Gospel,” *Trinity Journal*, NS 9, 1988, pp. 191-209. Bruce Barron, *The Health & Wealth Gospel* (Downer Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1987), and D. L. McConnell, *A Different Gospel: A Historical and Biblical Analysis of the Modern Faith Movement* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1988). Robert Jackson, “Prosperity Theology & the Faith Movement,” *Themelios* October 1999, pp. 16-23. Note also that I am unable to adequately cover the range of scholarship on the thousands of Charismatic traditioning in North America in this paper. For more on the range of Charismatic traditioning, see Stanley Burgess, Eduard M. van der Maas, and Ed van der Maas (eds), *New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

69 Moo, 1988, p. 191.

1 Tim 6:10): God's people are called to demonstrate their faith in Him by trusting in God rather than in the security of their riches and wealth. Those who have trusted in money as their security have strayed from the faith when they seek riches and wealth rather than God.⁷⁰ The 'Blessing and Prosperity' teaching accentuates perspectives on the goodness of God.⁷¹ Perhaps, the attempt to contemporarize the gospel to the modern culture of affluence is unprecedented. The message of health and wealth has been an effective tool for drawing unbelievers to the church. As Sociologist Gerardo Marti says, "prosperity theology is used to instill a profound Christian morality in which wealth and status can accrue to a successful believer, while elevating their social status with attendant privileges, power, and influence as a part of a distinctive moral [Christian] community."⁷² And because prosperity teaching "is fully compatible with the individualization experienced by and demanded from today's workers," the movement successfully generates a following for having contemporalized its message effectively.⁷³ Marti makes his claim after having studied the impact of a Word of Life church in Los Angeles California. I would add that these teachings contain elements of truth. Evangelicals can readily affirm the disciplines. e.g. devotion to God, serving God, faith in God, tithing, giving, compassion for the poor, attitudes when giving, generosity with people and God's servants, and cultivating good habits. But, ministers and believers need to rethink the rationale, intention, and motivation behind some of these pre-requisite conditions expected of believers.

The Charismatic interpretations cited in the preceding section have three

70 Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 495-515, 547-555. The pericope in 1 Tim 6:6-10 begins with exhortation on godliness, contentment, great gain, and an affirmation of humanity bringing no materiality with us at birth before discussing those who were led astray and ruined their lives when they become determined to seek wealth. Material comfort then becomes a temptation and a snare that traps and engulfs their attention, consumes them, and turns their allegiance away from God. The use of 'root,' to describe the passion for riches, is then fitting in that it is not materiality per se (since Paul explained that believers have been richly endowed with all they would need in Rom 10:12), but the passion and craving for riches that drive the pursuit of wealth, where the wellspring in one's heart is located. And it is from the heart that one finds one's desires and where one sets one's hope, and so in 1 Tim 6:17-19, the exhortation returns to find no security or hope in the precariousness and uncertainty of wealth. The only certainty is to trust in God's provision.

71 This point was also picked up by Dollinger, 1988, p. 131.

72 Gerardo Marti, "The Adaptability of Pentecostalism: The Fit between Prosperity Theology and Globalized Individualization in Los Angeles Church," *PNEUMA* 34:1 (2012): pp. 5-25.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

incisively related problems. Foremost, they held that they are preaching “the uncompromised Word of God”. What does “uncompromising” mean in this instance? Collectively, they are concomitant to spreading the word of God, which they believe has been distorted and unheeded with regards to God’s blessings particularly in the area of faith, healing, and prosperity.⁷⁴ Many of their biblical teachings on blessing are indicative of (a) non-adherence to biblical hermeneutics and interpretative methods, resulting in variant readings from evangelicalism, and (b) their attempts to redress some problems in traditional Christian belief, e.g. poverty and holiness, wealth and worldliness, resulting in extremism tendencies. For instance, Avanzini recommends financial giving (out of their own financial poverty and lack) as a solution to their huge financial debt crises; the principle for Avanzini is that God honors faith and giving unto his Kingdom, and those who sow financially to God’s work, shall reap abundantly. Consequentially, the proof texts and passages quoted from Scripture to cite their points are interpreted and applied unacceptably, resulting in the forms of teaching purported, which was ironically held to be “uncompromising” biblically. In philosophical hermeneutics, Merold Westphal calls this bible reading method a mistaken approach: We read Scripture correctly and others interpret (and by implication, if one has to interpret Scripture, then, they have already slide from truth).⁷⁵ The problem of such proof-texting method of reading Scripture is not only practiced by Charismatic Christianity alone.

Secondly, although it was taught that a believer is not to seek after wealth, but by laying the criterions/conditions necessary “to position the believer to receive all forms of blessings and financial abundance from God,” it seems to connote a subtle seeking after these material things. For instance, to give expecting to receive thirty, sixty, or hundred-fold returns may be construed as making a business-like transaction with God, rather than giving out of love, gratitude, and giving sacrificially for the sake of the kingdom, whether or not there would be any returns.

Lastly, this form of teaching has unintended consequences. The danger of the logic purported is the assumption that if we are in God’s will, we will be

74 See also Hollinger, 1988, p. 131.

75 Merold Westphal, *Which Community? Whose Interpretation?: Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008).

prosperous, no matter what (since it is God's will to prosper us).⁷⁶ Particularly, to believers who perceive that God wants to bless the individual in a certain way the individual has been taught, this can pose a problem or crisis in the person's religious faith in the long run. A consistent absence of blessings as demonstrative fruits in those areas the believer has been trusting God for (e.g. healing, financial prosperity, promotions, etc), may shake the believer's faith in Christianity. Ironically, the believer may divert from Christ's teachings because the teaching (though may encourage the believer to trust God for a season) is luring the believer further away from the truth that is laid so clear in the Scripture. He may become disillusioned as a result. God never promised a life like a bed of roses, without problems. In fact, suffering, persecutions, and troubles will arise and that is to be expected of a normal Christian life.⁷⁷ Trials and persecutions are not indubitably God's season of testing the individual, or the believer's lack of faith, or having sinned, or the work of the devil, or that of necessity for the promulgation of the gospel.⁷⁸ The twelve apostles in the New Testament, including Paul, trusted and believed in God's blessings. Yet, some of these apostles had experienced forms of incurable sicknesses, although God used them to heal many afflicted. Towards the end of their lives, most had experienced entrenched poverty, concluding in martyrdom for their commitment to Christ.⁷⁹

76 Kaiser, 1999, p. 162.

77 For different perspectives on Christian suffering, see Kristiaan Depoortere, *A Different God: A Christian View of Suffering*. Louvain Theological & Pastoral Monographs 17 (Louvain: Peeters & Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995).

78 See also an interpretation of "afflictions" and suffering in the Christian life found in 1 Thessalonians, Philippians, and Romans: L. Ann Jervis, *At the Heart of the Gospel: Suffering in the Earliest Christian Message* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2007), whereby suffering is not an abandonment of God, but a real attestation of the disciples' commitment to the Gospel. Jervis also critiques approaches that find definite reasons for sufferings and trials – which are often seen in the charismatic approaches to wealth and health such as exemplified in this paper.

79 I am unable to enter into deep discussion of theories of martyrdom in early Christianity. See Candid R. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions* (Princeton: Yale University Press, 2012), and William H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, rpr., 2008), in contrast to recent theories that attempt to discredit the factuality of actual martyrdom encounters such as those found in Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). Also, see Leslie J. Hoppe, *Being Poor: A Biblical Study*, Good News Studies 20 (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1987) for canonical investigation on the motif of poverty and biblical responses; Without dismissing the problems of avarice, greed, and wealth (such as the continual exploitation of the poor), Hoppe also recognizes that within the biblical tradition, God's people are to help take care of the poor. Hoppe also explains that material and economic poverty can also speak to the human condition, their "spiritual poverty," and need for God.

Conclusively, the purported “uncompromising” truth, is not without problems. It is true that God blesses seekers and believers with visible fruits as they pray. But, is it therefore normative for all Christians? How does one draw the line, without becoming presumptuous? Normative or prescriptive truth is held as truth because it has stood the test of time, found unchanging, and efficacious all the time. If there are one or countless other instances that indicates it to be less than normative, it is then simply a true account, and not a normative truth, no matter how experience may testify to the trustworthiness of the saying. What is the truth and what is true (though the two notions are related) contain different characteristics. The concise summary cum critique will prepare us for the next section, to delineate biblical principles for interpretation and application.

BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS⁸⁰ AND INTERPRETATION OF OLD TESTAMENT ‘BLESSING(S)’⁸¹

What do the Old Testament and an assessment of contemporary Charismaticism teach us about Christian orthodoxy? As Walter C. Kaiser asked, “Can the Old Testament be interpreted as advocating a prosperity gospel of wealth, health, and success (for the New Testament believer)?”

Interpreters who seek to be biblically sound would benefit from adhering to the following basic parameters in biblical hermeneutics, which have been loosely applied in many of the contemporary Charismatic gospel proclamation.

80 For a more thorough treatment, see Kaiser Jr., 1988, pp. 151-170. The key points of this section have also summarized where relevant, Mark Chan, HE101 Biblical Hermeneutics and Interpretation Course Notes, BGST, n.d.

81 I am aware that I have yet to research into the Inter-testamental era, and more specifically New Testament and the Early Church’s understanding of ‘blessings’. That is beyond the scope in this paper. Refer to Craig L. Blomberg (1999), and John R. Schneider (2002) for more details on intertestamental analysis. Suffice to state that a biblical theological approach (understand Old Testament Theology and New Testament Theology) is necessary for interpretation. Notwithstanding, this section offers general principles of interpretation to deal with the interpretative problems of the ‘biblical laws on wealth and prosperity’ purported.

a. The Bible comprises of different kinds of literature. Knowing the genres of each of the book(s) will provide perspectives for interpretation. There are narratives, wisdom, gospels, epistles, and prophecy. For instance, Narrative, Prophets, Wisdom literature each is to be read and interpreted differently, according to the characteristics of each genre.

The wisdom literature with its massive records of the Deuteronomistic preservation of God's blessings and deprivation based on obedience and disobedience must not be taken as prescriptive. The genre of a proverb records principles or generalizations that often proven true experientially but these principles may not be applied in an absolute sense.⁸² Studying the wisdom literature, particularly the Proverbs, Gottwald (1985:573) observes that less than one third of the Proverbs (dealing with the rich and the poor) taught that people get what they deserve, whereas the rest recognized its presence and problem of socio-economic injustice.⁸³ Riches in the Proverbs were also compared with wisdom, knowledge, honor, a good name, fear of the Lord, love, righteousness, peace and safety (8:10-11; cf. 3:13-16; 16:16; 22:1; 15:16-17; cf. 16:8; 17:1; 19:1; 19:22; 28:6). G.H. Wittenberg (1986:73) points out that a majority of the "better than" proverbs which deal with the issue of wealth and poverty, commended poverty with righteousness rather than riches with injustice, or riches without wisdom. The acquisition of wealth by the wicked was followed by a stern warning of judgment (11:4; 11:28; 17:5; 22:22-23; 28:20-22).⁸⁴ Setting Proverbs in the broader Wisdom genre tells that wealth and riches could not simply be understood as God's blessings. It may be true that faithfulness and obedience bring peace and prosperity, while faithlessness leads to exile and ruin. But, this pattern cannot be generalized as typifying human experience everywhere (cf. esp. Job 21:7-21 with 24:1-12). The wicked flourishing (Ps 37:16-17; Prov 15:16-17; 16:8) is in tension with God's covenant blessing (Ps 112; 128; Prov 12:11; 13:21; 21:5). Unseen forces - divine or demonic, may be at work in human affairs in ways people will never understand on this side of eternity.⁸⁵

82 Blomberg, 1999, pp. 58, 63.

83 Blomberg, 1999, p. 65.

84 Blomberg, 1999, pp. 63-68.

85 Blomberg, 1999, p. 58. Cf. his reference to Witherington 1994:52; Scott 1965:140.

The genre indicates the way to interpret the book. Biblical interpreters must never confuse a simple description with an absolute promise. If this interpretative framework is disregarded, should one take it literally when reading a biblical mandate for Christians to take vengeance and curse others in the light of Ps 137:8-9, and Ps 109? Or, how are we to understand the generally wise counsel of Job's friends, which was stunningly pronounced as "not having spoken rightly" (Job 42:7-9)? Clearly, genre guides interpretation.

b. Each of the writers in the Bible wrote in a particular context. Understanding the context will also provide the necessary framework for interpretation. It is quite possible for something to be historically authoritative (i.e. God's command to the people in the biblical situation), without it (the command) being normatively authoritative.⁸⁶ Three references will suffice for our consideration.

Firstly, the wealth of the patriarchs in the Pentateuch must be understood within its covenant context. The wealth is bound directly to God promising Israel a special land. In the Christian era, believers do not live in a uniquely promised land context. Therefore, it must not be assumed that wealth necessarily represents God's blessings upon a believer.⁸⁷

Secondly, Ecclesiastes 11:1, "cast your bread upon many waters," refers to the risk involved in sea trade. It is therefore not a call to charity as often assumed.⁸⁸

Thirdly, Malachi 3:8-10 is not a mandatory text for believers in the New Testament to tithe. Malachi clearly alludes to the covenant arrangement unique to the nation of Israel, with reference to the distinctive promises to Abraham. This unique relationship in the Old Testament between tithes and offerings, and the temple cult sets the context for interpreting the passage. Without a similar centre for bloody sacrifices today, one cannot simply transfer all principles for giving to God's sanctuary in the Old Testament, to the church budgets in the New Testament era.⁸⁹ It is true that

86 Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), p. 285.

87 Blomberg 1999, p. 36.

88 Blomberg, 1999, p. 62.

89 Blomberg, 1999, p. 80.

one can never out-give God. Christianity maintains a tradition of tithing from earliest believers as an expression of Christian stewardship.⁹⁰ But, to read Malachi as a proof-text that God must bless prescriptively as He did for the post-exilic Israelite is to read beyond its context, ignore the Mosaic interpretation of this prophetic tradition, and presume where Scripture is silent. Moreover, when we fast forward to the New Testament, Jesus appraised the Pharisees' ostentatious exactness in their piety (such as alms giving, praying, fasting, and tithing) but accuses them of overlooking the weightier issues of justice, mercy, humility, and faithfulness (Matt 23:23; Lk 18:10-14; cf. Heb 7).⁹¹

c. Each of the writers wrote with at least one purpose in mind, and in most cases, it was written for some specific audience. What is the author's intended purpose for writing the book? Who are the audiences? Test your answers to these questions by asking how does the passage fit the context of the book, or the events depicted? In addition, how does the recorded chain of events or sequence in the book cohere with what the author intended to say?⁹²

Of course, the entire Bible is inspired of God, written for the believer. But, to claim that "the bible says... so it must be..." is insufficient. There is interpretative work to be done in the light of genre, context, authorial intent, authorial audience, and authorial flow of presentation and argument.

90 Lukas Vischer, *Tithing in the Early Church*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), showed how the concept of tithing underwent modifications and revisions in Christian history, as well as the practical value of tithing, contrary to a popular opinion that Scripture attests to the directness and unanimity of tithing.

91 See introduction analyses of giving, post-tithing, new covenant tithing, and covenantal tithing readings in David A. Croteau, (ed.), *Perspectives on Tithing: Four Views* (Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Academic, 2011). I am also aware that my explanations for this footnote in the main body of this paper have not examined whether the Pharisaic traditions – whether Shammai, Hillel, or Gamaliel – would result in a different exegesis of Jesus' recorded conversations. Nonetheless, despite whether the pharisaic houses were at parity, it remains true that pericopes reflect not an approval of mere tithing or religious piety, but the spirit of the law, that is, to witness un-hypocritically and consistently to the character of God's love, justice, and truth attested in the Torah. See J.A.T. Robinson, *The Pharisees and Jesus: The Stone Lectures 1915-16* (New York: Charles Scribners's Sons, 1920), p. 134. Though dated, Robinson's analysis in this regard remains acceptable today. See sections in Martin Pickup, "Matthew's and Mark's Pharisees," and Amy-Jill Levine, "Luke's Pharisees" both essays in Jacob Neusner and Bruce D. Chilton (eds.), *In the Quest of the Historical Pharisees* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2007), pp. 102-108, 128.

92 Mark Chan, n.d., p. 2.

For instance, specifically on authorial intent and audience, the Prophets were written to the children of Israel, to warn them of living as God's holy people. Hence, to writ the judgment seems to be a delayed action on God's part. But, God's people are encouraged to be patient instead of losing heart even if it seems that the wicked are prospering. The authorial intent and purpose is clear, and it has to be interpreted likewise. To read it as specifically written to the New Testament believer is to read it presumptuously. One may learn unchanging principles for our context, but it is not the equivalent for anyone to suggest that God has to bless us as He did in the Old Testament. And because God is sovereign, He chooses the manner and method in which to bless the faithful believer, regardless of the times, space, and distance.

If the authorial intent is not crucial, does it then mean that every verse in the Bible could formulate into some kind of teaching 'endorsed biblically'? Consider the wisdom of bribery (Prov 19:6; 17:23; 21:14), the wisdom of saying nice and flattering words (Prov 16:24; 5:3), the immoral behavior of Eli's sons, and so forth. Are we to interpret them as a biblical basis for accepting or giving bribes, for flattering and sexual promiscuity? Or consider the frequent mention in Psalms where writers say bad things about other people and/or pray that God will do bad things to other people.⁹³ Are we to interpret these verses as a biblical basis for gossiping and cursing others? In no sense are the imprecatory psalms and other passages setting in motion an unchangeable course of teachings. God has the power to act as he sees fit whatever the desires of the psalmist. Clearly, the authorial intent, genre and context of the inscripturation, are crucial to interpret Scriptures and to formulate biblical teachings.

d. What theological points do the text or book make? How does that correlate with other parts of the Bible?⁹⁴

Behind all the Old Testament teaching on wealth was the theological point of the Lord's sovereignty, and that "the earth is the Lord's and everything in it" (Ps 24:1). All things are God's who alone is the disposer of all that exists. Mankind stands as stewards of what God has entrusted to

93 NDBT, p. 400.

94 Mark Chan, p. 2.

them. The living God will hold all accountable to him for the stewardship entrusted to them.⁹⁵ While the Old Testament prophets spoke much about wealth, the material blessing, they neither condemned wealth nor exalted poverty, and vice versa.⁹⁶ The theological point remains the attributes of a sovereign and faithful God, and the salvation history of God's people. The highlight was not on wealth, and interpreters should not overvalue this aspect of God's blessing. It cannot be made the sign of God's approval or an object to validate one's trust or walk with God as was often believed, citing Proverbs 11:28 as proof-text.⁹⁷

We have already dealt with the other problematic texts that suggest prosperity as a form of blessing; these are not normative, in the Old Testament and especially in the New Testament. Hence, interpreters must conceive a theologically holistic position of the whole Scripture before recommending a didactic teaching (normative and prescriptive) for all believers. As Kaiser concluded, "what is needed is less proof-texting over random passages taken from here and there in the Scriptures. Instead, we need to develop large teaching passages on each of these themes and see what Scripture teaches in its wholeness, rather than in just an assortment of bits and pieces quoted randomly from texts with authoritative assurances [and claim that] that is what the texts mean in these contexts..."⁹⁸

e. Be open-minded and tolerant of other interpretations,⁹⁹ especially when it does not disregard the basic biblical hermeneutical principles cited above. One may agree that biblical exegesis has a place for reading wealth as a form of blessing from God, such as demonstrated by Schneider. However, a caveat must be established. Material blessings are not meant to be prescriptive in the Old Testament, and even more so, material comfort is less likely a normative place for discipleship in accordance to the New Testament.

95 Kaiser, 1999, p. 161.

96 *Ibid.*, p. 162.

97 *Ibid.*, p. 162.

98 *Ibid.*, p. 169.

99 Longman III, 1998.

I shall weigh in on some of Schneider's arguments to show that wealth as God's blessing can be hermeneutically grounded in Old Testament authority:

- i. In Genesis, "God has designed [and thus intended for] human beings to enjoy life in the material world" so long as humanity embraces "a godly condition of delight."¹⁰⁰ "The goodness of creation... is unthinkable apart from its materiality. Materiality is as essential to the goodness of the created order as the physical body is to a fully human identity."¹⁰¹ In equally important ways, the dominions are not limited to "creative and redemptive terms," but also in "productive work, abundance, flourishing and unashamed [and wholesome] physical delight."¹⁰²
- ii. God's promises in the Old Testament (through the patriarchs and their descendants) have always been material in nature because, "human delight is a precious expression of God's glory, of human dignity, and of the goodness of life in this world. In its proper form, it is a sacrament to God's dominion over chaos and darkness. And it is the condition of affluence alone that makes full delight possible."¹⁰³
- iii. In the Exodus, "the God of Scripture has a peculiar interest in setting the poor free from poverty. There is no doubt that God liberates a poor and oppressed people, and this is an essential part of what the exodus narratives reveal about the nature and will of God generally... divine liberation in the exodus takes the form of material delight. And material delight (affluence properly achieved and enjoyed) emerges in this narrative as a paradigm for our spirituality and ethics."¹⁰⁴
- iv. Though affluence is not a negative thing, it is the spirituality and moral ethics that inspires the recipient of such gracious blessing. "Deuteronomy makes it clear that the good of affluence has certain, but very serious challenges built into it... it is to have right spirituality

100 Schneider, 2002, p. 43.

101 Ibid., p. 57.

102 Ibid., p. 56.

103 Ibid., pp. 60-61.

104 Ibid., pp. 66-67.

of affluence at the core of one's material life." Amid their wealth, God's people are to bless God.¹⁰⁵ To address the root of evil that comes with material affluence, the writer warns against the spiritual attitude that 'by my own hands I have gotten this wealth.' "The spirit of self-serving arrogance and pride of the worst sort" is what corrupts the good and wholesome use of affluence.¹⁰⁶ Here, I would add Pauline's instruction in 1 Tim 6 on the futility of setting one's hope on riches. The pericope urges that one should receive with thanksgiving all that God 'richly' provides so that one's trust is in God and not in the gift received from God.¹⁰⁷ And, in keeping with interpretations on the Old Testament concept of the Sabbath, it remains a plausible assertion: God is not against wealth, but the unbridled trust in wealth.¹⁰⁸

v. The prophetic writings show the reality of what evil may result from affluence. It is Schneider's understanding that "all the prophets describe[d] behaviors that realize the worst fears of Deuteronomy"¹⁰⁹ In these biblical narratives, the prophets saw economic, business, social, and political immoralities as among the causes of the exiles. As Schneider writes: "Their evil was less obvious in their theology and worship, than it was in their ethics of business, in the political policies and in their manner of eating and drinking... Just as economic life is on balance the measure of God's blessing, so is it a measure and

105 Ibid., p. 73.

106 Ibid., p. 74.

107 Vasile Mihoc, "Final Admonition to Timothy (1 Tim 6,3-21)" in Karl Paul Donfried (ed.), *1 Timothy Reconsidered. Monographische Reihe von Beneictina, Biblisch-Ökumenische Abteilung, Colloquium Oecumenicaum Paulinum 18* (Louvain: Peeters, 2008), pp. 248-249; George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 273. See also n. 70 of this paper.

108 For different perspectives on Sabbath, See Heather A. McKay, *Sabbath & Synagogue: The Question of Sabbath Worship in Ancient Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), where Sabbath may be read in a few ways – as that of a new moon (Hebrew Bible), a holy day of the Jews (Early Jewish literature such as Ben Sira, Judith, 1 & 2 Maccabees, 1 Esdras, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and Jubilees), a day of rest and study of the law/Torah (Philo, Josephus, and the Mishnah), a domestic celebration (Graeco-Roman non-Christian sources), and a practice in the synagogues (New Testament sources). My interest in mentioning Sabbath for this paper is limited to a reading of the Sabbath as an argument against wealth, which has been used as an argument against Charismatic teachings on prosperity. The main body of my paper offers a revision to this thoroughly negative criticism on grounds of the principle for Sabbath.

109 Ibid., p. 91.

mirror of the soul ... Jesus' entire mission embodied the principle of the prophetic tradition.”¹¹⁰

vi. The Wisdom books of the Old Testament were “all in different ways probe[d] the mysterious interaction between faith, morality and wealth.” Given the plurality of practical voices in these literatures, Schneider reminds that “the biblical wisdom (Proverbs) discourages us from picturing the moral world as this straightforward and predictable,” (namely that prosperity is an indication of God's blessings whilst poverty is an indication of the contrary). Instead, “Proverbs helps us to see and appreciate the much greater complexity and mystery of moral life in the economic realm.”¹¹¹

Accordingly, “biblical wisdom stresses that we cannot predict with certainty that faith will bring material flourishing and delight. Nor may we say confidently that unrighteousness will always be punished by poverty¹¹² ... If we are faithful, we should not expect to become rich, though we might. Nor should we assume that poverty and suffering are always the badge of righteousness, though they sometimes are¹¹³ ... The Lord brings justice from painfully long processes of history. He creates his tapestry from endless threads in countless times and places. Not every time and circumstances will be well, but, in the end, all of time will be well.”¹¹⁴

Through Schneider's excellent commentary, we see how God's blessing may be read acceptably and in consonant with a biblical-theological hermeneutical tradition. Still, the paradigm requires openness to fresh interpretations for some of our charismatic brothers and sisters.

110 *Ibid.*, p. 91.

111 *Ibid.*, p. 109.

112 *Ibid.*, p. 112.

113 *Ibid.*, p. 114.

114 *Ibid.*, p. 114.

CONCLUSION

The Old Testament's blessing(s) is set in the context of a covenantal promise that God would demonstrate His gracious favor on those who choose to honor Him and live as unto the Lord. The blessing(s) includes a temporal, earthly, socio-economic-genealogical prosperity as well as spiritual well-being, briefly outlined in the Pentateuch. This is a recurring theme throughout the Old Testament, even in the Prophetic writings, and the broader message of the Wisdom literature. However, as noted, the Wisdom literature is not to be applied as an absolute, prescriptive teaching on what the Bible says, because of its genre type. New Testament believers seeking to understand the multiple trajectories of the Old Testament teachings for the contemporary culture of success, wealth and affluence must seek to follow hermeneutical principles in interpreting and applying these Old Testament passages. Failing to do so would result in a form of teaching that claims biblical endorsement for believing that it is definitely God's will to bless the believer by means of success, wealth and material prosperity, which ironically is steering away from the biblical position. This paper laments the unqualified interpretation of the contemporary prosperity tendencies, prevalent in many parts of Charismaticism to contemporize the gospel. Indeed, hermeneutically, it is possible to interpret success, wealth, and material prosperity as "a" (rather than "the") form of God's blessing. To interpret materiality dogmatically as "the" blessing, as if it has prescriptive theological warrant is to misread the biblical genres and its application for Christian living.

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