

The letters 'JTLL' are rendered in a large, bold, green, sans-serif font. The 'J' is a simple hook. The 'T' has a thick vertical stem and a horizontal top bar. The 'L' has a thick vertical stem and a horizontal bottom bar. The second 'L' is similar but has a slightly different horizontal bar shape. The letters are spaced out across the width of the page.

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THE LIFE AND THEOLOGICAL METHOD
OF LEWIS SPERRY CHAFER
Part 2 (Chafer's Methodology)

David W. Gunn, PhD

CHAFER'S METHODOLOGY

The nature of Chafer's foundational commitments and the impact of his personal background on his theological methodology having been assessed, an analysis of his theological method will now commence. The primary areas of concentration will be Chafer's hermeneutical approach, his procedure for correlating and integrating Scripture with Scripture and Scripture with extra-scriptural data, and his central interpretive motif.¹ It will be apparent throughout the following discussion that every element of Chafer's theological methodology rests on the conviction that Scripture is divinely inspired, inerrant, authoritative, and sufficient.

Hermeneutical Approach

While Chafer never wrote a work specifically on Biblical interpretation, he did discuss the subject at several points in *Systematic Theology*. Chafer himself did not use the term, but it may fairly be said that he essentially adhered to the principles of *originalism*, or *literal-grammatical-historical interpretation*.²

¹ This framework for analyzing a theologian's methodology is the approach developed by Michael D. Stallard and applied in his work *The Early Twentieth-Century Dispensationalism of Arno C. Gaebelein* (Lampeter, Ceredigion, Wales: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2002).

² Lewis Sperry Chafer, "An Introduction to the Study of Prophecy," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 100, no. 397 (Ja-Mr 1943): 104. Elsewhere, I have

Concerning the definition and proper place of hermeneutics he wrote,

The doctrine of interpretation contemplates the science of discovering the exact meaning of the Spirit Author as this is set forth in a given Scripture passage. Such a science may be described theologically as *hermeneutics*. To fathom this doctrine it is necessary to know and follow the recognized rules of Scripture interpretation.³

Chafer then proceeded to quote, approvingly, the four hermeneutical rules formulated by his older brother, Rollin T. Chafer. That Lewis considered his brother's hermeneutical principles essentially identical to his own is demonstrated by his comment following the lengthy quotation from Rollin's work: "Since every student of Scripture ... is confronted with the problem of giving to the Sacred Text its precise meaning, the need of following these [Rollin's] rules is imperative."⁴

Hermeneutical Principles in Volume Seven of Systematic Theology

Rollin's hermeneutical rules were as follows. First, one must "Interpret grammatically; with due regard to the meaning

argued that *originalism* is a better term than *literal-grammatical-historical interpretation* to describe this approach to biblical interpretation; see David Gunn, "Why Originalism?: The Need for a Sound Hermeneutic, Part 1," *The Baptist Bulletin* (Nov/Dec 2019): 22–24; "Why Originalism? Part 2: The Superiority of an Originalist Hermeneutic," *The Baptist Bulletin* (Jan/Feb 2020): 30–31; "Why Originalism? Part 3: Common Objections and Questions," *The Baptist Bulletin* (Mar/Apr 2020): 26–28.

³ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 7:203.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7:205.

of words, the form of sentences, and the peculiarities of idiom in the languages employed.”⁵ Furthermore, “The words of Scripture must be taken in their common meaning, unless such meaning is shown to be inconsistent with other words in the sentence, with the argument or context, or with other parts of Scripture.”⁶ So, proper hermeneutical procedure, according to the Chafers, began with an evaluation of the normal meaning of the words of Scripture in grammatical relationship with the surrounding words.

Second, “Interpret according to the context. The meaning of a word, again, will often be modified by the connexion in which it is used.”⁷ Rollin Chafer went on to stress the priority of context over etymology for determining a word’s meaning: “The etymological study of some words indicates that their significance has entirely departed from the root meaning. On the ground of etymology, therefore, it would be misleading for an interpreter to hold to the root meaning in such cases.”⁸

Third, when the immediate literary context “does not give all the light needed to determine the meaning of a word or phrase ... a third rule is necessary, namely: ‘Regard the scope or

⁵ Ibid., 203. In this quotation (and several others that follow), Lewis S. Chafer is quoting approvingly from Rollin T. Chafer, who is in turn quoting approvingly from Joseph Angus and Samuel Green [*Cyclopedic Handbook to the Bible*. New York: Revell, n.d.].

⁶ Ibid. Note how similar this principle is to David Cooper’s now-famous “Golden Rule of Interpretation:” “When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.” [David Cooper, *The World’s Greatest Library Graphically Illustrated* (Los Angeles: Biblical Research Society, 1970), 11.]

⁷ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 7:204.

⁸Ibid.

design of the book itself, or of some large section in which the words and expressions occur.”⁹ Here, Chafer addressed the remote literary context, and the overarching theme or design of the book in which a text occurs. This point could be taken to imply the importance not only of contextual interpretation, but also of authorial intent (which transcends individual pericopae to encompass entire books), and possibly also the study of isagogics (in order to identify positively the purpose and theme of any given biblical book, so as to interpret the parts in light of the whole).

Fourth and finally, the analogy of faith was put forth as the

most comprehensive rule of biblical interpretation. ... Compare Scripture with Scripture. ... Scripture truth is really the consistent explanation of all that Scripture teaches in reference to the question examined; and a Scripture duty is the consistent explanation of all the precepts of Scripture on the duty.¹⁰

It would seem at this point that the line between hermeneutics and systematic theology was blurred somewhat. This language seems to pertain more to the synthesis of individual passages into one summary statement of “what the Bible teaches,” i.e., a movement of systematic theology, rather than to exegeting a particular text. This apparent conflation or confusion of hermeneutics and systematic theology occurs at several other points throughout Chafer’s work.

⁹ Ibid., 7:205.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Yet it is probably overly simplistic to charge Rollin Chafer (and Lewis Sperry Chafer, by extension) with pure confusion on this point, as though he had held that one's systematic theology should exert a determinative influence over the exegesis of specific pericopae. This probably is not what Rollin had in mind, as can be seen in the comment with which he closed his discussion on the fourth principle: "Some interpreters who claim to accept the Bible as the revealed Word of God, reject specific revelations in it because they do not fit into the framework of their preconceived theology."¹¹ So the individual pericopae, it would seem, should take some degree of priority over the broader doctrinal synthesis derived from the Bible as a whole.

There would seem to be some tension in Chafer's proposed hermeneutical approach at this point, but it is not necessarily a full-blown contradiction. One possible strategy for resolving the tension is to posit that careful exegesis of individual texts is prior to theological synthesis of multiple texts, but that the synthesis may act as a check and balance on further exegesis. Within such an approach, doctrinal synthesis is ultimately controlled by extensive exegesis, but if at first the exegesis of a particular text seems to be in conflict with the synthesis of all or most other related passages, this may alert the exegete that he has committed an error at some point. This explanation is not spelled out as such by Chafer, but it would seem to be a charitable way of interpreting him, especially since it seems generally consonant with the way he typically interpreted Scripture and applied the analogy of faith.

In summary, sound biblical interpretation according to Chafer is driven by the normal meaning of the individual words

¹¹ Ibid.

in grammatical relation with the surrounding words, read in light of the immediate and remote literary contexts and the overarching purpose of the book in which they are found, and taken in a manner that is consistent with the sum of related scriptural teaching on the subject at hand.¹²

Hermeneutical Principles in Systematic Theology, Volume One

In addition to presenting his brother's hermeneutical principles in volume seven of *Systematic Theology*, Chafer also discussed the interpretation of Scripture under Bibliology (volume one). There, he proposed several hermeneutical ideals that are not essentially dissimilar to the material presented in volume seven, though they are presented somewhat differently: the interpretation of Scripture should be contextual, lexical, and uncompromised by personal bias.¹³

Contextual Interpretation

The subject of contextual interpretation may be further divided into three subcategories: canonical context, literary context, and historical context. Interpreting according to canonical context means first to consider the part in light of the purpose of the whole. In particular, Chafer emphasized at this point that the central purpose of Scripture is to communicate spiritual truth such that men might be saved and brought into a right relationship with their Creator. Insofar as Scripture does touch on non-soteriological subjects such as history or science, it

¹² Note that all of these elements are reflected, to one degree or another, in Ryrie's later explication of "literal" or "normal" hermeneutics [Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 129–30.]

¹³ Note that Chafer himself did not precisely follow this organizational structure in presenting his material; instead, he jumped somewhat abruptly from principle to principle without classifying them.

does so inerrantly;¹⁴ nevertheless, those elements are included in order that the broader (primarily soteriological) purpose might be served. That being the case, interpreters should not expect to find, for example, revelations about heliocentrism in the language of Scripture. It is not that God was unaware of such scientific facts, but simply that He did not see fit to explicate them in Scripture, since that would not have served the primary, spiritual purpose of the work.¹⁵

Another important factor in interpreting according to the canonical context is considering all scriptural data on the subject or theme addressed by the individual text. Chafer wrote, “A right interpretation will also depend very largely on an induction being made of *all* that the Bible presents on a given subject. The conclusion must be no less than the consensus of that full testimony.”¹⁶ This principle reflects Chafer’s stance on the nature of Scripture: he saw the Bible as the unified work of one ultimate divine author. It was totally inerrant and harmonious in terms of its content. If this were not so—if the Bible were seen as the errant and diverse product of merely human authors—then what would such a comprehensive induction and synthesis benefit the interpreter?

The second category of contextual interpretation is the literary context. This includes both the remote context (the book in which a text is found) and the immediate context (the textual units surrounding the text at hand). Insofar as remote literary contextual interpretation is concerned, Chafer stressed the need to identify the “distinctive character and message” of the book under examination, “since a vital factor in any revelation is its

¹⁴ Cf. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 2:27–29.

¹⁵ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 1:115.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:117–18.

place in a certain book, and in the light of the specific message of that book.”¹⁷ Interpreters must also give due consideration to the immediate literary context. This entails not only reading a text in light of surrounding texts, but also identifying natural thought-units and the relationships between them: “The student must learn to establish context boundaries regardless of the mere mechanical chapter and verse divisions.”¹⁸ For example, Chafer criticized the placement of a chapter division between Matthew sixteen and seventeen, arguing that chapter seventeen should be seen as standing in direct fulfillment to Jesus’ prediction in Matthew 16:28.

The final element of Chafer’s proposal for contextual interpretation is the historical context. At this point, Chafer limited his discussion of historical context to the matter of the text’s compositional history, with a particular emphasis on a biblical book’s original audience. Every text of Scripture has valid primary and secondary applications, and the key to determining which is appropriate lies in the identification of the text’s intended audience.¹⁹ Specifically, Chafer had dispensational divisions in mind here: New Testament Christians ought not to interpret Old Testament texts as though they continue to have direct applications after the Day of Pentecost.

In presenting these three different aspects of contextual interpretation, Chafer did not specify which (if any) of them should be the most prominent in the interpreter’s approach. However, judging by his own works it seems that consideration of the canonical context contributed most to Chafer’s

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:116.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:117.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:116–17.

interpretive framework. One of the prevailing characteristics of Chafer's theology was his tendency to see texts or subjects in light of their placement in the overarching (primarily soteriological, in his view) metanarrative of Scripture.²⁰ On the other hand, this observation should not be pressed too far—since most of Chafer's published works were theological rather than exegetical in nature, such Scripture-wide synthesis is only to be expected.

Lexical Interpretation

Lexical interpretation emphasizes the importance of interpreting individual words and terms according to their customary meanings. Chafer referred to this aspect of interpretation as the “discovery of the exact meaning of the determinative words in the text.”²¹ A major consideration in this category is the importance of mastering the biblical languages, such that precise determination based on the original texts could be made: “Apart from the knowledge of the original languages in which the Bible was written, there can be no very accurate conclusions as to what a difficult passage teaches.”²²

Two examples from Chafer's commentary on Ephesians illustrate this aspect of interpretation. First, in discussing Paul's prayer in Eph. 1:16–17 that God will give the Ephesian believers the “Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him,” Chafer capitalized on Paul's use of *ἐπιγνώσις* rather than *γνώσις*: “Significant, indeed, is the use of the Greek word *epigenosis* at this point, which word refers to a *full* knowledge, and is much

²⁰ E.g., Lewis Sperry Chafer, *The Ephesian Letter* (Findlay, OH: Dunham Publishing Co., 1935), 29–30, 67–68.

²¹ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 1:118.

²² *Ibid.*

stronger than the general word *genesis*, which refers to the more restricted aspects of human understanding.”²³ Second, in discussing the “quickenings” depicted in Ephesians 2:5, Chafer saw doctrinal significance in the aorist tense of συνεζωοποιήσεν:

Likewise, the fact that the verb is in a tense which denotes a transaction completed at some point in the past, is of doctrinal importance; for by one act of sovereign, saving power, *all* who have believed were, at the moment of believing, made alive with Christ. No subsequent achievement is implied.²⁴

So, the lexical aspect of interpretation includes consideration of not only the denotative meaning of individual words, but also of grammatical considerations such as verb tense.

Uncompromised Interpretation

Chafer was acutely aware of the ease with which interpreters might project their preconceived theological conclusions onto the text of Scripture in the course of exegesis, and he warned against it:

It is exceedingly easy to twist or mold the Word of God to make it conform to one’s preconceived notions. To do this is no less than “handling the word of God deceitfully” (2 Cor. 4:2), and is worthy of judgment from Him whose

²³ Chafer, *The Ephesian Letter*, 56. As this was Chafer’s only published commentary and his only published book of an expository (as opposed to synthetic) nature, it is very important to a consideration of Chafer’s hermeneutical methodology.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

Word is thus perverted. At no point may the conscience be more exercised and the mind of God more sought than when delving into the precise meaning of the Scriptures and when giving those findings to others.²⁵

Unfortunately, apart from identifying the possibility for abuse at this point and warning his readers against it, Chafer did not provide any significant details on how he believed one could best avoid compromising interpretation with preconceived biases. However, judging from Chafer's comments elsewhere, it may be postulated that he would have seen primarily two important factors that could function as correctives to this tendency. First, the interpreter would need to be scrupulously textual in his formulation of theological positions. If the conclusion cannot be directly demonstrated from the text, then it is suspect. Second, Chafer would likely see this issue as one over which the illumination of the Holy Spirit exerts a profound influence, and encourage interpreters to ensure that they are fully yielded to the Spirit before engaging in the task of exegesis.²⁶

Other Implicit Hermeneutical Principles in Chafer's Writings

In addition to the hermeneutical principles that Chafer explicitly affirmed while discussing biblical interpretation, there were clearly additional principles that informed his hermeneutical method. The following discussion will cover those principles that Chafer did not discuss explicitly and those that he did discuss but without classifying them under the category of interpretation or hermeneutics. These include the principle of

²⁵ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 1:119.

²⁶ For a thorough discussion by Chafer on how one becomes fully yielded to the Spirit, see *He that is Spiritual*, 70–133.

single meaning, typology, historical event context, and illumination.

The Principle of Single Meaning

Chafer never directly discussed the principle of single meaning²⁷ under that title or any other, but it would seem that he did adhere to it at least to some degree. The clearest example of this tendency in Chafer's work would be his position on the New Covenant. On this subject, Chafer faced a puzzle: Scripture seems to speak of a future New Covenant for Israel (Jer. 31:31–34) but also employs New Covenant terminology in texts directed toward the New Testament Church (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6; Heb. 7:22; 8:7–13; 9:15; 12:22–24). So, given a dispensationalist precommitment to the distinction between Israel and the Church, to which of these two bodies does the New Covenant apply?

Chafer's solution was novel: He posited two separate New Covenants—one for Israel and another for the Church.²⁸ Obviously, Chafer's insistence on an inviolable line of demarcation between Israel and the Church lay at the foundation of his position on this subject. But why not conclude, as many others have done, that there is one New Covenant to which Israel and the Church are both parties? Or, alternatively, that there is one New Covenant with Israel, but its benefits have also been extended to the Church?²⁹ Unfortunately, Chafer did

²⁷ For a helpful discussion of what this principle entails, see Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 141–60.

²⁸ Chafer, *Major Bible Themes*, 146–147; Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:314–15; 7:98–99.

²⁹ Most dispensationalists today have not followed Chafer's lead on this point. For contemporary dispensationalist explorations of this issue, see

not reveal his rationale for rejecting these possibilities and positing instead two parallel New Covenants. However, the principle of single meaning would seem sufficient to explain his decision here (i.e., since Jeremiah 31 identifies the party to the New Covenant as Israel and Judah, that party can be understood to refer *only* to Israel and Judah), and such an adherence is in basic harmony with Chafer's consistent interpretive approach throughout his works.

Typology

If Chafer may fairly be viewed as an adherent to the principle of single meaning, he must also be charged with holding to it inconsistently. He viewed typology as a legitimate lens through which to analyze the Scriptures—a lens that had been woefully neglected by responsible expositors. This neglect he attributed to the excesses in which practitioners of typological interpretation had often indulged: “The fact that extremists have failed to distinguish between that which is typical and that which is merely allegorical, analogous, parallel, happy illustration, or resemblance, may have driven conservative theologians from the field.”³⁰

In an attempt to correct that trend, Chafer praised the merits of typological interpretation. He felt that recognizing typology reflected a belief that God had foreordained and sovereignly ordered all of history. Chafer was aware that within the practice of typological interpretation lay the potential pitfall

Christopher Cone, ed., *An Introduction to the New Covenant* (Hurst, TX: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2013) and Mike Stallard, ed., *Dispensational Understanding of the New Covenant: 3 Views* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Books, 2012).

³⁰ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 1:xxix–xxx.

of over-typologizing, but he seems to have regarded it as no less a danger than failing entirely to recognize legitimate types in Scripture, since the recognition and proclamation of types brings glory to God.³¹

Chafer rejected outright the idea that “nothing is to be deemed typical that is not sustained as such in the New Testament” on these grounds:

There are many easily recognized types which are not directly sanctioned by any specific New Testament Scripture. Like the problem of primary and secondary application of the Truth, the recognition of a type must be left, in any case, to the discernment of a Spirit-guided judgment.³²

Instead, he offered an alternate set of rules by which to minimize excesses in typological interpretation. First, a type usually falls into one of five categories: people, events, things, institutions, and ceremonials. Second, types are found in the Old Testament, and usually in the Pentateuch. And third, the vast majority of types point to Christ.³³ The thinking here seems to be that if interpreters were careful to check potential types against these rules, there would be less abuse of typological interpretation.

At the theoretical level, these statements and observations by Chafer would seem to encourage a moderate use of typological interpretation that tentatively explores possible typological connections while exercising due caution against excessive typologizing. In practice, however, Chafer erred

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1:xxx.

³² *Ibid.*, 1:xxxi.

³³ *Ibid.*, 7:308–9.

significantly on the side of liberality in making typological connections. Specifically, he saw typological significance in all the following: The Passover lamb;³⁴ Abel's offering, Noah's altar and sacrifice, and the two birds (Lev. 14:1–7); the Day of Atonement, the Red Heifer, the coats of skin (Gen. 3:21), Noah's ark, Melchizedek's bread and wine, the offering of Isaac, Joseph's life story, the manna in the wilderness, the smitten rock (Ex. 17:5–7; Num. 20:7–13), and the Tabernacle;³⁵ the seven Jewish feasts and Melchizedek;³⁶ the rite of circumcision and the first day of the week;³⁷ Eve and Rebekah;³⁸ Aaron, Abel, acacia wood, Adam, the altar of brass, the altar of incense, the Ark of the Covenant, the two staffs (Zech. 11:7), Benjamin, sacrificial blood, the burnt offering, sheep, lambs, rams, goats, turtle-doves, pigeons, the golden lampstand, the corn of the Promised Land, King David, unleavened bread, the two goats (Lev. 16:5–10), Isaac, Joshua, the Kinsman-Redeemer, the laver, light (Gen. 1:16), Moses, the Nazirite, the peace offering, Aaron's rod, the brass serpent, the showbread, the sin offering, the sweet savor offerings, the trespass offering, and the veil of the tabernacle;³⁹ oil (Ex. 25:6; 40:10–15; Lev. 2:1–16; 14:10–32), water (Ex. 29:4; Lev. 8:6; Num. 19:2ff.; Ezek. 47:1–12), fire (Ex. 3:2; 13:21; Lev. 9:24; 2 Chron. 7:1; 1 Kings 18:38; Mal. 3:3), wind (Isa. 40:24), the dove (Gen. 8:8–12), the seal, and Abraham's

³⁴ Ibid., 1:31; 3:120–21.

³⁵ Ibid., 3:116–25.

³⁶ Ibid., 4:64–65.

³⁷ Ibid., 4:119–20.

³⁸ Ibid., 4:137–41.

³⁹ Ibid., 5:43–44. This particular grouping of types is actually Walvoord's, listed in his unpublished notes on Christology. But Chafer quotes the list approvingly, indicating that he too sees all these as typologically significant.

servant;⁴⁰ the wave offering;⁴¹ Asenath, Zipporah, Boaz, Ruth, Abigail, Solomon, and the Shulamite maid;⁴² the mercy seat;⁴³ the Temple;⁴⁴ and Abraham, Sarah, Ishmael, the Exodus, the passage through the Red Sea, Jordan, Babylon, Egypt, the Sabbath, and the Israelite kingdom under David's rule.⁴⁵ After surveying this list, one wonders if there was anything at all in the Bible that did not hold typological significance for Chafer!

It should be noted that typological interpretation was an area of inconsistency for Chafer on at least two, and possibly even three, counts. First, he was inconsistent with his own evaluation of typology's proper place. A typological list as extensive as the one compiled above does not seem congruent with Chafer's warnings against excessive typologizing. Second, his use of typological interpretation goes well beyond the principles of literal interpretation that he himself advanced. And third, if Chafer's adherence to the principle of single meaning is sustained, then clearly his typological interpretation would be inconsistent with that principle as well.

That being said, it is important to note that Chafer allowed for such extensive typologizing not in spite of his view of Scripture, but because of it: As a committed Biblicist, Chafer emphasized (perhaps to a fault, in this case) the Bible's unity that it possessed by virtue of its divine authorship. That conviction, coupled with a view of God as one who foreknows everything exhaustively and delights in revealing the end from the beginning, resulted, in this case, in an undue eagerness to

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 4:47–56.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 7:20.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 7:62–63.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 7:236.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 7:300.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 7:308–9.

see prophetic patterns in the Old Testament text, even when the presence of such patterns would seem to go beyond the literal interpretation of the passage in question.

Historical-Event Context

When Chafer touched on the place of historical contextual factors in interpretation, he explicated only the importance of identifying the intended audience of a text. But of course, “historical context” is a category far broader than merely the text’s intended audience. Sailhamer has suggested a distinction between the horizons of “text” and “event”⁴⁶—a helpful distinction when considering the various applications of the term “historical context.” Chafer’s explicit discussion of historical context centered entirely on the historical context of *the text itself* (i.e., factors concerning when it was written, by whom, and to whom), but he also allowed the historical context of *the event being narrated* (i.e., historical factors pertaining to the actual event or subject that a passage records) to influence his interpretation.

Two examples are in order. First, when discussing the account of the Fall, Chafer focused on the serpent’s words to Eve: וְהָיִיתֶם כְּאֱלֹהִים. Because the noun is plural in form, the translators of the KJV had rendered this phrase, “ye shall be as gods.” But Chafer pushed back against this translation:

The phrase, ‘ye shall be as gods,’ is, for want of consistency on the part of the translators, quite misleading. ... [T]he word *gods* might be thought to refer to heathen gods; but since there were no heathen at the

⁴⁶ John Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 4–7.

time Satan appeared in Eden, nor had the notion of “gods many” occurred to anyone’s mind, such an interpretation is impossible.⁴⁷

Chafer’s contention here has nothing whatsoever to do with the historical context of the *text’s composition*, but with the historical context of the *recorded event*. Chafer’s argument is that since prior to the Fall there would have been no concept of a pantheon, the serpent must have intended to communicate “you shall be as God.” The historical circumstances of the portrayed characters thus have direct bearing on the meaning of the words and phrases in the account.⁴⁸

A second example can be found in Chafer’s commentary on Ephesians. On Paul’s teaching about the desegregation of Jews and Gentiles in the Church found in Ephesians 3:2–13, Chafer’s comments highlighted how very radical this concept would have been to Jewish converts in the first century. Toward this end, he briefly summarized the negative attitude that Jews almost unanimously exhibited toward Gentiles during the period in which Ephesians was written.⁴⁹ Once again, this is a clear case of historical data arising from outside the text itself making a direct contribution to Chafer’s interpretation of the text.

⁴⁷ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 1:267. Emphasis is in the original.

⁴⁸ Note too that this is an instance in which contextual and lexical interpretive sectors clearly overlap. Not only do interpreters need to consider the historical situation the characters faced, but they must also have some facility with Biblical Hebrew in order even to understand the interpretive dilemma, let alone to solve it.

⁴⁹ Chafer, *The Ephesian Letter*, 94–95.

Illumination

The illumination of Scripture by the Holy Spirit occupies a major place in Chafer's understanding of how fallen humans receive divine revelation. He defines illumination as "[T]hat influence or ministry of the Holy Spirit which enables all who are in right relation with God to understand the Scriptures."⁵⁰ This ministry of the Holy Spirit was necessary because the finitude and depravity of men made them unable to understand spiritual things.⁵¹ The unregenerate mind in its natural state was conceived of as "blind" to spiritual truth,⁵² and to that natural blindness was added several layers of additional blindness, which stemmed from the judicial rulings of God, the oppressive machinations of Satan, and the seemingly endless cycle of human carnality.⁵³ So, to reverse this inundation of spiritual blindness, the Holy Spirit had to perform a miraculous work to open the minds of believers, enabling them to grasp spiritual truth.⁵⁴

In our day, the Spirit's work of illumination has been variously understood and explained. Some see illumination as the Spirit's work in helping the believer *understand* the truth; others see the work as pertaining only to the *application* or

⁵⁰ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 1:50.

⁵¹ Chafer, *He that is Spiritual*, 15–19.

⁵² Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Classics, 1991), 17.

⁵³ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 1:105–8.

⁵⁴ Although it does not bear directly on the subject of hermeneutics, it is interesting to note that Chafer also saw an application of the Spirit's illumination to unbelievers: namely, a ministry of opening the minds of the unsaved to their lost estate and the inevitability of God's judgment on sin. Cf. Chafer, *He that is Spiritual*, 31; *Satan*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1945), 145; *True Evangelism*, 48–51, 56.

reception of the truth.⁵⁵ In Chafer’s view, the spiritual blindness was so widespread and so debilitating that even accurate interpretation of Scripture was impossible apart from the Spirit’s illumination of the believer’s mind, so the phenomenon of illumination extends to both interpretation and application: “The Spirit of God is given to every saved person as an indwelling Paraclete, thus providing a limitless resource *both for understanding and teachableness*.”⁵⁶

At this point there would seem to be a conflict in Chafer’s view of Scripture. On the one hand, as has been discussed, he clearly held to the perspicuity of Scripture, affirming that the language in which the Bible was written is simple enough to be comprehended by children. On the other hand, he saw depravity and spiritual blindness as nearly insuperable obstacles to understanding God’s written revelation. How can these two seemingly incompatible points be reconciled? Chafer explained: “While, as has been stated, the Bible is couched in the simplest of terms, its message, in many particulars, transcends the range of human understanding; but divine provision is made whereby these human limitations may be overcome.”⁵⁷ So, there is perspicuity at the level of expression but incomprehensibility (apart from divine illumination) at the level of content—

⁵⁵ For several helpful discussions on this, see William Arp, “Illumination: What Is the Role of the Holy Spirit in Interpretation?” *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 16 no. 1 (Spring 2012): 50–86; Graham A. Cole, *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2007), 264–66; and John S. Feinberg, *Light in a Dark Place: The Doctrine of Scripture*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2018), 567–619.

⁵⁶ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 1:9. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

especially content that relates directly to spiritual truths that are outside the realm of normal human experience.

In order to receive the illumination of the Spirit, Chafer held that an individual must be both regenerate and fully yielded to the Spirit, “not alone as to truth itself but [also] as to personal piety.”⁵⁸ In short, Chafer held that one could learn all the “nuts and bolts” of proper hermeneutical procedure and yet fail utterly to interpret Scripture properly if he was either unregenerate or a carnal believer. Just as God may be conceived of as both transcendent and immanent,⁵⁹ so also Scripture is seen as both transcendent (incomprehensible on the level of content) and immanent (perspicuous on the level of expression). And just as man cannot draw near to God without prior divine enabling action,⁶⁰ neither can he draw near to God’s revelation without prior divine illuminating action. Once again, Chafer’s methodology may be linked directly to his high view of Scripture.

Intra-Scriptural Correlation and Integration

Chafer’s principal role was that of a systematist. The vast majority of his works were synthetic in nature, in that they drew together data from all across the canon of Scripture and combined them so as to present biblical teaching in a topical, systematic fashion. Therefore, an analysis of how Chafer went about choosing which passages to link together is of great importance to the present study. Unfortunately, he never explicitly discussed his method on this point, nor did he ever clearly demonstrate it. (This is probably to be expected: *Systematic Theology* alone is filled with thousands upon

⁵⁸ Ibid., 1:10.

⁵⁹ Chafer, *Major Bible Themes*, 38.

⁶⁰ Chafer, *Salvation*, 13, 45; *Grace*, 42, 45.

thousands of linked proof-texts, and had he stopped to explain his rationale behind each linkage, the resulting tomes would have been bulky to the point of inaccessibility.) So, without a clear statement from Chafer, the analyst must resort to inference. In my opinion, Chafer’s approach to intra-scriptural correlation and integration is best explained by highlighting his position on three related subjects: inductive Bible study, the unity of Scripture, and the dispensational metanarrative inherent to the unfolding storyline of the Bible.

Inductive Bible Study

Chafer believed in the existence of countless themes and patterns within the Bible, just waiting to be discovered and synthesized via the inductive method.⁶¹ On the importance of induction to the task of systematic theology, Chafer wrote:

Of the two methods of dealing with the truth of God’s Word—*deduction*, by which a theme is expanded into its details of expression, a method belonging largely to the sermonic field, and *induction*, by which various declarations upon a subject are reduced to one harmonious and all-inclusive statement—induction is distinctly the theological method.⁶²

This quotation furnishes both the aim of intra-scriptural correlation and integration (namely, the synthesis of diverse teachings into “one harmonious and all-inclusive statement”) and a clue as to proper methodology for practitioners. If the inductive method is given pride of place, with all its

⁶¹ Richards, *The Promise of Dawn*, 89.

⁶² Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 1:8. Emphasis in the original.

observational rigor and investigative thoroughness, then that would imply certain limitations on linking passages together. Specifically, superficial similarities between passages (such as similarity of expression, the operative consideration in Midrashic interpretation)⁶³ would be considered insufficient grounds for linkage, as would the imposition of a non-inductively derived organizational structure (such as is operative in Covenant Theology, in Chafer's estimation)⁶⁴ onto the text of Scripture. Instead, passages under consideration for linkage must be carefully examined and interpreted on their own according to sound hermeneutical principles in order to assure that the perceived parallel is a true parallel.

Recall, for instance, Chafer's position on the New Covenant. In terms of expression, there are clear parallels between the New Covenant passage(s) in the Old Testament and those in the New. Indeed, the covenant's name and spiritual benefits seem to remain constant in both sets of passages, and on one occasion a New Testament writer even quotes directly from Jeremiah 31 when discussing the New Covenant (Heb. 8:17–31), thus establishing continuity on at least some level. Nevertheless, an inductive study of each passage focusing on the details rather than merely the semantics apparently led Chafer to conclude that the Old Testament and New Testament passages referred to two separate (though related) New Covenants. Hence, Chafer refused to link Old Testament and New Testament passages concerning the New Covenant(s) in such a way as to intimate identical reference.

⁶³ William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 180–81.

⁶⁴ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:156.

Elsewhere, Chafer linked Ephesians 2 with John 3:16, propounding that the former advances several details concerning the phenomenon of salvation while the latter provides information concerning the divine motivation for providing salvation.⁶⁵ Whereas Chafer evidently saw similarity of expression but disparity of details between the various New Covenant passages, here he saw similarity of details despite the absence of clear parallelism in terms of expression. Although Jesus's language in John 3:16 was (for the most part) verbally dissimilar to Paul's language in Ephesians 2, to Chafer an examination of each passage rendered it clear enough that both referred to the same phenomenon (eternal redemption through faith in Jesus).

Another important feature of Chafer's inductive method is comprehensiveness as an ideal. He explained:

Inductions are either *imperfect* or *perfect*. *Imperfect* inductions result when *some* but not all the teachings of the Scriptures are made the basis of a doctrinal statement. A *perfect* induction is formed when all the teachings of Scripture, according to their precise meaning, are made the basis of a doctrinal statement. It is evident that to finite minds the perfect induction is more or less ideal, and the fact that varying and imperfect inductions are secured accounts, in some measure, for the wide divergence in doctrinal belief among men of equal sincerity.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Chafer, *The Ephesian Letter*, 76–77.

⁶⁶ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1:8. Emphasis in the original.

So, in Chafer's system, the linkage of various passages from across the pages of Scripture should ideally be both inductively sustained and exhaustively comprehensive. One might well link a few parallel passages together and thereby discover part of the scriptural teaching on the subject, but by neglecting to incorporate *all* of the germane passages the theologian ends up with an incomplete or skewed conclusion.

An illustration: Chafer felt that amillennialists erred in their interpretation of Revelation partly by imposing an alien system on the text and partly by *failing to factor pertinent passages of Scripture into their doctrinal synthesis*. Only by ignoring Ephesians 6:10–12, 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17, and 2 Thessalonians 2:8–10 could they maintain that Satan is presently bound, the first resurrection is past, and the Beast was Nero.⁶⁷ Chafer believed that by neglecting some of the pertinent data, these theologians had developed not merely incomplete theological conclusions, but downright incorrect ones.

The Unity of Scripture

Chafer held an extremely high view of the unity (and, commensurately, the authority) of Scripture. Observe his description of the relationship between Scripture's divine and human qualities:

[O]n the Divine side, the Scriptures are the Word of God in the sense that they originate with Him and are the expression of His mind alone; and, on the human side, certain men have been chosen of God for the high honor

⁶⁷ Chafer, "An Introduction to the Study of Prophecy," 130.

and responsibility of receiving God's Word and transcribing it into human form.⁶⁸

Although Chafer rejected the mechanical-dictation theory of inspiration,⁶⁹ this quote is perhaps as close as one could come to the mechanical-dictation theory without actually embracing it. Consistent with this view of the Bible's origin, Chafer tended to view Scripture as a unified whole more than as a collection of diverse works.

Insofar as intra-scriptural correlation and integration are concerned, Chafer favored a harmonizing approach. This is unsurprising: if the entirety of Scripture came ultimately from one divine, inerrant author, then its constituent parts must necessarily be in harmony with one another. In linking texts that appeared to be in conflict, therefore, Chafer operated from the presupposition that the conflict was only apparent and that, in most cases, their truly harmonious relationship to one another could be discerned by careful examination.

Countless examples of Chafer's tendency toward harmonization could be reproduced, but two will suffice. First, in commenting on Ephesians 3:17 and Paul's prayer that Christ would come to "dwell in your [the Ephesian Christians'] hearts," Chafer argued on the basis of the aorist tense of κατοικησαι that the prayer referred not to a continuous indwelling, but to a "single, definite act."⁷⁰ But upon linking this verse to other New Testament passages on indwelling (Rom. 8:9; 2 Cor. 13:5), Chafer discovered a conflict: if the Ephesian Christians were already regenerate, then they must have already been indwelt! How

⁶⁸ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 1:72.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:68.

⁷⁰ Chafer, *The Ephesian Letter*, 111.

then could Paul pray for them to be indwelt yet again? Chafer's solution was to nuance the concept of *indwelling* differently in Ephesians 3:17 than in Romans 8:9 and 2 Corinthians 13:5: "The Apostle is not here making petition that these believers may be indwelt, but rather that they may come by faith into a fuller knowledge of the indwelling Christ."⁷¹

Second, when discussing the names of God in the Old Testament, Chafer addressed the apparent contradiction between Exodus 6:3 (which seems to indicate that God did not reveal Himself to the patriarchs by the name *Yahweh*), and the numerous passages in Genesis which depict the patriarchs using the divine name (such as Gen. 15:2). Since his high view of Scripture did not permit him to accept the explanation that the earlier references to the divine name were cases of anachronism or prolepsis, Chafer took the approach adopted by many conservative apologists: "[T]he name [Yahweh] was used freely from Adam to Moses, as the Scriptures record, but ... its meaning was not at any time [up to Moses] disclosed."⁷²

Dispensational Metanarrative

Dispensational premillennialism—particularly its Israel-Church distinction—occupied an important place in Chafer's approach to theology.⁷³ Chafer tended to think of the unfolding storyline of Scripture in terms of the "big picture,"

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 1:262.

⁷³ Richards, *The Promise of Dawn*, 194–196.

considering the Bible's parts in light of its overarching metanarrative:

God's program is as important to the theologian as the blueprint to the builder or the chart to the mariner. Without the knowledge of it, the preacher must drift aimlessly in doctrine and fail to a large degree in his attempts to harmonize and utilize the Scriptures. Doubtless a spiritually minded person who does not know the divine program may discern isolated spiritual truths, much as one might enjoy a point of rare color in a painting without observing the picture itself or the specific contribution which that color makes to the whole.⁷⁴

Presenting the sweep of biblical history in broad brush strokes, Chafer couched the entire biblical storyline, from beginning to end, in terms of seven distinct dispensations.⁷⁵ He tended to focus overwhelmingly on two dispensations in particular, however: Old Testament Israel and the New Testament Church.⁷⁶ Generally speaking, he saw the Old Testament and the Gospels as primarily applicable to Israel, and the New Testament Epistles and Revelation to the Church.

This way of looking at Scripture in terms of a dispensationally-delineated overarching metanarrative had a direct impact on Chafer's method of linking passages together: passages written to one dispensation must not be carelessly

⁷⁴ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 1:xiii.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 40–41.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:xiv–xix; 4:29–35, 47–53, 127–133; “An Introduction to the Study of Prophecy,” 109; “Dispensationalism,” 448.

linked together with passages from another dispensation without accounting for the categorical distinction:

A recognition of the divinely indicated distinctions as to time-periods and the messages belonging to each is the very foundation of a science such as Systematic Theology, which proposes to discover and exhibit the truth relative to the works of God. *No accounting is possible as to the extent of error which is prevalent because of the careless reading into one dispensation or age of that which belongs to another.*⁷⁷

That is not to say that Chafer never linked Old Testament and New Testament passages together. Indeed, he did so on many occasions; the Bible's fundamental unity required that truths concerning God and spiritual things would naturally be found across the pages of both Testaments. But before any such linkage could take place, due consideration would need to be given to the differences between each passage owing to dispensational distinctives. And quite frequently, when Chafer did link a passage in one dispensation together with one from another, he did so in order to contrast rather than to combine or synthesize them.⁷⁸

At this point, the charge of inconsistency might again be raised. If Chafer truly favored the inductive approach to studying Scripture, shouldn't he have let each text speak for itself rather than imposing alien organizational systems upon it? And in allowing his dispensational view of Scripture to affect

⁷⁷ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 1:xi. Emphasis mine.

⁷⁸ E.g., Chafer, *Salvation*, 89–90.

his integration of individual passages, did Chafer not fall prey to the same thing for which he faulted Covenant Theologians? Chafer never addressed this charge directly, but he probably would have had an answer for it. Clearly, Chafer did not think that there was anything wrong with having a theological system, provided that system could pass the “acid test of Biblical proof.”⁷⁹ Similarly, he had no problem with viewing Scripture through the prism of an organizational scheme, *provided the scheme itself was inductively derived from the text of Scripture*. Chafer made no attempt to conceal the fact that dispensational theology directly informed the premises from which he operated,⁸⁰ because in his estimation the primary difference between the dispensational and covenantal approaches was simply that the former scheme was inductively-derived from the Bible,⁸¹ whereas the latter was not.⁸²

Extra-Scriptural Correlation and Integration

The next issue to be addressed is Chafer’s method of integrating scriptural data with extra-scriptural data. Once again, Chafer’s comments and practices on this methodological point reflected, first and foremost, a high view of Scripture. Conversely, he maintained a very low view of the capacities and achievements of fallen humanity.

Human Incapacity

At first glance, Chafer’s works may seem to furnish a theoretically positive framework for incorporating extra-

⁷⁹ Chafer, “Dispensationalism,” 393.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 396.

⁸¹ Chafer, “Dispensationalism,” 445–48.

⁸² Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 1:156.

scriptural data into a robust theological system. He defined the task of systematic theology as “the collecting, scientifically arranging, comparing, exhibiting, and defending of all facts *from any and every source* concerning God and His works.”⁸³ Furthermore, he spoke highly at times about extra-biblical scientific disciplines and even applied scientific terminology to the tasks of exposition and theological synthesis.⁸⁴ Also, Chafer clearly hinted at the possibility of an integration of theology with the secular sciences when he wrote:

Though it is highly impractical to encumber the science of theology with extended discourse covering all the “ologies” of the universe, it remains true, nevertheless, that the basic fact underlying each and every science is its relation to the Creator of all things and His purpose in creation. Though not usually included in the science of theology, the other sciences which engage the thoughts of men would be both sanctified and exalted were they to be approached, as they should be, with that awe and reverence which recognized in them the presence, power, and purpose of the Creator.

Yet, despite these initially positive tones (and in tension with his definition of systematic theology), Chafer concluded that revelation alone (particularly the written revelation of Scripture) constitutes a suitable source for theological data, while reason is wholly inadequate to discover or gauge theological truth. This negative estimation no doubt arose from

⁸³ Ibid., 1:6. Emphasis mine.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 1:7–8.

Chafer's adherence to the doctrine of total depravity⁸⁵ and his resultant view on all-pervasive spiritual blindness. Add to these the reality of natural human finitude,⁸⁶ and it is easy to see how Chafer arrived at such a negative assessment of mankind's capacities to reason meaningfully about God.

Several quotations highlight Chafer's feelings about the contribution (or lack thereof) of extra-scriptural disciplines to the task and substance of systematic theology. First, while acknowledging the theoretical contribution that reason has to offer, Chafer downplayed its practical value: "Systematic Theology does draw its material from both revelation and reason, though the portion supplied by reason is uncertain as to its authority and, at best, *restricted to the point of insignificance*."⁸⁷ Second, in discussing theories on the method by which Scripture was inspired, he dismissed reason's contribution entirely: "The irrelevance which obtains between revelation and reason is as conspicuous in the field of inspiration as elsewhere."⁸⁸

So, Chafer's view on the contribution of extra-scriptural disciplines to Christian systematic theology may be summarized as follows: Theology does not need the help of extra-scriptural disciplines. At best, such data would be irrelevant given the inerrancy and sufficiency of Scripture. At worst, it would distort theological issues by introducing errant and questionable concepts into a field based on an inerrant book.⁸⁹ Theoretically, science could discover valid and relevant insights were the

⁸⁵ Ibid., 2:220–22.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 1:129.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 1:48–49. Emphasis mine.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 1:63.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 1:iv.

scientists neither fallen nor finite. But since they are, Christian theologians should be content with the Bible as their sole source of material for theology.

Theology as a One-Way Filter

However, that extra-scriptural disciplines have no meaningful contribution to make to Christian systematic theology does not mean that there is no interplay between the two. Chafer believed that theological conclusions *should not* be influenced by extra-scriptural disciplines, but also that sound theology *should* exert an influence over the Christian's interpretation and acceptance of truth claims from secular fields. In this way, systematic theology—grounded solely in the immutable, infallible, and inerrant foundation of God's Word—could function as a sort of one-way filter by which all other truth claims are judged.⁹⁰

An interesting example of this principle in Chafer's work is his discussion on the controversial topic of human origins. First, he rejected Darwinian evolution and theistic evolution as legitimate explanations on the grounds that Scripture plainly contravened them both (particularly Genesis 1:21–25, with its emphasis on each species' creation “after their kind”).⁹¹ Beyond that, Chafer further rocked the boat by presenting a view that might well be described as *incipient young-earth creationism*.⁹²

Although dispensationalists today tend to favor the young-earth creationist position, in Chafer's day this viewpoint

⁹⁰ Ibid., 1:128–29.

⁹¹ Chafer, *Major Bible Themes*, 165–66.

⁹² I am indebted to Dave Thomason for this observation. [Dave Thomason, “REVIEW: Lewis Sperry Chafer's *Systematic Theology*, www.doctordavet.com/chafer_systematic_review.html.]

had not yet gained much traction.⁹³ Instead, at that time, most dispensationalists held to either the day-age theory or the gap theory.⁹⁴ The latter theory had attracted a significant number of dispensationalist followers, especially after its promotion in the *Scofield Reference Bible*.⁹⁵ These two theories were appealing because they seemed to allow Biblicists to retain a literal interpretation of Genesis 1 without rejecting the scientific consensus concerning the age of the earth. But Chafer was so committed to the authority of God’s Word and the inductive method of interpreting Scripture that he rejected both the day-age theory and the gap theory; since they could not in Chafer’s estimation be supported by clear statements of Scripture, they should not be sustained.⁹⁶ This is remarkable for multiple reasons: not only did Chafer cut against the grain of contemporary dispensational thought on this topic, but he was also willing to reject a view that his own mentor, C. I. Scofield, had popularized.

In addition to rejecting the day-age theory and the gap theory, Chafer was willing to extend the length of human history only “a few thousand years beyond the dates proposed by Usher [sic].” Furthermore, while he did not wholeheartedly endorse the view that the days of creation in Genesis 1 were literal solar days (Chafer held that there was room for legitimate disagreement

⁹³ The inception of the modern young-earth creationism movement is usually attributed to the publication of *The Genesis Flood* by John Whitcomb and Henry Morris in 1961.

⁹⁴ Michael Roberts, *Evangelicals and Science* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 2008), 42–43, 141.

⁹⁵ R. Todd Magnum and Mark S. Sweetnam, *The Scofield Bible: Its History and Impact on the Evangelical Church* (Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2009), 153–57.

⁹⁶ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 2:142.

here among sincere, Bible-believing Christians), he did believe that that view had the strongest textual support.⁹⁷

So, for Chafer, there is indeed interplay between Biblically-sourced systematic theology and extra-scriptural data, but it is strictly a one-way street. The findings of extra-scriptural disciplines are to be judged by the content of Scripture, not the other way around. Relatedly, Chafer viewed historical theology as a worthy field of study, but one that should only be consulted after one's systematic theology had already been initially formulated.⁹⁸

Chafer's Central Interpretive Motif

The prominence of soteriological themes in Chafer's work has already been mentioned in passing; here, it comes to the foreground. A theologian's central interpretive motif is usually understood to be that theological theme (or set of themes) that he emphasizes most prominently and that most cohesively integrates the diverse data of his system.⁹⁹ In Chafer's case, that theme is not difficult to identify: it is the grace of God.

When Lewis Sperry Chafer shifted the focus of his ministry from evangelism to exposition and theologizing, he never truly ceased to be an evangelist. His fervor for the propagation of the gospel and for the salvation of lost souls permeated all that he taught and wrote, and shaped the way he approached Scripture and theology. For Chafer, Christianity at its core is a soteriological worldview, concerned primarily with

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7:109.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:xxxvii.

⁹⁹ For a helpful discussion on the concept and function of a central interpretive motif in systematic theology, see Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 63–64.

the salvation of sinners and their reconciliation to God: “The whole of the Christian faith is—perhaps more than elsewhere—compressed in the words, ‘God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them.’”¹⁰⁰ For Chafer, this theme was central to an understanding not only of the New Testament, but of the entire Bible:

Divine revelation is primarily unto redemption. Its progress of doctrine develops hand in hand with the doctrine of redemption. God has spoken to the end that man may be “wise unto salvation” (2 Tim. 3:15). God has caused a record concerning His Son to be written and men who believe that record are saved, and those who do not believe that record are lost (1 John 5:9–12)

God’s grace was the element of soteriology that most clearly defined Chafer’s theological thinking and in which his theological positions and conclusions found cohesion. Chafer defined grace as “pure unrecompensed kindness and favor,”¹⁰¹ and he saw grace as the primary motivating force behind all of God’s actions. God’s graciousness motivated Him to decree all things;¹⁰² to create all things;¹⁰³ and to provide and apply eternal salvation to humans.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, Chafer noted that God’s grace not only motivated Him; it also motivates believers to voluntary, loving, responsive Christian service.¹⁰⁵ God’s grace (particularly in its salvific dimensions) was understood to be

¹⁰⁰ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 1:286.

¹⁰¹ Chafer, *Grace*, 4.

¹⁰² Chafer, *Major Bible Themes*, 44.

¹⁰³ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 1:257.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:60.

¹⁰⁵ Chafer, *Grace*, xiii.

utterly unlimited and available to all.¹⁰⁶ In short, for Chafer, all of history revolved around God's grace, and all the ages to come would bear witness to it.

An objection might be raised at this juncture: What about Chafer's insistence upon the discontinuity between grace and law? If the Mosaic dispensation is characterized by Law and the Church-age dispensation is characterized by grace, then would that not imply the absence of grace in the previous dispensation? How then could God's grace function as Chafer's central interpretive motif, if entire swaths of biblical history do not incorporate the grace principle?

A version of this criticism was leveled against Chafer in his own day. In 1938, James E. Bear accused Chafer's teachings of destroying the unity of the Scriptures and denying the operation of God's grace in the Old Testament economy.¹⁰⁷ It isn't difficult to see how and why Bear came to this conclusion: Chafer had indeed characterized the Mosaic dispensation and the Church-age dispensation as two distinct "religions,"¹⁰⁸ and had repeatedly emphasized the mutual exclusivity of grace and law.¹⁰⁹ But Chafer responded to Bear's criticisms with incredulity, insisting that he had been misunderstood and misrepresented. In his response to Bear, Chafer argued that he had only distinguished two separate *rules of life* between Israel and the Church—not two separate *means of salvation*—and

¹⁰⁶ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:182.

¹⁰⁷ James E. Bear, "Dispensationalism and the Covenant of Grace," *The Union Seminary Review* (July 1938): 285–307.

¹⁰⁸ Chafer, "Dispensationalism," 409.

¹⁰⁹ Chafer, *Grace*, 216–43.

affirmed his belief that “a holy God can [never] deal with sin in any age on any ground other than that of the blood of Christ.”¹¹⁰ So, if Chafer’s own clarification is given any weight, he did not exclude the operation of God’s grace from any dispensation, but rather saw it as central to divine-human relations in every age.

Likely in an attempt to forestall future misunderstandings and misrepresentations, Chafer exercised a bit more caution in his terminology discussing Israel and God’s grace in *Systematic Theology*. There, he emphasized that while God’s grace is uniquely characteristic of the present dispensation (i.e., it forms the foundation for the Church’s rule of life, whereas theocratic law had formed the foundation for Israel’s rule of life), that does not mean divine grace was absent in previous dispensations.¹¹¹ In fact, Chafer insisted, it has been exercised in every dispensation, and it had a central role to play in Israel’s relationship to God just as it does in the Church’s relationship to God. Not only was God’s grace the foundation for the salvation of individual Jews, but it also underlay many of the other unique blessings that Israel experienced. Specifically, God chose Israel from among the nations because of His grace,¹¹² entered into covenant relationship with her because of His grace, and provided a sacrificial system for her (so that the Israelites’ sin would not necessarily jeopardize that covenant relationship) because of His grace.¹¹³ Moreover, God purposed and promised to effect the future national regeneration and

¹¹⁰ Lewis Sperry Chafer, “Dispensational Distinctions Denounced,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 101 (September 1944): 259.

¹¹¹ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 4:181.

¹¹²Ibid., 4:15.

¹¹³Ibid., 4:181–82.

forgiveness of all Israel in the eschaton—once again, because of His grace.¹¹⁴

For Chafer, grace was all-pervasive, available to all, and central to an understanding of who God is and how He relates to His creation. The central place of God's grace in Chafer's theological system is aptly summarized in the following quotation:

It is evident, therefore, that the supreme motive of God in the creation, preservation, and consummation of the universe, in the permission of evil to enter the world, and in the mighty undertakings of salvation as it is now offered to sinful men through the death and resurrection of Christ, is that His "riches of grace" may be disclosed to all intelligences within the whole scope of creation.

CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

Having covered much ground in the preceding pages, it will prove beneficial in these final paragraphs briefly to summarize the findings of this study and to present in condensed form a summary overview of Lewis Sperry Chafer's theological method.

Impact of Chafer's Historical Background

Chafer's theological method is impacted and informed by at least two major factors from his historical background: the evangelistic emphasis of his early ministerial career and the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy. Ever since his days as

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

an evangelist, Chafer gave soteriological themes (such as grace, redemption, reconciliation, and atonement) pride of place in his preaching and teaching ministry. His years of preaching to a broad cross-section of the American populace may have also helped to reinforce his view on the perspicuity of Scripture, which directly impacted his hermeneutical approach and his theological method. As for the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy, it seems to have supplied Chafer with certain non-negotiable doctrines; fostered in him a negative view toward the world-system and the reasoning capacities of mankind; and reinforced the need for comprehensiveness in theological expression.

Hermeneutical Approach

The hermeneutical approach advocated and employed by Chafer was essentially the literal-grammatical-historical method. It emphasized the importance of contextual and lexical factors on interpretation, and cautioned against permitting foregone theological presuppositions to color one's interpretation of Scripture passages. There was some degree of inconsistency in Chafer's interpretive method, as he seemed somewhat inclined toward the principle of single meaning and yet engaged in excessive over-typologizing. Chafer's presentation of the interpretive enterprise as a task governed by clear procedural rules was tempered by his insistence on the necessity of the Holy Spirit's illumination for proper interpretation.

Intra-Scriptural Correlation and Integration

Chafer's approach to linking one part of Scripture with another was governed by the principles of inductive reasoning. Linked passages must be thoroughly examined to ensure that

they are truly parallel at the conceptual level, not just at the level of expression. Linkage proceeded on the foundational conviction that Scripture was one unified whole (due to its divine authorship), and this promoted a tendency toward harmonizing perceived inconsistencies. The organizational grid of dispensationalism (especially the Israel-Church distinction) functioned as a control on correlation and integration, as it restricted primary application to the dispensation for which each respective passage was originally written.

Extra-Scriptural Correlation and Integration

Although he provided a theoretically positive basis for the integration of scriptural and extra-scriptural data, Chafer ultimately concluded that since mankind is finite and spiritually blind, he has little to offer as an input to theology. God had already provided an inerrant, authoritative, and totally sufficient form of revelation, so why would reason (which is fallible as well as fickle) even need to enter the equation? On the other hand, a theological system founded squarely on the sound exegesis of Scripture did have a part to play in validating or invalidating truth claims produced by human reason.

Central Interpretive Motif

Chafer's central interpretive motif was the unmerited, extravagant, all-pervasive, universally-available grace of God. He saw that grace as God's supreme motive for decreeing all things, creating the world, permitting the inception of sin, and both providing and applying eternal salvation. In short, the prevailing purpose of God in all that He does is to demonstrate His grace for all eternity. Although he was perhaps misconstrued on the relationship between grace and Old

Testament Israel, Chafer maintained that salvation has only ever proceeded on the basis of God's grace via Christ's death on the cross, and that this was true even in dispensations wherein the divinely ordained rule of life was based on a law principle.

Foundation and Focus

In all these layers of analysis, it is clear that the foundation of Chafer's thinking is not found in an *a priori* commitment to any particular confession, creed, theological system, or denomination; rather, it is found in a thoroughgoing commitment to Biblicism. In his hermeneutical approach, Chafer upheld literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutics precisely because he understood the Word to be inerrant and authoritative. Furthermore, his propensity toward typological interpretation reflected a high view of the divine authorship and concomitant unity of the Bible. In his intra-scriptural correlation and integration, Chafer continued the trend of seeing the Bible as a unified whole proceeding from the creative activity of an inerrant God. In his extra-scriptural correlation and integration, Chafer stressed the infinite superiority of the Bible as God's inerrant, dependable, immutable revelation over the fickle and fallible reason of finite humanity.

The resulting emphasis of this theological method, founded as it is on a robust Biblicism, is a portrait of God as superaboundingly gracious—gracious not only in that He created humanity and purposed to save them after they fell, but also in that He saw fit to graciously reveal Himself to them (through the Scriptures) and to overcome their inability to understand that self-revelation. The Bible itself was understood to be a product of God's grace, even as it was the primary means

by which His grace was revealed. Biblicism was Chafer's foundation, and God's grace was his perpetual focus.