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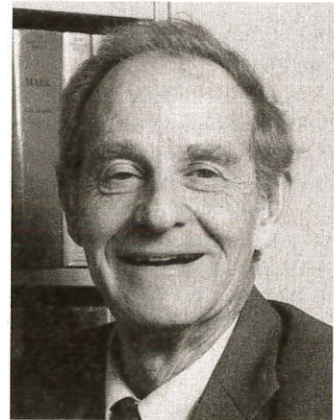
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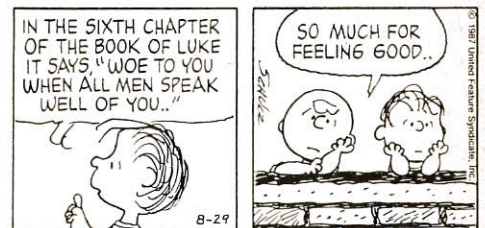
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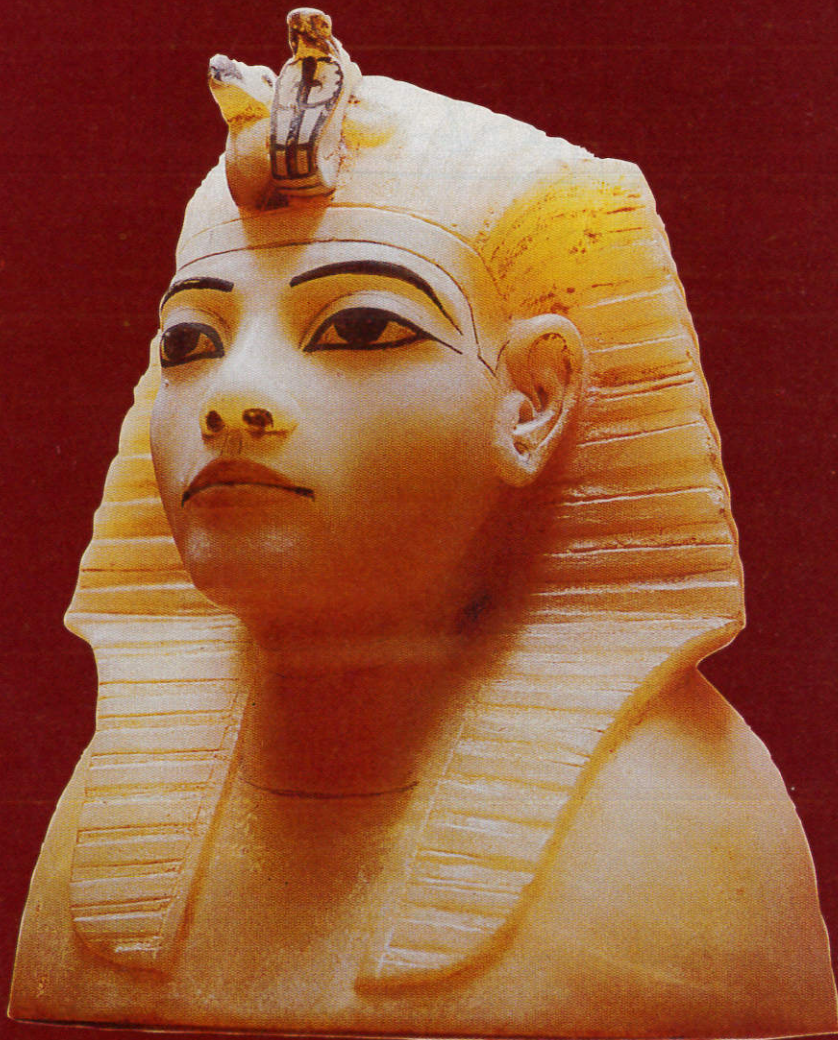
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ON THE COVER: Melchior, Caspar and Balthasar, the three kings from the east, open their treasures and offer the newborn Jesus gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh in this 13th-century stained glass window from the Chapel of the Magi in Cologne Cathedral, Germany. Above the virgin and child shines an eight-pointed star that, according to the Gospel of Matthew, led the magi from the east to the baby. For centuries, people have tried, with little success, to explain this star in terms of astronomical phenomena. How could a star, high above in the heavens, lead the magi to the child? In "What Was the Star that Guided the Magi?" on page 20, Dale C. Allison, Jr., offers a plausible interpretation. *Photo by Sonia Halliday and Laura Lushington*

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Why Did God Harden Pharaoh's Heart?

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The Exodus account of that classic contest of wills—between Moses acting under his patron, the God of Israel, and Pharaoh, ruler of Egypt—contains a strange, but repeated reference to the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. Just when Moses thinks he has demonstrated Yahweh’s power to Pharaoh and Pharaoh has agreed to let the Israelite slaves leave Egypt, Yahweh hardens Pharaoh’s heart and Pharaoh changes his mind, thus calling forth further plagues.

Hardening the heart can, of course, simply be a poetic way of describing Pharaoh’s stubbornness. But it takes on a much deeper meaning when we understand the concept of a hardened heart against the background of ancient Egyptian culture and its mythology.

This should not be surprising because, as is well known, a good deal of the Exodus story is illuminated by its authentic Egyptian setting. The author

SYMBOLS OF POWER, a vulture and a uraeus (serpent), adorn the brow of the headdress on this lid from a canopic jar, a vessel containing some of the viscera of the pharaoh. Made of alabaster and measuring about 9 inches high, this lid comes from the tomb of Tutankhamon (1347-1337 B.C.). The vulture represented Nekhbet, the national goddess of Upper Egypt, and the uraeus stood for Lower Egypt. Together they signified the two lands over which the pharaoh ruled.

Yahweh, the Israelite god, challenges Pharaoh’s sovereignty and power by appropriating the uraeus symbol during the confrontation in Exodus 7:8-13. Through Yahweh’s power, Aaron’s staff becomes a snake. When Pharaoh’s wise men turn their rods into snakes, Aaron’s snake swallows them, dramatically demonstrating Yahweh’s superiority. Subsequently, Yahweh would further demonstrate his power by “hardening” Pharaoh’s heart.

clearly understood the Egyptian world, and especially Egyptian religion, from the inside, for the story is nothing so much as a contest between the powers of Yahweh and the powers of the Egyptian pantheon, including the Pharaoh himself.

The very name “Moses” is Egyptian. We see the same Egyptian root at the end of pharaonic names like Tuthmosis and Ramesses. Phinehas (*Pinchas* in Hebrew), Aaron’s grandson (Exodus 6:25), also has an Egyptian name. (Phinehas is the one who found an Israelite man whoring with a Midianite woman and speared them through while they were *in flagrante delicto* [Numbers 25:6-8].)

More to the point, the plagues Yahweh hurled against Egypt, as recorded in Exodus 7-12, were specifically directed against Egyptian gods whom the Egyptians believed were personified in nature.¹ Perhaps the clearest example is the ninth plague, in which the sun is darkened and not allowed to shine for three days. The sun was the natural element that the ancient Egyptians regarded as their chief deity, Amon-Re. The revolution of the sun was all-important: Amon-Re in his rising symbolized new life and vigor, he was regarded as the creator god; as Amon-Re sank in the west, he represented death and the underworld. In Exodus 10:21-29, Yahweh prevents Amon-Re from rising, in effect preventing the very symbol of life from rising. The polemical theme is summarized in Exodus 12:12, “Against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment. I am Yahweh.” The God of the Hebrews is simply demonstrating his superiority over the false gods and heathen religions of Egypt.

Less frequently observed is that Pharaoh too is a god; the battle is therefore between Yahweh and Pharaoh, as well as between Moses and Pharaoh.

The king of Egypt ruled the land as a god—as the incarnation and Son of Amon-Re, or as Horus,

or as a combination of the gods of Upper and Lower Egypt. A stela from the Middle Kingdom describes the divinity of a deceased pharaoh named Ni-Maat-Re, also known as Amenemhet III (1842-1794 B.C.) and exhorts the reader:

“Worship Pharaoh Ni-Maat-Re, living forever, within your bodies. And associate with his majesty in your hearts . . . He is Re, by whose beams one sees, He is one who illumines the Two Lands more than the sun disc.”²

This text, only partially quoted, reflects the Egyptian understanding of the deity of Pharaoh. Not only is he eternal, worthy of worship, omniscient and the one who imbues Egypt with its existence and power, he is the *ka*, the life force and soul of Egypt. He is its creator. He is descended from the gods. Texts from Luxor and Deir el-Bahari record that the supreme god (Amun or Amon-Re) actually had intercourse with the queen mother in order to produce Pharaoh.³

After his death, Pharaoh went to the place of the gods. There he exercised the right over life and death—some monuments proclaim that the dead king “gives breath to whomsoever he pleases.” Even the elements of nature were thought to obey him in death. The inundation of the Nile, an event the Egyptians depended on for survival, occurred at the will of the dead king. Elaborate funerary architecture was built for him so that he would bless Egypt in the afterlife. Those entrusted with the cult of the dead king continually made offerings to him and worshiped him. Rekhmire, a vizier of the XVIIIth Dynasty (1550-1307 B.C.) summarized the matter: “What is the king of Upper and Lower Egypt? He is a god by whose dealings one lives, the father and mother of all men, alone by himself, without an equal.”⁴

The conflict between the Hebrew God Yahweh and Pharaoh as an Egyptian deity took a variety of forms. In Exodus 5:1, for example, Moses confronts Pharaoh with the formulaic opening, “Thus saith Yahweh, the God of Israel, ‘Let My people go . . .’” In the Bible, when a prophet (such as Moses) uses that expression he is using a common Near Eastern idiom for the final, authoritative word of a god. In other words, “Thus saith . . .” was a proclamation derived directly from the gods. The prophet’s role was simply to communicate the authoritative announcement. The Egyptians were well aware of that formula and its significance; many of their own texts introduce the pronouncements of deities in the same way. For example, several sections of the Book of the Dead begin “Thus saith Atum . . .”

When Pharaoh hears Moses proclaim, “Thus saith Yahweh . . .,” he realizes he is being directly

challenged by the deity of the Hebrews. In Exodus 5:10, Pharaoh’s henchmen address the Israelites: “Thus saith Pharaoh . . .” The command of the Egyptian king is arrogantly announced in the same divine language Moses uses of Yahweh. The gauntlet has thus been thrown down—the Egyptian deity Pharaoh replies to Yahweh’s challenge with a challenge of his own.

In the serpent confrontation of Exodus 7:8-13, Pharaoh requests a miracle from Moses and Aaron as proof of the power and magical abilities of Yahweh. In this opening skirmish, Yahweh’s messengers turn Aaron’s staff into a snake; Pharaoh replies in kind, and all of his wise men turn their rods into serpents. Yahweh’s power is superior, however, because Aaron’s staff swallows those of the Egyptians. The serpent, or uraeus, was an emblem of Pharaoh’s power during the New Kingdom period. On most pharaonic crowns were two golden serpents reflecting the king’s royalty and sovereignty (especially over the two lands of Upper and Lower Egypt)—Yahweh’s challenge was directed at the very symbol of Pharaoh’s power.

The principal motif of the deity conflict between Pharaoh and Yahweh, however, is the “hardening of Pharaoh’s heart.” That expression is repeatedly used to explain Pharaoh’s refusal to obey Yahweh’s command to release the Israelites.

Three Hebrew terms are used interchangeably throughout this pericope to describe the state of Pharaoh’s heart. The most common is *hazaq* (Exodus 4:21, 9:12, 10:20,27, 14:4,8), but occasionally *qasa* (Exodus 7:3) and *kaved* (Exodus 10:1) are used. *Kaved* literally means heavy, which, as we shall see, has a special significance as applied to the heart in Egyptian mythology. *Hazaq* conveys the sense of tough and strong. *Qasa* means to be difficult and conveys stubbornness.⁵ Because they appear to be interchangeable here, they are often translated by the same word—“to harden” Pharaoh’s heart or, sometimes, “to stiffen” his heart. In terms of Egyptian mythology, the best translation may be “to make his heart heavy.”

In the context of Egyptian culture, with which the Israelites are in conflict, what does it mean that Pharaoh’s heart is hardened? And why does the God of the Hebrews harden Pharaoh’s heart?

In ancient Egyptian sacred texts, the heart (*ib*) represents the essence of the person. The great Egyptologist E. A. Wallis Budge defined *ib* as the “heart, middle, interior, sense, wisdom, understanding, intelligence, attention, intention, disposition, manner, will, wish, desire, mind, courage, lust, self, and thoughts” of a person.⁶ The *ib* is distinguished from the *ba* (soul, spirit, body) and the *ka* (a manifestation of the vital energy, both shad-



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owy and ill-defined concepts. The *ib* is simply the inner, spiritual center of oneself, arguably the most important part of the human in ancient Egyptian religion.

After someone died, the heart was weighed in the balance of truth to determine the kind of after-life the deceased would receive. The heart of the deceased, on one side of the scale, was balanced on the other with a feather. If the heart outweighed the feather, the deceased was in trouble.

The Book of the Dead (The Papyrus of Ani) contains a dramatic description in words and pictures of this weighing process.⁷ Ani and his wife Tutu are depicted entering the hall of judgment. They both bow to demonstrate their devotion to the gods and submission to their judgment.

If his heart is too heavy, Ani will be adjudged a sinner and cast to the goddess Amenit, the Devouress; if, however, his heart is no heavier than the feather, then Ani will receive the righteous reward of eternal life. Ani addresses his heart in these words:

“O my heart from my mother! O my heart from my mother! O my heart from my different forms!⁸ Do not stand against me as a witness! Do not oppose me before the Assessors!⁹ Do not be belligerent to me before the One who keeps the balance!¹⁰ You are my *ka*¹¹ which was

THE BALANCE OF TRUTH renders judgment on the dead in ancient Egyptian religion, as illustrated in this detail from the papyrus of Hu-nefer, a work dated to the New Kingdom (1550-1090 B.C.). At left, the dog- or jackal-headed Anubis, originally chief god of the dead, leads the deceased to the balance. Anubis then weighs the heart of the deceased, in the pan at the left end of the balance, against a feather, in the right-hand pan. Beneath the balance on the right sits Amenit, the Devouress, who will eat the deceased if the heart outweighs the feather (the sign of a sinner). To the right of the balance, Thoth, the recorder, writes the results of the judgment.

The Exodus story uses three Hebrew terms interchangeably to describe Pharaoh’s heart. Although these terms usually appear as “harden” or “stiffen” in translations, the author suggests that the best translation would be “to make his heart heavy,” an event that would doom Pharaoh to be devoured by Amenit in the afterlife. By making Pharaoh’s heart heavy, Yahweh was judging him to be a sinner, thereby contradicting Egyptian belief in Pharaoh’s perfection. Moreover, by this action, Yahweh demonstrated his supremacy over Pharaoh.



SCARABS, modeled on the dung beetle, were the most popular amulets in dynastic Egypt. This example, probably from Thebes, dates to about 1400 B.C and measures nearly 3 inches long. The inscribed lower surface of a scarab bears a text, an official's name or a decorative symbol. Scarabs inscribed with a text from the Book of the Dead, like this one (lower photo), served as a popular protection for the heart, because the Egyptians associated the beetle with the heart.

The dung beetle's prominence in Egyptian tradition stemmed from the parallel that the Egyptians saw between the beetle and the sun. The beetle's activity—rolling a ball of dung on the ground and burying it—resembled the rolling of the sun across the sky and its burial in the earth at night. In addition, the Egyptians believed that the beetle was self-generating, a parallel to the belief that the sun-god had created himself.

in my belly; the protector who strengthened my limbs. Go forth into the joyous place. Do not make my name stink before the officials who make men! Do not speak lies about me in the presence of the god!"¹²

Ani's plea is effective. He is judged not to be a sinner. Thoth pronounces this judgment:

"Thoth, judge of truth, to the great Ennead [the tribunal of gods] who are in the presence of Osiris: Hear this speech to notable truth. The heart belonging to Osiris [i.e., Ani's heart] has been weighed, and his soul stands as a witness for him. His deeds are true in the Great Balance. No crime has been found in him. He did not subtract (any) offerings from the temples. He did not damage what he made. He did not go in the lies of deceitful speech while he was on earth."¹³

The scales of righteousness are thus balanced. The *ennead*, or assembly of gods, then makes the final pronouncement regarding Ani's character and his fitness for future existence: "No sin is found in him; he has no evil to be with us. Amemit [the Devouress] shall have no power over him."¹⁴ Ani is then received into the Field of Reeds, the Egyptian heaven or abode of the dead.

The condition of one's heart thus determined whether or not one entered the afterlife. If a person's heart was heavy-laden with misdeeds, the person would, in effect, be annihilated; if the heart was filled with integrity, truth and good acts, the person would earn an escort to heavenly bliss.

The heart of the dead could be protected by various trinkets. The most important was the *scarabeus sacer*, a scarab that contained inscribed spells from the Book of the Dead. The scarab was a sculpted model of the dung beetle, which was used as an amulet or seal. The most popular charm symbol in dynastic Egypt, it has been found by the thousands.¹⁵ Usually the amulet was made out of faience or other hard material, and on its lower surface was inscribed either a text, the name of an official or some other decorative symbol.

Dung beetles roll a ball of dung on the ground and then bury it. This reminded the ancient Egyptians of the invisible force that rolled the sun across the sky and pushed it under the earth at night. So the Egyptians adopted the dung beetle as an earthly model of the sun and its movements. The ancient Egyptians also believed they saw newborn beetles emerge from the dung ball. Since dung beetles have no apparent gender distinctions, ancient Egyptians believed the dung beetle's young were formed by an autogenic process, in other words, by self-genera-

tion. Here is Plutarch's description of the process:

"As for the scarab-beetle, it is held that there are no females of this species; they are all males. They place their seed in a round pellet of material, which they roll up into a sphere and roll along, pushing it with their hind legs, imitating by their action the course of the sun from east to west which seems to follow a direction opposite to that which the sky follows."¹⁶

This belief in the dung beetle's autogenesis paralleled the Egyptian belief that the sun-god created himself.

The ancient Egyptians also associated the dung beetle with the human heart—the seat of emotion, the center of the intellect and the soul, and the place of one's character or personality.

When Yahweh made Pharaoh's heart heavy, this should be understood against the Egyptian background of the story. The God of the Hebrews was serving as the judge of Pharaoh. Yahweh weighed the heart of the Egyptian king and then proclaimed the result for all to see. Pharaoh was simply judged to be a sinner and worthy of condemnation. This is in striking contrast to the Egyptian belief in Pharaoh's perfection. Texts frequently commanded the Egyptians who approached the king to prostrate themselves, "smelling the earth, crawling on the ground" and "invoking this perfect God and exalting his beauty." When the biblical text tells us that Yahweh hardened Pharaoh's heart, this is a polemic against the prevailing thought of Pharaoh's pure and untainted character. In Exodus 9:34, the idea of sin and a hardened heart are explicitly linked: "[Pharaoh] sinned once more and hardened his heart" (NRSV).

According to Egyptian belief, Pharaoh's heart was the all-controlling factor both in history and society.¹⁷ Yahweh, however, even controlled Pharaoh's heart; he could harden it. This demonstrated that only the God of the Hebrews was the true sovereign of the universe, for Yahweh controlled the very heart of Egypt's king.

The ultimate purpose of hardening Pharaoh's heart was to glorify Yahweh and to demonstrate his control of the entire universe. This too is made explicit in the biblical text:

"I will harden Pharaoh's heart . . . so that I gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army; and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord" (Exodus 14:4; see also Exodus 14:17-18).

There is an interesting pun in these two passages from Exodus 14. Each refers to the glory that God will gain from his hardening of Pharaoh's heart. The root of the word for glory (or honor) is

KVD (pronounced *kavod*); this is the same root as one of the three interchangeable words used for heavy—*kaved*.^{*} Indeed, the words are related. Honor lends a certain weightiness to a person. When the same root is applied to the heart, it is made heavy. And in Egyptian terms that meant sinful. Thus, the *kvd* (honor or glory) was Yahweh's, while the *kvd* (the sinfulness of a heavy heart) was Pharaoh's. And that, of course, is the whole point of the Exodus story. BR

* Classical Hebrew is written without vowels. The reader is supposed to know from the context what vowels to supply. Frequently a word will have a slightly different, or significantly different meaning, depending on the vowels used.

¹ The literature making this correlation is quite extensive. See, for example, Ziony Zevit's "Three Ways to Look at the Ten Plagues," *Bible Review*, June 1990; George A.F. Knight, *Theology as Narration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976); Jack Finegan, *Let My People Go* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963); and many others. W.M. Flinders Petrie, in *Egypt and Israel* (1911, pp. 25-36), was the first to demonstrate that the plagues followed one another in the calendar year. Greta Hort attempted to explain away the miraculous in the plagues in an important study, "The Plagues of Egypt," in *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* (ZAW) 69 (1957), pp. 84-103, and ZAW 70 (1958), pp. 48-59.

² "The Divine Attributes of Pharaoh," trans. John Wilson in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 2nd edition, ed. James Pritchard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1955), p. 431.

³ For discussion of texts discovered in the temples of two sites, see Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1948), pp. 40-47.

⁴ Alan Gardiner, "The Autobiography of Rekhmire," *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 60 (1934), p. 69.

⁵ For an in-depth study of these terms, see Gregory K. Beale, "An Exegetical and Theological Consideration of the Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart in Exodus 4:14 and Romans 9," *Trinity Journal* 5 (1984), pp. 129-154. I encourage readers to consult Beale's work because it is a critical study and it supplied much of the impetus for the present article.

⁶ E.A. Wallis Budge, *An Egyptian Hieroglyphic Dictionary* (London: John Murray, 1920).

⁷ For colored reproductions of the Papyrus of Ani, see E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Dead: Papyrus of Ani*, Vol. III (New York: Putnam, 1913), and R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead* (New York: Macmillan, 1972).

⁸ The author of the text includes a mummy determinative here—Ani is probably telling his heart not to desert him even though he is dead and mummified.

⁹ Probably a reference to the *emnead*, the tribunal of gods awaiting to pass judgment on Ani.

¹⁰ The ancient mortuary god Anubis.

¹¹ The *ka* sign represents the spirit or essence of a person. See, John D. Currid, "An Examination of the Egyptian Background of the Genesis Cosmogony," *Biblische Zeitschrift* (1991), p. 24, n. 31.

¹² *Book of the Dead XXXB*. All quotations are the author's translations unless otherwise noted.

¹³ *Book of the Dead XXXB*.

¹⁴ *Book of the Dead XXXB*.

¹⁵ See, for instance, William A. Ward, *Studies on Scarab Seals I* (Warminster, UK: Aris and Phillips, 1978); Olga Tufnell, *Studies on Scarab Seals II*, 2 vols. (Warminster, UK: Aris and Phillips, 1984); Alan Rowe, *A Catalogue of Egyptian Scarabs* (Cairo: Imprimerie de l'Institut Français, d'Archeologie Orientale, 1936); Flinders Petrie, *Scarabs and Cylinders* (London: School of Archaeology in Egypt, 1917); Carol Andrews, *Egyptian Mummies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984); and many others.

¹⁶ Plutarch, *Moralia* 10 (355A), 74 (381A); cited in G. Posener, *Dictionary of Egyptian Civilization* (New York: Tudor Publ., 1959), p. 252. Other ancient authors who denied the existence of a female *scarabeus* include Horapollo (*Hieroglyphics*), Aelian (*De Natura Animalium* 10.15) and Porphyry (*De abstinentia* 4.9). For a general discussion, see E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Mummy* (New York: Macmillan, 1972).

¹⁷ Beale, "An Exegetical and Theological Consideration," p. 149.