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ARTICLES

Pharmaceutical Companies Predicted?

By Martin Pröbstle

What does the Greek word *pharmakeia* mean in Revelation 18:23?

There is an idea circulating that Revelation 18:23 predicts our time because the Greek word *pharmakeia* appears in this verse. There it is said to Babylon, “For by your sorcery [*pharmakeia*] all the nations were deceived.”¹

This is said to be a prophetic reference to the coronavirus crisis and the role of the pharmaceutical companies with their vaccines. Anyone can immediately recognize the similarity to the root word *pharma-*, which we use in many words today.² In fact, the ancient Greek words starting with *pharma-* have a range of meaning, and *pharmakeia* can definitely mean “medicine” and “remedies” in certain contexts.³ But does *pharmakeia* in Revelation 18:23 really refer to the pharmaceutical industry and coronavirus vaccination, as some promulgate? The short answer: *pharmakeia* in Revelation 18:23 refers to sorcery—that is, occult practices and magic—not pharmaceutical drugs. The following arguments justify this statement:

The Textual Context of Revelation 18

We know how problematic it is to ignore the context and original intent of the text. When we take biblical statements out of their context, even with the intent to “apply” them, we distort their message. There is the saying “A text without a context is a pretext for a proof text,” for anything you want to prove.⁴ We

must be especially careful not to take Bible verses out of context.

Revelation 18 is about the fall of Babylon, which is metaphorically described here predominantly as a city, but also as a woman (see Rev 17). Three groups of clients of the “Harlot Babylon” have their say and mourn the destruction of the city in cries of woe: the kings of the earth (Rev 18:9–10), the merchants (Rev 18:11–17a), and the seamen (Rev 18:17b–19). This is followed by the speech of a strong angel (Rev 18:21–24). First, the latter notes that the festive and everyday life of the city, exemplified in music, industry, food production, lights, and weddings, will no longer be present. His final justification of the fall of Babylon states, “For by your sorcery [*pharmakeia*] all the nations were deceived” (Rev 18:23).

Remarkably, this is the only activity of Babylon mentioned in the angel’s speech, although elsewhere in Revelation quite a few are stated. Thus, the focus is especially on the deception—and on *pharmakeia* as a means for it. This must therefore be something that defines Babylon; it is not a secondary activity.

The Greek verb *planaō* means “lead astray, mislead, deceive”⁵ and primarily denotes the distortion of divine truth, the seduction to spiritual immorality and idolatry (cf. Rev 2:20). In the book of Revelation, this eschatological deception occurs through miraculous signs (Rev 13:13–14; 16:14; 19:20). *Pharmakeia* therefore has to do with the use of miraculous signs to deceive.

Babylon’s seducing of the nations is also likened to fornication. “All nations” have drunk of the “wine of

the wrath of her fornication” (Rev 14:8; 18:3). Fornication is here a picture of spiritual harlotry (Rev 17:2, 4; 18:3, 9; cf. 2:14, 20) that corrupts the whole earth (Rev 19:2; cf. 11:18). This refers to false spiritual teachings with which Babylon seduces its allies. The metaphor of seduction and fornication is already used in the messages to the seven churches (Rev 2:14–15, 20–22) and goes back to the prophetic imagery of the Old Testament, which refers to idolatry as fornication (so, e.g., in Jer 3; Ezek 16; 23; Hos 2–3).

Pharmakeia is thus connected with miraculous signs and spiritual fornication, with false worship and idolatry. Thus the meaning of “sorcery,” which has to do with signs and deception, is appropriate. Revelation 18:23 is not about medicinal remedies, the pharmaceutical industry, or the like. Rather, the angel explains that Babylon’s judgment is the result of her self-glorification and the universal effect of her idolatrous and deceptive claim to dominion over the world, the realization of which will be accompanied by disastrous demonic activity at the time of the end.

The Pharma Group in the Book of Revelation

Words of the root *pharma-* occur four times in Revelation: in addition to *pharmakeia* (Rev 18:23), the plural nouns *pharmakōn* (“sorceries,” Rev 9:21) and *pharmakoi* (“sorcerers,” Rev 21:8; 22:15) appear.

Revelation 9:21 says that at the time of the sixth trumpet people did not repent “of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.” Here, *pharmakōn* is used alongside terms pertaining to the Ten Commandments—murder, fornication, theft—and the verse preceding adds to this the worship of demons and idols (Rev 9:20).

In Revelation 21:8 and 22:15, John includes sorcery among the sins of those who suffer the second death and do not enter the new Jerusalem. In both places *pharmakoi* are mentioned in a list of people with wrongful behavior, in immediate relation to explicit transgressors of the Ten Commandments: murderers, the sexually immoral, idolaters, and liars (Rev 21:8; 22:15).⁶

In these three catalogs of vices and evildoers (Rev 9:21; 21:8; 22:15), the meaning of sorcery fits best for the *pharma* word. Because of its use of supernatural, non-divine powers, sorcery is associated within the book of Revelation with idolatry and spiritual immorality, just as it appears in these lists. Translating the *pharma* words in the semantic field of “medicine, remedy,” however, appears to be rather meaningless contextually.

Pharmakeia in the New Testament

Pharmakeia occurs in only one other place in the New Testament: in a list of fifteen vices in Galatians

5:20.⁷ After three words for sexual sins come two words that describe primarily religious transgressions, idolatry and *pharmakeia*, before eight words targeting sins that have their primary effect in social relationships and two words concerning intemperance or a dissolute lifestyle. *Pharmakeia* is thus mentioned together with idolatry, as is the case with *pharmakōn* and *pharmakoi* in the book of Revelation (9:21; 21:8; 22:15). The translation of “sorcery” is therefore much more appropriate than “poison mixing” or “medicine making.”

For “sorcery” there is also another Greek word group that starts with *mag-*, which is known to us from the terms “magic” and “magician.” In the entire Greek Bible, *mageia* (“sorcery,” Acts 8:11) and *mageuō* (“to practice sorcery,” Acts 8:9) occur only once each; *magos* (“sorcerer”) occurs somewhat more often (Matt 2:1, 7, 16; Acts 13:6, 8 and a few times in Daniel). But why does Revelation 18:23 not use *mageia*, which distinctly means sorcery alone? Some think that this is because *pharmakeia* in fact means something other than sorcery. It seems, however, that *pharmakeia* is used because the *pharma* group, in contrast to the *mag* group, is also associated elsewhere with fornication (Rev 9:21; 21:8; 22:15), which fits the metaphor “harlot Babylon,” and because it evokes precisely the Old Testament associations that one wants to posit in the book of Revelation. *Mageia* cannot provide either and therefore does not fit in this verse.

Pharmakeia in the Old Testament

Also contributing to the range of meanings of a biblical Greek term is its use in the Septuagint, which, as the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (with a few additional Greek writings), is often referred to as the Bible of the first Christians. In the Septuagint, *pharmakeia* occurs eight times (Exod 7:11, 22; 8:3, 14 [ET 7, 18]; Isa 47:9, 12; *Wisdom of Solomon* 12:4; 18:13). It always denotes sorcery, never poison or medicinal remedies.

The Hebrew words, which *pharmakeia* translates, are *lat* (“magic spell, enchantment,” Exod 7:11, 22; 8:3, 14 [ET 7, 18]; cf. the meaning “secrecy” in Judg 4:21; Ruth 3:7; 1 Sam 18:22; 24:5), its alternative form *lahat* (“enchantment,” Exod 7:11), and *keshef* (“sorcery,” Isa 47:9, 12). While *lat* and *lahat* occur only in the indicated verses, *keshef* occurs also in three other texts, always with the meaning “sorcery” and in connection with divination and fornication (2 Kgs 9:22; Mic 5:11 [ET 12]; Nah 3:4).⁹ Thus, the meanings of these Hebrew words likewise do not suggest a connection to medicinal remedies.

In the Septuagint, three other related terms appear, all of which refer to magic or poison, though one term also refers positively to medicine. The noun *pharmakon* occurs twelve times, designating physicians (*Tobit* 2:10), medicine (*Tobit* 6:4, 7; 11:8, 11; *Sirach*

6:16; 38:4), or magical potion (2 Kgs 9:22 [LXX 4 Kgs 9:22]; Mic 5:11 [ET 12]; Nah 3:4 [twice]), and poison (*Wisdom of Solomon* 1:14). The verb *pharmakeuō* occurs three times and refers to practicing magic (2 Chr 33:6), being mixed with poison (Ps 58:6 [ET 58:5; LXX 57:6], and poisoning oneself (2 *Maccabees* 10:13). The noun *pharmakos* occurs thirteen times, always referring to mixers of magical potions, sorcerers, or magicians (Exod 7:11; 9:11 [twice]; 22:17 [ET 18]; Deut 18:10; Ps 58:6 [ET 58:5; LXX 57:6]; Mal 3:5; Jer 27:9 [LXX 34:9]; Dan [OG] 2:2, 27; 5:7, 8; Dan [Theod.] 2:2). In sum, while of the four *pharma*-terms in the Greek Old Testament only *pharmakon* is found to also include the positive aspect of medicinal remedies, the term *pharmakeia* exclusively signifies sorcery.

Old Testament Allusions Evoked by *Pharmakeia*

The book of Revelation is full of allusions and echoes of the Old Testament. Therefore, when examining its language and symbolism, it is necessary to carefully consider which possible Old Testament backgrounds are evident. In the main part of the book (Rev 8–18), one recognizes an “Exodus-from-Egypt”/“Fall-of-Babylon” motif.¹⁰ The term *pharmakeia* alludes ingeniously to the plagues in Egypt and to the fall of ancient Babylon: the magical arts of the magicians of Egypt (Exod 7:11, 22; 8:14 [ET 18]) had nothing to do with remedies or pharmaceuticals; only the blood/water miracle could perhaps be associated with poison.¹¹

Isaiah 47 prophesies the fall of ancient Babylon. In verse 9, “the multitude of your sorceries [*pharmakeia*]” parallels “the great abundance of your enchantments.” Sorcery is here associated with magical spells, not with poison or remedies. This meaning is also seen regarding the sorcerers in the royal courts of the surrounding nations (Jer 27:3).

Revelation 18:23 is also particularly reminiscent of Nahum 3:4, where the harlot Nineveh is called “the mistress of sorceries [plural of *pharmakon*],” “who sells nations through her harlotries, and families through her sorceries [plural of *pharmakon*].” Nineveh as a prostitute and sorceress refers to more than just the cruel oppression of Judah and other peoples of the ancient Near East. Fornication and sorcery describe Nineveh’s seduction and forcing her will on others, and the two metaphors also include the idea of idolatry.¹² “The result is a seductive and fornicating being that is in league with demonic forces and brings death to all who follow it.”¹³ Jezebel was already known for this, introducing Baal and Asherah worship, and therefore Jehu accuses her of magical-mantic practices (“The harlotries of your mother Jezebel and her witchcraft are so many,” 2 Kgs 9:22). God always opposes sorcery (Deut 18:10–12) and those who practice it (Exod 22:17 [ET 18]; Lev 20:6, 27). God promises to remove all pagan worship, along with the occult, from His people (Mic 5:12–14 [ET 13–15]).

The Usage of *Pharmakeia* in Greek Literature

In Greco-Roman times, the art of medicine was highly respected and often practiced at an astounding level.¹⁴ There is an abundance of information about medicinal and herbal treatments in ancient times. An even greater amount is likely to have been lost. The sources we have, however, reveal to us more of a rich diversity than a homogeneous system of ancient medicine. For example, the field of ancient medicine included drugs, herbs, and plants and their accompanying procedures (ancient pharmacology),¹⁵ anatomical discoveries and surgery, magical remedies, spells, and chants, to name a few. Such variety is also reflected in the variety of meanings that the specific vocabulary of the *pharma* word group can have.

While in the Bible *pharmakeia* means exclusively “sorcery,” in extrabiblical Greek it can also refer to the administration of poison¹⁶ or to the use of drugs in magical practices.¹⁷ Their ingestion was thought to induce hallucinations and visions and to establish contact with the spirit world. In some cases, *pharmakeia* may also mean medicines.¹⁸ Therefore, the semantic range of *pharmakeia* in the extant Greek literature is wider than in biblical Greek. The related term *pharmakon* refers to “any substance (including magical talismans) thought to be able to alter the body for good or ill. The word encompasses both drugs and poisons.”¹⁹ It can also indicate remedies in contexts where healing is involved; for example, Homer uses it to cover both healing drugs for external applications,²⁰ magical potions,²¹ and poison.²² Other *pharma* words have similar connotations.²³

In summary, the range of meanings of the Greek *pharma* word group includes poison, drugs, and remedies, in addition to sorcery and magic. As might be expected, it is the context that decisively determines the meaning of the specific *pharma* word.

So, *pharmakeia* in extrabiblical Greek can take the meaning of “medicine” in certain contexts. However, considering the immediate context in Revelation 18, the New Testament use of *pharmakeia*, and the Old Testament background and allusions, the meaning of “medicine” or the like in Revelation 18:23 must be ruled out.

Some may fall into the lexical fallacy and claim that for *pharmakeia* the meaning “medicine” cannot be ruled out one hundred percent for all places and therefore it could refer also in Revelation 18:23 to pharmaceutical companies and their products. However, as important as establishing the semantic field of a word is, the immediate context remains primary and central for its meaning. The fact that one meaning of a word cannot be ruled out for all its occurrences does not imply that this one meaning cannot be ruled out for a particular occurrence. And the evidence given so far precludes *pharmakeia* from meaning “medicine” in Revelation 18:23.

Further Thoughts on *Pharmakeia*

At this point, we will briefly discuss some statements that are brought forward to support the argument that Revelation 18:23 speaks of remedies and the role of the pharmaceutical industry during the coronavirus crisis.

1. It is often cited that *Strong's Dictionary* gives “medication” as the first definition for *pharmakeia*.²⁴ Strong created his dictionary in 1890 to provide a simple translation aid for word roots to readers who cannot read biblical languages. Much has happened in linguistics since then. Nowadays there are much better dictionaries that also consider all occurrences of the word in and outside the Bible as well as their contexts. These translate *pharmakeia* in all biblical places with “sorcery.” The principle is that words must be interpreted both according to their grammatical relationship in the sentence and according to the context of the passage in which they occur.²⁵ For us, it follows that one cannot simply pick one meaning out of many given somewhere and apply it to a particular occurrence of that word without considering translation principles.

2. Some believe that the context of a prophecy is not understood until it is fulfilled. One should therefore consider the current coronavirus crisis, in which end-time Babylon is supposedly beginning to crystallize, as a canvas for interpreting Revelation 18:23. But this puts the cart before the horse. Whoever believes that to interpret *pharmakeia* correctly because Revelation 18:23 is being fulfilled today, one must already know what the text prophesies, even before he or she interprets the text, is engaging more in eisegesis than exegesis—more is read into the Bible than out of it.²⁶

3. The idea that occultism and healing were not infrequently linked in the pagan nations must not lead one to understand “sorcery” in Revelation 18:23 to include healing and, of course, to assume that “healing” then includes the modern medicinal drug industry. Moreover, it seems there is a certain negative bias against modern pharmaceutical products manifesting itself here. However, it does not seem fair from today's point of view to understand all pharmacology and pharmaceuticals as well as natural remedies (these were also called *pharmakon*) as the means employed by Babylon or as harmful drugs or poisons.

4. But does *pharmakeia* not contain pharmacy after all? We have seen that John chose the word *pharmakeia* because of the biblical context of sorcery, and not because of our modern associations with similar terms. We need to avoid the misuse of subsequent meaning and must not read twenty-first century meanings of words into the ancient words of the Bible without considering their original context. We do not use *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* to interpret Greek words. For example, no one would understand the Greek “Hades” (e.g., Matt 11:23; 16:18; Luke 10:15; 16:23; Rev 6:8) as the deity of the underworld or the realm of the living dead, as the term is commonly defined today.²⁷ In linguistics there is the term “false friend” to describe an expression (in our case, *pharmakeia*) that has a similar form to an expression in a person's native language (*pharmacy*), but a different meaning.

Conclusion

The best translation of *pharmakeia* in Revelation 18:23 is “sorcery.” All common Bible translations render the word correctly. Even the specialized dictionaries suggest the translation “sorcery” without exception.²⁸ If one wants to explain the application of this text to end-time Babylon, *pharmakeia* suggests a connection between ancient sorcery and modern spiritualism, which undoubtedly have much in common.²⁹

The focus of the discussion about *pharmakeia*, however, is not so much about pharmaceutical companies or sorcery as it is about biblical interpretation. Therefore, let us use and consider our basic and time-tested principles of biblical hermeneutics! We use and apply these principles of studying the context, language, and historical background in connection with other texts, and we do well when we apply these principles in the interpretation of Revelation 18:23 also.

Martin Pröbstle
Professor of Old Testament
and dean of the Department
of Theology, Seminar Schloss
Bogenhofen, Austria



¹ All biblical quotations are from the NKJV.

² E.g., “pharmacology” (the science of drugs or the properties and reactions of drugs), “pharmacologist” (specialist in the science of medications), “pharmacy” (drugstore or health science in relation to medicinal drugs), “pharmacist” (health care professional licensed to engage in pharmacy), “pharma” or “pharmaceutical company” (company that manufactures medicinal drugs), and “pharmaceutical representatives” (representative for medicinal drugs).

³ See the section “The Usage of *Pharmakeia* in Greek Literature.”

⁴ The saying is often attributed to D. A. Carson; see D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 117.

⁵ Frederick W. Danker et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 821–822.

⁶ The sequence of the individual categories are somewhat different. Cf. “But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers [*pharmakoi*], idolaters, and all liars ...” (Rev 21:8) and “Dogs and sorcerers [*pharmakoi*] and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie ...” (Rev 22:15). “Dogs” parallels the “abominable” and probably refers to sexual perversion or cult prostitution in pagan temples and worship (in Deut 23:18–19 [ET vv. 17–18] the term “dogs” [Heb. *kelev*] is used

in parallel with harlot [Heb. *zonah*] in v. 19 [ET v. 18] but also to “consecrated one, cult prostitute” [Heb. *kadesh*] in v. 18 [ET v. 17]).

⁷ Besides Galatians 5:20, *pharmakeia* additionally appears as a variant reading in Revelation 9:21. A variant reading is a different version of a text in one or more Greek manuscripts. In a textual tradition of Revelation 9:21 that is first attested in the Codex Alexandrinus (fifth century), the plural form is *pharmakeiōn* (from the singular *pharmakeia*), while the plural form *pharmakōn* (from the singular *pharmakon*) is attested as early as the third century (e.g., Papyrus 47 [third century], Codex Sinaiticus [fourth century], and Codex Ephraemi [fifth century]). *Pharmakōn* is probably the original reading because it is attested in older manuscripts and because it is more likely that *pharmakōn*, which occurs only in this passage in the New Testament, was changed to *pharmakeiōn*, which is also found in its singular form in Revelation 18:23 and Galatians 5:20. See Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the New Testament* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1971), 742.

⁸ See Johan Lust, Erik Eynikel, and Katrin Hauspie, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*, rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2003), 643; Joanne K. Kuemmerlin-McLean, “Magic: Old Testament,” in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:468–471.

⁹ See David J. A. Clines, ed., *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 9 vols. (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 1993–2014), 4:471.

¹⁰ Kenneth A. Strand, “‘Victorious-Introduction’ Scenes,” in *Symposium on Revelation*, vol. 1, *Introductory and Exegetical Studies*, ed. Frank B. Holbrook, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series 6 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992), 66–67.

¹¹ The magicians of Egypt make serpents out of their rods (Exod 7:11), turn water into blood (Exod 7:22), and cannot bring forth a gnat (Exod 8:14 [ET v. 18]).

¹² Klaas Spronk, *Nahum*, Historical Commentary on the Old Testament (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1997), 122–123, writes, “‘Harlotry and sorceries’ . . . represent two different aspects of evil power. Harlotry denotes the ability to seduce others, sorcery denotes the possibility to forcing one’s will upon the other. The first can be related to Nineveh as an attractive city, the second to the idea so often expressed in Assyrian texts that they had the mightiest gods on their side. One could think of the many curses added to the vassal treaties mentioning all kinds of supernatural sanctions on breaking the treaty.” So also Duane L. Christensen, *Nahum*, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 343; and Heinz-Josef Fabry, *Nahum*, Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament (Freiburg: Herder, 2006), 191–194 (p. 193: “Assyrische Propaganda und Wortgeklingel ist immer schon verkappte Verführung zum Götzendienst”).

¹³ A. Berlejung, “Erinnerungen an Assyrien in Nahum 2,4–3,19,” in *Die unwiderstehliche Wahrheit: Studien zur alttestamentlichen Prophetie, Festschrift für Arndt Meinhold*, ed. Rüdiger Lux and Ernst-Joachim Waschke, Arbeiten zur Bibel und ihrer Geschichte 23 (Leipzig 2006), 339–340 (translation by Martin Pröbstle).

¹⁴ For an in-depth treatment of ancient medicine, see Vivian Nutton, *Ancient Medicine*, 2nd ed., Sciences of Antiquity (London: Routledge, 2013); Laura M. Zucconi, *Ancient Medicine: From Mesopotamia to Rome* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019); the chapters “On Healing and the Human Body,” in Georgia A. Irby, ed., *A Companion to Science, Technology, and Medicine in Ancient Greece and Rome*, Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 343–515, esp. Molly Jones-Lewis on “Pharmacy” (pp. 402–417); and Paul T. Keyser and John Scarborough, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Science and Medicine in the Classical World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). For a comprehensive dictionary on ancient medicine, see Karl-Heinz Leven, ed., *Antike Medizin: ein Lexikon* (Munich: Beck, 2005). For the early Christian reception of Greek medicine and the development of Christian medical treatment in the first five centuries, see Gary B. Ferngren, *Medicine and Health Care in Early Christianity* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2009).

¹⁵ Most impressive is Galen’s theory of drugs as established in his

treatises *On the Properties of Simples* and *On the Composition of Drugs*, covering thousands of pages.

¹⁶ E.g., Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 15.47; and Polybios, *Histories* 6.13.4.

¹⁷ E.g., Plato, *Laws* 933a.b. Plato includes under the category *pharmakeia* practices like trickery (*manganeiais*), incantations (*epōdais*), and binding spells (*katadeses*). See Kimberly B. Stratton, “Magic, Magician,” *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, 5 vols. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006–2009), 3:767.

¹⁸ E.g., Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 4.2.17.

¹⁹ Jones-Lewis, “Pharmacy,” in Irby, 403. See also Nutton, 98.

²⁰ Homer, *Iliad* 4.190–191; 5.401; 11.846; 13.392; and Homer, *Odyssey* 4.230; 10.287, 302; 11.741; 22.94.

²¹ Homer, *Odyssey* 10.290, 317, 392.

²² *Ibid.* 1.261; 2.329.

²³ For the meaning of *pharmakon* and other related words to *pharmakeia*, see Danker et al., 1050; and Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 1917.

²⁴ In which order a Greek specialized dictionary offers the particular translations of a word has less to do with the preference for translation than with syntactic and semantic considerations and the conceptual arrangement of a lexical article. Such considerations are part of the scientific field of lexicography. In *Strong’s Dictionary*, however, the translation alternatives are “arranged in the alphabetical order of the leading terms” as the *Authorized English Version* of 1873 renders them; see James Strong, *A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek New Testament With Their Renderings in the Authorized English Version* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1890), 5. In the entry for *pharmakeia*, Strong gives as etymology and root meaning “medication (‘pharmacy’), i.e. (by extens.) magic (lit. or fig.),” and then lists the ASV translations for the term: “sorcery, witchcraft” (*ibid.*, 75).

²⁵ Strong, 3, also points out the primacy of context for the meaning of a specific word usage in his preface, when he categorizes his dictionary as “brief and simple,” written for readers “who do not care at all times to consult a more copious and elaborate Lexicon,” deliberately omitting “grammatical, archaeological, or exegetical details.”

²⁶ It is not uncommon to use statements by Ellen G. White about the health message to show how significant the subject of health is supposed to be in the end times. Some deduce that the health message should be found in the book of Revelation, and the term *pharmakeia* in 18:23 is then considered a viable candidate for this. However, her statements do not play a role in the interpretation of Revelation 18:23. She once quotes verses 23 and 24 and introduces this with the words: “Take each verse of this chapter, and read it carefully, especially the last two” (Ellen G. White, Ms 92a, 1898, para. 13). But at no point does White explain this text or the terms *pharmakeia* or “sorceries” (KJV).

²⁷ See, e.g., Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, s.v. “Hades,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Hades> (accessed February 28, 2022); and Wikipedia, s.v. “Hades,” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hades> (accessed February 28, 2022).

²⁸ See, e.g., Danker et al., 1049: “sorcery, magic”; “*pharmakeia*,” in Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990–1993), 3:417: “sorcery, magic”; Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 544: “magic spells”; and “*pharmakeia*,” in James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997): “sorcery, witchcraft, black magic.”

²⁹ In an article on the “Burning of the Magical Books” in Ephesus (Acts 19:19), Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, May 18, 1882, para. 8–9, relates ancient sorcery to modern spiritualism: “The system of magic or sorcery then extant was in reality the same as that which is now known as modern Spiritualism. Many were deceived in Paul’s day by this Satanic delusion, and many are deceived today by the same power. . . . Witchcraft and sorcery are practiced in this Christian age and Christian nation, even more boldly than by the old-time magicians.”

Lessons from Matthew 18

By Clinton Wahlen

Matthew 18 begins a more concentrated focus on Jesus' teaching of the disciples, hinted at already in His discourse on kingdom mysteries (Matt 13:16–17). This chapter presents the fourth of the five major teaching blocks of Jesus.¹ Some of Jesus' most important teachings surface in this chapter, including sayings on who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (Matt 18:4), seeking and saving the lost (Matt 18:11),² dealing with an offending brother (Matt 18:15–17), and the need to forgive “seventy times seven” (Matt 18:22),³ as well as two well-known parables. Opinions differ as to how this chapter is organized. Some divide it into five sections, while others divide it into six (by considering verses 21–22 as a separate unit).⁴ But it actually seems to divide more naturally into three sections: 1) “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” 2) Preserving unity in the church, and 3) “How often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?” It will be helpful for us to understand the structure of this teaching block in more detail before considering its individual units.

Structure of the Discourse on the Kingdom and the Church

Similar to the teaching block on kingdom mysteries (Matt 13) that had some dialogue between Jesus and the disciples (Matt 13:10, 36, 51), this block unfolds in response to two questions. The first question is from the disciples and introduces this teaching block: “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” (Matt 18:1). The second question is from Peter midway through: “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” (Matt 18:21). Between the two sections (roughly equal in length) that answer these questions is a shorter but pivotal middle section that picks up and develops Jesus' teaching on the church first introduced in His response to Peter's confession (see Matt 16:18–19). In a sense, this middle section on the church helps to characterize what precedes and follows it. Important images for understanding the church that appear in the first half include “children” (Matt 18:3), “little ones” (Matt 18:6, 14), and “sheep” (Matt 18:12). Important terms connected with the church in the last half include “brother” (Matt 18:21, 35), “servant(s)” (Matt 18:23, 26–28, 32), and “fellow servant(s)” (Matt 18:28–29, 31, 33). Interestingly, both of these sections conclude with parables that illustrate key ideas—seeking lost sheep and showing forgiveness. The entire chapter,

then, elaborates on relationships within the church and can be outlined in three sections as follows:

Structure of Matthew 18

1. Question: “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” (Matt 18:1–14)

- Conversion and humility (Matt 18:1–5)
 - Warning of offenses (Matt 18:6–9)
 - Seeking and saving the lost (Matt 18:10–11)
- Parable:** the lost sheep (Matt 18:12–14)

2. Preserving unity in the church (Matt 18:15–20)

3. Question: “How often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?” (Matt 18:21–35)

- Showing forgiveness (Matt 18:21–22)
- Parable:** the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:23–35)

Interpretation of Matthew 18

1. Verses 1–14

- Like the third teaching block, the setting for this discourse is a private one (Matt 13:36). Jesus and the disciples are alone in the house (cf. Matt 17:24–25)—probably Peter's house in Capernaum (Matt 8:5, 14). Jesus, in spending more focused time teaching His disciples, draws valuable lessons for every member of the church, beginning with conversion and humility in response to the disciples' question as to who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven. According to the parallel accounts, this question did not arise in a vacuum. On the way back to Capernaum, the twelve had been arguing about which of them would be the greatest in the kingdom (Mark 9:33–34 // Luke 9:46).
- To answer the disciples' question about greatness, Jesus calls a young child to come to Him. The readiness and simplicity with which the child responds in humble obedience to His call becomes an acted parable of how believers (cf. Matt 18:6: “these little ones who believe in Me”) are to relate to Him as well as to God as their heavenly Father (Matt 18:10).

- Being “converted” (literally, the Greek word means “turning around”) and humbly responding as the child did is identified by Jesus as essential for entering the kingdom of heaven. Greatness is found in accepting a humble position of service (which was the role many children filled at that time) rather than seeking a higher one.
- Jesus also suggests that the way we respond to children, whether we treat them kindly and respectfully, is indicative of our response to Him (Matt 18:5; cf. 25:40). On the other hand, if we lead them astray and into sin, He says in so many words, it would be better to die without any hope of resurrection—pictured as having a large, heavy millstone hung around one’s neck and being cast into a watery grave never to be seen again.
- The word translated “cause to sin” (*skandalizō*) or “cause to stumble” (NAS95) literally refers to setting a trap to catch something or someone. By extension, then, it refers to putting something in someone’s way that leads them to lose faith, causes damage to their spirituality, or influences them to do wrong or believe error.
- The image of cutting off one’s hand or foot (Matt 18:8–9), like the related idea of plucking out one’s eye rather than looking at someone with lust in one’s heart (Matt 5:28–29), starkly portrays the seriousness of sin and the extreme means that may be needed to cut it out of one’s life—not literally by dismemberment, but by a sanctified mind shutting down all avenues of temptation. Better even to lose a limb than have the entire body destroyed forever in the fires of hell.⁵
- The parable of the lost sheep applies not just to those outside the church and in need of salvation (Luke 15:4–7), but also to estranged or offended members within the church who need our love and attention in order to find healing and restoration to the fellowship of faith. They need to be sought out and ministered to as diligently as those who do not know Jesus or the message for this time. Otherwise, they may likewise perish (Matt 18:14).
- The reference to “their angels” (Matt 18:10) is one of the verses on which the concept that each person has a “guardian angel” is based (see also Ps 34:7; 91:11; Heb 1:14). Additional biblical support for this are references to the angel who ministered to Elijah during his escape to Horeb (1 Kgs 19:5–8), the angel who protected Daniel in the lion’s den (Dan 6:22), the angel who rescued Peter from prison and certain death (see Acts 12:5–11,

and the exclamation of the disciples in 12:15), and the angels who ministered to Jesus after His temptation in the wilderness (Matt 4:11) and in Gethsemane (Luke 22:43).

2. Verses 15–20

- This famous passage about how to deal with a brother (or sister) in the church who has sinned is easier to understand than to practice. The words “against you” are missing from some important manuscripts but the omission could be due to the confusion of similar-sounding endings.⁶ Therefore, as Matthew 18:15 suggests, the passage specifically focuses on individual relationships between believers, though reproving sin is also a biblical principle (Prov 27:5–6; Gal 6:1).
- This passage does not deal with minor offenses or annoyances because the step of last resort is exclusion from fellowship (Matt 18:17; cf. 1 Cor 5:11). Public, open sin, such as flagrant immoral or illegal conduct, should be publicly rebuked (1 Tim 5:20),⁷ but always in the context of preserving relationships within the spiritual family that is the church (1 Tim 5:1–2).
- The principle of confronting the offending person privately has its precedent in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament: “Debate your case with your neighbor, and do not disclose the secret to another” (Prov 25:9). As the context in Proverbs indicates, there are two sides to every conflict and impartial observers may consider one person, and not the other, at fault. Listening to the other person’s point of view may reveal our own blind spot. Then again, the conversation may help them see their mistake. If so, “you have gained your brother.” The Greek word *kerdainō* (“gain”) is used in connection with winning people to Christ (1 Cor 9:19–22), including in one’s immediate family (1 Pet 3:1), and even gaining Christ Himself (Phil 3:8). In reality, by restoring relationships within the church we retain people for Christ.
- The Greek word translated “church” is *ekklēsia*, used also in Stephen’s speech for “the church in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38, ASV), referring to Israel. The usage by Jesus shows the unbroken continuity of the people of God throughout both Old and New Testaments, the intention to build His church with the twelve apostles as its initial leadership structure, and that their collective decisions as well as those of the Spirit-guided church going forward are to have been bound and loosed in heaven.⁸ That is, the decisions are made first in heaven, and if

church decisions are Spirit-led they will be in harmony with heaven.

- Concluding this central section is one of the most important statements about the unity of the church, based on Christ's continuing presence with His people. Agreement and unity within the church is powerful because nothing can stand in the way of the kingdom's advance (cf. Matt 16:18). When even just two believers agree, guided by Christ's personal presence through the Spirit, they can be assured of answered prayer.
- One of the clearest statements of the deity of Christ is also found here: "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them" (Matt 18:20)—through His Spirit (Rom 8:9; Phil 1:19; 1 Pet 1:11).

3. Verses 21–35

- Peter's question about the number of times one is obligated to forgive (and which assumes a positive reply) seems related to the principle taught by Jesus about forgiving someone who sins against you and repents "seven times in a day" (Luke 17:4). But the answer, alluding to the Jubilee-based prophecy of "70 weeks" (seventy times seven) in Daniel 9:24,⁹ describes a forgiveness that is full and complete and grounded in the atoning death of Christ, the Messiah (Dan 9:26).
- Jesus concludes the section and this discourse with a warning by way of a parable, the interpretation of which is explicitly given: "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, *from his heart*, does not forgive his brother his trespasses" (Matt 18:35, emphasis supplied).
- As is often seen in Jesus' parables, the point is brought home by way of contrast: the abundant forgiveness of a debt impossible to pay with the petty demand of a small debt and refusal to forgive. Ten thousand talents is the equivalent of a national debt, not a personal one, its value being estimated at 60–100 million denarii,¹⁰ with a denarius representing a common laborer's daily wage (Matt 20:2). Assuming about three hundred workdays a year, a laborer would have to work between two hundred thousand and three hundred thousand years to pay off the debt.
- Even this enormous debt of 10,000 talents does not come close to approximating the debt each of us owes as sinners, the only just wages of which is death (Rom 6:23). Having been forgiven so much, we, as "unprofitable servants" (Luke 17:10), can claim no merit

for anything we do as followers of Christ, but will not be excused if we fail to forgive others.

- God's forgiveness is predicated on our acceptance of that forgiveness, which issues in a changed heart and life—something that will be examined in the course of the heavenly judgment that has been ongoing since 1844. Should it be shown that we have only pretended to accept God's gift of salvation (cf. Matt 7:21), our pardon will be removed, our sins will not be blotted out, and we will receive the "wages of sin"—death and destruction in the lake of fire (Rom 6:23; Rev 20:11–15).

Application of the Chapter

Some important lessons we may glean from Matthew 18 include:

1. The disciples' desire for position was rooted in pride and selfishness, rather than the love of God and service for Him. It reflects not the principles of God's kingdom, but the same lust for power that led to strife in heaven. Conflict will result wherever this spirit is seen.

2. Humility, service, and faith are childlike qualities that make one great in the kingdom of heaven.

3. Jesus grounds the counsel of Matthew 18:15–17 in Scripture (quoting Deut 19:15) as the basis for the examination of wrongdoing within the church. Such was Jesus' standard method for discerning and explaining God's will and established the hermeneutical practice for the apostles and the other New Testament writers. It should also guide our interpretation of Scripture.

4. It should be remembered that even those who have been removed (or who removed themselves) from church membership are not thereby cut off from the mercy and love of God, nor should they be cut off from our love and sympathy. To the contrary, they need it even more.

5. Since we all have been freely forgiven through faith in Christ by virtue of His atoning death for sin, His resurrection, and His mediatorial ministry in heaven, we are liberated to forgive others (cf. Matt 10:8). Having been forgiven much and accepted that forgiveness, we are enabled to love much (Luke 7:47).

Clinton Wahlen
Associate Director
Biblical Research Institute



¹ The others are Matthew 5–7, 10, 13, and 24–25.

² Several important manuscripts omit this verse (cf. Luke 19:10), but it is a fitting introduction to the parable that follows (Matt 18:12–14).

³ All biblical quotations are from the NKJV, unless otherwise indicated.

⁴ See W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, “Excursus XIV: The Structure of Chapter 18,” in *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 750–751, who favor six separate units.

⁵ See the discussion of Matthew 5:22 in Clinton Wahlen, “Lessons from Matthew 5,” *Reflections* 64 (October 2018): 10.

⁶ The words “against you” (*eis se*), absent from $\aleph$ and B, approximate the aorist subjunctive ending (*-ēsē*).

⁷ The reason for this is the serious damage brought on the public’s perception of Christ and the gospel (see, e.g., the following verses, all of which indicate that such behavior not only brings disgrace upon

the church, but is also a form of blasphemy: Rom 2:24; Titus 2:5; 2 Pet 2:2).

⁸ This is the literal translation of the Greek future passive periphrastic constructions (*estai dedemena* and *estai lelymena*) used in Matthew 18:18.

⁹ The Greek phrase (*hebdomēkontakis hepta*) is ambiguous: “seventy times seven” as in CSB, GNB, LEB, NAS95, NKJV, RSV or “seventy-seven times” as in CEB, ESV, NASB, NIV, NRSV.

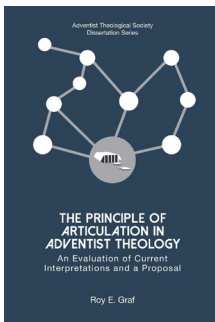
¹⁰ David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 450 (60 million denarii); and Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Social-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 458 (60–100 million denarii).

BOOK NOTES

Roy E. Graf

The Principle of Articulation in Adventist Theology: An Evaluation of Current Interpretations and a Proposal.

(Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society, 2019, 374 pp. USD 20.00).



The Principle of Articulation in Adventist Theology: An Evaluation of Current Interpretations and a Proposal

By Frank M. Hasel

The book *The Principle of Articulation in Adventist Theology: An Evaluation of Current Interpretations and a Proposal* covers much more than just Adventist theology. It deals with some foundational presuppositions of human reason and their expression or articulation in theology. Roy E. Graf meticulously investigates how they are at work in different theological systems throughout church history and how they have affected and influenced theology. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the subject and describes the purpose, scope, presuppositions, and methodology being used. Chapter 2 describes the principle of articulation in theology in general and the *sola Scriptura* principle as a criterion of evaluation for the different models. Chapter 3 investigates the principle of articulation in different models throughout history. It starts with the Greek philosophical background (Plato, Aristotle), moves to Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, then continues with Martin Luther and John Calvin before dealing with modern theology (Friedrich Schleiermacher, process theology). It ends with a discussion of the principle of articulation among the Adventist pioneers. Chapter 4 describes the principle of articulation within three different models current in Adventist theology: the Evangelical Adventist model, the Modern Adventist model, and the Adventist Theodicy model. Chapter 5 develops the principle of articulation from an Adventist *sola Scriptura* perspective. Chapter 6 ends with a

concise summary, conclusion, and a few recommendations. In his discussion of different positions, Graf provides a rigorous analysis of important aspects of theological reasoning. He covers much ground, comparing leading and influential theologians in church history as well as influential philosophers. His findings are methodically presented in chapter 3 (pp. 61–144) and then contrasted and compared with Adventist representatives, ranging from the Adventist pioneers to influential modern Adventist theologians in chapter 4 (pp. 145–310). The main representative of the Evangelical Adventist model is Desmond Ford, the main representative of the Modern Adventist model is Fritz Guy, and the main representative of the Adventist Theodicy model is Norman Gulley. Complementing the discussion, Graf also mentions and deals with other contemporary Adventist authors of these models.

This book does not make easy reading. The academic style of the original dissertation, done at the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies (AIAS) in the Philippines, is still clearly perceivable. To benefit from an engagement with its content, at least some basic theological and philosophical knowledge is required to follow Graf’s thoughtful analysis. But the attentive and informed reader will greatly benefit from his exploration and investigation of the complex material. His interaction with those different positions and approaches to theology is insightful and instructive. Graf succeeds in providing

a comprehensive and in-depth analysis and overview of the philosophical and theological foundations of theological thinking throughout church history from a Seventh-day Adventist perspective. He also engages in a perceptive analysis of influential modern Adventist theologians and thinkers. His book testifies to the high caliber of Adventist scholarship that is emerging from leading Adventist institutions of higher education.

The book also raises some questions. Graf himself indicates that the ontological and epistemological principles of articulation that he describes so eloquently are not explicit in several of the theologians he describes and analyzes (Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Schleiermacher, Ford, Gully, etc.). In several instances he acknowledges that these theologians are not aware of the principles of articulation that Graf delineates (cf. pp. 100–101, 148–149, 171, 173, 175, 177). Considering the fact that these theologians apparently do not purposefully discuss these ontological and epistemological principles that are at work in their theology and do not seem to deliberately reflect them makes one wonder whether they were even fully aware of them. If their theology is done implicitly, without serious reflection on this deeper level, one wonders whether some modern theologians, like Ford, are more influenced by the premises of modern science than by a sustained reflection of the theological articulation of these principles. This raises the question of how deliberate their approach is and how much they are responsible for it. This, of course, makes any analysis more difficult and requires even greater carefulness in one's conclusions.

Sometimes one gets the impression that some of the evidence listed for the principles of their presuppositions is rather scant. When Graf discusses the early Adventist pioneers, it is not clear why John H. Kellogg was selected and dealt with as a prominent representative (pp. 139–143). Is he really the most representative early Adventist theologian who could have been chosen? Aren't there other early Adventist theologians who should have been selected? If the Adventist theological position is indeed a radically different theological position, as Graf argues, how can we employ Ellen G. White's counsel to seek common ground with other Christians as much as possible when dialoguing with them?

These questions aside, his analysis and critique of some influential modern Adventist theologians are eye-openers, leading the reader to see more clearly the influences of important theological thought patterns on some Adventist thinkers and their implications for Adventist theology and mission. Graf is to be commended for his careful work and for venturing to deal with such a complex task. This book makes a fine contribution to our understanding of major theological approaches in theology and helps to reflect and develop an authentic Adventist approach to doing theology that is robustly based on the *sola Scriptura* principle. Considering his conclusion that “the diverse interpretations of this principle imply that the Adventist Church faces the problem of theological disunity” (p. 324) and that “different interpretations of the principle of articulation entail that the church is proclaiming different messages that in turn contribute to increasing its theological disunity” (p. 325), we need to realize that the issues addressed in this book have far-reaching implications for the mission and theological well-being of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (p. 327). While there is much more that needs to be explored in developing a genuinely Seventh-day Adventist theology that is solidly grounded in *sola Scriptura*, as Graf briefly indicates in his short conclusion and succinct recommendations (pp. 311–327), any interested pastor and theology teacher would benefit from his discussion and should understand the issues involved. This interesting book should have a place on the bookshelf of every serious Adventist thinker.

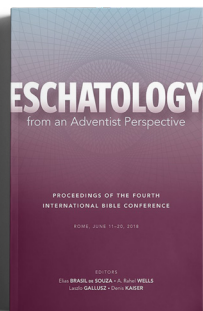
Frank M. Hasel
Associate Director
Biblical Research Institute



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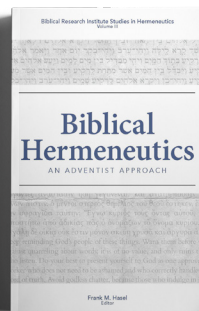
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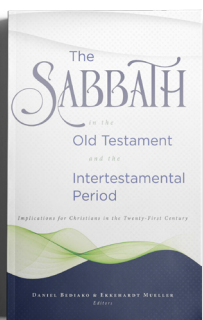
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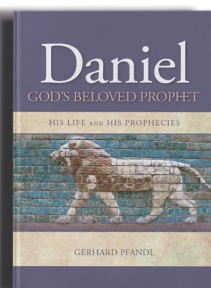
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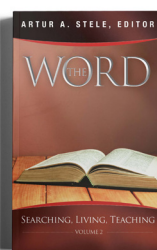
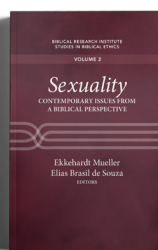
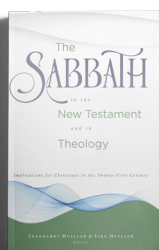
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Production Manager: Nicol Belvedere
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General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists®
12501 Old Columbia Pike
Silver Spring, MD 20904, USA
Phone: 301.680.6790
Fax: 301.680.6788
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