Brightest Heaven of Invention

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A Christian Guide to Six Shakespeare Plays

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O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend
The *brightest heaven of invention*,
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!

Prologue, *Henry V*

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Acknowledgments

For three school years, from 1992-1995, I had the privilege of teaching Shakespeare to junior high and high school students at Heritage Academy, a home school ministry sponsored by the church of which I was then pastor, the Reformed Heritage Presbyterian Church of Birmingham, Alabama. I had learned Shakespeare in high school and as an English major in college, but it was not until I began to teach his plays that I came to appreciate his unequalled brilliance as poet and observer of human life, as well as the deeply Christian worldview embodied in his plays. Awesome is today a much-abused word, but in its original sense it fits perfectly Shakespeare's literary achievements. I became an unabashed fan. Fortunately, my students responded favorably when I tried to share my enthusiasm. It was largely the surprising receptivity and interest of those students and their parents that encouraged me to prepare those original classes for distribution to a wider audience. Accordingly, and fittingly, this book is dedicated to them, with gratitude.

Thanks also are due to the Session of Reformed Heritage Presbyterian Church, for giving me leave and encouragement to study and teach what are unconventional subjects for a contemporary pastor.

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Thanks, finally, to my family, for their patient endurance of several years of wild and whirling words in the form of quotations, quizzes, random snatches of speeches, and interpretations good and bad. I especially thank my wife, Noel, and my children Woelke, Lindsey, Jordan, and Sheffield, all of whom helped me check citations and quotations and thereby made this a more accurate book than it could otherwise have been.

Introduction:
A Christian Approach to Literary Study

On Reading Literature

Christians have often had a difficult time with the study of literature. Fiction has been seen as a seductive distraction from the serious business of holy living. Poetry's rich language has been viewed as a means of promoting beautiful falsehoods. Drama has been condemned for depicting immorality and violence, for tempting audiences to lust and anger. So, in writing a study guide to Shakespeare for Christians, I must first address the question, why study literature at all? Why should the Christian spend time with novels or plays or short stories? Shouldn't we be concerned with "real life," with edifying the Church and building God's kingdom, with witness and worship?

Christians who have warned of the dangers and seductions of literature have a point that ought not be ignored. Literature can indeed become a temptation and a distraction from true piety and service to God. Anything in this world can be abused, of course, but it does seem that language and literature are particularly susceptible to abuse and particularly suited to seduce. We are, after all, made in the image of the God whose name is Word. Since language is one of man's greatest glories, it is also potentially one of his most dangerous pitfalls. Having recognized the danger of abuse, however, we need not conclude that therefore literature has no proper use. For the same reason that language may be used to

commit evil, its use in speech and writing is near the heart of what it means to live as a creature in God's image.

In defending the study of literature, it is worth pointing out that Scripture itself is a literary work, and while it is a unique book in being divinely inspired, it also uses a variety of common literary types or genres: poetry, narrative, epistle, prophetic vision. C.S. Lewis rightly pointed out that understanding how literature works can lead to a better understanding of Scripture. Rather than follow this valuable line of thought, however, I want to challenge the assumption that there is a sharp distinction between literature and life. (Here, I am concentrating on narrative literature, literature that tells as story—novels, narrative poetry, drama.) Obviously, there are differences between studying history and studying literature. Far from being sharply opposed, however, humans have a natural tendency to think about our lives in narrative terms. Our lives are story-shaped. Let's think about this with a story, or a bit of one:

> Will Lissen and Stuart Tistix met for the first time at a wedding reception. After introductions, Lissen took a sip of champagne and said, "So, Stu, tell me about yourself."
>
> "I'm 5'10" and weigh 175 pounds buck-naked. I wear size 9 ½ shoes. My annual adjusted gross income is $53,560. The mortgage on my house is $69,890 with an interest rate of 7.5%. I own a 1992 Honda Accord with 57,906 miles on it—last I checked—Ha! Ha! I've forgotten the registration number. . . it'll come to me. Oh, and I have an unsightly hexagonal mole on my left shoulder blade that measures 3 cm by 2.65 cm."
>
> Lissen shivered as some indescribable horror flitted through his brain, gulped down his champagne, and, excusing himself with all the grace he could muster, fled toward the cake table. Moments later, still sweating, he found himself at the punch bowl, where he met

Ann Terestin. They exchanged introductions, pleasantries, and found they had mutual friends in the wedding party. "So, tell me about yourself," Lissen said, wincing slightly.

"Well, I was an army brat," Ann said. "I was born in Germany, but my father was transferred every few years, so I've lived all over the place. That was hard, having to make new friends all the time, but it was exciting too. It got me hooked, so I majored in international finance and spent a few years working at the Tokyo stock exchange. When I got married and had kids, though, my husband and I decided we wanted a quieter life, so we settled in a little town in Vermont. My husband runs a local printing shop. Now that the kids are older, we're starting to do some traveling again. We love the Far East. Last summer, we went to China with a Christian mission and took in a crate full of Bibles."

Glancing across the room, Lissen saw Stu Tistix in an animated conversation with Congressman Ira Ess, the brains behind the National Survey of Shoe Sizes. With a feeling of satisfaction and intense gratitude for which he immediately felt guilty, Lissen settled into a long and engrossing conversation with Ann Terestin.

When you ask someone to describe himself, you are expecting to hear a story or a series of stories, not a collection of statistics. Individual identity is bound up with the stories we have lived. Stu Tistix may be Ira Ess's dream citizen, but he has never learned how civilized people answer the question, Who are you? For normal people, the question, Who am I? is inseparable from the question, What is my story?

Giving a narrative shape to the events in our lives is virtually inescapable. Historians are quite conscious that they have to select and arrange facts in order to make sense of a topic. It is literally impossible for them to know much less to record everything. In selecting and arranging the facts of history,

they give narrative shape to what they study. What is true for historians is true for each of us who tries to make sense of a complex world. The number of events in the real world is impossible for us to even think about, much less record. If you were prepared to go into enough detail and had a lifetime supply of #2 pencils, you could spend the rest of your life describing what is going on around you while you have been reading the first few pages of this introduction. You would have to record every electrochemical interaction in your brain, all your thoughts, every time you were distracted by recalling the bills that need paying or the pile of dirty clothes in the bathroom hamper. You would have to record every time one of the children came through and interrupted, every time you yawned, looked at your watch, scratched your ear, every time heard a passing car on the street or the borborygmi grumble in your abdomen. To make any sense of what seems to be the bloomin', buzzin' confusion that surrounds us, we need to select and arrange the facts of our existence into a manageable order. And this order turns out, frequently if not always, to be the order of a story.

Our understanding of the world typically takes the shape of a story because we are temporal creatures. That is, we exist in time. In a timeless universe, a painting or photograph would be able to picture the world as it is. But we live in a universe where time is constantly moving, where the present instantly fades into the past and the future becomes present. To depict the way the world is, we need some way to depict the flow of time that is so basic in all our experience. A picture cannot do it; it can give the illusion of movement, but in the end a painting gives a timeless slice of life. But a story is able to depict a temporal flow and change, as are those ways of depicting the world that have derived from literature—film and drama. Music too has a temporal dimension, but its language is too abstract and specialized for most people to use. So, if we want to describe the world, we are pretty much left with telling stories.

There are theological reasons why we think of life as

having a narrative structure. Though everyone naturally arranges the events of his life into a narrative pattern, Christians have particular reasons for doing so. God has a plan—that is, a story—for each one of His children. Strictly speaking, we do not shape the facts of our lives into stories; we try to discern the pattern of the story that God is telling with our lives. The story is built into the web of life; it is not a figment of our imagination. More generally, we believe and confess that history is the story of God's plan for mankind. The whole history of mankind and the creation has a beginning, a middle, and is moving toward an end. The history of the world began with creation and the fall of man; the center of history was the coming of the Son in human flesh to redeem us; and the end will come when Jesus returns. It is not just that we arbitrarily impose narrative patterns on life. Real life is sovereignly shaped and arranged by God into a story. History is not just *His*-story; it is His-*story*.

Thus, it is a mistake to suggest that literature and life are completely different from one another. They are not the same, but they fall into similar patterns. This means that learning narrative literature can enhance our understanding of real life. It is true that the study of literature can be dry, dusty, and completely irrelevant to life, but then some have made the study of the Bible dry, dusty, and completely irrelevant to life. Such is the perverse ingenuity of the human mind. But literary study need not be like this. Although the characters and events of fiction are not real, they can help us to gain wisdom about real people and events. Literature abstracts from the complex events of life (just as we do all the time every day) and can reveal patterns that are like the patterns of events in the real world. Studying literature can give us sensitivity to those patterns. This sensitivity to the rhythm of life is closely connected with what the Bible calls wisdom.

Literature also helps us to discern patterns of character. Literary characters can teach us a great deal about how real people act and think. Literature gives us a kind of shorthand for knowing and describing people. For those who have read

Lewis's *Narnia Chronicles*, if I describe someone as a "Puddleglum," you know what kind of character type I'm talking about. If you know Winnie the Pooh, saying that so and so is more like Piglet than Eeyore will give you a handle on his personality. If you know *Much Ado About Nothing*, and I say that so and so uses the English language like Dogberry, you know he does not speak the king's English. If you know *Macbeth*, and I describe a woman as a "Lady Macbeth," you know it's not a compliment. Saying someone is an "Esau" or a "Judas Iscariot" brings to mind a host of thoughts and associations and can more effectively characterize a person than a long, detailed description.

I have found Shakespeare's plays to be especially helpful—I daresay, edifying—in this respect. Shakespeare was, as Caesar says of Cassius, "a great observer," who was able to look "quite through the deeds of men," able to see and depict patterns of events and character. He understood how politics is shaped by the clash of men with various colorings of self-interest and idealism, how violence breeds violence, how fragile human beings create masks and disguises for protection, how schemers do the same for advancement, how love can grow out of hate and hate out of love. Dare anyone say that these insights are irrelevant to living in the real world? For many in an older generation, the Bible and the Collected Shakespeare were the two indispensable books, and thus their sense of life and history was shaped by the best and best-told stories. And they were the wiser for it.

The Bible as a Master Story

If the argument above has convinced you that studying literature is worthy of a Christian's time and effort, the next question is likely to be how to go about it. How does a Christian approach literature *as a Christian*?

Before offering some thoughts on that question, I should make a couple of qualifications. First, though this is a guide to the study of "serious" or "classical" literature, I have no

desire to condemn other, more popular kinds of literature. There is nothing wrong with reading simply for enjoyment. There are certain kinds of literature that would violate Paul's exhortation to think only on things that are lovely, of good report, and true (Phil. 4:8). But nothing in Scripture forbids you to read John Grisham or Tom Clancy because they write exciting stories. If you like reading Eugenia Price's novels or Agatha Christie's detective stories as a diversion, that too is fine. I have nothing against "light reading," which, to my mind at least, is normally preferable to television as a way to use leisure time. Having said that, I would insist that the richer and more profound your reading—if you will, the more "serious" your reading—the more enjoyable it will be.

Second, I offer no suggestions for evaluating literature, for making either artistic or moral judgments. Those kinds of judgments must be made, of course, and there are some good books on how Christians can go about making them. It is also true that evaluation is involved in any act of reading; we can never totally separate knowing facts from making value judgments. The emphasis of my remarks here, however, is how Christians seek to *understand* literature, rather than how we should *evaluate* it. Christians must avoid the danger of forming judgments, especially moral judgments, without really understanding what they are reading. We should not condemn *Macbeth* as occultic and unChristian because witches play a major role; we need to look carefully at how Shakespeare uses the witches in the play, and I will argue that his use is perfectly compatible with a Christian view of life. Some Christians think little of the *Iliad* because it seems to celebrate senseless violence. Before I support that evaluation, I want to make sure that, in fact, the *Iliad* does celebrate senseless violence. Ghosts appear with some frequency in Shakespeare's plays, but the plays are not ghost stories; Shakespeare uses ghosts to make profound points about guilt and the consequences of sin.

It is helpful to compare the study of literature to learning a foreign language. In general, we learn not just by studying

individual things but, perhaps more importantly, by comparing one thing to another. We learn a new language not only by studying that language's grammar and vocabulary, but also by making comparisons with a language we already know. As you learn about Latin, you compare its grammar and vocabulary to English grammar and vocabulary. You can remember that *agricola* means "farmer" because you know the word "agriculture"; you can remember that *amo* means "I love" because you link it with the word "amorous." Grammar is learned in a similar way. In English, word order is very important; if you switch the subject and the direct object, you change the sense of the sentence. In Latin, word order is not so important for making sense and has more to do with emphasis and style. In English, case endings are used only with pronouns (who, whom; he, him), but case endings are basic to Latin. When, as a native speaker of English, you learn a new language, English functions as your "master language." You learn the new language by noticing similarities and differences between it and your native tongue.

We can approach learning literature in a similar way. Just as we learn a new language by reference to a "master language" or a "native tongue," so we learn literature by reference to a "master story," a "native story" that we already know. As Christians, our "native story" or "master story" is the story revealed in the Bible, the real life story of God's works in history. In fact, the Bible gives us a several of what I am calling "master stories" or "model stories."[1] Once we have grasped the architecture of these stories, we can make comparisons with other examples of narrative and dramatic literature.

The first of these model stories is the "fall story," which follows basically this sequence of events: God makes a world

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[1] Far and away the best work on the literary patterns of the Bible is James B. Jordan, *Through New Eyes: Developing a Biblical View of the World* (Nashville, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1987). Jordan's more recent work is available from Biblical Horizons, P.O. Box 1096, Niceville, FL, 32588-1096.

and places human beings in it. He gives them instructions about how to behave, but they don't listen and they violate His instructions. Because of their sin, they are punished and their fall into sin leads to a decline. This story can be pictured as a upside down U: the character starts in a low position, is raised higher, but from that height, he descends on account of his sin.

The first and most familiar fall story in the Bible is of Adam and Eve, and it sets the pattern for other fall stories. Adam and Eve were given great privileges and blessings; God instructed them not to eat of the tree of knowledge, but they disobeyed; as a result, they were cursed in various ways. Though this is the most familiar fall story, it is far from the only one. The line of Seth, the "sons of God" fell into the sin of intermarriage with the heathen (Gen. 6). Because of their sin, God did not merely remove them out of the garden but removed all living things from the world through the flood. Saul's history is a fall story: he was a member of a small and despised tribe; God chose him to be the first king of Israel and raised him to the throne; and for a while Saul was an admirable figure, a great warrior and a good king, whom 1 Samuel subtly compares with the greatest judges of Israel's history. But Saul refused to listen to the Lord's prophet, and eventually the Lord abandoned him. Saul is an Adam whose kingdom is taken from him.[2] The whole history of Israel can be seen as a "fall" story: Israel was elected by God in Abraham, brought into the land, where they abandoned the Lord and went after idols. After calling them patiently to return to Him, the Lord finally drove them into exile. Though they returned, they later rejected their Messiah, and the kingdom was given to another nation (Mt. 21:33-46).

The upside-down U pattern appears in literature outside the Bible, so often that it is one of the basic narrative patterns of world literature. By studying the various fall stories in the Bible, and by comparing literature outside the Bible to these

[2] See Jordan's essay on Saul, available from Biblical Horizons.

"master stories," our understanding and appreciation of the extra-biblical literature will be enhanced. For example, we shall see that *Macbeth* is a "fall story," which focuses on what comes to pass when an ambitious man impenitently commits murder. Comparing *Macbeth* to the "master story" in the Bible leads us to make many fruitful comparisons: Macbeth's murder of King Duncan is something like the original fall of Adam; Lady Macbeth, who encourages and tempts her husband to commit murder, is a combination of Eve and the serpent; just as Adam's sin led to a curse on the earth, so Macbeth's plunges Scotland into a dark age. Some fall stories will diverge significantly from the biblical pattern. Oedipus, for instance, falls because his fate has been unchangeably determined, not because he sins.

The other "master story" in the Bible tells is a reversal of the fall. Where the fall story has the shape of an upside-down U, this other story has a U-shape. We can call this a "redemption story." This is the main story the Bible tells, the main point of the story of history. Man fell into sin, and became alienated from God with his whole life under God's curse. God rescued him from sin, death, and Satan and brought those who believe into fellowship with the Father, Son, and Spirit. The redemption story can take a number of forms. The gospel is an adventure story: Jesus is a Hero who comes to rescue his people from their enemies. He is the Stronger Man who binds Satan and plunders His house, and the gospel is the story of His holy war against Satan and his triumph over death and sin. When you read an adventure story, as a Christian you have a built-in model to compare it to. Every hero in an adventure story is something of a "savior," and all his opponents have something of the demonic about them. The gospel is also a Romance. Jesus is the Lover who comes to rescue His Bride. To put it differently, He comes to recover His unfaithful Bride (cf. Hos. 1-2).

Again, the master redemption story of the Bible can be compared and contrasted with the stories found in other literature. Though *Macbeth* is in one respect a fall story, it ends

with Malcolm's triumph over Macbeth and the beginning of Scotland's restoration. We will find it useful to compare Macbeth's fall from power to Jesus' triumph over Satan, "the ruler of this world," and to consider Malcolm and Macduff as something like "Christ figures." The death and resurrection sequence that is at the heart of the gospel is brought out in various ways in the works studied in this volume: Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing* goes through a mock death and resurrection; Katherina, the shrew, is killed by the "kindness" of her husband, Petruchio, and emerges as a new creature; Scotland goes through a winter of tyranny under Macbeth, but good king Malcolm comes to renew spring.

Much literature combines these two patterns. Some characters find redemption while others are judged. The *Odyssey* is a good example of this double story line. Odysseus spends the epic trying to get home from the Trojan War, encountering various trials and tests along the way. At home in Ithaca, his wife, Penelope, is beset by suitors who insist that Odysseus is dead, pressure her to marry again, and meanwhile eat Odysseus out of house and home (as Odysseus' son Telemachus describes it). For Odysseus, the story has a redemptive shape, for he returns and is reunited with Penelope. The suitors, by contrast, are slaughtered when Odysseus returns; theirs is definitely a story of fall and judgment. For this type of story too there are biblical models, for the gospel involves not only the redemption of the Bride but judgment of her oppressors.

How to Use This Book

I wrote this book as a guide for junior and senior high school students. Now that it is finished, I find that it is more suitable to the latter than the former, though, with guidance from parents or teachers, I believe junior high students could also use it profitably. It is suitable for both home school and traditional Christian school settings. Home school students in high school should be able to use it as a self-study course.

I do not, however, believe that I have greatly oversimplified, so that the guide may also be useful for adults who are discovering or rediscovering Shakespeare.

I should note that I have not covered some of the topics one normally expects from a book of this sort, such as the dates of the plays, the events of Shakespeare's life, or Elizabethan theater. That information is readily available from encyclopedias or general works on Shakespeare. It might be useful, however, if a student using this guide were given an assignment that would introduce him to these matters.

This book provides several things. First, each chapter is a self-consciously Christian interpretation of one of Shakespeare's plays, organized around one or several main themes. The major organizing theme of each play is reflected in the quotation that serves as the title of the chapter. Within each chapter, there are 4-5 sections that offer a running commentary on the play, showing how the particular themes are developed. At the end of each of these sections are two sets of questions. The "Review Questions" are designed to determine whether or not the student has comprehended the chapter; answers to these questions can be found in the preceding commentary. The "Thought Questions" are based on the commentary but go beyond it, and require the student to consider questions and draw conclusions for which the book provides no explicit answers. Some of the Thought Questions ask the student to interpret a particular passage or sentence in the light of what he has learned; some require the student to apply ideas given in the commentary to matters that are not mentioned there; others prod the student to formulate a Christian view of a particular issue. In some cases, there is a right answer to a Thought Question but in many cases the questions are intended to be fairly open-ended, and the parent or teacher should be willing to accept an answer for which the student can give a convincing rationale, based on the text. At the end of each chapter I have included brief comments on the most readily available video versions of the play and a list of suggested paper topics.

The studies in this volume assume that the student is already familiar with the plots and characters of the various plays. I have not summarized the story nor introduced the characters. Thus, before using this book, the student should acquire some grasp of the play to be studied. This can be done in a number of ways. The parent or teacher may require the student to read the actual play before beginning to use this book. This may not, however, be the most effective way to introduce Shakespeare. Beginning students often have difficulty not only because Shakespeare's language is unfamiliar but also because of the way Shakespeare constructed his plays. He sometimes assumes that readers know something about the events that he depicts, and the plays present the action and necessary background in bits and pieces, and leave the reader or viewer to put things together. Thus, it may be helpful for a student to begin by reading a retelling of the play in straight story form. Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* is the most widely available of these re-tellings, but its language and syntax is such that it is almost as difficult to read as the plays themselves. More readable simplifications are available.

Another way for the student to become familiar with the plot and characters is to view a stage, video, or film version of the play. When I taught Shakespeare, I found video a most helpful tool to awaken my students' interest. Shakespeare has recently taken on new life at the cinema, and there are a number of new films currently under production. In addition, there are a number of fine older Shakespeare films readily available on video. By watching a film, a student will come to realize that Shakespeare's plays are exciting and fun stories, which, if he learns nothing else, helps to break down prejudices and barriers. Of course, all enactments of a play—whether on film or stage—are inevitably interpretations, just as every book is an interpretation. The play itself imposes certain limits on the director, but the director or filmmaker must still make important decisions about how the characters and events will be portrayed, and these decisions are ultimately

based on the filmmaker's view of the world. Students should therefore learn to be discerning and critical of the way a film presents a particular play.

Once the student is somewhat familiar with the plot and characters, he is ready to use this book. At this point, the student should be required to read the play itself. I suggest the following sequence of assignments:

(1) The student should read the appropriate portion of the play carefully, whether an act, two acts, or several scenes. There are numerous editions of individual plays, many of them relatively inexpensive, as well as collections. As regards the plays discussed in this text, all but *The Taming of the Shrew* may be found in Bertrand Evans, ed., *The College Shakespeare*, which also includes brief but insightful material on individual plays and on Shakespeare in general.[3]

(2) The student should read the commentary provided in the guide.

(3) The student should answer the Review Questions at the end of the section. The parent or teacher should make sure that the student has answered these adequately before going on to the Thought Questions.

(4) The student should answer the Thought Questions at the end of the section. As noted above, these questions may be difficult to answer precisely, and it may be helpful for the parent or teacher to discuss the answers with the student.

(5) When the student has finished working through each section of the chapter, he may be asked to prepare a paper on one particular aspect of the play. He may use one of the suggested topics or formulate a topic of his own.

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[3] In this guide, each citation from a play gives the Act, scene, and line numbers, in that order. Thus, 1.3.45 means "Act 1, scene 3, line 45." For most plays, the citations follow the text of *The College Shakespeare*. For *The Taming of the Shrew*, I used the 1982 Oxford Shakespeare edition, edited by H. J. Oliver. Line numbering and text may differ from edition to edition.

Each play is divided into four lessons, each of which, if the student is required to provide written answers to the Review and Thought Questions, could take a week of class time in a home school setting. Assuming that the student will spend 45 minutes to an hour each day on the assignment, I suggest the following schedule for a week:

(1) Monday: read the appropriate scene(s).
(2) Tuesday: read commentary in the guide.
(3) Wednesday: answer Review Questions.
(4) Thursday and Friday: answer Thought Questions.

Each play, following this scheme, would take a month to cover. In a traditional school setting, the assignments could easily be adjusted. I would also encourage teachers and parents to require students to memorize at least thirty lines from each play. Memorization is useful as a mental exercise, but more than that countless writers have attributed some of their skill in language to their early memorization of Shakespeare.

If a student were to use this guide as part of his English curriculum for three years, covering two plays a year, I would suggest something like the following sequence of plays:

Year 1: Taming of the Shrew and Julius Caesar
Year 2: Much Ado About Nothing and Macbeth
Year 3: Henry V and Hamlet

Conclusion

I do not agree with H. Rider Haggard's fictional adventurer, Allan Quatermain, for whom the Bible and Shakespeare were interchangeable authorities. Yet, over the past several years I have discovered Shakespeare to be a stimulating source for reflections on pastoral practice, history, politics, love, and life in general, not even to mention that Shakespeare uses the English language as no human being, before or since, has used

language. It is my hope that this volume will open some of the riches of at least a few of his works to a new generation of Christian students.

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