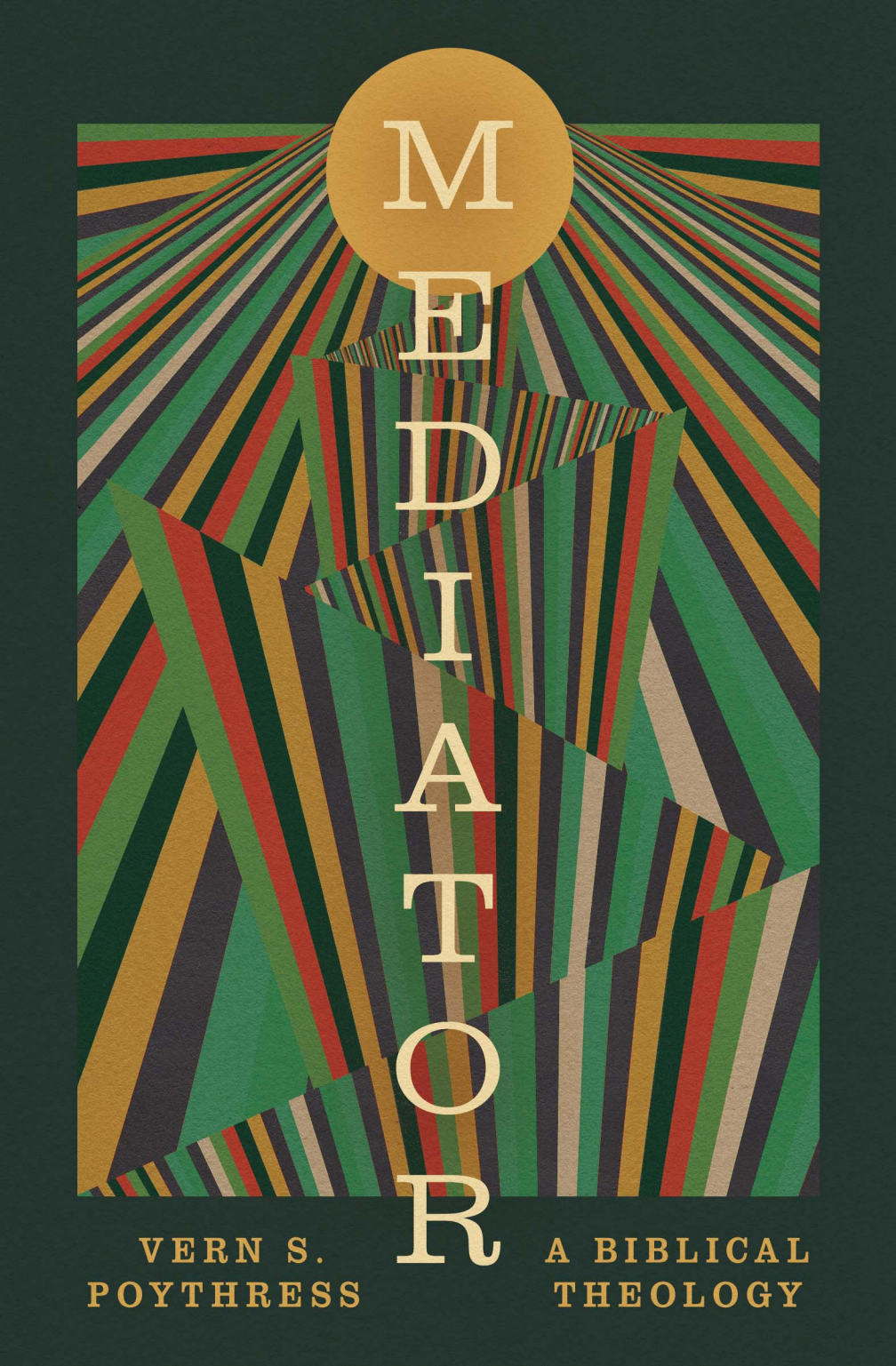


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A BIBLICAL
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Mediator

A Biblical Theology

Vern S. Poythress

 **CROSSWAY®**
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Mediator: A Biblical Theology

© 2026 by Vern S. Poythress

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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This book adapts and expands on Vern S. Poythress, “The Theme of Mediation,” in *Biblical Typology: How the Old Testament Points to Christ, His Church, and the Consummation* (Crossway, 2024). Used by permission.

Cover design: David Fassett

First printing 2026

Printed in the United States of America

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Trade paperback ISBN: 979-8-8749-0570-5

ePub ISBN: 979-8-8749-0572-9

PDF ISBN: 979-8-8749-0571-2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Poythress, Vern S. author

Title: Mediator : a biblical theology / Vern S. Poythress.

Description: Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway, 2026 | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2025039279 (print) | LCCN 2025039280 (ebook) | ISBN 9798874905705 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9798874905712 (pdf) | ISBN 9798874905729 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Jesus Christ—Mediation—Biblical teaching | Bible—Theology | Bible, Old Testament—Relation to the New Testament | Bible, New Testament—Relation to the Old Testament | Mediation between God and man—Biblical teaching

Classification: LCC BT255 .P69 2026 (print) | LCC BT255 (ebook)

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2025039279>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2025039280>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

BP		35	34	33	32	31	30	29	28	27	26			
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

To my wife

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PART 1

INTRODUCING
THE CHALLENGE OF
THE OLD TESTAMENT

A key principle in interpreting the Bible is that Jesus Christ is the one way to God, which is foreshadowed in the theme of mediator and mediation in the Old Testament.

Christ the One Mediator

ONE CORE THEME in the Bible is that there is only one way to God. At the heart of the Bible is the message of salvation. How does God bring about salvation? He accomplishes the work of salvation through Jesus Christ as the *one way to God*, the *mediator*:

Jesus said to him, “I am the *way*, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

For there is one God, and there is *one mediator* between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. (1 Tim. 2:5)

Because the message of salvation is at the heart of the Bible, the whole Bible is about Christ and his work as a mediator.

The Old Testament speaks beforehand concerning the coming of Christ through pictures of deliverance and forgiveness that show that the only way to God is through a mediator.¹ (See Figure 1.1.)

¹ Vern S. Poythress, *Biblical Typology: How the Old Testament Points to Christ, His Church, and the Consummation* (Crossway, 2024).

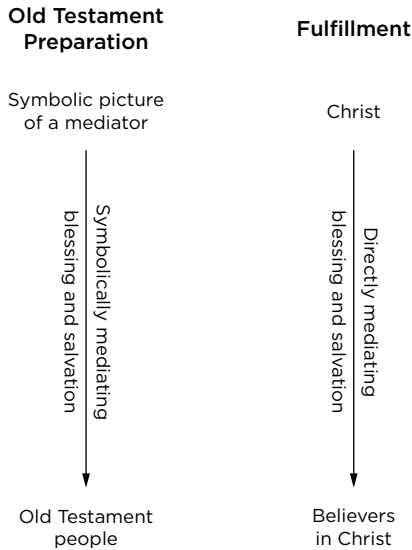


Figure 1.1 How the Old Testament Points to Christ

In the New Testament, the Gospels set forth the life of Christ on earth and show how he is the way to God. He is the mediator who accomplishes salvation. The book of Acts, the Epistles, and the book of Revelation further explain the significance and implications of the mediation of Christ in the life of the Christian. In short, the whole Bible is tied together by the theme of mediators and mediation.

Consider the Old Testament in particular. A big key to interpreting the significance of the Old Testament is to see how it prepares for Christ and looks forward to Christ:

And he [Jesus] said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not neces-

sary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in *all the Scriptures* the things concerning himself. (Luke 24:25–27)

Then he [Jesus] said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in *the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms* must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand *the Scriptures*, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. (Luke 24:44–47)

Jesus clearly says that the Old Testament (the Scriptures) is about him. But how? Exploring the theme of mediator can help us trace the thread of Christ across the Old Testament.

Christ the Mediator

As we begin our study of the theme of mediator, let us go back to 1 Timothy 2:5. It says that Christ is not only a mediator, but that he is the “*one* mediator.” What is the meaning of this claim?

The Universal Problem

God created the heavens and the earth and everything in them. He created man and woman and had personal fellowship with them in the garden of Eden. The Bible makes it plain that because of Adam and Eve’s sin, all human beings are sinners. Because God

is holy, he cannot be in the presence of sin. So Adam and Eve had to be cast out of God's presence, separated from God by their sin. This is the universal problem of humanity. How can sinners be reconciled to God?

God is a God of justice. And his standards of justice are perfect. He condemns all wrongdoing. No sinful human being can hope to escape God's condemnation (Rom. 3:23; 6:23). That is, he cannot escape if he stands on his own merits.

But the Bible has a message of salvation. No sinner *needs* to stand on his own merits. Christ has come into the world and died as a substitute in order to atone for sin so that by believing in him, people may escape this condemnation. He takes the punishment for our sins, and we receive the perfect righteousness of his life and death and resurrection. Our sin is exchanged for his righteousness. This is "the great exchange." The famous verse John 3:16 says it well: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have *eternal life*."

One Mediator

There is only one way of escape from sin—through the death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In a number of declarations, the Bible underlines that there is only one way:

Jesus said to him, "I am *the way*, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father *except* through me." (John 14:6)

So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, *unless* you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have *no*

life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. (John 6:53–54)

I am *the door*. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. (John 10:9)

And there is salvation in *no one else*, for there is *no other name* under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12)

And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God *does not have life*. (1 John 5:11–12)

The same conclusion about Jesus being the one way follows from the very nature of the human problem. All people, apart from Jesus, are sinners (Rom. 3:23). Sin leads to condemnation. Every human being will be condemned unless he has a refuge in Jesus.

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe *is condemned* already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. (John 3:18)

Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things.

We know that the judgment of God *rightly falls* on those who practice such things. Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? (Rom. 2:1–3)

For the wages of sin is *death*, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 6:23)

But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the *propitiation for our sins*, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:1–2)

For you [Christ the Lamb] were slain, and by your blood you
ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation.
(Rev. 5:9)

Jesus is the only one—the only way, the only name, the only advocate, the only propitiation, and the only mediator.

The Need for Reconciliation

A mediator is needed because of the problem of sin. Sin includes not only outward behavior that violates God's commandments (such as the Ten Commandments) but also inward desires and attitudes that *lead* to the outward behavior (Matt. 5:22, 28). Sin produces alienation between God and humanity. God made human beings to be in fellowship with him. But sin has broken that fellowship. Reconciliation is needed.

The need for reconciliation exists on *both* sides, not merely one side. On the human side, human beings are turned against God. They are in rebellion against God. They are sinners. This is true even with regard to people who see themselves as very religious. Any religion detached from complete reliance on Christ is man-made religion. Such religion is constructed by human beings who are not in fact serving God but are instead serving themselves and the false gods that their imaginations have constructed:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness *suppress the truth*. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for *images* resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a *lie* and *worshiped and served the creature* rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. (Rom. 1:18–25)

People need to turn away from false religions and serving themselves and turn to God in repentance: “*Repent* and be baptized

every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Repentance includes two steps: (a) admit that you are in the wrong and have offended God; (b) turn away from the wrong, and make a commitment to walk in God’s way, with God’s help, in the future.

The other side of the picture is that God is alienated from sinful humanity. In his holiness and his justice, he hates sin. As the just Judge of the universe, he is determined to punish all evil according to what it deserves. God’s judgment “*rightly* falls on those who practice such things” (Rom. 2:2).

God’s wrath hangs over evildoers. If any are to escape, God’s wrath must be turned away through appeasement, which is called *propitiation* (1 John 2:2).

The role of Christ as mediator encompasses both aspects of reconciliation. He reconciles God to man by turning away the wrath of God. He reconciles man to God by changing human hearts, enabling them to repent and turn back to God. Both sides are essential if salvation of human beings is actually going to be accomplished. Jesus Christ is the only one who accomplishes these two aspects of reconciliation.

Mediation in the Old Testament

As we have seen, Christ is the “one mediator” (1 Tim. 2:5). This claim raises one big question: What was happening in the Old Testament? Were there not mediators then? What about the priests, the sons of Aaron? Were they not mediators? How is it consistent for Christ to be the *one* mediator if there were already *many* mediators at earlier points in time?

The book of Hebrews provides an answer. Throughout its long discussion on the meaning of the Old Testament priesthood (Heb. 5–10), we learn that the earlier priests were anticipations (8:4–5); their symbolic role pointed forward to the great priesthood of Christ. God provided forgiveness of sins through the priests and the animal sacrifices (9:13). But the provision was not ultimately based on a supposed efficacy of the priests and their sacrifices. No, the priests and the sacrifices were *shadows*. All along, the actual forgiveness of sins depended on Christ, to whom the shadows pointed (9:11–12). In Old Testament times, people could receive forgiveness and be saved by placing their hope in God and his word through the shadows that already pointed to Christ.

That may sound complicated. But how else was God going to do it? From the time of Adam and Eve onward, people have been sinners. They need forgiveness. They need the removal of God's just judgment against sin. But because God is just, removing that judgment is no easy matter. Some people may think, "Oh, God is merciful and powerful—he can just ignore sin and wave it aside." But it is not that simple. God is perfectly holy and just and cannot merely ignore sin. If it were easy, Christ would not have had to come into the world and to die a horrible death for sins. How do we know that there was no other way? Because Christ asked his Father to remove the cup of suffering from him if possible (Mark 14:35). It was *not* possible—he still had to go to the cross (14:36). Christ died as a propitiation in order that God "might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:25–26).

The two aspects—just and justifier—are both important in God's plan. God must be just because that is his character. It is who he is. And he has found a way to be both just *and* "the justifier

of the one who has faith in Jesus.” The person who has faith is justified not because he is innately sinless. He, too, is a sinner. But he is justified by placing his faith in Jesus. He is united to Jesus, who is perfect. He benefits from what Jesus has achieved in his death. So he is clean. He is holy in God’s sight, with the perfect holiness of Jesus himself (2 Cor. 5:21).

This perfect redemption that Jesus accomplished is already foreshadowed in the Old Testament. Colossians says that the Old Testament ceremonies “are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” (Col. 2:17).

The book of Hebrews makes the same point more extensively in its discussion of Old Testament priests (8:1–6) and the Old Testament tabernacle (9:1–5, 23–24).

So were the Old Testament priests, the sons of Aaron, truly *mediators*? Yes and no, depending on what one means. Yes, the priests were mediators who stood between God and the people. They facilitated and maintained a positive relationship with God by offering sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins. But no, they did not do so through their own merits. They were a shadow of Christ, who all along is the one great high priest. All the blessings that the priests brought to the people in the Old Testament came from God in anticipation that they would ultimately be fulfilled and secured by Christ. It is Jesus alone who accomplished reconciliation and propitiation and forgiveness of sins *for all time*.

Studying the Old Testament

The victory that Christians obtain through Christ has deep implications for the meaning of the Old Testament. God never intended

that the Old Testament should stand by itself, independent from the hope of future fulfillment. In God's mind, it was a preparation and a pointer, pointing to Christ. Even in Old Testament times, the people could have sensed this meaning, though they would not have fully understood. As far back as Adam and Eve, God gave them a promise of coming redemption through "the offspring of the woman":

I [God] will put enmity between you [the serpent,
the mouthpiece of Satan] and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he [the offspring of the woman] shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel. (Gen. 3:15)

This early promise from God gives color and deeper meaning to the subsequent history of the entire Old Testament period. God tells his people early on that he is going to bring decisive redemption—the bruising of the serpent's head. This redemption comes through a single figure—the offspring of the woman. In Genesis 12 and following, God narrows down the focus to the offspring of Abraham in particular. And in Galatians 3:16, the apostle Paul affirms who the offspring is: "And to your offspring, . . . who is *Christ*."

The word God speaks in Genesis 3:15 sets up an expectation for the people. And then the rest of the Old Testament period gradually unfolds the working of God in preparation for the decisive victory that is to come in Christ. All Old Testament mediators fit into this larger picture. So readers should bear in mind the forward-pointing character of the Old Testament.

Only One Way?

Before turning to the Old Testament, we must consider one objection: There cannot be only *one* way to God, can there? Do all religions lead to God? People say, “There must be *many* ways.” Many people do not like a claim that *excludes* all but one way. But 1 Timothy 2:5 says that Jesus is the *one* mediator. The Gospel of John says that no one comes to the Father *except through* Christ (John 14:6). People think that such a thing is intolerant.

One could easily have a whole book answering this objection. Briefly, consider the following points.

First, God has reasons why it has to be this way. We have already considered some of them: God is just. God’s standards have to be taken seriously. No human being can get around these standards. The standards require that sin be punished. Jesus’s death as a substitute, bearing God’s wrath, is the only way that God may “be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26).

Second, the desire to expand the path to salvation is related to people’s feelings of “fairness.” But what is salvation? What does one need saving from? Sin. What is “fair,” in terms of God’s justice, is for every sinner to be condemned. So what is surprising, even beyond belief, is that anyone can be saved at all.

Third, true Christian faith is not one among many basically equivalent religions. It is the polar opposite from what many in other religions advocate, and it is opposite from the assertions of those who claim to be Christian but distort the Christian faith. According to the Bible, it is not the high and mighty people, the prominent people, or the so-called “good” people who are saved.

It is needy people, people who recognize that they have no way to make a claim on God because of something they have done or achieved. There is no place for human pride:

God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that *no* human being might *boast* in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, *boast in the Lord*.” (1 Cor. 1:28–31)

True Christians do not boast about their religiosity but confess that they have received a gift of salvation that they did not at all deserve. The same offer comes to everyone regardless of religious background—receive the blessing of eternal life from *Christ* as a sheer *gift*.

Fourth, people may wish it to be otherwise, but all religions are not equal. Christians affirm that Jesus is the divine Son of God. Muslims and Jews deny this claim. Other religions seek God apart from Jesus entirely. Not everyone can be right. Muslims hope for God’s mercy in the final judgment. But they do not think that they have a divine Savior in Jesus. Their hope is a mere uncertain wish. The hope that the Christian has in Christ is a confident assurance of salvation (Eph. 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:3–4).

Fifth, the idea that all religions are equal is itself a deep religious commitment. It is bold to claim to have such superior knowledge of what is true and false among the various religions of the world. And what basis does this idea have? It is in the air in the Western

world. But what is its *foundation*? It is presumptuous to claim to know before examining any religion in depth that its claims to unique spiritual insight are false.² Tacitly, it is a claim to superior revelation. But the Western skeptic's position is that there could be no such revelation in the first place. The denial of such revelation before examining every religion to its fullest extent is arrogant. The denial *beforehand* is arrogant.

Sixth, the claim that all religions are equal is made in the name of "tolerance." But this claim about religions is itself *intolerant* of all competing claims! It rejects them. It is impossible to "tolerate" everything and at the same time have any conviction at all.

Seventh, the Bible itself provides an account for the multitude of religions. I have already mentioned it in citing Romans 1. All people all over the world are innately religious. They are so because they know God (1:20–21). But they suppress the truth and turn to falsehoods (1:18, 22–23). That is one more reason why they need the truth that is found in Jesus (John 14:6).

Eighth and finally, God, as the divine author of the whole Bible, is also the divine author of 1 Timothy 2:5. Paul the apostle is the human author of 1 Timothy, but as an apostle, he is authorized by God to speak with God's authority—"Paul, an *apostle* of Christ Jesus by *command* of God our Savior" (1 Tim. 1:1). When addressing objections in another of his letters, Paul points out that objectors may not reckon with God. He asks, "But who are you, O man, to answer back to God?" (Rom. 9:20). This is the appropriate question to ask when anyone finds himself complaining about God's character or his means of salvation.

2 Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (Dutton, 2008), 3–21.

The One Mediator in the Old Testament

The rest of this book explores how the theme of mediation appears in the Old Testament and how it points forward to Christ.³ This theme reinforces the New Testament teaching that Jesus is the *one* mediator, the *only* way to God. By exploring this theme, one can grow in appreciating many aspects of the Bible: the unity of the whole Bible, the meaning of the Old Testament, the necessity of Christ, the glory of his person and work, and the relevance of the Old Testament for spiritual nourishment today. The Old Testament nourishes us by teaching us about the plan of God for salvation and for mediation, a plan that culminates in Christ. It enhances our appreciation of the glory of Christ as we see the meaning of who he is and what he has done. This meaning is pictured already in the Old Testament through mediators.

³ This book expands on themes already introduced in a summary way in Vern S. Poythress, “The Theme of Mediation,” chap. 13 in *Biblical Typology: How the Old Testament Points to Christ, His Church, and the Consummation* (Crossway, 2024). Used by permission.

