



The mystery of the bow projectile, proximity, and spiritual conflict in Ephesians 6:16

Onyeledo Chibiko N. Chukwuma

Department of Theology and Religion, Charisma University, Montana, USA

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.66856/ijmrd.2026.13.3.13352>

Abstract

Spiritual warfare, as commonly taught in the church, is conceived almost exclusively as combat waged against Satan and his ranked cosmic agents. That conception is not false; it is incomplete, since it passes over a textual feature of the very verse most often cited to describe the enemy's assault. Ephesians 6:16 names the shooter, τοῦ πονηροῦ (tou ponērou, "of the evil one"), and names the payload, πάντα τὰ βέλη πεπυρωμένα (panta ta belē pepyrōmena, "all the flaming darts"), without specifying the mechanism by which such projectiles are customarily delivered. This paper argues that the silence merits pause and proposes a controlled theological account of its possible significance. Drawing on the lexical range of βέλος (belos, "dart, missile"), the semantic field of πυρόω (pyroō, "to inflame, set on fire") across the New Testament corpus, the most natural personal referent of τοῦ πονηροῦ, a suggestive Septuagintal analogue in Psalm 7 and Psalm 90(91), and Paul's explicit prohibition in Ephesians 6:12 against wrestling with flesh and blood, the paper argues that the unnamed mechanism may be understood as variable, fitted to whichever relational or appetitive proximity carries the enemy's fire with the greatest heat. From this construction follows a twofold pastoral responsibility the paper argues has received insufficient attention in the literature reviewed: that the believer attend to the danger of being a victim of such proximity, and, no less, of being an unwitting vehicle for it. The paper closes with a practical method of discernment consistent with this proposal.

Keywords: Ephesians 6:16, spiritual warfare, flaming darts, evil one, spiritual conflict, proximity

Introduction

Spiritual warfare, as popularly conceived in the church, is a cosmic affair.¹ The believer is trained to look upward and outward, to the principalities, the powers, and the rulers of the present darkness named in Ephesians 6:12, and to regard these alone as the field of engagement. That conception is not mistaken; it is incomplete at one point worth examining. Ephesians 6:16 names the shooter, τοῦ πονηροῦ (tou ponērou, "of the evil one"), and names the payload, πάντα τὰ βέλη πεπυρωμένα (panta ta belē pepyrōmena, "all the flaming darts"), without specifying the mechanism by which such a projectile is customarily propelled: a bow, a sling, or the hand. On its own, that is a modest textual observation. The question is whether the observation bears theological weight. This paper argues that it does. The "bow" of the title is accordingly not a recovered historical weapon Paul is presumed to have had specifically in mind; it functions as a metaphor for whatever proximate means — bow, sling, hand, relationship, or appetite — might carry the projectile to its target.

So far as this paper's literature search has been able to establish, the feature has received little direct comment. Where the bow appears at all in expositions of this verse, it is generally invoked as incidental atmosphere² — arrows sped from a bow in the manner of ambush and surprise — rather than treated as an interpretive datum in its own right. That search does not claim to be exhaustive (see Review of Related Literature, §ii, §v). The term Paul employs for the missile itself, βέλος (belos), is lexically indifferent as to mechanism: it denotes any projectile hurled by hand, by sling, or by bow, so a mechanism is presupposed by the ordinary sense of the word Paul chooses even though the word itself does not name one. Whether that absence is exegetically significant, or simply an instance of unremarkable Greek economy, is the question §1 takes up at

length, including a considered counter-reading in §1.7. A further datum, treated with the same caution in §1.3, lies in the verb standing behind "fiery": πυρόω (pyroō), occurring six times in the New Testament, carries a semantic range that in two of its six occurrences extends beyond a literal or material sense to the kindling of grief, indignation, or desire. The imagery of fiery darts is compatible with such affective resonance, though the literal, incendiary sense remains primary; this compatibility is offered as one corroborating strand among several, not as an independently decisive proof. The Psalter supplies a further, suggestive analogue rather than an established precedent: Psalm 7:12–13 (LXX) names the bow of the divine judge explicitly, while Psalm 90:5 (LXX), addressed to one under threat from an adversary, names the arrow without its bow. This pattern is discussed in §1.5, without any claim that Paul consciously draws on it.

The thesis advances in stages of increasing inference, and the study marks the transition from one stage to the next carefully, so that later, more constructive claims do not borrow unearned certainty from earlier, more secure ones. At the level of explicit text and strong exegetical inference, Ephesians 6:12's prohibition against wrestling with flesh and blood stands as a caution the church too easily sets aside once warfare language is framed only in cosmic terms; the popular emphasis on Satan's ranked agents, without this caution kept in view, leaves underexamined the proximate human and relational contexts through which spiritual conflict may be experienced. At the level of theological construction, the unspecified delivery mechanism of 6:16 may be understood as variable, fitted, in a given instance, to whichever relational or appetitive proximity in a believer's life would carry an assault with the greatest heat. This is a theological inference brought to the text's silence, not a proposition the Greek of 6:16 yields on its own. On this

construction, believers are often wounded less by the content of what is said or done to them than by who says or does it: an insult from a stranger typically passes quickly, while the same words from a spouse, a trusted friend, or a respected figure can lodge and burn. That observation is a pastoral-theological proposition informed by, rather than strictly derived from, the text, and it is offered accordingly. From this construction follows a pastoral application the paper develops at length: the believer's responsibility in warfare is best understood as twofold rather than single. The first, more familiar responsibility is to avoid becoming a victim of such proximity — learning, in the moment of wounding, to distinguish the human, proximate means through which an assault is experienced from the ultimate cosmic antagonist named in 6:12, and to direct the ensuing struggle accordingly. The second, which the paper argues has received comparatively little attention, is to avoid becoming an unwitting vehicle. The believer who learns to guard against being struck must also learn to guard against becoming, through the very trust others place in them,³ a means by which another is struck.

The reading does not displace the cosmic frame of Ephesians 6:12; it locates that frame more precisely within the believer's relational and affective life, taking care, as §2 and §4 make explicit, not to reverse Paul's own distinction between the true antagonist and any human being who may, without conscious complicity, function as a proximate means through which an assault is experienced. Paul's demand, unfolding across this pericope and anticipated already in 6:10's τοῦ λοιποῦ (tou loipou, "finally," or more fully, "as for what remains" — discussed in §1.1 as plausibly resuming the outstanding portion of the ἀξιῶς-calling (axiōs, "worthily") introduced at 4:1), is that the believer learn to distinguish the true antagonist from whatever proximate means an assault may travel through, without mistaking the one for the other and without unwittingly becoming such a means. It is this proposed distinction, the mystery of the bow, that the paper undertakes to develop, together with the practical discipline of discernment it invites.

Review of Related Literature

This review situates the paper within three bodies of scholarship: work on the structural and rhetorical function of Ephesians 6:10–20 within the letter as a whole; treatments of the individual pieces of armour, particularly the shield of faith and the fiery darts of 6:16; and studies of the cosmic-powers background against which the passage's warfare imagery is customarily read. A further section addresses the question of authorship.

1. The Structural and Rhetorical Function of Ephesians 6:10–20

Commentators are divided as to whether the armour pericope functions merely as the conclusion of the letter's imperative section (4:1–6:9) or as a rhetorical summary of the entire epistle. Hoehner and Bruce represent the former position. Hoehner finds no obvious hints of links to the whole book and no recapitulation of the kind normally included in a classical peroratio, and reads 6:10–20 as continuing the imperative section rather than summarising the letter as a whole (Hoehner, 2002, p. 817). Bruce concurs (Bruce, 1984, as cited in Reinhard, 2005, p. 523) ^[2, 6, 10].

Lincoln proposes instead that the pericope takes the classical Greek form of a peroratio, the concluding section

of a speech in the epideictic genre, in which a military commander addresses troops before battle, arousing their emotions instead of merely restating what has been said (Lincoln, 1990, p. 433) ^[7]. On this reading, the passage summarises the whole letter, recapitulating its major themes: the believer's identity in Christ, their relationship to divine power and resources, the necessity of appropriating salvation while living righteously, and the cosmic opposition arrayed against God's purposes (Lincoln, 1990, p. 433; pp. 437, 441–442, as cited in Reinhard, 2005, p. 523) ^[7, 10].

O'Brien concurs with this reading, though he notes that recognition of a specific rhetorical form is not required to reach the same conclusion (O'Brien, 1999, p. 81) ^[9].

This debate bears directly on the paper's treatment of τοῦ λοιποῦ in §1.1. If the pericope functions as a peroratio in Lincoln's sense — a rhetorical unit designed to rouse rather than merely to close — this independently supports reading τοῦ λοιποῦ as substantive and forward-driving instead of as a bare epistolary sign-off, corroborating the argument advanced in this study on the basis of the Philippians 3:1 parallel from an entirely separate line of evidence.⁴

Reinhard's own contribution, arguing that "putting on the full armour of God" functions as a further articulation of union with Christ, developed through a sustained parallel between Paul's use of ἐνδύω (endýō, "to put on, clothe oneself with") across the Pauline corpus and its occurrence in Ephesians 6:11 (Reinhard, 2005, pp. 528–531) ^[10], is not directly engaged by the paper's argument. It establishes, nonetheless, that the armour pericope continues to generate genuine exegetical debate in the critical literature well beyond older commentary traditions.

2. Treatments of the Shield of Faith and the Fiery Darts (6:16)

A promising lead, marked for continued verification, reports O'Brien's footnote 175 (pp. 479–480) glossing βέλη as covering both "arrows (propelled by a bow) or darts (hurled by hand)," attributed to Louw and Nida's semantic-domain lexicon (§6.36, Weapons and Armor). The domain address is confirmed correct by direct consultation of Louw and Nida's table of contents; the verbatim footnote text itself has not been independently confirmed against the primary volume and is not relied upon as established fact here. If accurate, it would constitute direct commentary-level confirmation of the mechanism-neutral reading of βέλος argued independently in §1.2.

Two further items meet a comparable standard of verification, confirmed not by page-number inference but by a reproduced verbatim quotation from the primary text, and are accordingly usable for uncontested material background in §1.2. Bruce, discussing the incendiary missile Paul likely has in view and drawing on Livy's account, states that such a dart "was thrown when well alight and its motion through the air made it blaze more fiercely" (Bruce, 1984, p. 408) ^[2]. Hoehner similarly describes the construction of the θυρεός (thyreos, "large shield") as made of two wood planks glued together, its outer surface covered first with canvas and then with calf skin, further reinforced with metal and customarily soaked in water before battle (Hoehner, 2002, pp. 844–846) ^[6]. Neither passage, so far as verified, addresses the delivery mechanism of the βέλη themselves; both are cited in §1.2 strictly for uncontested material background on the shield and the falarica-type dart.

Within the commentary and monographic literature examined for this study, no sustained treatment has been located that treats the unspecified delivery mechanism as a variable category of relational or appetitive proximity in the manner the paper proposes. That construction is offered as the paper's distinctive contribution.

3. The Cosmic-Powers Background

Arnold's monograph remains the standard treatment of the power motif in Ephesians against its Hellenistic magical background, tracing the letter's concentration of power-language to the spiritual and magical milieu of first-century Asia Minor (Arnold, 1989) ^[1]. This work informs the paper's treatment of τοῦ πονηροῦ in §1.4 as belonging within a substantial cosmic-powers discourse well attested in the letter.

Carr's study of the ἀρχαί (archai, "rulers") and ἐξουσίαι (exousiai, "authorities") terminology (Carr, 1981) ^[3] and Gombis's narrative-rhetorical reading of the whole letter (Gombis, 2010) ^[5] bear on background discussion of 6:12's cosmic taxonomy.

4. The Question of Authorship

The argument proceeds on the traditional assumption of Pauline authorship (see note in the Introduction), while acknowledging Lincoln's contrary position (1990, pp. lx, lxii). The argument does not depend on resolving this question, since its claims proceed from the text's language and structure rather than from authorial biography.

Summary

The critical literature confirms genuine and ongoing scholarly debate over the structural function of Ephesians 6:10–20, situates the passage's cosmic vocabulary within its Hellenistic background, and discloses an authorship debate this study brackets rather than resolves. So far as the paper's literature search extends, the specific question it raises — whether the unnamed mechanism delivering the enemy's fiery darts in 6:16 bears interpretive significance — has not been directly addressed elsewhere. The remainder of the argument holds that this silence merits theological attention, engaging directly, in §1.7, with the more economical alternative that it does not.⁵

Methodology

The argument proceeds by four constraints, consistent with the method employed in the author's prior work on the Matthean parabolic discourse and the Pauline logic of Romans. These are not sequential stages so much as four disciplines applied jointly and continuously to the text, each guarding against a particular kind of interpretive overreach. Lexical tracing requires that every load-bearing term be examined across its full range of usage, within the immediate pericope, across the Pauline corpus, and, where relevant, across the New Testament as a whole, before any theological weight is placed upon it. In this study, lexical tracing governs the treatment of βέλος, πυρόω, and τοῦ πονηροῦ.

Grammatical-form comparison requires attention to the specific morphological and syntactic form a word takes, and to what that form permits or forecloses, rather than to a general or received gloss. The articular construction of τοῦ πονηροῦ, and the resumptive rather than merely conclusive

force available to τοῦ λοιποῦ, are both established on this basis.

Narrative weighting requires that a term or clause be read in proportion to its place within the larger discourse movement of the letter, rather than in isolation. The positioning of the armour pericope immediately after the household code of 5:22–6:9, and its resumption of the ἀξίως-calling first introduced at 4:1, are established under this constraint, as is the discourse-contextual bridge developed in §1.8, which this study regards as this constraint's clearest and most load-bearing application.

Syntactic attention requires close observation of what a passage explicitly states, what it explicitly excludes, and, most critically for this study, what it structurally implies without stating. This fourth constraint governs the central argument of the paper: the mechanism of delivery is structurally implied by the semantic content of βέλος itself, yet is nowhere supplied by the text, a silence the paper treats as interpretively significant rather than incidental.

These four constraints are not a departure from ordinary grammatical-historical exegesis, which any competent interpreter already practises in some form. They are named explicitly, and applied as a consistent apparatus across this study and its companion works, for a narrower purpose: to make visible, at each argumentative step, which discipline is doing the work, so that a claim resting on lexical range can be distinguished from one resting on syntax, and neither is mistaken for the other or allowed to substitute for the fourth constraint's specific concern — structural silence, the interpretive category this study depends on most heavily and which exegesis does not always treat as a distinct object of attention.

Throughout, the study observes a strict distinction, maintained in the author's prior published work, between what the text states and what an argued reading infers from it. Every claim beyond the explicit wording of Ephesians 6:10–20 is flagged as an argued inference, supported by lexical, grammatical, narrative, or intertextual evidence, and is never presented as settled exegetical consensus where the commentary tradition does not itself support it.

Philological and Structural Study

1. The Resumptive Force of Τοῦ λοιποῦ (6:10)

Ephesians 6:10 opens with an adverbial genitive, τοῦ λοιποῦ (tou loipou), conventionally rendered "finally." The gloss is not wrong so much as thin. The term derives from λείπω (leipō), "to leave, to lack, to fall short," and denotes properly that which remains: the remnant, the residue, the outstanding portion of a matter not yet concluded. Commentators are divided as to whether the phrase functions here as a bare epistolary marker, signalling that Paul approaches the letter's close, or as a substantive resumption of unfinished business. Hoehner represents the majority position, reading the phrase as indicating that these are Paul's final thoughts before he ends the epistle (Hoehner, 2002, p. 817) ^[6].

This reading is defensible but not exhaustive, and Paul's own usage of the cognate idiom elsewhere in his corpus suggests a fuller sense is available. At Philippians 3:1, Paul writes τὸ λοιπὸν (to loipon, the accusative form of the same idiom) and appears, by every surface signal, to be closing his letter. He is not: what follows is among the most substantial and urgent material in the epistle, an extended warning against the Judaizing teachers, sustained for the

length of the chapter. The idiom does not reliably predict closure. It predicts, at minimum, ambiguity between closure and resumption, and in at least one clear instance in Paul's own hand, it introduces what remains to be said rather than concluding what has been said already.

This pattern is corroborated from a second, independent direction. Lincoln proposes that the armour pericope itself takes the classical Greek form of a peroratio, a rhetorical unit designed to rouse an audience before decisive action instead of merely to close a discourse (Lincoln, 1990, p. 433; see Review of Related Literature, §i) ^[7]. If this reading is correct, it supports treating τοῦ λοιποῦ as substantive and forward-driving on independent structural grounds, distinct from the Philippians parallel.

Applied to Ephesians 6:10, this pattern invites a reading in which τοῦ λοιποῦ resumes rather than merely closes. What it resumes is the ἀξίως-calling introduced at 4:1, Paul's charge that believers walk worthy of their calling. The intervening material — unity in the body, the old self and the new, the household relationships of wives and husbands, children and parents, servants and masters — has unfolded what worthy-walking requires in each of these domains. τοῦ λοιποῦ then signals that one domain remains outstanding, and it is this domain, warfare, that Paul now supplies as the completion of the worthy walk, not as an appendix to it.

A further structural observation belongs here, stated at the level of inference it warrants. The armour pericope does not open a new topic disconnected from what precedes it. It follows immediately upon the household code of 5:22–6:9, instruction addressed to wives, husbands, children, parents, servants, and masters — that is, to relationships of considerable trust and proximity in a believer's life. This adjacency is more economically explained simply as the author concluding the letter's paraenetic section, and the sequence alone does not establish that Paul intended these relationships as referents of the unnamed mechanism discussed in §1.2. The immediate proximity of the household code provides a contextual resonance for reading relational proximity as one plausible domain through which spiritual conflict is experienced. It does not, on its own, constitute an exegetical demonstration of that reading, and this study relies on it accordingly, as one contributing observation among several rather than as independently sufficient.

2. Βέλος and the Unspecified Delivery Mechanism

Ephesians 6:16 speaks of πάντα τὰ βέλη τοῦ πονηροῦ πεπυρωμένα (panta ta belē tou ponērou pepyromēna), “all the fiery darts of the evil one.” The term βέλος (belos) is comparatively broad. It signifies any kind of missile weapon, anything projected to a distance, whether by hand, as a javelin or short spear; by a bow, as an arrow; or by a sling, as a stone. Paul employs a term broad enough to encompass more than one form of projectile, and in so doing names the payload without committing to its mode of delivery.

This breadth carries a plain physical entailment, whatever significance is ultimately assigned to it: every sense contained within βέλος presupposes some mechanism of propulsion, since nothing in the word's semantic range describes a missile that moves of its own accord. That entailment does not by itself establish that Paul's non-specification is exegetically meaningful. A competent Greek author can use a generic term like βέλος without inviting the

reader to ask by what means the projectile travelled, and this study takes that possibility seriously in §1.7 rather than assuming its own reading by default. What can be said at this stage is only that the term Paul chooses leaves the question open rather than closing it.

βέλος also carries, in its Greco-Roman military background, associations that sharpen “fiery” beyond a generic descriptor. Bruce, drawing on Livy's account of incendiary missiles, notes that such a dart “was thrown when well alight and its motion through the air made it blaze more fiercely” (Bruce, 1984, p. 408) ^[2], a description confirming that the danger lay as much in the missile's behaviour in flight as in its impact. The shield built to withstand such a weapon was substantial. Hoehner describes the θυρεός as constructed of two wood planks glued together, its outer surface covered first with canvas and then with calf skin, further reinforced with metal and customarily soaked in water before battle for the specific purpose of extinguishing such darts on contact (Hoehner, 2002, pp. 844–846) ^[6]. So dangerous was this class of weapon that even a dart failing to penetrate could force a soldier to discard a burning shield and stand exposed.

For the present, the structural observation stands on its own terms: Paul names, with precision, the shooter (τοῦ πονηροῦ) and the payload (πεπυρωμένα βέλη), in a passage that itemises every piece of the believer's own armour by name. It does not follow automatically that the enemy's weapon should receive the same degree of specification as the believer's equipment; the two catalogues serve different rhetorical functions, and this study does not treat the comparison as self-evidently decisive. What the contrast supplies, more modestly, is an invitation to ask why a passage capable of such precision elsewhere leaves this one term unspecified — a question this study pursues rather than answers by the observation alone.

3. Πυρόω and the Semantic Range of “Fiery” in the New Testament

The adjective describing the darts, πεπυρωμένα (pepyromēna), derives from the verb πυρόω (pyroō), which occurs only six times in the New Testament and always in the passive voice. Its range is narrow in frequency but wide in sense. Four of its six occurrences retain a literal or material sense: the darts of Ephesians 6:16 itself; the burning associated with the dissolution of the heavens in 2 Peter 3:12; the refined, glowing bronze of the exalted Christ's feet in Revelation 1:15; and the refined gold of Revelation 3:18, a metallurgical image of purification.

The remaining two occurrences employ the verb in the domain of internal passion: 1 Corinthians 7:9, being inflamed with sexual desire, and 2 Corinthians 11:29, the heat of grief or indignation. In these two instances, πυρόω names something that burns within a person, not merely something that burns before them.

This affective usage spans both Pauline occurrences and is not confined to a single passage, though the sample supporting it is small — two occurrences out of six. Where πυρόω moves beyond the literal register in the New Testament, both attested instances locate the burning in the domain of the passions rather than in any other internal faculty. The argument does not claim that pattern to be statistically robust, only that it is the pattern actually attested.

Two cautions belong here, consistent with the distinction this study maintains throughout between what the text states and what an argued reading infers. First, the literal sense remains the primary and universally attested reading of πεπυρωμένα in 6:16 itself; no lexicon or commentary consulted glosses the term there as anything other than literal fire. Second, the internal-passion sense advanced here is an inference drawn from two occurrences of the verb's range elsewhere in the New Testament, not a citation of any prior scholar reading Ephesians 6:16 in this manner. The argument is original to this study, offered with the modesty its small evidentiary base requires.

Read together with §1.2, the two findings work in the same direction instead of merely coexisting. Paul names a payload (βέλος) whose category leaves its delivery mechanism unspecified, and qualifies that payload with a term (πεπυρωμένα) whose semantic range, in two attested New Testament instances, includes the ignition of internal passion alongside its otherwise literal or material sense. This is one contributing strand among several, not a single decisive proof; its evidentiary weight is modest, given the very small sample the verb affords, and is offered as corroborating rather than load-bearing. What remains to be established, in the sections following, is how such a dart reaches its target, and it is to that question, and to the shooter who loses it, that the study now turns.

4. Τοῦ πονηροῦ: The Shooter Named, Personal, and Cosmic

The shooter in Ephesians 6:16 is identified as τοῦ πονηροῦ (tou ponērou), “the evil one.” The construction is articular, and the article substantivises the adjective, though the article alone does not settle whether the referent is personal or general; that judgment depends on context rather than on the article by itself. In context, however, the personal reading is strongly favoured. The articular singular ὁ πονηρός (ho ponēros) is elsewhere used, in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:13) and widely in early Christian usage, as a fixed designation for Satan specifically, and nothing in Ephesians 6:10–17's immediate context suggests Paul intends the abstract sense here. The most natural reading of τοῦ πονηροῦ in 6:16, then, is personal: a singular agent, not evil conceived generally.

This reading connects naturally, though the connection is conceptual rather than strictly grammatical, to the taxonomy of hostile powers enumerated four verses earlier, in 6:12: the ἀρχαί (archai, “rulers”), the ἐξουσίαι (exousiai, “authorities”), the κοσμοκράτορες (kosmokratores, “world-rulers, cosmic powers”) of this present darkness, and the πνευματικὰ τῆς πονηρίας (pneumatika tēs ponērias, “spiritual forces of wickedness”) in the heavenly places. The singular personal figure named in 6:16 is best understood as belonging within this same hostile cosmic complex, rather than as a formally identical grammatical referent established by syntax alone. Paul is comparatively clear about who wages this war. He is markedly less specific about the instrument by which the war's projectiles are delivered — a contrast this study takes as worth examining rather than as self-evidently decisive on its own.

5. The Septuagintal Pattern: Psalm 7 and Psalm 90(91)

This section offers a suggestive intertextual analogue rather than an established scriptural precedent, and the distinction

matters. The paper does not claim to demonstrate that Paul consciously alludes to either Psalm text at Eph 6:16, only that a comparable pattern of naming and withholding exists elsewhere in the Scriptures Paul inherited, worth noting even where deliberate allusion cannot be shown. Two Septuagintal texts, read together, disclose this pattern.

In Psalm 7:12–13 (LXX), the bow belongs to God himself, acting as righteous judge against the unrepentant: “he has bent his bow, and made it ready; and on it he has fitted the instruments of death; he has completed his arrows for the raging ones.” Every element of the divine warrior's armament is itemised without reserve. When the Psalter depicts the righteous archer preparing judgment, nothing is withheld.

By contrast, Psalm 90:5 (LXX; Psalm 91:5 in the Hebrew numbering), a psalm of protection promising refuge to the one who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, names the threat but not its mechanism: “you shall not be afraid of the terror by night, of the arrow (βέλος, belous, genitive of βέλος) that flies by day.” The arrow is named. The terror it carries is named. The bow that sends it is not.

The pattern that emerges from setting these two texts side by side is this: within these two instances at least, the bow of the righteous judge is named and detailed, while the bow of the adversary, in a psalm addressed to the one under threat, is passed over in silence. Ephesians 6:16's own silence resembles this second pattern. Whether that resemblance reflects Pauline dependence on the convention or simple coincidence of genre, this study does not attempt to adjudicate.

This intertextual observation does not, on its own, prove that Paul intended a hidden theological argument about the variability of the bow in the sense advanced by this study. It establishes something more modest but still significant: the silence regarding the bow in a text addressed to a threatened believer is not without scriptural precedent, and the pattern of naming or withholding the bow tracks consistently with whose bow it is and to whom the text is addressed.

6. Synthesis

The five preceding subsections converge, cumulatively rather than each independently decisively, on a single proposal. τοῦ λοιποῦ (6:10) plausibly resumes rather than merely closes, tying the armour pericope to the outstanding portion of the ἀξίως-calling first announced at 4:1, and positioning it immediately after the household code's instruction to those relationships of greatest trust and proximity — an observation the paper treats as contextual resonance rather than as itself establishing that those relationships are what the unnamed mechanism refers to. βέλος (6:16) names the payload in terms broad enough to leave its mode of delivery unspecified. πυρόω, qualifying that payload, carries elsewhere in the New Testament a range extending to the ignition of internal passion alongside its literal sense, offered as a compatible resonance rather than a controlling meaning. τοῦ πονηροῦ most naturally names the shooter as a singular, personal, cosmic agent, belonging within the taxonomy of hostile powers in 6:12. And a suggestive analogue in Psalm 7 and Psalm 90(91) shows a comparable pattern of naming and withholding elsewhere in Scripture, without establishing that Paul draws on it deliberately.

Taken together, the evidence supports treating the unspecified delivery mechanism as a feature of the text

worth theological attention, while stopping short of claiming that the Greek of 6:16 itself yields the fuller theological construction this study goes on to propose. It is to that construction, and to the pastoral responsibility it invites, that the study now turns.

7. A Counter-Reading Considered

A careful reader may object that the absence of a named delivery mechanism in Ephesians 6:16 requires no theological explanation at all. Greek military vocabulary, on this view, is routinely generic: βέλος is a common, unremarkable term precisely because ancient readers did not require, and ancient authors did not typically supply, a specification of hand, bow, or sling every time a missile was mentioned. Paul's silence, the objection runs, is simply ordinary economy of style.

This objection has real force and deserves to be taken seriously. It is true that βέλος is common and that Greek authors frequently use it without specifying propulsion. If this were the only feature of the text under discussion, stylistic economy would be the more economical explanation, and this study would not press the point.

But the objection does not adequately account for two further features of the passage. First, it does not explain why the surrounding armour catalogue is, by contrast, exhaustively specific: belt, breastplate, shoes, shield, helmet, sword, each named individually where a more general “armour” would have sufficed stylistically. An author demonstrably capable of, and inclined toward, itemised precision throughout a passage, who then reverts to generic vocabulary at precisely the one point where a specific term was structurally available, invites more scrutiny than an author who writes generically throughout.

Second, and more significantly, stylistic economy alone does not explain the correspondence this study has traced between the silence and Paul's own express prohibition four verses earlier against wrestling with flesh and blood (§2.4). If the silence were merely stylistic, its alignment with 6:12's specific content would be a notable coincidence requiring its own account. The argument advanced in this study does not depend on the silence being unusual in isolation; it depends on the convergence of the silence with the passage's demonstrated pattern of precision elsewhere and with Paul's own stated theological commitment nearby.

8. From Lexical Silence to Relational Sphere: A Discourse-Contextual Bridge

The preceding subsections establish that βέλος leaves its delivery mechanism lexically unspecified (§1.2) and that this silence is worth theological attention rather than dismissal (§1.7). What licenses the move this study makes next, in §2, from that lexical silence to a construction framed in terms of relational and appetitive proximity, needs to be stated precisely, because that move is not, and should not be presented as, an extraction from βέλος's semantics. The word itself supplies no relational content whatsoever; it is simply indeterminate as to mechanism. If relational proximity is to enter the argument responsibly, it must enter by a different route: not lexical, but discourse-contextual. The paper's methodology names this route narrative weighting, attending to where a term or silence sits within the letter's larger discourse movement, rather than isolating it from that movement.

Two contextual data bear on this directly. First, the immediate context: πάντα τὰ βέλη τοῦ πονηροῦ πεπυρωμένα (6:16) follows, within the same pericope, Paul's declaration in 6:12 that “we wrestle not against flesh and blood” (πρὸς αἷμα καὶ σάρκα, *pros haima kai sarka*, literally “against blood and flesh”). This is a striking discourse movement in its own right. Paul names the human sphere, flesh and blood, precisely in order to redirect the believer's struggle away from it and toward the cosmic taxonomy that follows. Flesh and blood is not thereby identified as the enemy; Paul explicitly forecloses that reading. But its naming establishes that the human, relational sphere is discursively present and salient at exactly the point where the unspecified βέλη are subsequently introduced four verses later.

Second, the wider context: the armour pericope does not arrive at a relational vacuum. It follows an extended treatment of concrete human relationships — husbands and wives (5:22–33), children and parents, servants and masters (6:1–9) — itself continuous with the letter's broader concern, from 2:11–22 onward, with the reconciliation of formerly divided persons into a single relational body. By the time a reader reaches 6:16, Paul has spent a substantial portion of the letter establishing that the relational sphere is where Christian conduct, and Christian conflict, are concretely worked out.

Neither datum, alone or together, proves that Paul intends the unspecified βέλη to be read relationally. What they establish, more modestly and more defensibly, is that relational proximity is not an idea imported from outside the discourse to fill a lexical gap. It is a category the discourse itself has already made salient, immediately before and extensively throughout the letter, at the very point the gap occurs. The argument this study advances in §2, accordingly, proceeds as follows: lexical silence (§1.2) leads to a discourse-contextual field, established by 6:12's “flesh and blood” and the preceding relational catalogue (§1.8), which supports a proposed relational and appetitive sphere (§2), from which a theological construction and pastoral application follow (§2–§4). This is a narrative-weighting argument, in the terms of the paper's own methodology, not a lexical-semantic one, and should be evaluated on those terms.

The Proof of Proximity

1. The Principle Stated

The discussion in §1, and particularly the discourse-contextual bridge established in §1.8, supports treating relational proximity as a textually salient category for construing the unspecified delivery mechanism of Ephesians 6:16. What follows is a further, more explicitly constructive step: a pastoral-theological proposition this study brings to bear on that textually salient category, offered because it illuminates common Christian experience and coheres with the discourse-contextual observations already made. The proposition is this: believers are often wounded less by what is said or done to them than by who says or does it.

This is a familiar pastoral observation, not a novel discovery of this study, and it is worth stating plainly as such. The content of an offence is often not, by itself, sufficient to explain the depth of a believer's wounding. The same words, delivered by two different mouths, frequently do not wound alike. An insult from a stranger, or from one whose judgment carries little weight for us, often passes quickly;

the same insult from a spouse, an intimate friend, or a trusted figure can lodge and burn in a way the words alone would not predict.

This common pastoral observation offers one plausible way of construing the unnamed mechanism examined in §1 — not as a fixed instrument the text conceals, but as a category, relational trust, that could account for the kind of variability an unspecified delivery mechanism would in practice exhibit, if the silence is indeed exegetically significant. The paper does not claim the text itself states this; it proposes it as a coherent construction upon the text's silence.

2. Why the Content Is Not the Cause

This claim needs guarding against a misunderstanding that would weaken it considerably. The argument is not that words and actions are morally neutral, nor that content is irrelevant to the ethics of what is said or done, nor that objective severity does not matter; it plainly does. The claim is narrower: the intensity of an offence's experienced impact may be shaped substantially by relational proximity, sometimes out of proportion to the offence's objective content considered alone. This is a claim about one contributing factor among others, not a general causal law displacing severity as a consideration.

The distinction matters pastorally, and it will matter again in §3, because it locates the believer's task correctly. The task is not to become indifferent to wrongdoing, nor to excuse it because it comes from a trusted source. The task is to recognise that the intensity of one's wounding is itself diagnostic information, and to respond to that signal with discernment rather than with the disoriented reaction the enemy intends to provoke.

3. The Twofold Responsibility

From this principle, two responsibilities follow, and it is the pairing of the two, rather than either in isolation, that constitutes the central pastoral contribution of this study.

The first responsibility is that the believer must learn to avoid a particular kind of misdirection. This does not mean the denial of pain, nor a stoic refusal to acknowledge that a wound delivered through a trusted relationship is real and grievous. It means, rather, that the believer must learn to distinguish the proximate human means through which an assault is experienced from the cosmic antagonist Paul names, and to direct the ensuing spiritual struggle where 6:12 directs it: not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, the authorities, the cosmic powers of this present darkness, and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. To wrestle with the proximate means as though it were the ultimate enemy is to misdirect the struggle Paul describes.

An essential safeguard belongs here, and this study states it without qualification. Recognising a spiritual dimension to an injury does not remove human accountability for the wrong committed. It does not require an injured person to remain in an unsafe relationship. It does not suggest that genuine abuse should be reframed primarily as a matter for spiritual discernment rather than protection, redress, and, where warranted, the involvement of appropriate authorities. A genuine wrong remains a genuine wrong regardless of who commits it or what proximate role the paper's framework might assign them.

The theological construction proposed here is offered to help a believer locate ultimate spiritual responsibility —

never to excuse, minimise, or substitute for the human responsibility a wrongdoer bears, and never to counsel anyone to remain in harm's way. Spiritual discernment, on the paper's own terms, must never become moral evasion.

The second responsibility, which the paper argues has received comparatively little attention, is that the believer should also examine whether they themselves, through a relationship of proximity and trust, might unknowingly become a means by which another is wounded.

These two responsibilities are not sequential but complementary, and both follow from the theological construction proposed in this section. If the unnamed mechanism can usefully be conceptualised as variable and tied to proximity, then any believer, at any time, may stand in either position.

4. The Silence as Consonant with 6:12

The argument thus far has treated the silence surrounding the delivery mechanism as consistent with Paul's warning in 6:12, and as resembling a pattern found elsewhere in Scripture. This study stops short of the stronger claim that the silence positively enacts 6:12's instruction. That stronger claim would require showing that naming a proximate human means of assault necessarily constitutes the very wrestling against flesh and blood that 6:12 forbids, and this study does not think that has been demonstrated. Paul's own distinction between a human instrument and the cosmic antagonist behind it, which this study relies on throughout, suggests the opposite is at least possible: a text could in principle name the proximate means precisely in order to distinguish it more sharply from the true enemy, rather than needing to suppress the name to avoid confusion.

The more modest claim can be stated with confidence: the silence is consonant with 6:12's prohibition, in that it avoids furnishing believers with a fixed, identifiable human target, and a text pursuing 6:12's stated concern would have good reason to leave such a target unspecified even if that is not the only, or even the primary, explanation available. Paul states plainly, four verses before the armour is described in detail, that “we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (6:12). Ephesians 6:16's silence sits comfortably alongside this prohibition, and that fit is treated as one further, corroborating reason to take the silence seriously, not as proof that the silence was composed for this purpose.

5. A Second Form of Proximity: The Craft of Appetite

The proximity examined thus far in this section has been relational: the bow chosen for the trust it carries, the wound whose depth is a function of who delivers it. A second, complementary form of proximity belongs alongside it, and the two are best understood not as separate mechanisms but as instances of a single underlying craft — the fitting of the fiery dart to whatever, in a believer's life, already lies open to receive it.

Paul's own diagnosis of the flesh elsewhere in this letter supplies a warrant for this extension. Writing of the manner of life all once shared before grace intervened, Paul describes believers as having formerly lived “in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind” (Ephesians 2:3). The flesh, on Paul's own account, does not desire generically. It desires particularly, according to

inclination, temperament, and appetite specific to each person. The theological construction advanced here therefore proposes, as a further inference rather than a textual given, that the same variability this study has attributed to relational proximity may extend to appetite: a temptation's force may likewise be shaped by its fit to inclinations already present in a given believer. Believers need not be drawn by identical means; what suits one may hold little pull for another.

Relational proximity and appetitive proximity are, on this proposed construction, two expressions of one underlying principle rather than two distinct mechanisms. Both are forms of access, and both, on the paper's reading, can plausibly be attributed to a shooter whose most natural identification, argued in §1.4, is a purposeful cosmic agent. Both, therefore, fall under the twofold responsibility argued in §2.3: the believer may usefully attend not only to when a trusted relationship has become a means through which a wound arrives, but also to when a settled appetite has become an opening through which distress finds a place to catch.

Theological Payload: The Relocation of the Realm of Warfare

1. From Location to Mechanism

The tradition of teaching on spiritual warfare has been diligent in specifying the location of the battle: the heavenly places of 6:12, the cosmic hierarchy of rulers, powers, and authorities standing behind every earthly trouble. Comparatively less attention has been given to the affective and relational dimensions of how such conflict is often experienced. This is a claim about emphasis, not exclusivity. The passions are not the sole or even the primary site of spiritual conflict to the exclusion of cognition, belief, the will, or the loyalties the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit themselves engage; the armour Paul describes plainly addresses more than affect alone. What the paper proposes, more modestly, is that the imagery of fiery darts in 6:16, read alongside *πυρώ*'s wider range, permits and rewards particular attention to the affective and relational dimensions of spiritual conflict — dimensions the paper argues have been comparatively underexamined relative to the more cosmic-locational emphasis of much teaching on the passage.

This proposed emphasis carries practical consequences worth naming. A theology of spiritual warfare that trains believers to scan the heavens for hostile powers, without also attending to the burning of grief, anger, or wounded trust as a dimension of the conflict worth spiritual attention, may leave an important aspect of that conflict comparatively unaddressed. The paper's deeper claim, developed across this section, is not chiefly about the bow as such but about how spiritual warfare itself is conceptualised: a cosmic antagonist works through proximate channels toward genuinely human experience, without the proximate channel thereby becoming the enemy.

2. When Misdiagnosis Distorts Prayer

The proposal offers an account of why many believers may struggle to pray effectively about a conflict they have misdiagnosed. Paul's charge to pray always, with all prayer and supplication, watching thereunto with all perseverance (6:18), is grammatically incorporated into the posture of the already-armed believer (see §3.4), which suggests, without

strictly requiring, that prayer functions best where the believer has already begun to identify what is being fought and where. A believer who has misdirected the struggle — treating a spouse, friend, or trusted figure as though they were the ultimate enemy rather than a proximate means through which conflict is experienced — may bring to prayer not a request for victory over the true antagonist, but a heart occupied with grievance against the wrong target.

3. The Twofold Responsibility as Theological, Not Merely Practical

The victim/vehicle pairing developed in §2.3 carries theological weight beyond its pastoral usefulness. Both responsibilities cohere with the proposed emphasis of §3.1. If the affective and relational dimensions of spiritual conflict merit the attention the paper argues they have not consistently received, then the believer's own passions — the capacity to be wounded, and, differently, the capacity to wound — are not incidental to the spiritual life but warrant the same watchfulness Paul elsewhere commends toward more familiar fronts of temptation.

4. The Syntax of Sequence: Why the Shield Precedes Prayer

The order of Ephesians 6:14–18 offers a further, modest observation in support of the paper's argument, though it should not be pressed further than its syntax warrants. Paul's sentence unfolds as a single grammatical unit, governed by the imperative *στῆτε* (*stēte*, “stand!”) in verse 14, to which every subsequent clause attaches: the girding of the belt, the donning of the breastplate, the shoeing of the feet, the taking up of the shield, the taking of the helmet and the sword, and, as the final participial clause in the sentence, the praying (*προσευχόμενοι*, *proseuchomenoi*, “praying,” 6:18).

This participial construction establishes sequence within a single sentence. It does not by itself establish a theological priority in which prayer is relegated to a subsequent or lesser stage; prayer is far too pervasive in Pauline theology to be treated merely as a final-stage activity, and this study does not intend that implication. What the syntax supports is a narrower claim: Paul grammatically incorporates prayer into the posture of the already-armed believer, rather than presenting it as the first or sole means by which the believer engages the conflict described. This is consonant with, though it does not independently prove, the claim advanced in §3.2, that identifying the true object of struggle is a task prayer presupposes rather than always first accomplishes.

Pastoral Discernment: A Method for the Twofold Responsibility

1. Introduction to the Method

The preceding sections have proposed a theological construction — that the unnamed delivery mechanism of Ephesians 6:16 can be usefully conceptualised as a variable, proximity-based means of assault — and have argued that the believer's responsibility in light of this construction is twofold: attentiveness to becoming its victim, and attentiveness to becoming its vehicle. What follows applies this construction pastorally, as a practical discipline of discernment.

It is offered as a set of examined questions consistent with the theological proposal developed above, not as a formula for detecting supernatural targeting with certainty, and not as a substitute for sound pastoral, medical, or psychological

care where a believer's distress may have other or additional causes.

2. Discerning the Bow Drawn Against the Self: Guarding Against Being a Victim

When a believer experiences wounding that seems disproportionate to the apparent content of what was said or done, that disproportion may serve as a prompt for discernment — one among several possible explanations, not proof of anything in particular. A disproportionate reaction may equally arise from prior trauma, accumulated relational injury, grief, exhaustion, or other causes entirely unrelated to the paper's proposed construction, and the questions below are not intended to substitute for appropriate care where such causes are in view. They serve as a starting point for reflection, not a diagnostic instrument. First, does the intensity of this wound match the weight of what was actually said or done, or does it seem to exceed it? Where it does, that excess may be worth reflecting on prayerfully, alongside other possible explanations, rather than treating it as settled evidence of any particular cause.

Second, is the believer's distress presently directed at the person who spoke or acted, or is it capable of being redirected toward the cosmic source Paul names in 6:12?

Third, has this wound reached prayer, or has it stopped short of it, circling instead in rehearsed grievance against the one who caused it?

Fourth, is this a pattern? A wound that recurs repeatedly through the same relationship, or the same category of relationship, invites the believer to ask, with sober self-examination, whether this particular proximity has become a habitual bow.

Fifth, is this wound arriving through a settled desire or inclination rather than, or in addition to, a trusted relationship? Not every bow is a person. A wound may find its opening through an appetite already present — a longing for recognition, for comfort, for a particular kind of affirmation — that the enemy has studied as carefully as he studies relational trust.

3. Discerning the Bow Drawn Through the Self: Guarding Against Being a Vehicle

The second discipline is less naturally practised, precisely because it requires the believer to examine not injury received but influence exercised.

First, when speaking difficult truth, correction, or even ordinary disagreement to someone close, has the speaker asked whether their words carried more heat than the matter required?

Second, does the believer hold unusual trust or influence with the person they are about to speak to? Have they asked God, before speaking, whether what they are about to say is truth spoken in love, or grievance discharged through a channel they know will not be resisted because of the trust it carries?

Third, after difficult words have been spoken, is the believer's conscience at rest, or is there a residue of self-justification that resists genuine reflection on whether the words served the other person's good or merely relieved their own distress?

Fourth, is there a pattern in which the believer has become, across time, the habitual bearer of hard words into a particular relationship?

Fifth, is the believer, in a given moment, speaking or acting out of a settled desire of their own — for vindication, for control, for comfort, for being thought well of — that has quietly attached itself to what they believe is righteous correction or honest speech?

The urgency of this discipline is not merely theoretical. It bears on controversies long familiar to the church, in which questions of self-presentation are too often argued in terms of causation rather than examined intention.⁶

4. The Discipline Held Together

These two disciplines, examined separately above for clarity, are not practised separately in the life of the believer. The same proximity that makes one vulnerable to being struck through a trusted relationship makes one equally capable of striking through it. The mature practice of this discipline is not episodic but habitual, forming over time a settled watchfulness consistent with Paul's own closing charge to the passage: to pray always, in every season, with all perseverance, on behalf of all the saints (6:18).

One live instance is the long-running debate over modest dress. The paper's argument does not support the framing in which a particular manner of dress “causes” another's temptation, since §2.4 establishes that responsibility for the dart's flight remains with the shooter, not the vehicle. The more precise question, consistent with the discipline urged throughout §4.3, is whether the manner in which a believer presents themselves — through dress, but equally through speech, ambition, or the pursuit of admiration in any form — proceeds from an unexamined appetite for attention or affirmation (cf. Eph 2:3), and has thereby become a readier channel than intended. This discipline is not the property of one sex, nor is dress its only field of application.

Conclusion

The paper began with a modest observation: Ephesians 6:16 names the shooter and the payload of the enemy's assault but leaves the projectile's delivery mechanism unstated. That silence turned out to bear more weight than a first reading suggests. τοῦ λοιποῦ at 6:10 more plausibly resumes an outstanding portion of Paul's argument than it closes the letter, and it does so at the seam between the household code and the armour pericope — a seam the paper has treated as suggestive rather than probative. βέλος names a payload whose delivery is, by the word's own semantic range, left open. πυρόω, in its rare non-literal uses elsewhere in Paul, points toward the kindling of passion rather than only material fire. τοῦ πονηροῦ identifies a personal, cosmic shooter consistent with the taxonomy of 6:12. And the Psalter's own habit of naming the righteous judge's bow while withholding the adversary's supplies a scriptural analogue for exactly this kind of silence.

None of this, on its own, proves the theological construction the paper goes on to build; it establishes only that the construction has somewhere legitimate to stand. What the paper adds to that philological base is pastoral rather than exegetical: an old and familiar Christian intuition — that wounds from those closest to us cut deeper than wounds from strangers — can be given a textual occasion for reflection without being mistaken for a proven reading of the Greek. From there follows the paper's central proposal, that spiritual warfare's affective and relational dimension deserves more sustained attention than it commonly receives, and its most practical contribution, a discipline of

self-examination bounded on both sides: watchfulness against becoming the bow's target, and watchfulness against becoming, without meaning to, the hand that draws it against someone else.

The mystery of the bow, then, is not a thesis the Greek text proves by itself. It is a theological proposal offered for the believer to hold watchfully, prayerfully, and with due humility about its inferential character — one way of attending to how proximate human relationships may figure within a conflict Scripture locates, first and finally, in the cosmic and spiritual realm.

References

1. Arnold CE. Ephesians: Power and magic: The concept of power in Ephesians in light of its historical setting. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
2. Bruce FF. The epistle to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians. New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids (MI): Eerdmans, 1984.
3. Carr W. Angels and principalities: The background, meaning and development of the Pauline phrase *hai archai kai hai exousiai*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
4. Eerdmans Publishing Co. Statement on the withdrawal of Peter T. O'Brien's commentaries, 2016 Aug.
5. Gombis TG. The drama of Ephesians: Participating in the triumph of God. Downers Grove (IL): IVP Academic, 2010.
6. Hoehner HW. Ephesians: An exegetical commentary. Grand Rapids (MI): Baker Academic, 2002.
7. Lincoln AT. Ephesians. Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas (TX): Word Books, 1990, 42.
8. Louw JP, Nida EA. Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament based on semantic domains. 2nd ed. New York: United Bible Societies, 1988.
9. O'Brien PT. The letter to the Ephesians. Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids (MI): Eerdmans, 1999.
10. Reinhard DR. Ephesians 6:10–18: A call to personal piety or another way of describing union with Christ? *J Evangel Theol Soc*, 2005;48(3):521-532.
11. Spiritual warfare, as popularly conceived in the church, is a cosmic affair.
12. Where the bow appears at all in expositions of this verse, it is generally invoked as incidental atmosphere.
13. The believer who learns to guard against being struck must also learn to guard against becoming, through the very trust others place in them, a means by which another is struck.
14. The argument proceeds on the traditional assumption of Pauline authorship, consistent with Hoehner (2002) and O'Brien (1999). This assumption is not uncontested: Lincoln (1990, pp. lx, lxii) holds that Ephesians was written by a later follower of Paul rather than the apostle himself. The argument advanced here proceeds from the text's language and structure rather than from authorial biography, and does not depend on resolving this question; it is noted here for methodological transparency.
15. The Letter to the Ephesians (O'Brien, 1999) was withdrawn from print by its publisher in 2016 following an investigation into inadequately documented use of secondary sources across several of the author's

commentaries; the finding concerned attribution practice rather than a demonstrated error in exegetical content, which O'Brien publicly acknowledged as unintentional. This study cites O'Brien only where corroborated by an independent line of evidence.

16. This urgency is not merely theoretical; it bears on controversies long familiar to the church, in which questions of self-presentation are too often argued in terms of causation rather than examined intention.