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Preaching the David Story

David G. Firth

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Anyone looking for an exciting story around which to compile a series of messages could do much worse than consider the story of David. In so many ways, it is a story that has it all. Here is someone who rises from relatively obscurity, who overcomes the jealous attention of the previous king, to become the one whose rule unites all Israel, north and south. He is the resourceful but trusting shepherd who is also a natural soldier, a leader recognised by all. At the same time he is astute enough to know how to deal with the political structures of his time. But unlike most romances, it does not end with David riding off into the sunset with all settled and arranged. Instead, after reading of his accession we have the long and twisted account of his fall through his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba and the revolts led by Absalom and Sheba. Although it seems that David cannot survive Absalom's rebellion, it is Absalom who is defeated and David reclaims his throne, though it is never as secure as before. Indeed, David's final years are marked by weakness as his sons plot to succeed him. Moreover, various members of his court join different factions until Solomon is finally secured on the throne. There are twists and turns, a host of characters, and dangers thrown up at many points.

Seen in these terms, we might almost imagine that David is an ancient adventurer who invariably has some element of his personal resourcefulness on which to draw to overcome his adversaries. Whether consciously or not, such a reading of David has found its way into popular culture. Anyone who has seen Raiders of the Lost Ark should recognise the parallels between the scene where Jones faces a huge swordsman it seems he cannot overcome until he laconically pulls out his gun and David's defeat of Goliath in 1 Samuel 17. Indeed, this is but one example of how David's story has worked its way into popular culture to such an extent that many will not recognise, though preachers alert to such possibilities may well make good use of them. At the same time, as anyone who has done their exegetical homework on 1 Samuel 17 should know, David's defeat of Goliath is much more about knowing how and where God is working than simply how the small man overcomes the big one. 'A David and Goliath' story may mean that in the popular parlance, but ironically it is not the main point of the biblical story which highlights David's faith in

Yahweh's promise to Israel. The story's climax is not so much Goliath's defeat as the fact that his defeat vindicates David's claim in 1 Samuel 17:45–47 that his victory would prove Yahweh's power and demonstrate to the whole world that there was indeed a God in Israel.¹ David's story may well be an exciting one, but it is above all else theological literature and David is never the hero. Rather, although we know through the story how David becomes king, the focus throughout is on what Yahweh is doing. If we are true to the text in which we find David's story, then our preaching will find its goal in helping our congregations understand Yahweh and how he is at work throughout.

Two False Paths

If this is therefore a story centred on Yahweh, then there are two false paths we need to highlight, since both lead us away from the goal of being true to the text itself. Both may seem to offer much, and both have found their way into many a sermon, but neither is true to the texts which tell David's story.

The Moral Exemplar

The first of these is what we might call 'the moral exemplar.' This approach is one that is commonly employed when considering narrative texts in the Old Testament, especially as preachers grapple with the problem of narratives that do not appear to offer much else, or at least not much in the time that many have to do their exegesis and preparation. And it must be admitted that preaching any narrative text is not easy, not least because narratives do not come with their 'point' clearly stated for us. The Old Testament's narrative texts are not historicised variants of Aesop's fables. Neither are their central theological themes typically those outlined in our systematic theology classes, so thinking about these texts theologically can be a challenge. But if these things are 'written for our instruction' (Rom 15:4), then seeking some form of moral can seem the quickest way for preachers to move from the story to something they can apply to the lives of their congregations. After all, David is well known as the man who is 'after God's heart' (1 Sam 13:14), though in fact this is only a fairly oblique reference to him since we do not know that David is this person until 1 Samuel 16. But if David is someone 'after God's heart' then, the reasoning seems to be, there was something that marked him out as special, some sense in which he was clearly superior and thus worthy of emulation. But the difficulty with this approach is that it ignores the context in which this statement is made. In 1 Samuel 13 we have the first of a pair of stories about Saul's rejection, and the promise about this person is specific to their role as king. If the text refers to some quality of David, it is only in terms of his understanding of the role of king in Israel. But it is also highly probable that the

1. David G. Firth, "'That the World May Know': Narrative Poetics in 1 Samuel 16–17", in Michael Parsons (ed.), *Text and Task: Scripture and Mission* (Bletchley: Paternoster, 2005), pp. 20–32.

statement emphasises Yahweh's gracious choice rather than some quality in David, though, of course, these options are not mutually contradictory.²

The dangers of this approach ought to be apparent from some reflection on the text, especially as David is presented in Samuel – Kings. Although our first encounters with David paint him positively, there are hints even during the time of his rise that he can be morally ambiguous. We see this perhaps in the fact that although many people are said to 'love David' he is never expressly said to love anyone unless we read the ambiguous reference in 1 Samuel 16:18 this way, though it is more likely that it is Saul who loves David at this point.³ But from 1 Samuel 18 on there are often points where he is morally ambiguous. Thus, when fleeing from Saul he not only allows Michal to lie on his behalf (though it might be argued he does not control this), it also becomes clear that he has a 'household idol' (1 Sam 19:13), employing the same term that Samuel had used when condemning Saul in 1 Samuel 15:23. Beyond this, we find David lying to Ahimelech to obtain provisions and Goliath's sword (1 Sam 21:1–10), something Saul later misconstrues when he orders the slaughter of the priests at Nob (1 Sam 22:6–20). We could multiply examples, but the point is that well before the account of his adultery with Bathsheba there are numerous signs that David is not presented as a faultless moral exemplar.

Despite this, we can still learn from him as we see him wrestling with the question of what it meant to be faithful to Yahweh in the face of significant challenges. But if we are true to the Bible's portrayal of David, we will not make him a faultless hero whose example should always be followed (save in the events of 2 Samuel 11 and its results) and recognise instead that it is his very frailty that makes him such an intriguing character.⁴ We can learn from him, but we do so most effectively by focusing on what God is doing in and through David rather than making David our central focus.

Preaching the Gaps

This path is equally common, but it too fails to proclaim the text itself, though again it does so from the best of motives. We might call this 'preaching the gaps.' The 'gaps' are those points where the text does not provide us with information

2. Keith Bodner, *1 Samuel: A Narrative Commentary* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008), pp. 123–24 indeed argues that the phrase means that David is not someone whose life is according to God's heart in the sense it has traditionally been taken, though this rather overstates things. None of this means that we can never use characters in narrative as the basis for preaching, not least because in some narratives they are presented as exemplars. See Paul J. Kissling, 'Preaching Characters' in Grenville Kent, Paul J. Kissling and Laurence A. Turner (eds.), *He Began with Moses. . .: Preaching the Old Testament Today* (Nottingham: IVP, 2010), pp. 30–46.

3. G. C. Wong, 'Who Loved Whom? A Note on 1 Samuel xvi 21', *VT* 47 (1997), pp. 554–56 argues that it is David who loves Saul, but most commentators argue that it is Saul who loves David.

4. The book of Kings does use David as an exemplar (though cf. 1 Kings 15:4), but it is notable that in every case this is immediately defined in terms of the king leading the nation to worship Yahweh correctly. David is a model king in this respect, but it is quite a particular point.

about the motives and intentions of the characters involved in their various actions and choices, but which modern readers might fill in a number of ways. The most obvious sign of this approach comes when the preacher says ‘now I believe David thought. . .’, or something similar, thus offering an explanation for the gap in the text. The problem with this is that the proposal for filling the gap almost invariably interprets David in the preacher’s own social and cultural framework, resulting in a David who fits our cultural norms. But the differences in time, culture and place between David and now need to be respected if we are not to tame the text. Now, one of the skills of great storytelling is that it does leave gaps, points where readers can imaginatively enter the narrative, and David’s story is full of such things. For example, while fleeing from Saul, David moved from Adullam to Moab where he left his parents with the king of Moab (1 Sam 22:3). One can imagine several reasons why David did this, especially given the links between David’s family and Moab made clear in Ruth, but the text itself offers no comment. Perhaps more surprising is the fact that in 2 Samuel 11 we are given no direct reason as to why David committed adultery with Bathsheba and subsequently murdered Uriah. We can draw a range of conclusions at various points, but as intriguing as we might find these gap filling exercises, we can be reasonably sure that a text’s central themes lie in what it makes explicit, not in the gaps. To stay for the moment with 2 Samuel 11, we must finally recognise the crucial importance of the narrator’s observation that ‘the thing that David had done was evil in Yahweh’s eyes’ (2 Sam 11:27).

Of course, gap filling also occurs in the alternative version of David’s story in 1 Chronicles. There are significant similarities between these narratives, something we would expect if the author of Chronicles has consciously taken Samuel–Kings as a base text,⁵ but Chronicles has different points of development and emphasis. To take one example, both 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21:1–22:1 recount the sin of David’s census and the subsequent punishment for it. The majority of contemporary readers are most exercised by the fact that in 2 Samuel 24:1 it is Yahweh who is said to have incited David to take the census where 1 Chronicles 21:1 has Satan.⁶ But the more significant difference may well be that in Chronicles it is this that leads to the location of the temple whereas in Samuel the important associations are with the story of Saul’s famine in 2 Samuel 21:1–14 as a result of the extended chiasm running through 2 Samuel 21–24.⁷ In Samuel, the emphasis falls

5. The same is true if we follow the proposal of A. Graeme Auld, *Kings without Privilege: David and Moses in the Story of the Bible’s Kings* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), that Samuel–Kings and Chronicles draw from a common source rather than Chronicles drawing from Samuel–Kings, though how we understand their relationship would then be different.

6. Or ‘an adversary’ as the term occurs most commonly in the Old Testament as a common noun meaning ‘adversary’ rather than the proper noun ‘Satan.’ See J. W. Wright, ‘The Innocence of David in 1 Chronicles 21’, *JSTOT* 60 (1993), pp. 87–105. If ‘an adversary’ is the correct translation then we may simply have an oblique reference to Yahweh in Chronicles, something obscured by the trend of most translations to see the proper noun ‘Satan’ here.

7. This reflects a complex literary feature of the books of Samuel that is beyond the scope of this paper. The links between these passages are helpfully treated in Herbert H. Klement, *II Samuel 21–24. Context, Structure and Meaning in the Samuel Conclusion* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter

upon the contrast between David and Saul and their respective responses to the effects of their sin. Chronicles has little interest in Saul, and does not make this contrast. Hence, the Chronicler's account tells how David's sin and its punishment ultimately led from David's own worship to the worship of the nation. Without underplaying the seriousness of David's sin here, anyone preaching the Chronicles' account will need to show how sin is not final, that worship is restorative, and that this restoration need not be restricted to the individual. That is, Chronicles has a constructive theology here, pointing to the potential of worship. By contrast, the emphasis in Samuel is on the damaging effects of sin as something not restricted to the individual, but emphasising the need to take sin seriously. Saul has not done this in 2 Samuel 21:1–14, so that David has to put things right⁸ whilst in 2 Samuel 24 David has to recognise both the effects of his sin and the need to restore his relationship with both God and his people. Preachers dealing with the account in 2 Samuel need to show the seriousness of David's sin while showing that repentance involves restitution under the grace of God.

Although there are considerable points of overlap between these two accounts preachers should not use one to fill in what is missing in the other. Our goal is not to construct the full story of David's sin. Indeed, we cannot know the 'full story.' We can only know what these accounts tell us, and both have left significant gaps. But our goal is to preach the biblical text, and if we fuse Samuel and Chronicles we don't allow our congregations to hear either text in its own clarity. By fusing the two we create a hybrid and what we preach, though starting from the Bible, is not the Bible's own message. Preachers who wish to be faithful to the text need to allow each to be heard in its own terms. This does not mean that we must ignore the alternative accounts, as it is sometimes by reading one version in light of the other that we most clearly see how one develops its own themes. But we must let each text's voice guide ours in preaching and realise that its gaps are there because they are important to its narration. It is this, not a hybrid we create, that our congregations need to encounter.

Working with David's Story

From what has been said, it should be clear that we need to focus on the text's central concerns and explore their significance for our congregations. It should be said that although these false paths need to be avoided, there is no one correct way that we have to preach this story. Each preacher has different gifts and the mode of our preaching ought to reflect that. Hence, as much as I might appreciate and prefer expository preaching, we should admit that not everyone has the skills in exegesis necessary to do this effectively if we mean by 'expository' a systematic

Lang, 2000), pp. 161–84. See also Jin-Soo Kim, *Bloodguilt, Atonement, and Mercy: An Exegetical and Theological Study of 2 Samuel 21:1–14* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 205–23 and Laszlo T. Simon, *Identity and Identification: An Exegetical and Theological Study of 2 Sam 21–24* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 2000), pp. 53–159.

8. Though in fact David does not emerge without blemish in this narrative either, and is himself challenged by Rizpah's faithfulness.

reading that works through David's story. Although all preachers need an exegetical grounding for their preaching, some will be better suited to a more topical approach. Since my own inclinations as a preacher are expository, I would like to sketch what an expository series of sermons on David's story might look like. However, in doing so I shall try to point to some of the key themes that those more inclined to a topical approach might consider. For the sake of simplicity, we will consider here only the representation of David in Samuel – Kings.

The best option for an expository series is one where the preacher works more or less systematically through the whole of 1 Samuel 16–1 Kings 2, though an 'edited highlights' package might work for some. Many congregations could struggle to have a sustained treatment of such a lengthy text, and it might be appropriate to consider presenting David's story within four separate 'chunks.' These would more or less follow the source analysis many scholars offer for David's story, though many regard them simply as appropriate division points within the narrative rather than as discrete sources. In addition, the exact boundaries of these sections are open to some dispute, but the divisions offered here offer a coherent structure for a sermon series even if other divisions might also work.

Thus, an initial series could consider the story of David's rise to the throne of Judah. This would cover 1 Samuel 16:1–2 Samuel 2:4. This involves covering some of the best known stories about David, such as his anointing, the defeat of Goliath and the time he refused to kill Saul in the cave, though it would also involve some lesser known accounts such as his time at Keilah or the period he spent living among the Philistines. There is great value in a congregation knowing some of the stories, but there can also be a sense of excitement as they encounter less familiar parts of the narrative.

Preachers working through this material will discover that one of the most important literary features of the books of Samuel is the ways in which it employs repetition.⁹ Thus, we have two accounts of David arriving in Saul's court in 1 Samuel 16–17, two accounts of David not killing Saul in 1 Samuel 24 and 26, and two accounts of Saul's death in 1 Samuel 31 and 2 Samuel 1. These repetitions are not simply a careless collection of sources, but rather a device to emphasise key points within the overall story. Even stories which do not have any obvious parallels, such as Saul's visit to the spirit-wife at Endor in 1 Samuel 28, actually include many intentional echoes of earlier narratives with Samuel. This does not mean we can skip these parallel accounts as a neat way of abridging a lengthy block of text, but need rather to see the different contribution each makes to understanding a central theme. To take the example of the two occasions where David doesn't kill Saul, it is apparent that there are not only many parallels between the two chapters, there are also key points of development. Thus, in 1 Samuel 24 David is struck by his conscience for cutting off the corner of Saul's robe and has to oppose his men's claim

9. See David G. Firth, 'Play it Again Sam: The Poetics of Narrative repetition in 1 Samuel 1–7', *Tyndale Bulletin* 56/2 (2005), pp. 1–18, and Grenville J.R. Kent, *Say It Again, Sam: A Literary and Filmic Study of Narrative Repetition in 1 Samuel 28* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011).

that this is a (literally) God-given chance to kill Saul. But he doesn't know anything yet about how Yahweh deals with his adversaries, and David only responds to Saul. By contrast, the events in 1 Samuel 26 show David taking the initiative to show he is no threat to Saul because of what he has discovered through Abigail's intervention when he went to kill Nabal in 1 Samuel 25. Repetition drives home the key point that power is not something to be grasped through violence, but the carefully delineated differences also show that David is growing in his understanding of this and therefore what it means to trust Yahweh when under pressure.

A second block could consider David as king in 2 Samuel 2:5–8:17. Again, preachers will note repetitions, so that David's conflict with Ish-bosheth in 2 Samuel 2:5–4:12 represents a short rivalry narrative that parallels the earlier long rivalry narrative between David and Saul. Where the first block has a largely continuing narrative line, there is a marked change in 5:1–8:17. Here, we have summary material drawn from across the whole of David's reign, with a chiasm in 5:17–8:14 which focuses on David in worship and the covenant with David in 7:1–17. By drawing material from across the whole of David's reign readers are given an overall assessment of David's reign that is positive.¹⁰ David is still not presented as a flawless character, and preachers will need to ensure that the tensions evident in 2 Samuel 6 where David brings the ark to the city of David are properly brought out. David failed to bring the ark on the first attempt and was in conflict with Michal when he did. Even at his best, David remains a flawed character, and yet Yahweh not only continued to work through him, he established a covenant with him that was in many ways the seedbed for the messianic hope in the Old Testament.

A third block would then consider 2 Samuel 9–20. Unlike much of the rest of Samuel which has sequences of shorter, independent (but related) narratives, this is one of the longest continuous narratives of the Old Testament.¹¹ Here we encounter David at his lowest, although his move to bring Mephibosheth to his court (2 Samuel 9) seems positive. But subsequently we have his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah (2 Samuel 11) before David's encounter with Nathan in 2 Samuel 12:1–15a. Preachers here will need to be attuned to the skill with which the story is told, so that Nathan's declaration of Yahweh's punishment on David in 2 Samuel 12:7–14 virtually becomes the text for what follows. Careful readers will note that Yahweh is mentioned rather less in these chapters than other parts of Samuel, but the reason for this is that we are told what Yahweh is doing at key points and there is no need to revisit this. It is important that the importance of this announcement is recognised so we appreciate that although we see David's failures with his family and then the rest of the kingdom in 2 Samuel 13–20, we also are shown Yahweh's punishment on him being fully worked out.¹² This is also why it

10. See David G. Firth, 'Shining the Lamp: The Rhetoric of 2 Samuel 5–24', *Tyndale Bulletin* 52/2 (2001), pp. 203–24.

11. Only the Joseph story (Genesis 37–50) and the book of Esther are of similar length and complexity.

12. On this element, see especially Gillian Keys, *The Wages of Sin: A Reappraisal of the 'Succession Narrative'* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 127–41.

is important that we have a positive assessment of David for the whole of his reign in the preceding block. In this block David fails, fails spectacularly, but this does not mean the end of his reign. His punishment is painful; not only for David but also the whole kingdom. Nevertheless, failure is not the end because this is also a story of Yahweh ensuring his purposes are being fulfilled. What ultimately marks David out as Yahweh's ruler is that he accepts this greater authority of Yahweh, and for all his failures in this section of Samuel, he can still be assessed positively.

A fourth block would then consider 2 Samuel 21–24 and 1 Kings 1:1–2:11. There is a clear difference between these two sections, but both cause us to reflect on the whole of David's reign. 2 Samuel 21–24 has long been regarded as a sort of appendix, a gathering of miscellaneous traditions about David that did not quite fit elsewhere. But recent studies have shown that this is in fact a carefully structured collection of texts which are an intentional conclusion to Samuel.¹³ It has long been recognised that these chapters are presented in an extended chiasm, but the links between this section and 2 Samuel 5:17–8:14 have only been explored more recently. It now seems clear that where 5:17–8:14 present the public David, these chapters let us see the private figure. Moreover, 2 Samuel 9–20 has demonstrated a gap between the public David and the private figure, so these chapters show him bringing those elements together. Further, just as 2 Samuel 9–20 is ultimately a narrative about the punishment of sin and ultimate restoration, so the first and last narratives in this sequence also pick up this theme, highlighting the impossibility of cheap grace. At the heart of these chapters are the two poems, 2 Samuel 22 and 23:1–7. 2 Samuel 22 is virtually identical to Psalm 18, but it is important that it is interpreted within its context in Samuel as a key reflection on the nature of kingship, and in this it is paired with David's 'Last Words' in 2 Samuel 23:1–7. These poems resonate with themes from Hannah's Song (1 Samuel 2:1–10) and David's lament over Saul and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:17–27), and so become a means for reflecting not only on David, but also for assessing future kings and the means by which David becomes the model for all subsequent kings in Israel and Judah. Sin, punishment, restoration and righteousness are the key themes of these chapters and they provide much for reflection. Beyond this, 1 Kings 1:1–2:11 picks up David's story at the end of his life. As with 2 Samuel 9–20, it is not a pretty picture, as it shows him as old, weak, and at times vindictive. This is not David as a 'model', but rather someone who is manipulated by all to ensure that Solomon follows him on the throne. Sin may not have prevented David from being mightily used by Yahweh, but it does not mean he did not still suffer the consequences of that sin.

Conclusion

David's story is a powerful one and it resonates with modern concerns about power and its abuse, sin and forgiveness, restoration and righteousness. As preachers, we are called to let our congregations discover the wonder of this story, and

13. On this, see especially Klement, *II Samuel 21–24*.

through the story to appreciate the ways in which God is at work. Since God's promise to David is also central to the messianic hope, it is from this that we can further explore the ways God continues to work in and among us through Jesus, 'great David's greater son.'¹⁴ Although we have not explored it in this paper, we do ultimately need to bring our congregations to Jesus as we reflect on this story, but the key first step is to hear this story with its own emphases and interests, because only when we understand this story as God's word to us will we appreciate what it means to hear it as those who know God through Jesus.

But what would this look like in practice? Since I don't think I have ever heard it preached, I would like to take 1 Samuel 19 as a sample, giving some comments on how it might be preached.

The chapter is paired with 1 Samuel 18 where Saul primarily attempted to kill David through others (notably the Philistines), whereas now his intentions are publicly expressed (1 Sam 19:1). Anyone who has first preached 1 Samuel 18 will want to note both the repetitions and the contrasts here. Thus, both chapters have Saul attempting to kill David under the influence of the baleful spirit (1 Sam 18:10–11, 1 Sam 19:10–11), though a consistent theme in Samuel is that Saul always misses with his spear. Yet, although he 'prophesies'¹⁵ in 18:10, he does not in 19:10, with that deferred until 19:23–24. Throughout the chapter Saul attempts more desperate strategies to kill David, but is initially prevented by his own children and ultimately, when David had fled to Samuel, by the Spirit who leads him to prophesy by rolling on the ground naked for a day and a night (1 Sam 19:23–24). The more Saul sets himself against David, the more his own sin costs him because as becomes explicit by the end of the chapter, he has set himself against God and it is God who prevents him taking David's life. This is important because God has already announced Saul's replacement with David, a point on which he will not recant (1 Sam 15:29). So, the more Saul sets himself against David, the more he sets himself against the purposes of God. And in spite of Saul's power relative to David, God is ensuring his promise concerning David is being fulfilled.

That God is at work to fulfil his promise through David thus points us to the theological motif to develop in our preaching. Whether it is family, the baleful spirit or the direct intervention of God's Spirit, these are all ways in which God is at work. Indeed, in 1 Samuel 19:18–24 it seems as if David has no escape, and yet God intervenes. The preacher could reasonably be content to develop this theme as each of the situations presented in the chapter is rich with analogies for both the individual believer and the church today. And it is important to realise that God's purposes are not frustrated, even when faced by seemingly overwhelming odds, but also that the means by which this happens will vary considerably. We could develop this further by reflecting on what those purposes are today within

14. For a useful treatment on how to preach Christ from the Old Testament, see R. W. L. Moberly, 'Preaching Christ from the Old Testament', in Kent, et al., *He Began with Moses...*, 233–50.

15. Many EVV (e.g., ESV) have raved in 18:10, but this misses the parallel to 19:18–24.

the mission of God. The preacher might then show how these events are preparatory for God's promise to David in 2 Samuel 7 and then show how this develops through to the New Testament. This provides us with a firmer anchor for understanding the points where God's purposes are equally certain today, though anyone preaching through the whole of this chunk of Samuel will probably want to avoid making that connection every week. And in the end, whether it is by open words of truth, the failings of sin, human craft or the direct intervention of the Spirit, that God is at work to ensure the fulfilment of his promises is surely good news our congregations need to hear.

Preaching Old Testament Narratives

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“I believe cinema is now the most powerful secular religion, and people gather in cinemas to experience things collectively, as they once did in church. Cinema storytellers have become the new priests. They’re doing a lot of the work of religious institutions, which have so concretized the metaphors in their stories, taken so much of the poetry, mystery and mysticism out of religious belief, that people look for other places to question their spirituality. I don’t think we fully understand yet the need of people to gather together to listen to a story, and the power of that act.”

-George Miller (*Happy Feet, Babe, Mad Max*)¹

Preachers and teachers soon notice that stories draw an audience in. Compared to a list of propositional points in a lecture, stories (or good ones at least) are more concrete and emotionally accessible, almost experiential: a listener can feel like they have learned a lesson from life in the company of others. A story well told feels like a dialogue, an invitation to try it on for size and make it your own. When life feels random and unresolved, a story can help people who have “lost the plot,” giving a sense that our present experience is part of an ongoing story of cause and effect that is progressing somewhere. Bible stories in particular constantly assure us that God can play a part in the real world, and may yet be an influential character in our personal stories. For postmodern hearers who are suspicious of metanarratives, a story acts like just a humble little truth, yet can smuggle in profound meaning.² Stories have always been superb vehicles for religious experience: Jesus said nothing without one (Mk 4:34).³

1. George Miller, interviewed by Janet Hawley, “The Hero’s Journey: The Epic Progress of Filmmaker George Miller,” *Sydney Morning Herald Good Weekend*, October 14 1995, 54–55, 57–58, 60 (60).

2. On this see Fred B. Craddock, “Story, Narrative and Metanarrative,” in Mike Graves and David J. Schlafer (eds.), *What’s the Shape of Narrative Preaching?* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008), 87–98.

3. Craddock, “Story, Narrative and Metanarrative,” in Graves and Schlafer, *Narrative Preaching*, 87–98:88, observes that “anyone who has listened to Jesus’ stories, the parables, knows

Yet Old Testament narratives have often been under-utilized in Christian preaching and teaching. Biblical narrative itself has been considered light and simple, better left to children while sophisticated minds analyze epistles or prophecy. Then again, some Bible stories explicitly portray such violent or sexual themes that some have practically excluded them from the canon of preaching, finding them sub-Christian or just too hard to explain. Yet perhaps they are designed to cut through apathy and provoke passionate moral questioning at an adult level.⁴ Some may have considered OT stories part of the old covenant, forgetting that Jesus and the apostles used them as Scripture.⁵ Further, some scholarly approaches have theorized about various sources behind the OT narratives, and have attempted to break texts into various voices and authors. Interesting though this speculation may be to some, it does not consider that at least the final form was intended by somebody and works effectively as a unified work of literature. The 20th century also saw debates over historicity. Buttrick caricatures the problem: “Liberals distilled eternal truths from the biblical record while tossing out those embarrassing narratives that stretched credulity. And conservatives were busy trying to defend the facticity of the Bible’s literal story in our more modern world; they too lost track of narrative meanings.”⁶ It is important to support the Bible’s historical claims with research, but an argument defending the accuracy of a narrative account, however valuable, is not the same as telling it in a way that engages and informs a listener.

So when many people want a story that transports them, they pick up a novel or attend a cinema. I have not heard liberals complain about miraculous special effects or the incredible plot moves of Hollywood’s magical realism, or conservatives worry about the historicity of the plot – most people simply relate to the narrative and absorb its themes. I find George Miller’s comment (above) irritating, hopefully in the sense that a grain of sand irritates an oyster and produces a pearl. I think Miller has sensed something very important. Do churches offer rich, multi-layered, subtly told narratives as well as good films do? If not, why not? Some will plead lower budgets, but I do not mean expensive special effects, I mean quality of narrative, and we have in Scripture some of the best literature ever written. Have you ever heard a brilliantly nuanced and characterized OT narrative flattened into one dimension and rendered in cardboard by a preacher trying to prove one moral? (I confess I have probably done this.) How then can preachers help our listeners experience the artistry and persuasive power of Bible stories?

that a story may be more than an ingredient of the sermon: it may be the message itself. As such, the story has the density, complexity, and realism of life.”

4. Cf. Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Preaching Hard Texts of the Old Testament* (Peabody: Hendricksons, 1998). Robin Parry, *Old Testament Story and Christian Ethics: The Rape of Dinah as a Case Study* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004).

5. To name but a few, Jesus reasons from Adam and Eve narrative (Matt 19:4–6), Peter from the Noah narrative (1 Pet 3:17), and Paul from the Exodus narratives (1 Cor 10:1–12).

6. David Buttrick, “Story and Symbol, the Stuff of Preaching,” in Graves and Schlafer (eds), *Narrative Preaching*, 99–113:102.

From around 1980, scholarly interest in the literary study of the Bible has resulted in many more insights into reading and understanding it, and of all the genres, narrative has received most attention.⁷ This has also influenced the preaching of narrative⁸ and caused a sea change: previously, most seminaries taught propositional preaching as almost the only method. I recently unearthed my notes from a preaching class 25 years ago, and found the classical approach: preaching is for the mind, so sermons should make three points, clearly drawn from the text(s) and logically connected into an argument, and then give a brief illustration or poem to touch the emotions as well. Stories are small illuminating windows but the walls of the house are propositional points linked into a case for some belief. This theory comes from Greek rhetoric. It works well in preaching passages from the prophets or epistles who argue in this style, and yet a large part of the Bible is narrative. Narratives have their own shapes, which may or may not really fit a three-point sermon outline. Further, stories often make their points inductively, while classical sermon outlines are deductive. Craddock has challenged preachers by asking why we would stick to the style of a Greek debater rather than using the many literary forms of the Bible.⁹ If preachers let the type of Biblical literature shape our sermonic form as well as our content, we would not fall into doing what we find easy and audiences find predictable, but would offer fresh variety in both content

7. See Jean Louis Ska, *“Our Fathers Have Told Us”: Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narratives* (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2002). Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981). Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001). Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989). Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987). Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987). Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2000). David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative Art in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). Michael Goldberg, *Theology and Narrative: A Critical Introduction* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001).

8. One excellent example is Stephen D. Matthewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002). See also Walter C. Kaiser, “Preaching and Teaching Narrative Texts of the Old Testament,” in *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament: A Guide for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 63–82. Elizabeth Achtemeier, “Preaching from the Narratives,” in *Preaching from the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 61–91. Sidney Griedanus, *Preaching Christ From The Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: Expanded Edition: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001). Mark Ellingsen, *The Integrity of Biblical Narrative: Story in Theology and Proclamation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1990). John C. Holbert, *Preaching Old Testament: Proclamation and Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991). Roger Standing, *Finding the Plot: Preaching in Narrative Style* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004). Austin B. Tucker, *The Preacher As Storyteller: The Power of Narrative in the Pulpit* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2008). Dale Ralph Davis, *The Word Became Flesh: How To Preach from Old Testament Narrative Texts* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2006).

9. Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 113.

and style. What if we shaped our sermon around the story's own structure and theme(s), rather than forcing it to fit our argument? What if we copied its style – tragic or comic, hard-hitting or gentle? That would really be Biblical preaching. It would be wholistic preaching, reaching hearts and minds.

How then can a preacher exegete an OT narrative¹⁰ and then render it for a contemporary audience? We will discuss strategies in reading and preaching 1 Samuel 25.

1. Choose your passage

In personal devotions, I am drawn to the story of David wanting to kill Nabal (1 Sam 25). I admire Abigail's gentle strength and conflict management skills, persuading David to leave vengeance to God. After some pastoral experiences sorting out drunken fights (in a worship band, of all places), Nabal's drinking seemed very relevant.

I notice this chapter is part of a triple-story,¹¹ where David is thrice tempted to kill: first Saul as he relieves himself (ch 24), then Nabal the rich fool, then the sleeping Saul (ch 26). Each time he struggles but ultimately resists temptation, and it seems David is meant to learn a lesson about using power responsibly. Reading on into the wider context of Samuel, abuse of power is the very sin that will kill Uriah and seriously damage David's family and kingdom (2 Sam 11 ff.). Preaching three chapters would be too much, so I will relate 1 Samuel 25 and briefly mention the connections. I would largely avoid 25:40–44 because polygamy raises a separate issue.

Often the text signals its divisions using changes in incident, location, subject, genre or speaker.

This sermon could stand alone, or could be part of a series on the life of David. I find a series on a biblical epic (David, Moses, Joseph, Esther) grip an audience for a number of weeks in church, or a number of lessons in class, and can help people grasp the broader theology of a book in a systematic way. Starting each week with a brief review of what has happened previously in the plot, as TV serials do, not only helps orient new listeners but reminds regulars of the key points. My first attempt at a serial covered too much biblical text each time because I worried I would not get enough material, but in fact there was so much good material that I preached long, felt rushed, and struggled to fit in enough application. Now I take a smaller part of the story and trust it to generate enough events and ideas. I find that attenders who connect with the first sermon or two will keep coming out of curiosity, and may invite friends, which helps build church attendance.

10. Exegesis of narrative uses similar principles to exegesis generally. See for example Craig C. Broyles, *Interpreting the Old Testament: A Guide for Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

11. Cf. Cynthia Edenburg, "How (Not) To Murder a King: Variations on a Theme in 1 Sam 24; 26." *SJOT* 12.1 (1998) 64–85.

2. Translate (or read versions)

This takes time. I am tempted to apologize for that, but teaching Scripture is central to the minister's job description (Acts 6:4; 2 Tim 4:1–5; Mal 2:5–7), and poring over Biblical details can help us listen carefully to God, which is personally transforming. Take all the time you can.

You are not trying to outdo the specialists who produce versions, but translating (or reading commentaries based on the original language) makes you slow down and notice textual details. For example, look up *nabal* in a concordance and you will grin: “foolish,” especially someone with “no perception of ethical and religious claims . . . , disgraceful.” A *nebel* is a “bladder, skin-bottle, skin of wine,” which suggests Nabal is characterized by his bladder – a serious drinker.¹² A mother would hardly choose this name, so perhaps he earned it. When Abigail loads two fat *nebel* wine-bladders (25:18), we smirk at her husband's expense.

The writer uses the name Nabal/ Bladder in a motif about wine and urination which may sound crude, but which creates memorable theology. David twice angrily speaks of planning to kill “anyone who urinates on the wall” (my translation). This is evident in the KJV, which fearlessly translates “any that pisseth against the wall” (25:22, 34). That was polite English in 1611, though it may sound like coarse slang today, and it accurately translates the Hebrew word *shathan* (“urinate”). The NIV translates as “male,” which is more polite but misses the wordplay: David is talking about men, but his expression makes them sound like dogs. I just give the literal translation in passing and ask the audience to remember it for later, often seeing curious looks on their faces. It becomes important at the end of the narrative when God eventually acts in judgment on Nabal exactly when the wine is going out of Nabal/Bladder (25:37), as he urinates the morning after his drunken party. This is dark comedy and memorable poetic justice, because it is exactly what David wanted to do, but with one huge difference: God kills only the guilty, while David was planning to kill all the men, not considering innocent people like the servant who spoke up for him (25:14–17). David later admits his vengeance would have caused evil, as Abigail had already seen (25:39, 28). Human vengeance is flawed. We are self-serving and biased in our judgments, and even our best smart missiles are not smart enough to spare the innocent. Yet God's justice is pure in motivation, all-seeing, and perfectly targeted. Vengeance is his and – make no mistake – he will repay (Rom 12:19). Tell that to those who suffer injustice: perfect justice is on its way. And for the church, solid judgment theology hopefully makes us less judgmental ourselves: God is the judge. (This too is where psalms of lament and imprecation are so useful to believers in expressing our rage and enabling us to wait patiently for God's action.)

This is not the only OT story with adult themes, and certainly not the most

12. Brown Driver Briggs Lexicon, pp. 614–5. Others have recognized this: e.g., Peter J. Leithart, “Nabal and his wine,” *JBL* 120/3 (2001) 525–527; Robert P. Gordon, “David's Rise and Saul's Demise: Narrative Analogy in 1 Samuel 24–26,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 32 (1980), 37–64.

confronting. Preachers could gloss over these textual details, but if we believe all Scripture is inspired and useful (2 Tim 3:16–17), then a Spirit-led writer chose wordplay about urination to make a striking theological point about justice. In fact God later speaks of killing all who urinate on the wall (1 Kgs 14:10; 21:21; 2 Kgs 9:8),¹³ wiping out entire royal houses in a way that recollects Nabal. We can hardly censor Scripture, as though we have a higher morality. Some Biblical scenes and expressions are meant to shock: Nabal's death scene shows sin paying its wages. If that startles my apathy, I should be grateful. If it shows me the horrible death I deserve as a sinner, and makes me appreciate Christ taking that death for me, I should be eternally grateful. Of course, preachers need to be careful that our expressions do not cause unnecessary offence in our hearers' culture. You might simply stick with the text and say this happened "while the wine was coming out of Nabal / the bladder," leaving adults to understand the picture and children to miss it. Yet we can trust this inspired literature to speak powerfully and frankly to people's lives today. Our hearers do not live in a nice polite world but in the real world, and Scripture meets them there.

If you are not confident in Biblical languages, there are good commentaries that offer these textual details, whether in print or software packages. Find a theological library or, if you are outside a city, ask if there is a shelf of commentaries in a large church near you. As a gift to yourself and your hearers, why not spend a morning there every week with your phone off.

3. Consider text critical questions

To which desert did David move: Paran (1 Samuel 25:1, KJV) or Maon (NIV)? Here the KJV follows the Hebrew Masoretic Text, and the NIV follows some Greek Septuagint manuscripts. The Hebrew usually preserves the better reading, but each case must be assessed on internal and external evidence. Maps show Maon close to Carmel, where Nabal's property was (25:2), while the Desert of Paran is some 300 km away, so the Greek translators probably thought Maon made more sense. Yet Samuel is dead (25:1), and no longer guiding David or restraining Saul, so David the constant fugitive might well run far south into a formidable desert to escape. Paran makes most sense here. Text criticism can feel threatening to Bible believers, but it need not be so.¹⁴

4. Muse and meditate

Read the story twenty times across a few days. Tell it to your children (where

13. KJV and Hebrew. Many versions read "male." Zimri killed a drunken king and his men in 1 Kings 16:8–11.

14. One helpful introduction is Ellis R. Brotzman, *Old Testament Textual Criticism. A Practical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994).

age-appropriate) and see if parts bore or confuse them. Ask them to imagine themselves as different characters, and how they feel. Value their questions.

To help you visualize it, break it into scenes like in a film:

- The death of Samuel (25:1a)
- The Funeral (25:1a)
- David runs (25:1b)
- General description of Nabal, Abigail (25:2–3). Not really a scene but an exposition.
- David briefs his men on what to say (25:4–8)
- Nabal abuses David’s men (25:9–11)
- The men arrive and report to David, who sends 400 armed men straight back (25:12–13).
- Back at the farm with Abigail (25:14–19)
- On a mountain road, Abigail meets David (25:20)
- Flashback to David’s angry comment (25:21–22)
- On the mountain road, they speak (25:23–35)
- At Nabal’s farm: party night (25:36)
- At Nabal’s farm: the morning after (25:37)

. . . and so on.

To kick-start your creativity, try a creative writing exercise sometimes called “Six Senses.” Read each verse and note down each character’s experience using six categories: See, Hear, Smell, Touch, Taste, and Emotion. This will not work on every verse, and you will not use everything you jot down, but it can generate sensory ideas that keep your audience virtually experiencing the story through different learning styles. Work hardest on visuals, because visual learners are most common today. Word pictures, and the theology they express, are long remembered.

Be frank about what is in the text and what details you have reconstructed. You can say, “I imagine . . .”

These exercises take time and are hard at first, but you are training yourself to meditate on Scripture (Psalm 1:2) and building your imagination.

5. Preach one big theme

This story mentions anger, alcohol, marriage, workplace politics, leadership, insults, revenge, power, violence, grace, judgment, kingship, conflict resolution – and probably more I have not yet seen. One message could not raise all these points without becoming a mini-series, so a preacher could use their knowledge

of the hearers to choose one theme to emphasize. Yet if we listen closely, stories reveal their primary theme. One way is through keywords. In Hebrew we find the words *ra'* and *ra'ah* ("evil") appearing seven times in this story. The narrator tells us that Nabal is *ra'* in his dealings with people (v.3). The servant tells Abigail that *ra'* is hanging over Nabal and his whole household (v.17) because of his actions. The servant expects that evil will always boomerang back onto the evil person, reflecting his view that the universe is basically moral, and yet he worries that one person's evil choices can bring evil consequences for others ("his whole household"). David seems to share this moral worldview, because he complains that life is unfair as his kindness to Nabal is paid back with *ra'ah* (v.21). Most people like to believe that "Justice prevails," even if they do not choose to believe in a God and do not have a mechanism by which justice can prevail. Many people expect a movie or novel to resolve happily for the "good" person (or the one we like), even though this would not be guaranteed at all in a godless universe, where the fittest (not the most moral) survive and thrive. Even believers find it a struggle to believe in justice when the race is not always to the swift nor bread to the wise, but time and chance happen to all (Eccl 9:11). Justice can seem terribly slow, and even believers scream, "How long . . . ?"¹⁵ Why do so many people expect justice? Could a need for justice and God be wired into the human mind? Yet that same expectation, when disappointed, is what causes many people to doubt the existence of a just and kind God. The David story has not yet finished and will narratively demonstrate that, in this case at least, God makes life fair eventually. Abigail acknowledges that "someone" (Saul!) wants to do *ra'ah* to David (v.26), but challenges David not to do *ra'ah* himself (v.28) because God will act for him. This expresses the view that the universe is temporarily unjust, but justice will one day come. David chooses to believe this and to act accordingly, and finally God does act in justice. David's closing comment credits God for keeping him back from the *ra'ah* he intended to do, and for bringing Nabal's own *ra'ah* down on Nabal (v.39). Thus the narrative claims that God's justice may take time, but it is very effective. But this is not just cold karma. One can also hear the gospel in David's comment on the story: the wages of *ra'ah* are death, but forgiving grace and sanctifying grace are God's free gifts to the undeserving who simply trust Him. Seeing David's realization of this is more powerful than an abstract argument about justice and grace.

Some postmodern "reader response" theories suggest that a story can mean almost anything a reader may see in it. While there is scope for Scripture to speak to many situations, some interpretations do not stand up to a close reading of the text, and often the writer leaves a brief thematic statement near the beginning (cf. Gen 22:1) or end, or both (Judges 19:1; 21:25), or repeated throughout. Brevity is the key here: the Bible writers usually resist long moralizing speeches, showing great economy and restraint. As a young preacher, I made the mistake of trying to deliver a propositional homily at the end of a children's story – but the children

15. Cf. Ps 6:3; 13:1–2; 35:17; 62:3; 74:9–10; 79:5; 80:4; 82:2; 89:46; 90:13; 94:3–4; Is 6:11; Jer 12:2; Dan 8:13; 12:6; Hab 1:2; 2:6; Rev 6:10.

knew the action was over and dry moralism was coming. As soon as I said, “And so, girls and boys . . .,” they began wriggling and looking out the window. A wiser policy is to embed the main message in the story itself or state it briefly in a question early in the narrative, or in the mouth of a character while the action is still live, as Bible stories often do. Some story-tellers can simply tell a story almost without any explanatory comment, and trust it to convey its themes. This is a skill beyond most of us, but we can at least work on making our thematic summaries crisp and clear signposts in just a few well-chosen words.

It can be tempting to preach all the themes of a story, but this will confuse most audiences. Another temptation for the well-researched preacher is to get lost in the details of the text and try to express every detail that is there. To maintain a clear focus, force yourself to write the sermon’s aim and target audience in one sentence. For example: “For people who doubt God because of pain and evil, to convince them that He is working on a solution and is worth trusting.” You may be tempted to add: “And give them a strategy on personal vengeance. And touch on good marital communication, avoiding drunkenness, non-violence, and . . .” Resist this temptation!

If God’s grace is not the major theme in a story, look again. Abigail’s opening line is “Let the ‘awon (guilt, punishment, iniquity) be on me” (25:24). Taking blame, giving to appease anger, and reconciling – does that attitude remind you of Anyone? David’s statement, even though it was made some ten centuries before the ultimate expression of God’s justice and mercy at the cross of Calvary, still reveals the same God of justice and grace. Even Nabal presumably had years of grace from Abigail and from God. Preaching has often focused too hard on moralizing from biblical stories.¹⁶ Of course morality is part of their message, but pushing morals without a strong gospel framework amounts to legalism. The greater story is what God is doing in his gracious plans for us.

6. In delivery, let the plot work

Traditional preaching advice includes the saying, “Tell ’em what you’re gonna tell ’em. Tell ’em. Then tell ’em what you’ve told ’em.” This is deductive, but a narrative works by creating curiosity. What will happen? How? Why? And so stating the conclusion at the beginning can work like starting a joke with the punch-line¹⁷ or reading a novel beginning with its last page. Build curiosity as much as possible early on. Repetition is the mother of learning, but it must be done artfully.

Kissling has argued that the sermon’s structure, whether inductive or deductive, should simply follow the order of the story and allow “the arc of tension in the narrative to maintain interest and flow.”¹⁸ So if the writer does not at first

16. See Stephen D. Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 99.

17. Craddock, *Without Authority*, 52.

18. Paul J. Kissling, “Preaching Narrative: Characters,” in Grenville J. R. Kent, Paul J.

reveal Jonah's real motives for not wanting to go to Nineveh, but keeps us guessing until Jonah 4:2, then this is likely to have some dramatic and theological reason. A preacher who reveals this too early can be like someone who tells you the ending of a movie you are about to watch. An audience needs some early introduction to the general topic, but the introduction should not give away all the conclusions or there is nothing left to wonder about. I find a question works well.

Bible stories manage to include a lot of other types of literature within them – proverbs, laws, songs, prophetic messages, letters, explanatory comments – and similarly the narrative sermon can include brief thoughts about textual details or background information, “questions raised by the biblical text and life, quotes from authorities . . . , critical analysis,”¹⁹ and other helpful side comments as the narrative rolls. This requires a light touch because an overloaded narrative becomes boring. A story is not an exegetical lecture or an exhaustive commentary, so the skills required include those of a novelist in presenting an enthralling narrative that embodies its themes.

A lot of explaining can be done narratively. For example, Mathewson²⁰ shows that preachers could insert a historical lecture on child sacrifice in Canaanite religions, or could depict a brief imagined incident of child sacrifice in the background while telling a bible story. This is a fine example of the adage, “Show. Don't tell.” As an old boxer told me, “One in the eye is worth two in the ear.”

I am constantly surprised at how little church audiences know of Bible stories, especially from the OT, and even those who know what happens can still be interested in details of how and why, and details of background research you bring to the story can offer them fresh insights.

It is wise to be careful about imposing grids onto a narrative. For example, the “Lowry loop” has done preachers a favor in making us aware of plot movements and other elements in redemptive stories, but it may not fit all biblical stories, particularly those where redemption does not happen, for example Judges 19–21. Turner summarizes one helpful way of analyzing the elements of plots: the Initial Situation (life at the beginning of the story), the Complication (the event that changes things), the Transforming Action (which is a response to the Complication), the Resolution and Final Situation.²¹ Shorter stories may not explicitly present all those elements (cf. Judges 3:31), and larger stories may repeat Complications and Transforming Actions a few times before coming to resolution, but overall this is a useful way to think about stories. Beyond any grids, it is important to look at what is really there.

Kissling and Laurence A. Turner, *Reclaiming the Old Testament for Christian Preaching* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2010), 30–46:41.

19. Ronald J. Allen, “Theology Undergirding Narrative Preaching,” in Graves and Schlafer (eds), *Narrative Preaching*, 27–40:28.

20. Mathewson, *Narrative Preaching*, 142–143.

21. Laurence A. Turner, “Preaching narrative: Plot,” in Kent, Kissling and Turner, *Reclaiming*, 13–29:16.

7. Help listeners relate to the characters

People relate to other people. Pastoral training can help us understand Bible characters, yet we should avoid the trend of importing large amounts of popular psychological theory and speculating about what characters “must have felt,” and instead follow the agenda of the text. Narratives reveal character in basic ways:

- What people do
- What they say (to others and to themselves)
- Their appearance, costume, props, possessions and the way they move
- Other characters’ comments about them
- Most authoritatively of all, the narrator’s comments about them.

Watch introductions closely. In 1 Samuel 25:2, we meet “a certain man” and hear about his properties and wealth (the Hebrew word can also mean greatness, which makes us wonder for a while). Impressive! But then the narrator undercuts our first impression by using the down-putting name Nabal (Fool/ Bladder). What? Did we hear correctly? Then we hear his wife’s name (‘my father’s delight’), and are told how wise and beautiful she is. Surely her husband must be a good man? But then the narrator resolves our confusion by bluntly telling us Nabal was mean and ra’ (evil), even though descended from the great Caleb. Now we are wondering. Why did she marry him? Was it arranged? Or was he once a promising young man? If so, what changed him? Alcohol abuse? Arrogance? We can speculate about the reasons, but the writer leaves some matters without comment, perhaps to pique our curiosity.

Nabal’s only speech begins by personally demeaning David as a nobody, a runaway slave. He uses words for “I,” “me” and “mine” a self-absorbed eight times in the Hebrew of 15:11, and the KJV translates this while the NIV smoothes away some of the repetition, probably for contemporary tastes. Nabal’s own servant describes his tone as shrieking (25:14).

Watch for character changes, because they usually reveal a theme. David begins speaking of shalom, (25:6, three times), then reacts violently. When Abigail re-orientes him to God, he again speaks of shalom (25:35).²²

After Abigail’s speech, David tells her, “I have lifted up your head” (25:35, my translation²³). This expression is something a king would say. People bow to ask favours, and a king’s positive answer sends them out with head held high. David elsewhere uses a similar expression of Yahweh, his king (Psalm 3:4 (3:3 English)). Nabal may see him as a runaway slave, but Abigail reminds him he is in fact God’s chosen messiah (25:28), and in this expression David reveals that he has decided to live up to his calling. I would not let this opportunity pass without remembering

22. Compare his comments in Psalm 120:6–7.

23. It is literally lifting her face, but face-lifting has other connotations today.

that the gospel makes royalty of any believer (1 Pet 2:9; Rev 1:6; 5:10) and asks us to live up to that high calling, especially in difficult life circumstances.

Some listeners will connect most with David in his struggles. Some will identify with Abigail's marriage and wish they had her wisdom. Some may even see Nabal-like trends in themselves and be led to repentance. Above all one hopes they will learn from these characters about God, and relate directly to the character of God. This then is lived truth, embodied doctrine, word made flesh.

8. Show the relevance for real people

Exegesis asks what the story meant, but application asks what it means here and now. To do that, we preachers can ask ourselves:

- What general principles can we take from this specific case?
- What is cultural, and what is timeless?
- In this passage, what does God offer to do for me? How does He ask me to respond?
- Does the theme easily make sense to my hearers, or do they need persuasion? Does it surprise or challenge mainstream culture?
- Has this truth reached my own heart yet? My own lifestyle?

We also need to study our listeners. I most admire preachers who love skeptics and doubters, and who constantly do persuasive evangelism. They tell me that they make time to socialize widely – not just with believers, but being a friend of sinners – so that their sermons can be in conversation with experiences and questions of people not currently in church. This kind of preaching avoids cozy assumptions and builds a rugged faith for the real world.

May God help us see how fascinating and surprising and refreshing the Biblical literature is, and help audiences experience that in messages full of grace and truth.

Sample Sermon Outline:

Title: The Best Kind of Revenge

Optional Scripture reading: Romans 12:17–21. This is optional because OT stories can stand alone rather than just being illustrations of NT propositions, and yet this Pauline passage could almost have been written by Abigail.

Introduction A:

Have you ever suffered injustice? (Briefly describe someone else's recent story of this.) It hurts and offends us, and also prompts fair questions, like, "How can there be a kind, just God when the world has so much injustice and evil?" I find that question – often called "the problem of evil" – is the most common reason for people who don't believe in God. Can I show you a Bible story that raises that question?

OR: Introduction B:

Recently I broke a finger in a football game. As the physical therapist treated it, she told me about all the beautifully designed mechanisms in the human hand which I had damaged. I said, “Designed?” She didn’t know I was a Christian minister, but she said, “Well, some people find that such intricate machinery in nature suggests there is a higher power.” Immediately the back patient in the next bed groaned out his view, “Yes, but the existence of pain and evil in the world makes people think there couldn’t be a God.” We all had a fascinating discussion about that, and he’s onto something: evil in the world is perhaps the major blocker to faith in God. Can I tell you a Bible story that raises that question?

You will do better than the above if you know your audience and what will provoke their curiosity.

Body: Tell the story with the central theme in mind, embedding brief theological reflections (as above) in amongst the narrative action. I usually plan which theological comments I want to make, and where in the narrative I will do this. I don’t usually use notes, but if I am preaching a sermon for the first time I may pencil some key words in the margin of my Bible. For example, beside Abigail’s speech I will write words like “Moral universe?” “Messiah’s reign,” or, beside Nabal’s speech, “Sin = Selfishness.”

Conclusion: God’s judgment and the gospel will eventually answer the question of suffering and evil brilliantly. More specifically,

- God sees the problem, and took ra’ (evil) and ’awon (guilt) onto Himself at the cross.
- God’s justice may take time but will be perfect, finally destroying evil and those who stubbornly cherish it (Nabal) – yet showing grace to faulty people who are open to Him (David).
- One day earth will be as God intended. David will have a sure dynasty, as Abigail foresaw (1 Samuel 25:28), and the Messiah will rule forever. When human leaders disappoint (as David’s polygamy will do a few verses later) we can still hope in David’s perfect Son. Blind people can look forward to that (briefly recounting Matt 20:30–34). You and I can visualize his kingdom. Dare to hope. Dare to live like it’s true.
- Major invitation: You can believe in a good God. Trust him. Repent and believe the good news.
- Minor invitation: If all this is true, a sensible response would be to hand your vengeance over to God. Trust his justice and grace. Choose to overcome evil with good (like Abigail). This point could be applied with a narrative of a person who did that.

Select Bibliography

For a well-researched and creative guide to theory and practice, see:

Stephen D. Matthewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002).

For theory on reading biblical narrative, see:

Jean Louis Ska, *Our Fathers Have Told Us: Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narratives* (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1990).

Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (USA: Basic Books, 1981).

For examples of reading Samuel, see narrative-aware scholars like:

Robert Alter, *The David Story* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1999).

David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009).

*The Immutable Mutability of YHWH*¹

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“And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people” (Exod 32:14 NRSV).

“God is not a human being, that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind” (Num 23:19a NRSV).

The problem: Does YHWH change?

Scripture states both that God changes and that he does not change. To complicate the problem, the mind-changing verb in these two verses from the Pentateuch is the same, *נִחַם*. If these two texts were unique in presenting this paradoxical perspective of YHWH, then reconciling them might not seem a daunting task. However, other texts support the doctrine of divine immutability and even more support the idea of divine change. How does one reconcile these apparently contradictory biblical perceptions? Does the OT affirm divine change or not?

Despite biblical evidence on both sides of the issue, the popular Christian perception is that God does not change. The pervasiveness of the doctrine of divine changelessness is testified to in hymns such as Thomas Chisholm’s *Great is thy Faithfulness*, “Thou changest not, thy compassions they fail not” (1923), as well as in contemporary songs such as Cindy Berry’s *Almighty, Unchangeable God* (1996) or Chris Tomlin’s *Unchanging* (2002). Thomas Aquinas, who argued for “The Immutability of God” in his *Summa Theologica* (question 9) has apparently won the debate, at least in popular theological circles. In my experience of teaching the OT, when students encounter Num 23:19 they experience no tension, but they are confused by Exod 32:14.

Certain theological traditions put great emphasis on divine immutability and frequently preach out of the OT to support their perspective. However, the OT

1. This article is modified from a chapter of my non-academic book, *God Behaving Badly: Is the God of the Old Testament Angry, Sexist and Racist?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2011).

does not speak of divine immutability in a vacuum, so one needs to be careful when teaching from these texts, particularly since unchangeability can have negative connotations associated with rigidity, inflexibility and stubbornness. Unfortunately, these characteristics are often associated with Christians. When God's unchangeability is preached without an explanation of why, audiences could reasonably conclude that God is rigid, inflexible and stubborn, which could then in turn lead listeners to believe that these "divine" characteristics should be emulated.

Determining the biblical perspective on divine change is more complicated than Aquinas might have us believe, and will require examining many relevant texts within their contexts to discover the pattern of why God is described as changing or not. To do this I will examine texts that use נָחַם to describe YHWH both as not changing and as changing (section 3), as well as three relevant texts that do not use נָחַם (section 4), but first it will be necessary to survey scholarly opinion on the topic to see how they resolve the problem of these apparently contradictory texts (section 2).

Three solutions

God does not change (Maier, Master)

Scholars who argue that God does not change naturally focus on the handful of texts that support this position and typically explain the divine changing texts as necessary to convey the complexity of God's character in terms of human behavior (anthropomorphisms) or human emotions (anthropopathisms). Maier argues that God does not actually change, but only seems to change in texts like Exodus 32:14 and the anthropomorphic language is being used to communicate divine compassion.¹ However, he only looks at two of the many texts that are problematic for him (Gen 6:6; Exod 32:14) and provides little textual evidence to support his figurative interpretation.²

Master, in his analysis of Exodus 32, looks at the broader context of Exodus 1–31 and concludes that when God appears to change in 32:14, he is actually inviting dialogue and intercession.³ Master could be right about what was happening between Moses and YHWH, but that is not what the text states and while he accuses his opponents of having an argument from silence the same charge could be levied against him.⁴

The problems with these scholarly perspectives is that they do not take the

1. Walter A. Maier, "Does God 'Repent' or Change His Mind?" *CTQ* 68 (2004): 127–43.

2. Maier prefers translating נָחַם as "relented" instead of "changed his mind," yet relenting also implies a mind change about a decision, so his suggestion does not reduce the textual tension.

3. Jonathan Master, "Exodus 32 as an Argument for Traditional Theism," *JETS* 45 (2002): 585–98.

4. Unfortunately, both Master and Maier repeatedly misspell נָחַם without the final *mem* (as נָחַמ). Master, "Exodus 32," 594–95; Maier, "Does God 'Repent,'" 133.

biblical text seriously in three ways, in respect to clarity, quantity and quality. First, the text clearly states that YHWH changed his mind (“the LORD changed his mind”; Exod 32:14). If the text records without qualification that God changed, then one must conclude that God is changeable at least on some level. While it might feel more comfortable theologically to deny the straightforward meaning of a text because it does not appear to cohere with other biblical texts, it is theologically dangerous to conclude that what the text explicitly states, it obviously cannot mean. Other options need to be pursued before one resorts to changing the meaning of Scripture.

Second, there are not just a few, but numerous texts that describe God as changing. The extensive biblical support for the idea that God changes cannot be discounted lightly. I will be examining these later (in sections 3 and 4), but briefly here is a list of nineteen texts that support the idea that God changes (Exod 32:14; Num 14:20; 2 Sam 24:16; 2 Kgs 20:1–6; 1 Chr 21:15; Ps 106:45; Isa 38:1–6; Jer 15:6; 18:8, 10; 26:3, 13, 19; 42:10; Joel 2:13–14; Amos 7:3, 6; Jonah 3:9–10; 4:2).⁵ The fact that the vast majority of these references appear in narrative and not in poetic contexts (only three occur in poetry: Ps 106:45; Jer 15:6; Joel 2:13–14) undermines the perspective of these scholars who argue for a figurative or anthropomorphic interpretation of these divine changing texts since narrative is generally less figurative than poetry.

Third, the texts that support divine change are found not in obscure passages, but in crucial narratives within the history of Israel. The golden calf incident (Exod 32) came immediately after the reception of the Ten Commandments (Exod 20) and the people’s rebellion after the spies’ report (Num 14) prevented the original generation from entering the promised land. The narratives of the divine changing prayers of David and Hezekiah are deemed sufficiently important to be recorded each twice in the OT (2 Sam 24:16 and 1 Chr 21:15; 2 Kgs 20:1–6 and Isa 38:1–6).

God does change (Kuyper, Fretheim and others)

Most of the scholars who think God changes begin by mentioning Kuyper. In Kuyper’s discussion of “The Repentance of God,” he first examines the root נחם and then spends the bulk of his article discussing the history of translation and interpretation (8 pages) but unfortunately relatively little space (3 pages) directly examining the actual divine repentance passages in question.⁶ Fretheim argues that “divine repentance” should be considered a significant “controlling metaphor” for God because of its pervasiveness in a variety of OT traditions and genres.⁷ Since Fretheim stated that “divine repentance is one of the most neglected themes in

5. Richard Rice speaks vaguely of “forty or so” texts that assert that God “repents” but does not support this claim with a list or a systematic discussion of these texts, “Biblical Support for a New Perspective,” in Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994): 32.

6. Lester J. Kuyper, “The Repentance of God,” *RefR* 18 (1965): 3–16; cf. Lester J. Kuyper, “The Suffering and the Repentance of God,” *SJT* 22 (1969): 257–77.

7. Terence Fretheim, “The Repentance of God: A Key to Evaluating Old Testament

biblical scholarship⁷⁸ over twenty years ago, an increasing number of scholars have addressed the subject.

Willis and Gowan follow Kuyper and Fretheim (perhaps too uncritically) in their arguments for a God who “repents.”⁷⁹ Willis concludes by helpfully laying out four reasons why the idea of divine repentance has been rejected (biblical evidence, divine transcendence, divine foreknowledge and divine impassability) and how these concerns can be addressed.¹⁰ Gowan makes two important points: first, that biblical tensions need to be “lived with” and not “smoothed out” and second, that God’s changing “can be a basis for our petitions.”¹¹ Moberly is unusual as a scholar who argues that God changes but primarily focuses on problematic texts where God is described as not relenting (Num. 23:19 and 1 Sam. 15:29) and he concludes that as these texts speak of God not changing they are primarily emphasizing God’s faithfulness first to Israel (in Numbers) and then to David (in 1 Samuel).¹² (This point about divine faithfulness will be revisited in section 5.)

Just as three concerns were raised above concerning the position that God does not change, here I see three problems with the views of the scholars who argue that God does change. First, just as clearly as it states that God does change, the biblical text repeatedly states that God does not change. Therefore to conclude that God changes, based on certain texts, when other texts state categorically that he does not again runs the risk of devaluing Scripture, or using certain texts that one favors to “trump” texts that one does not favor. In our attempts to harmonize or systematize God’s word it is almost impossible to not downplay or perhaps even denigrate texts that we deem as “outliers” which leads to the next point.

Second, scholars who argue that God changes typically ignore some or all of the four key texts that speak of God not changing generally (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29; Psalms 110:4; Mal 3:6) or the four texts that speak of God not changing in a specific context (Jer 4:48; 20:16; Ezek 24:14; Zech 8:14).¹³ Moberly only looks at

God-Talk,” *HBT* 10 (1988): 47–70. See also Terence Fretheim, “The Repentance of God: A Study of Jeremiah 18:7–10,” *HAR* 11 (1987): 81–92.

8. Fretheim, “A Key to Evaluating,” 47.

9. John T. Willis, “The ‘Repentance of God in the Books of Samuel, Jeremiah, and Jonah,” *HBT* 16 (1994): 156–75; Donald E. Gowan, “Changing God’s Mind,” in F. C. Holmgren and H. E. Schaalmann, *Preaching Biblical Texts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 90–104.

10. Willis, “Samuel, Jeremiah, and Jonah,” 168–71.

11. Gowan, “Changing God’s Mind,” 101, 104.

12. R. W. L. Moberly, “‘God is Not a Human that He Should Repent’ (Numbers 23:19 and 1 Samuel 15:29),” in Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal, *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998): 112–23. I will only occasionally mention other scholars who address the subject of divine change but are more interested in presenting an argument for the theory of an open view of God. See Rice, “Biblical Support,” 11–58; Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000); cf. Scott A. Ellington, “Who Shall Lead Them Out? An Exploration of God’s Openness in Exodus 32.7–14,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 14 (2005): 41–60.

13. I will basically ignore the second set of four references (but will briefly discuss Ezek 24:14 and Zech 8:14 later in a footnote). Because these four refer to specific situations they are less problematic than the first four references that describe God as unchanging more generally.

Num 23:19 and 1 Sam 15:29 and similarly Willis only focuses on relevant texts in Samuel, Jeremiah and Jonah. While Fretheim does mention the נחם texts where “God does not repent,” his brief discussion does not adequately explain how these texts do not undermine his perspective.¹⁴ Most blatantly however, Malachi 3:6 is ignored (perhaps because it does not use נחם?) by Kuyper, Fretheim, Willis, Gowan and Moberly. Since Mal 3 affirms God’s unchangeability (“For I the LORD do not change”) and therefore undermines their perspective, it needs to be discussed (which I will do in section 4).¹⁵

Third, these scholars often use language of “divine repentance” (Kuyper, Fretheim, Willis) which is unnecessarily provocative and not warranted since נחם has a broader range of meaning than simply “to repent.” (However, Gowan and Moberly include helpful discussions of נחם which address this concern.¹⁶) Instead, speaking of God’s “repenting,” his “relenting,” “mind changing” or “showing compassion” fit better as translations of נחם in the context of the relevant passages. Kuyper’s statement that his use of the word “repentance” does not connote moral evil or guilt may have been accurate in the 1960s, but it is certainly inaccurate now.¹⁷

The “compromise” position (Ware, Rice and Chisholm)

A few scholars take what appears to be compromise positions, however since these perspectives acknowledge divine change, albeit limited, they are not actually a compromise. The strength, however, of these perspectives is that they tend to take texts on both sides of the issue more seriously than either of the two polarized positions.

While Ware’s conclusion that God is ontologically and ethically immutable, but relationally mutable sounds like a compromise, his arguments are similar to those who argue that God does not change.¹⁸ He does not discuss in depth the נחם texts that describe God as changing (relegating them to a footnote¹⁹) and argues that these texts should be understood anthropomorphically (like Maier). He believes the appearance of God changing is necessary to communicate in human terms what is taking place in the divine realm. Curiously, he only focuses on three texts that speak of “divine changelessness” (Ps 102:25–27; Mal 3:6; Jas 1:17), completely ignoring the three נחם texts (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29; Ps 110:4).²⁰

Another way these tensions are often understood is to say that God’s decisions

14. Fretheim, “A Key to Evaluating,” 53.

15. Rice briefly mentions it but does not discuss it, “Biblical Support,” 47.

16. Gowan, “Changing God’s Mind,” 100; Moberly, “God is Not a Human,” 115. While Willis acknowledges the problematic nature of translating נחם as “repent” his explanation of its fundamental meaning (1994: 157–58) is still too focused on changing of the mind to accommodate the broader shades of meaning of נחם related to compassion.

17. Kuyper, “The Repentance of God,” 5.

18. Bruce A. Ware, “An Evangelical Reformulation of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God,” *JETS* 29 (1986): 431–46; cf. Bruce A. Ware, “An Exposition and Critique of the Process Doctrines of Divine Mutability and Immutability,” *WTJ* 47 (1985): 175–96.

19. Ware, “An Evangelical Reformulation,” 441, n. 25.

20. Ware, “An Evangelical Reformulation,” 432–34.

change, but his character does not. Rice, for example states, “most of the biblical references to divine changelessness pertain to God’s character rather than his existence.”²¹ While I generally agree with this idea, it is still not the most helpful way to explain the problem. By focusing on the difference between God’s unchanging character and his changing judgments a distinction is set up that Scripture simply does not make. The problem goes beyond just the text never stating a version of “God’s character does not change, but his judgments do.” Since the same verb נָחַם is used to communicate both that YHWH has changed and that he does not change, it is difficult to argue that in certain passages נָחַם clearly refers to his unchanging character and in other passages it clearly refers to his decisions which may change.

Chisholm’s solution that God’s announcements change, but his decrees do not is more satisfactory than many other scholarly solutions and has many compelling aspects, but some of his distinctions between announcements and decrees seem artificial or difficult to support from the text.²² What makes one divine speech an announcement and another one a decree? Apparently, we know a word of God is a decree if it does not change and it is an announcement if it does change. Thus, his logic may appear circular.

Therefore, none of these solutions are entirely satisfactory explanations for the problem of a God who is described as both changing and unchanging. However, as we examine the broader contexts of the specific texts, both those using נָחַם and those that do not, a consistent pattern will emerge.

The verb נָחַם

Basic meanings of נָחַם

If there is one Hebrew word that the issue of divine changeability centers upon, it would be נָחַם, since it is used in most of the references describing God as either changing or not changing his mind.²³ For this reason scholars discuss this verb at length (e.g., Fretheim, Gowan).²⁴

The root נָחַם has three basic meanings: 1) to change one’s mind, 2) to regret and 3) to show compassion. The context usually makes it clear whether נָחַם is referring to a mind change, to regret or to compassion. In this discussion, I will focus on texts which fit the first meaning because mind changing implies mutability or flexibility. While the second meaning of regret may imply a change of heart, and even perhaps repentance, it could simply involve sorrow or grief regarding the turn of events, so it would not necessarily suggest mutability. The third meaning involving compassion or comfort would also not necessarily infer a change on the part of the

21. Rice, “Biblical Support,” 47.

22. Robert B. Chisholm, “Does God ‘Change His Mind?’” *BSac* 152 (1995): 387–99.

23. See also the discussion on the consistency and flexibility of God in John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology* (vol. 2): *Israel’s Faith* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 88–92.

24. Fretheim, “A Key to Evaluating,” 53–54; Gowan, “Changing God’s Mind,” 100. For more detailed analysis, see also the נָחַם entries in reference works (*TDOT*; *NIDOTTE*).

subject. Therefore, texts that use נחם referring to divine regret (e.g., Gen 6:11; 1 Sam 15:11) or to divine compassion (e.g., Judg 2:18; Isa 40:1) will not be discussed here.

English versions translate נחם slightly differently in contexts where a divine change of mind is involved. For example, in Exodus 32:14 older translations inform us that YHWH “repented” (KJV, RSV), but since repentance is often associated with sin and God is without sin, the possible connotations of translating נחם with “repent” could be controversial. More recent translations of Exodus 32:14 state that YHWH either “changed his mind” (NAS, NRSV) or “relented” (NIV, ESV, TNIV). While “relent” may seem less controversial than “repent” or “change his mind” it also involves a mind change, particularly away from a harsh decision. Interestingly, the Latin root, *lentus*, from which *relent* is derived means flexible. Regardless of whether the English translation for נחם mentions change, relenting or repenting, each of these words implies flexibility or mutability.

Why does God not change?

As we work to understand the apparent biblical contradiction regarding the (im)mutability of God, an examination of the relevant texts will reveal a consistent biblical pattern of why God changes or does not change in certain contexts. Of the four primary OT texts that are used to support divine immutability, three of them use the verb נחם (the other, Mal 3:6 will be discussed in section 4), each time with a negative particle (לֹא), stating basically that God does not change. Balaam declares to Balak ruler of Moab that since YHWH has promised to bless Israel, he would not change his mind (נחם) and curse them instead (Num 23:19). Samuel tells Saul that YHWH is not like a man that he should change his mind (נחם) regarding the judgment to tear the kingdom away from Saul and give it to his neighbor David (1 Sam 15:29). The psalmist explains that YHWH will not change his mind (נחם) about his decision to make the addressee a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek (Ps 110:4).

In two of these three texts the divine immutability involves an explicit promise or commitment by YHWH to bless his people. In Numbers Moab will not be allowed to defeat Israel and in Psalms the messianic individual will not be removed from the priesthood. If God were to have changed his mind in these three contexts negative repercussions would have resulted for his people.

The third text, the judgment against Saul, includes an implicit promise to bless David, Saul’s neighbor (1 Sam 15:28), and even though David had yet to be anointed (1 Sam 16:13) YHWH has already expressed this promise to Saul once before (1 Sam 13:14). Therefore, Saul will need to be removed from power for YHWH to not change his commitment to David.

Thus, for all the individuals in these texts except Saul, YHWH’s lack of flexibility was a positive thing.²⁵ These texts testify that YHWH will not change his mind about blessing his people. In these situations flexibility would have resulted

25. Even for Saul, the consequences of his sin could have been far worse. He remained on the throne until his death in battle, recorded some fifteen chapters later (1 Sam 31).

in judgment and death, but divine rigidity results in mercy and life. Divine “stubbornness” is therefore good in these contexts.

The main point that these texts are making is not simply that God is unchangeable, but that he is unchangeable about his commitment to bless his people. And those additional words make a huge difference in how the message of divine immutability is perceived. Unchangeability is not necessarily a valuable end by itself, and in certain contexts, as we will soon see, it would be bad. What makes it good is that God is unwaveringly committed to doing good.

Why does God change?

While four OT texts clearly state YHWH does not change (three using נִחַם), many more describe YHWH as changing his mind and, as I stated above, the same verb נִחַם is used in most of these other passages to describe YHWH as changing. In general, these texts reveal YHWH to be changing in the context of showing compassion toward his people, often in response to human intercession.

Moses changes the mind of God twice (the second, Num 14:11–20, will be discussed in section 4). Shortly after agreeing to fully obey the covenant delivered on Mount Sinai (Exod 24:7), Israel breaks the first three commandments by worshipping the golden calf (Exod 32:1–6). In anger YHWH declares that he will consume the people, but Moses intercedes and YHWH relents (נִחַם) from destroying his people (Exod 32:12, 14). Maier notes that the imperfect verbs used in Exod 32:10, could imply conditionality, so instead of “I will consume” he suggests “I may consume them,”²⁶ but Maier’s nuanced and deliberative perspective on YHWH’s behavior in Exod 32 does not reconcile easily with the textual portrayal of a God who is intensely angry as “wrath” (אַף) is repeated three times in three verses (Exod 32:10, 11, 12). YHWH is not asking to be left alone to consider the options, but to consume the people.

In response to David’s assertion about the greatness of his mercy, YHWH relents (נִחַם) concerning the pestilence he had sent upon Israel for David’s census and therefore interrupts the punishment (2 Sam 24:16; 1 Chron 21:15). The psalmist describes a period when YHWH heard the cry of his oppressed people and remembered his covenant, so he relented (נִחַם)²⁷ according to his steadfast love (Ps 106:44–45). While specific incidents of divine immutability are narrated in the previously cited narrative texts, Psalm 106 describes a broader pattern or a general characteristic of YHWH as a God who relents which could fit easily into the cycles of the book of Judges where God repeatedly shows compassion to his people (Judg 2:18).

The theme of divine changeability occurs most frequently in prophetic literature, particularly in Jeremiah.²⁸ Using the image of potter and clay, Jeremiah

26. Maier, “Does God ‘Repent,’” 139. Chisholm argues similarly about Exod 32:10, “Does God ‘Change,’” 396.

27. Although the NRSV renders נִחַם as “showed compassion,” most other English versions translate the verb with a form of “relent” (ESV, RSV, NAS, NIV, TNK, NLT, NKJ).

28. In the book of Isaiah, YHWH poses the question, “Will I relent (נִחַם) for these things?”

pronounces an oracle describing the dual nature of YHWH's changeability in chapter 18. If an evil nation turns from evil, YHWH will relent (נחם) concerning the evil he was going to do to them, and if a nation that YHWH has promised to bless does evil in his sight, he will relent (נחם) concerning the good he had intended to do for them (Jer 18:7–10). As Jeremiah preaches in the temple, he twice exhorts the people to repent of their evil ways, so that YHWH would then repent (נחם) of the evil he had intended to do to them (Jer 26:3, 13). In the conclusion of Jeremiah's sermon, he reminds them of when YHWH changed his mind (נחם) about the judgment he had declared upon Hezekiah after the king entreated his favor (Jer 26:19; cf. 2 Kgs 20:5–6). Jeremiah delivers an oracle from YHWH to the remnant living in Judah, after the fall of Jerusalem, telling them that if they remain in the land of Judah, he will relent (נחם) of the punishment he was bringing upon them (Jer 42:10). In typical fashion, they do not believe him and not only flee to Egypt, but they also kidnap Jeremiah and take him with them (Jer 43:1–7). Apparently, YHWH changes his mind so often regarding potential judgments against Israel, that Jeremiah reports that YHWH complains of being weary of relenting (נחם) (Jer 15:6).

The Minor Prophets also speak of how God changes his mind regarding punishments he had intended to mete out. In a series of visions, YHWH first shows the prophet Amos what type of judgment he is about to perform against Israel, but then in response to Amos's desperate pleas for mercy after the first two visions (locusts and fire), YHWH twice relents (נחם) and declares that the punishment will not happen (Amos 7:1–3, 4–6).²⁹ In Joel's description of YHWH's attributes, along with graciousness, mercifulness and slowness to anger, YHWH is said to relent (נחם) from punishing (Joel 2:12–14).

In the book of Jonah, after all the Ninevites have repented (even the animals wore sackcloth), God changes his mind (נחם) about the evil that he had said he would bring upon them and he did not do it (Jonah 3:8–10). Jonah is not surprised because he knows that God is gracious, merciful, abounding in love and ready to relent (נחם) from punishing (Jonah 4:2). Thus, according to both Joel and Jonah, YHWH's willingness to change his mind in order to show mercy was not just a capricious whim, but it characterized his nature. God was concerned about all the Ninevites, even their cattle (bovine contrition always helps).³⁰

(Is 57:6). The question initially sounds like he will not relent, but 57:13 ends on an optimistic note, suggesting perhaps that a change was possible.

29. For an extended excursus on divine repentance in the context of Amos 7 and the entire OT, see Francis I. Anderson and David N. Freedman, *Amos: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 638–79.

30. While two prophetic texts speak of YHWH not relenting from judgment (Ezek 24:14; Zech 8:14), the immediate context of both passages reveal aspects of his merciful character. Ezek 24:13 describes how he had cleansed, and presumably forgiven, Jerusalem previously, yet it did not result in them remaining clean, so this time he will not forgive and relent. Zechariah describes how YHWH had planned to bring disaster previously and did not change his mind, so in the current situation he will not change his mind about his intentions to bless Jerusalem and the house of Judah (Zech 8:15).

Divine changeability is precisely what infuriates Jonah so much because he wanted Nineveh to be destroyed. Jonah perceives God's willingness to move from judgment to mercy as a weakness, while Joel saw it as a strength. Apparently, it depends upon your perspective whether or not divine flexibility is a good thing. YHWH's flexibility was good for Hezekiah as well as for many other people in the OT.

Similar to the **נחם** references that support divine immutability, a pattern emerges among these **נחם** texts supporting divine change. In only one text, does YHWH change from mercy to judgment (Jer 18:9–10) but in the other fifteen texts YHWH changes from judgment to mercy and what prompts the divine change in these texts is human intercession or repentance. In their discussion of **נחם** references Anderson and Freedman observe that God changes either from doing harm or from doing good.³¹ While their observation is certainly accurate, it misses the main point that in the vast majority of these references God is changing from harm to good.

Texts that do not use **נחם** (Mal 3:6; Num 14:20; 2 Kgs 20:5–6)

While discussions of God's (im)mutability reasonably focus on the verb **נחם**, other texts also address the issue. Since these texts do not use **נחם** they tend to get ignored (depending upon the perspective). I will examine three of them here.

In a context of divine judgment against Israel for their many sins, YHWH declares, "For I, YHWH, do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished" (Mal 3:6).³² YHWH exhorts them to return to him, so that he can return to them (Mal 3:7). The Hebrew verb in Mal 3:6 is **שנה**, which is used elsewhere for objects changing (fine gold: Lam 4:1; clothes: 2 Kgs 25:29) but is also used by YHWH to declare that he will not change or alter his spoken covenant to the house of David (Ps 89:34; cf. 2 Sam 7:12–16).³³ Divine change in the context of Mal 3 would have apparently resulted in destruction for Israel. Thus, Mal 3:6 fits the pattern seen above for the **נחם** texts where YHWH does not change because of his faithfulness to his people. It is therefore good for Israel in Mal 3 (and David's lineage in Ps 89) that YHWH does not change because it means that he will continue in relationship with Israel.

The second incident of Moses changing YHWH's mind in Num 14 shares striking parallels with the first incident in Exod 32, although this time **נחם** is not

31. Anderson and Freedman, *Amos*, 672.

32. Ryan E. Stokes argues that Malachi 3:6 does actually not speak of YHWH not changing ("I, Yhwh, Have Not Changed? Reconsidering the Translation of Malachi 3:6; Lamentations 4:1; and Proverbs 24:21–22" *CBQ* 70 (2008): 264–76). Without changing the consonantal text and by only changing the Hebrew letter *shin* to a *sin*, Stokes translates his emended Hebrew text as, "For I, YHWH, have not hated." While his idea is simple and therefore could be appealing (particularly to scholars who argue that God changes), I suspect that his view will not ultimately persuade many scholars since it lacks support in the versions.

33. In Mal 3:6 **שנה** is in the qal stem, but in Ps 89:34 it is in the piel.

used. After the Israelites refuse to enter the land based on the report of the twelve spies, YHWH initially declares he will strike all the Israelites and disinherit them and start over with Moses, but after Moses intercedes on the behalf of the people, YHWH changes his mind and promises to forgive (נָסַח) them (Num 14:11–20). Divine forgiveness here did not allow the current Israelite generation to enter the promised land, but it prevented them from being instantly destroyed as YHWH had originally planned. While it is conceivable that YHWH did not actually plan to wipe them out, there is no textual evidence to support this idea, and the fact that the text states that he will suggests otherwise. Scholars who argue consistently for divine immutability may conclude that YHWH did not really intend to strike down the Israelites as the text states (Num 14:12), but in their attempt to minimize the theological “problem” of a text that could support divine mutability, they create another problem by manufacturing (without textual support) a God who appears to be manipulative or deceptive. A straightforward reading of Num 14 leads to the conclusion that Moses’ mediation prevented YHWH from wiping out his own people as he had said he would do.

While the text records that many OT individuals changed the mind of God, Hezekiah was among a few (Moses, Amos) who did it twice. However, unlike Hezekiah’s encounter with the prophet Micah (Jer 26:19) discussed above, the verb נָסַח is not used in his encounter with the prophet Isaiah which is recorded in both 2 Kgs 20:1–6 and Isa 38:1–6. While the two parallel passages are very similar, here I will look at the slightly longer version in 2 Kgs 20:1–6.³⁴

When Hezekiah was sick and “at the point of death” (2 Kgs 20:1), the prophet Isaiah delivered a message from YHWH to the king that he would die. To make it clear, Isaiah repeated it: “you shall not recover” (20:1). There is no reason given in the text for Hezekiah’s illness or the death pronouncement but Isaiah’s message appears simply to give him an opportunity to prepare for the inevitable. Hezekiah, however, was not content just to “put his house in order” (20:1), so he prays, laying out his spiritual CV, but curiously he never tells YHWH to change his mind or prolong his life. The text states that he also broke down (literally, “he wept a great weeping”: 20:3). At this point YHWH changes his mind and sends Isaiah back to tell Hezekiah (20:5–6).

Lest one think that YHWH only appeared to change, the text makes the divine change explicit. At first, YHWH and Isaiah were in agreement that Hezekiah’s death was definite and imminent. In Isaiah’s second message, however, YHWH states that he will heal Hezekiah and add fifteen years to his life. What caused the change in YHWH? YHWH explains that he changed his mind because he had heard Hezekiah’s prayer and had seen Hezekiah’s tears.

Thus, both Num 14 and 2 Kgs 20 fit the pattern seen above with the נָסַח texts

34. The following phrases are present in English translations of 2 Kgs 20, but not Isa 38: “And before Isaiah had gone out of the middle court” (v. 4), “the leader of my people,” “I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the LORD” (v. 5), “for my own sake and for my servant David’s sake” (v. 6).

where YHWH changes. In these texts, YHWH consistently changed from judgment toward mercy in response to a request. While the human mechanism varied (Moses interceded for the people, Hezekiah for himself), the divine response remained consistent.

Context is crucial

An examination of the relevant passages has thus revealed a pattern. The text portrays God as unchangeable or changeable in certain specific contexts. Context is therefore crucial to understand the apparent biblical paradox.

In contexts where there could be uncertainty as to whether or not he will be faithful, the text declares that God does not waver from his commitments. YHWH has promised to bless his people, so he will not suddenly start to curse them (Num 23:19–20). Since YHWH does not change, his people Israel have not perished (Mal 3:6). It is not simply that God never changes, but specifically that he does not change regarding his promises to his covenant people.

In contexts of imminent judgment from God, when people repent or intercede he changes his mind and shows mercy. Not only did YHWH change to show mercy to his people the Israelites but he also did it for Gentiles, specifically the Ninevites. YHWH listened and showed compassion based on the intercession of rulers (e.g., David, Hezekiah) and the efforts of prophets (e.g., Jeremiah, Amos).³⁵ The text includes both specific incidents of YHWH changing from judgment to forgiveness (Num 14:20; Jer 26:19) and general descriptions of YHWH being eager to relent and show mercy (Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). It is not that God always changes or is inconsistent, but specifically in situations where people deserve punishment, when they repent, he consistently changes from judgment to grace.

Unfortunately, scholarly discussions or sermons on this topic often can be characterized by a narrow, proof-texting approach to the Bible, which can distort the broader message of the text. One cannot simply base theological conclusions on one statement God speaks in isolation, but one needs to examine what he is doing more generally whenever he makes a particular statement.

The conclusion that God changes or does not change depending upon the context may sound similar to the views of scholars that conclude God's character or decrees are unchangeable but his judgments or announcements may change. How then does this conclusion focusing on context differ from the "compromise" positions (Ware, Rice and Chisholm) discussed above?

First, the focus on context points to more profound truths about God than simply whether or not he changes. The text consistently portrays God's unchangeability as a manifestation of his faithfulness and his changeability as a manifestation of his mercifulness. A focus on God's unchanging character misses the deeper point

35. While many English translations (e.g., NAS, NRSV) have Amos claiming not to be a prophet (Amos 7:14), since the verse in Hebrew lacks a verb of being Amos might be simply saying that he was not a prophet initially (e.g., NIV, ESV).

that God is faithful.³⁶ An emphasis on God's changing decisions could be misleading since the vast majority of God's decisions do not appear to change and when God changes it is for a specific reason—to show mercy. Therefore as we examine the contexts of these texts we learn not so much about divine (im)mutability, but about divine faithfulness and divine mercy. This leads to the next point.

Second, the focus on context takes seriously the biblical value of relationship. The texts that state God does not change do not support the idea that divine immutability should be understood as an end in itself, but rather God's faithfulness must be understood specifically in the context of his commitment to his people. Likewise, the texts that speak of God changing do not suggest that God is capricious or unpredictable, but that he changes his mind in a very predictable manner and in very specific contexts—when he is turning from judgment toward grace to his people. In fact, YHWH's merciful, mind-changing behavior in these contexts is so consistent that it could be considered unchangeable.

The Old Testament characters themselves understood both the changing and unchanging aspect of God's nature. Moses, David, Hezekiah, the psalmist, Jeremiah, Amos, Joel and Jonah all knew that the flexible aspect of YHWH's character does not change. According to the OT, God is predictably flexible, constantly changeable, and immutably mutable, at least in regards to showing mercy toward repentant sinners.

Jesus and the female dog

While one might reasonably wonder if examples of divine change are limited to the Old Testament, not surprisingly, Jesus displayed compassionate flexibility during his ministry, evidenced in his interaction with a Gentile woman from Syrophenicia (Mark 7:24–30). The woman approaches Jesus to ask him to cast a demon out of her daughter. Since he had previously performed numerous exorcisms (Mark 2:25–26, 34; 3:22; 5:8–13) one might expect him to respond positively, but shockingly he tells her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs” (Mark 7:27). For Jesus to grant her request would be like giving Jewish “bread” to a Gentile “dog,” and the term “dog” would have had worse connotations in Jesus' day than it has in ours.³⁷

Surprisingly, the woman does not seem to take offense at being called a dog by Jesus. She even uses the language of Jesus' analogy in her response: “But even the dogs get crumbs from under the table” (Mark 7:28). She realizes that even if she does not deserve to sit down at the table yet, the crumbs from Jesus' table will be

36. Both Moberly (“God is Not a Human,” 120–22) and Rice (“Biblical Support,” 47) argue convincingly that divine faithfulness is being emphasized primarily in these “immutability” texts.

37. In the world of the OT and the NT dogs were not considered man's best friend but were viewed with contempt, like we would view rats (see Deut 23:2; 1 Sam 17:43; 2 Sam 3:8; 16:9; Phil 3:2; Rev 22:15).

sufficient (presumably she envisioned a table with small children). She understood that Jesus had ample power to heal both Jews and Gentiles, so an exorcism of her daughter should be no problem for him. Jesus then replies that because of her response, her daughter has already been healed.

One could argue that Jesus was planning on helping the woman all along. In commenting on this incident, Maier states that “Christ knew all along what he would do,”³⁸ however that is exactly the opposite of what the text says. Jesus makes it explicit that he healed the girl not because he was planning on doing it already, but because of what she said: “For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter” (Mark 7:29). Jesus was not going to heal her daughter initially, but only after his interaction with the woman did he agree to do it. While this story may still seem strange on several levels, it should not strike us as odd that Jesus would change his mind to show compassion because, as we have seen throughout the Old Testament, God is both loyal towards his commitments and flexible when it comes to showing mercy.

Conclusion: It depends

So, does YHWH change or not? According to Scripture, it depends. In contexts where God’s faithfulness might be called into question, the text clearly states that he does not change but remains loyal to his people. However, when God has pronounced judgment and his people repent or intercede, he changes his mind and shows mercy. The fact that God does not change his commitments but remains faithful to his promises is great news, but the fact that he does change when people repent is even greater news.

What would it be like if Christians had a reputation of being like God in both of these ways? We were known as being unchangeable in a good way (faithful, loyal, reliable and dependable) and changeable in a good way (merciful, gracious, flexible and compassionate). One way to make this true would be to preach not only about divine immutability, but also about divine flexibility.

38. Maier, “Does God ‘Repent’,” 141.

Preaching Deuteronomy as Christian Scripture

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“For it is certain that our Moses is the fountain and the father of all the prophets and sacred books, that is, of heavenly wisdom and eloquence.”¹

Preaching—at least in its expository form—is an oral exercise of theological exegesis set within a particular (liturgical) context. That is not all to be said of preaching, of course, but among the numerous discussions of theological exegesis it seems strange that few scholars have been willing to imagine the Christian pulpit as an arena where the same questions and concerns have long been at play. The Christian preacher who desires to work his way either through a book of the Bible (a *lectio continua* approach such as John Chrysostom, Augustine, Calvin, and others), or at the least be faithful to a particular text in preaching, faces all of the main questions the academic writer of theological exegesis will face. How do we as a Christian church read this particular text? What questions arise from it? What is the place of this text in the various horizons in which we must read it: original/textual, canonical, ecclesial, historical, liturgical? Why would God have this particular text preserved to be read and heard by his people? What role in the “divine drama” do we play, and what impact might that have upon our hearing and acting upon this text? But these are not questions the preacher asks in theory. He must, every week, stand and address a concrete expression of Christ’s body on earth and answer (even if not explicitly) these concerns. And more than this, the preacher has a burden most academics do not have in their musings and books: the preacher has to be interesting.

This article is a retrospective in some ways. I spent considerable time looking at Deuteronomy in an academic setting, and then upon my move to the pulpit I soon undertook the task of preaching through Deuteronomy in the evening services. Standing in front of a congregation whose concerns and struggles I knew—from struggles in marriage to personal addictions, and from grief over loss to joy over blessings—provided a new context for reading Deuteronomy. And my general

1. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Deuteronomy* (*Luther’s Works*, vol.9, St. Louis: Concordia House, 1960), 6.

conviction (undefended, I suppose) was that Deuteronomy must be able to address the Christian church as it actually is: not, as Lewis describes, the “Church as [the demonic powers] see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners”;² nor, what is the luxury of academics, the “church” as a vague or generalized entity. But the church as she stands, gathered on any given Sunday in any given Christian church—the “church as a hospital” as old preachers would say. In what follows I do not offer a defense of Deuteronomy as Christian Scripture, nor do I attempt to answer all the questions associated with such a proposal. Much will have to be assumed or simply touched upon. I offer instead a suggestion—a way into the preaching of Deuteronomy in its integrity as Christian Scripture. The book stands as “the heartbeat of the OT,”³ and its neglect in Christian pulpits and the general faith and practice of the church means that we are neglecting a vitally important work.

A Dying Man to Dying Men

“I preached as never sure to preach again,
And as a dying man to dying men.” (Richard Baxter)

Deuteronomy is by and large a book of preaching. This is true whether one conceives Deuteronomy as a kind of constitution, or as a variant of a covenant form (or both, or neither). The editorial structure in Deut 1–30, given by the narrator, comes straightforwardly as three oral sermons given by Moses the dying prophet as the people stand on the cusp of the land promised to their fathers. The editor enters the stage at the outset of the work only to introduce the setting and then the first sermon, much as one might introduce a great public speaker needing no introduction: you say quickly what must be said, and then hide behind the curtain. For the largest part of Deuteronomy the editor’s role is quiet, but important: largely because of the editor we know that (literarily or rhetorically) we are reading the final sermons of Moses as the people are set to enter Yhwh’s land to possess it. The editor will reintroduce himself and play a stronger role after the three sermons are given, as the book traces the move from oral word to written scroll.⁴ The survival of these sermons as part of the Torah, and the people’s life in the land after Moses presents the themes governing the final chapters before the death of Moses is narrated. Deuteronomy as a book becomes “the means by which the Moab covenant will be realized in future generations of Israel.”⁵

But the framing of the book by the death of Moses is important to remember for the reader and perhaps especially for the preacher of Deuteronomy. The setting just “beyond the Jordan” is given by the editor in 1:1–5 (though the exact location

2. C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 5.

3. Christopher J. H. Wright, *Deuteronomy* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 1.

4. See the work of Jean-Pierre Sonnet, *The Book within the Book: Writing in Deuteronomy* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997).

5. J. Gordon McConville, *Deuteronomy* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 2002), 437.

is uncertain). Such sets the stage for our reading in 1:37 of the fact that Moses will die without entering the land. Moses stands up in front of the people on the very verge, as though their feet were wet at the Jordan's edge, and preaches to them. But he will not cross the river with them. Moses traces the rebellion and movement of the people from Horeb (Sinai) up to the present moment (chs. 1–3) and then, concluding the movement to where the people stand now, we read again of Moses being forbidden from entering the land (3:23–29). The latter extended statement of Moses' impending death forms the turning point into the preaching that begins in earnest at 4:1. The fact of Moses' not entering the land with the people is repeated in 4:21, and then frames the conclusion of the book: from Moses' confession of his age and weakness (along with yet another reminder of the word forbidding him to enter) in 31:2f. to the encomium at his death in 34:1–12. Even the great Song of Moses in chs. 32–33 are introduced by the Lord saying to Moses, "Behold, the days approach when you must die." (31:14)

In all, the editor and the framing of the work makes plain to the reader that we are holding, as it were, the final sermons of a dying preacher urging the people in how they are to live as they are now to cross over into Yhwh's land. Thomas Mann notes:

[T]he effect of the repeated references to Moses' imminent death is to emphasize not so much why Moses may not enter as that he may not enter. Particularly in the opening chapters, the references impress upon Moses' audience that these are Moses' final words of instruction. . . . Thus the greatest significance of Deuteronomy as a book derives from its configuration as the narrative of Moses' farewell address, the address that constitutes his last will and testament to the new generation of Israel, the people who wait "beyond the Jordan" for the fulfilment of the promise.⁶

Deuteronomy is an ancient illustration, in the narrative frame, of a "passionate preacher"⁷ delivering his final sermons: preaching as a dying man to dying men. We do not confront any of the laws in Deuteronomy as a part of a bald "legal codex". We confront them as preached by the dying prophet to the people on the cusp of the land.⁸ (This is true even of the lengthy section of laws, the most difficult portion for the preacher.)

The consequence for the cooperative reader, and then the Christian preacher, is an urgency to the book. Not only do we find an authority given to the sermons by virtue of coming from Moses, the man of God, but these are his last sermons.

6. Thomas Mann, *The Book of the Torah: The Narrative Integrity of the Pentateuch* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 146. His emphasis.

7. Mann, 147.

8. More broadly conceived as embedded in the larger narrative-form of the Pentateuch, see James W. Watts, *Reading Law: The Rhetorical Shaping of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999). But this is easily accommodated: the laws in Deuteronomy come as sermons, of which we read as set within the narrative (whether of Deuteronomy or the whole of the Pentateuch, or indeed beyond).

The preacher picking up Deuteronomy cannot afford to preach the book as though it were meant to be a “take it or leave it” document from the ancient Near East: such would belie the text as we have it, and in fact lose the function of the book in its intended role of forming the people of God as they live in the land of promise. The manner of preaching Deuteronomy must fit its content: as an urgent appeal to the people of God to walk in a manner worthy of the calling they have received. In this regard, Moses is put forward as a model of what D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones calls for all Christian preachers:

The preacher does not just say things with the attitude of ‘take it or leave it’. . . . He is not giving a learned disquisition of a text, he is not giving a display of his own knowledge; he is dealing with these living souls and he wants to move them, to take them with him, to lead them to the truth. That is his whole purpose. So if this element is not present, whatever else it may be, it is not preaching.⁹

The Law in Deuteronomy: Works Righteousness?

The great urgency with which Moses stands as the preacher—and which the Christian preacher is bound to reflect—comes with the correlative call of obedience and faithfulness to Yhwh. Urgency in the narrative framing, and the sermons themselves, demand something of the listener. As Thomas Mann states it, speaking of the first speech in particular but applicable to the whole:

In fact, the basic purpose of [the editor’s] narration. . . is to lead up to the “Great Commandment” [Deut 6:6] that Yahweh as the covenant lord places upon Israel, the covenant people. Ultimately, the telling of the story [of Deuteronomy] demands that the audience either accept or reject this Great Commandment, and the covenant itself. Thus listening to the story cannot be (from the redactor’s point of view) a passive act; it demands a response. One cannot listen to the story and simply conclude that it is interesting, or even that it is profound. After hearing the story, one must respond in either of two ways: “Because of this story, I accept the covenant,” or, “Despite this story, I reject the covenant.”. . . The significance of the narration in Deuteronomy is eviscerated if this demand for responsibility is ignored.¹⁰

Yet the demand for responsibility, the very point of the urgency, comes with a particular question in Christian theology and preaching: is the responsibility and acceptance of the covenant coherent with the gospel of grace?

In my experience the greatest (theoretical) challenge to preaching Deuteronomy as Christian Scripture is the old question about whether or not Deuteronomy espouses a form of works-righteousness: in some manner an earning of saving or

9. D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1972), 92.

10. Mann, 147.

justifying righteousness by means of individual or corporate works, rather than by grace through faith.¹¹ Some, even recently, have suggested that the ratio or plan of Deuteronomy was, in God's providence, to provide a standard far too high for any to attain (Law) in order that they might flee for refuge (Gospel).¹² In this case a preaching of Deuteronomy as Christian Scripture becomes a matter of making Deuteronomy a foil for the "true" Christian message of salvation *sola gratia*. Or, to put it bluntly, one no longer preaches Deuteronomy as Christian Scripture; one preaches some other text or idea (a particular perspective on Paul, for instance), which Deuteronomy is made to serve.

Many things would need to be said in such a large question, but the view that Yhwh in Deuteronomy lays out a law so demanding that none can keep it runs directly opposite the concluding sermon (which is the rhetorical high-point of the three sermons), where we read:

30:11–14 For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.

Some have divorced this entirely from the rest of Deuteronomy as a later (and inconsistent) addition, while others have found ways to dismiss it or postpone it as though Moses is here speaking to a future people rather than the present—the kind of false dilemma nowhere else present, I would argue, in the rhetoric of Deuteronomy.¹³ But taken as tied to the rhetorical situation of 30:15–16, the meaning is not in fact very subtle: the call of faithfulness that is "set before you today" cannot be set aside as mysterious or too difficult to discover or accomplish, even if the concern is patently not a "perfection" according to the Law. As Christopher Wright says on this text:

11. E.g., Matthias Köckert, "Das nahe Wort. Zum entscheidenden Wandel des Gesetz-erständnisses im Alten Testament," *Theologie und Philosophie* 60 (1985), 496–519.

12. In various forms, see: J. G. Millar, *Now Choose Life: Theology and Ethics in Deuteronomy* (Leicester: Apollon, 1998); and the essay (more concerned with theological conclusions than sound exegesis) by Bryan D. Estelle, "Leviticus 18:5 and Deuteronomy 30:1–14 in Biblical Theological Development: Entitlement to Heaven Foreclosed and Proffered," in *The Law is Not of Faith* (eds. Bryan D. Estelle, J. V. Fesko, D. VanDrunen; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), 109–46.

13. For the former, see (e.g.) A. Rofé, "The Covenant in the Land of Moab (Deuteronomy 28:69–30:20): Historico-literary, Comparative, and Formcritical Considerations," *Das Deuteronomium: Entstehung, Gestalt und Botschaft* (ed. N. Lohfink; Louvain: Louvain Univ. Press, 1985), 310–20; H. Cunliffe-Jones, *Deuteronomy* (London: SCM Press, 1951), 160. For the latter, see (e.g.) Paul A. Barker, *The Triumph of Grace in Deuteronomy* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004), 182ff. For fuller interaction with Barker, see Ryan O'Dowd, *The Wisdom of Torah: Epistemology in Deuteronomy and the Wisdom Literature* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 98–101.

[The law] is not, therefore, impossibly idealistic, impracticable, unachievable. . . The idea that God deliberately made the law so exacting that nobody would ever be able to live by it belongs to a distorted theology that tries unnecessarily to gild the gospel by denigrating the law. The frequent claims by various psalmists to have lived according to God's law are neither exaggerated nor exceptional. They arise from the natural assumption that ordinary people can indeed live in a way that is broadly pleasing to God and faithful to God's law, and that they can do so as a matter of joy and delight. This is neither self-righteousness nor a claim to sinless perfection, for the same psalmists are equally quick to confess their sin and failings, fully realizing that only the grace that could forgive and cleanse them would likewise enable them to live again in covenant obedience. Obedience to the law in the OT, as has been stressed repeatedly, was not the means of achieving salvation but the response to a salvation that was already experienced.¹⁴

Or as B. Cranfield states concerning Deut 30:

They do not have to inquire after the will of a harsh or capricious tyrant. They have received the revelation of the merciful will of the God whose prior grace is the presupposition of all He requires. Essentially what He asks is that they should give Him their hearts in humble gratitude for His goodness to them and in generous loyalty to their fellows.¹⁵

The Torah stands in Deuteronomy as that way of life by which the people of God shall live in the land he is graciously giving to them. And this gift of Yhwh's land is not based on the people's righteousness (9:4–5) or their might and power (7:7–8), or in anything in them whatsoever. The gift of the land is due to the promise of Yhwh to the fathers, and Yhwh's faithfulness to his word (7:6–8). Nor does Deuteronomy suggest that the people of God possess some inherent ability to keep the law apart from Yhwh's prior work within them (the old Augustinian/Pelagian controversy)—it appears the opposite (29:3; 30:6).¹⁶ If we remain within Deuteronomy, the ratio does not lie in the impossibility of the law to be kept; it lies in the exhortation to “choose life” by faithfulness to Yhwh. The summary of William Tyndale in his preface to Deuteronomy is in this case far better:

This is a book worthy to be read in, day and night, and never to be out of hands. For it is the most excellent of the books of Moses. It is also

14. Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 290. Cf. O'Dowd, op. cit.. In different forms, see the older study by W. R. Roehrs, “Covenant and Justification in the O. T.,” *CTM* 35 (1954), 583–602; Georg Braulik, “Law as Gospel: Justification and pardon According to the Deuteronomic Torah,” *Interpretation*, 38 (1984), 5–14.

15. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; 2 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), 523.

16. So Peter Diepold: “Die Realität des Bundes ermöglicht es, Indikativ und Imperativ nach beiden Seiten hin voll zu entfalten, so daß der Indikativ nicht zur billigen Gnade wird, aber auch so, daß der Imperativ nicht zur Werkgerechtigkeit entartet.” *Israels Land* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1972), 100; see pp. 96–102.

easy and light, and a very pure Gospel, that is to wit, a preaching of faith and love: deducing the love to God out of faith, and the love of a man's neighbour out of the love of God. Herein also thou mayest learn right meditation or contemplation, which is nothing else save the calling to mind, and a repeating in the heart, of the glorious and wonderful deeds of God, and of his terrible handling of his enemies and merciful entreating of them that come when he calleth them, which thing this book doth, and almost nothing else.¹⁷

Love in Deuteronomy—both love of God and neighbor—always arises as the faithful response to the gracious calling and redemption of Yhwh. Love is that act demanded by the covenant already graciously established. Or put another way, the people are not constituted as Yhwh's own by means of the Torah, but are given the Torah because they have already been constituted as Yhwh's when he brought them out of Egypt.¹⁸

We see this clearly in the lists of the blessings and the curses (ch. 28), a standard “danger” area for preachers who want (rightly) to avoid a form of “health and wealth” preaching. But in Deuteronomy the blessings and curses are theological, not merely a “do this, and get that” approach to life. The blessings in every case are those things that are fitting the people who have Yhwh, the true and living God, as their God: fruitfulness, peace, safety, victory, and all the things that were not to be sought by turning to other deities or nations. The curses, on the other hand, are those things that are fitting the people who have rejected Yhwh, who now stands as their enemy. There is an important disjunction between the two: the blessings come by virtue of the covenant promise, not by the works of the people; but the curses come by virtue of the rejection. The people must “choose life,” but do not thereby earn life. They either enjoy the grace offered in the covenant by faithfulness, or they reject it and perish. Again, here is Wright:

[A]lthough it is clear that if the curses happen, they will come as deserved punishment, there is no corresponding sense in which the blessings can be earned as some kind of reward. The whole thrust of Deuteronomy would protest at such an idea. Israel is bluntly warned to make no equations between military or material success and its own merits. . . . Rather, God's blessing on God's people is already there in the very fact that they are God's people at all. It is intrinsic to the promise to Abraham and to the covenant relationship. Blessing is the prior reality of God's grace. It is there to be enjoyed, but can be enjoyed only by living in God's way in the

17. William Tyndale, “A Prologue into the Fifth Book of Moses, called Deuteronomy,” in *Works of the English Reformers: William Tyndale and John Frith*, vol. 1 (E. Palmer: London, 1831), 49–50. Cp.

18. Patrick D. Miller: “The single ground for identifying the Lord and explaining why that one claims to be ‘your God’ is the clause ‘who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage’.” Patrick D. Miller, “The Most Important Word: The Yoke of the Kingdom,” *Ilfiff Review* 41 (1984), 20. Cf. Deut 29:25.

land God is giving them. Obedience, therefore, like faith, is the means of appropriating God's grace and blessing, not the means of deserving it.¹⁹

The basic theological point is not hard to find for the Christian preacher. It is simply what we see stated by Richard Baxter:

[L]et 'Deserved' be written on the door of hell, but on the door of heaven and life, 'The free gift.'²⁰

Law as Delight in Deuteronomy

Yet we can say even more about the theological context of the Torah in Deuteronomy. Contrary to the notion of the Torah as being a "burden" from which the people of God were meant to feel a desire to be freed, the Torah is situated in Deuteronomy as exactly what the Psalmists declared: a delight and a joy. On the one hand, the law stands as the necessary response to Yhwh's gracious acts in salvation. But the true setting of the Law is given full flourish in the description of the time in which the book of the Law was to be read:

31:10 And Moses commanded them, "At the end of every seven years, at the set time in the year of release, at the Feast of Booths, when all Israel comes to appear before Yhwh your God at the place that he will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing."

The instructions designate a particular week in a particular year within the liturgical calendar of Israel as the true setting for the reading of the law. But it is strange to see how often commentators have missed the theological significance of this setting. Christenson, for instance, thinks this time was chosen simply because it provided a better "educational" setting "when the people were more exempt than usual from the concerns of employment."²¹ Most simply do not go beyond the statement that a time is given, not asking why (the *qua* without the *quia*). But in Deuteronomy both the year of release and the Feast of Booths are prominent not for educational purposes, but for the symbolism of Yhwh's provision, and a joy in Yhwh's provision.

The year of release was that year in which all creditors released what was lent to their neighbors; all who were reduced to indentured servanthood were released; and so the poor were cared for. Yhwh promised prosperity and provision, and so the year of release was interpreted in Deut 15 as a sign of faith in that provision. And with the release of slaves or servants, the point of redemption is even more explicit: "You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this today." (15:15) In

19. Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 280–81.

20. Richard Baxter, *The Saint's Everlasting Rest* (1650; Repr., Christian Focus Publ., 1998), 66.

21. D.L. Christenson, *Deuteronomy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 766. Similarly S.R. Driver, *Deuteronomy* (3rd ed., Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1901), 336.

Deuteronomy the year of release stands for the provision of Yhwh past, present and future, and his redeeming work for their sake. To place the reading of the Torah during this year was not accidental. The year embodied the grace and provision of Yhwh that was to shape the lives of the people of God in return (to provide for the poor, as Yhwh had promised to provide for them; to free the slaves, as Yhwh had freed them when slaves). The Law is set in a context of grace and provision.

But the directions are even more specific: within the year of release, the week for re-reading is to be the Feast of Booths (cf. 16:13–15). The Feast of Booths brought to a conclusion the three feasts of the liturgical year at the final ingathering of the last harvest of wine. The description for the feast in Deuteronomy drips with the joy to be associated by everyone on the occasion, both those who had land and property and those who were dependent upon others:

You shall rejoice in your feast, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow who are within your towns. For seven days you shall keep the feast to Yhwh your God at the place that Yhwh will choose, for Yhwh your God will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands, so that you will be altogether joyful.

The Feast of Booths was the “feast par excellence” for Israel, called by the rabbis “the time of our rejoicing.”²² The placement of the Torah as to be read during the year that embodied the grace and provision of Yhwh, and in the week given over more than any other to joy in Yhwh’s presence, offers in ritual the theology of Law in Deuteronomy: given by Yhwh for joy and happiness, in the context of Yhwh’s redemptive and fatherly care.

Liturgical and ritual settings have been given rather more attention in recent years, in part through the work of Charles Taylor. But many biblical commentators, and many (especially American evangelical) preachers, have yet to take much notice. James K. A. Smith argues:

We are embodied, affective creatures who are shaped and primed by material practices or liturgies that aim our hearts to certain ends, which in turn draw us to them in a way that transforms our actions by inscribing in us habits or dispositions to act in certain ways.²³

Applied to the setting of the Law in Deut 31:10, the ritual or liturgy was to shape and aim the hearts of the people of God to certain ends: to view God’s Law in a

22. Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 158.

23. James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 133. Or elsewhere: “Rather than being pushed by beliefs, we are pulled by a telos that we desire. It’s not so much that we’re intellectually convinced and then muster the willpower to pursue what we ought; rather, at a precognitive level, we are attracted to a vision of the good life that has been painted for us in stories and myths, images and icons. It is not primarily our minds that are captivated but rather our imaginations that are captured, and when our imagination is hooked, we’re hooked. . . . Those visions of the good life that capture our heart have thereby captured our selves and begin to draw us toward them, however implicitly or tacitly.” *Ibid.*, 54.

particular context. And so, being shaped in such a way, would inscribe the habits or dispositions to act in certain ways—namely, by keeping the Law of Yhwh.

The most proper setting for a preaching of the Law (which is what Deuteronomy and preaching Deuteronomy would be), is a liturgical and ritual setting in which the people of God, standing in his presence, joyously celebrate God's redemption and provision. Or more simply: in worship. That is not to say that Deuteronomy cannot be studied or preached elsewhere (cf. Deut 6:4–9!), but it's proper theological place stands as a preaching of the Law of God to the redeemed and joyous people of God. In classical, and especially classical Reformed liturgies (such as the Book of Common Prayer), the sermon/homily ordinarily stands after the confession of sin and absolution, and prior to the joyous feasting of the Eucharist. In this regard, the preaching of Deuteronomy in that setting would be a manner of cooperating with the theology of the book itself. And, on the negative side, the neglect of placing Deuteronomy in such a liturgical and ritual setting (for whatever pragmatic reasons), and remaining content to have it read away from or outside that setting, will itself shape and prime us, and neglect to aim our hearts at what the narrator places in front of us in Moses' call.

Deuteronomy and the Good Life

“[H]appiness is pretty much a kind of living well and acting well.”²⁴

Deuteronomy inculcates the simple claim that it is with Yhwh their God that Israel has to do, and their happiness or futility in life will depend upon the way in which that truth is acknowledged (or not) in their social and individual existence. The Torah is not merely a set of laws or legal constitution, though they take somewhat the form of the latter in Deuteronomy. The Torah stands to offer a view of the “good life,” of happiness in its richest sense.²⁵ Peter Vogt has convincingly argued for a view of Deuteronomy in its final form as inculcating a life in which Yhwh is supreme in all things.²⁶ One could, in theory, deduce this from the theological claim of the covenant formula: “I will be your God, and you will be my people,” standing at the core of the Torah. But in Deuteronomy the preacher is not content to allow people to deduce the preeminence of Yhwh and, thus, his Torah. Rather, the fact of the covenant moves throughout the society, in corporate structures and individual ethics to announce Yhwh's sovereignty over all things.

24. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (tr. Roger Crisp; Cambridge: CUP, 2000), §1.8.

25. “‘Life’ here [in Deut] denotes ‘happiness’, that is to say, life in its fullest sense. . . . The addition of the word ‘good’ indicates the sense in which ‘life’ is employed in the book of Deuteronomy: it is the ‘good life’, i.e., a full life, in brief—a happy life.” M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 307–08.

26. “The supremacy of Yahweh thus is at the very heart of the theology and ideology of Deuteronomy. Equally important, however, is the role of Torah, because it teaches the means by which Yahweh's supremacy is lived out by his people.” Peter T. Vogt, *Deuteronomistic Theology and the Significance of Torah: A Reappraisal* (Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 229.

The king is reduced to a figure bound to copy the law and live according to it, as a model Israelite; the priests are to serve and teach the law; the judges (elders) are to enforce the law; and the prophets are to be measured by the law (16:18–18:22).²⁷ At every turn the people face a fundamental reality: it is with Yhwh their God that they have to do.

Many have characterized the projection of a society in Deuteronomy as “utopian” whether they consider the projection to be done in prospect or retrospect. But far better is the characterization in terms of the way things ought to be, as Vogt:

Deuteronomy is, in a sense, “eschatological” in its outlook. That is, it envisages a society as it ought to be.²⁸

At bottom Deuteronomy exerts the claim of the covenant, that Yhwh is the God of his people. Such a truth means particular things given the nature of Yhwh who set his name among them. The social consequences and individual consequences, as well as liturgical and ritual practices to aim the hearts of the people to love and fear Yhwh, are all given their place so that (rhetorically) the people who now stand on the cusp of the land of promise will form a nation that is as it ought to be.

Preaching the laws can be heavy going. Some, such as the food laws, are explicitly repealed upon the inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God. But preaching the holiness of the people of God flows very easily from such laws, and takes very little imagination to connect to the life of the church in the world.²⁹ Others of the laws, embedded as they are in Ancient Near Eastern society (and sometimes carrying nuances and significance we have yet to fully discover), can make preaching Deuteronomy difficult and, truth be told, in danger of being dull. But in every case the law stands as an application of Yhwh’s claim upon Israel, and their reminder that in everything it is with the Lord their God that they have to do. Richard Rogers, an English Puritan, was once told, “I like you and your company very well, but you are so precise.” “Sir,” replied the preacher, “I serve a precise God.”³⁰ Such a view is not far from what we read of the truth of Yhwh in Deuteronomy. And the promised result is happiness: not a smiling sense of well-being, but a life lived according to its created and redeemed purpose, and so bringing the

27. See Vogt, *op. cit.*, 204ff. See also the essay by Patrick D. Miller, “The Good Neighborhood: Identity and Community through the Commandments,” in Miller, *Way of the Lord: Essays in Old Testament Theology* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 51–67.

28. *Ibid.*, 231.

29. See the classic study by Mary Douglas, where the food laws announce in every day life the holiness to which the people of God are called: “holiness is exemplified by completeness. Holiness requires that individuals shall conform to the class to which they belong. And holiness requires that different classes of things shall not be confused.” Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2003), 67. Again, understood in light of the shaping influence of rituals and liturgies, the food laws in fact make rather fine material for the Christian preacher to take up.

30. Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as they Really Were* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 5.

blessings of the covenant—having Yhwh as one's God, and being one of his people, with all the blessings contained in it.

Conclusions

It was no accident that Jesus repudiated the temptations of Satan in the wilderness by citations of Deuteronomy. (I once had a class on the Torah with the cheeky title: "The Pentateuch: or, What Jesus Would Do.) Deuteronomy stands at the headwaters of biblical theology, life, and practice. So likewise it is hard to imagine Paul's exhortation to Timothy regarding the usefulness of "all Scripture" (i.e., the Hebrew Scriptures) for the Christian church to exclude Deuteronomy (2 Tim 3:16f). Preaching Deuteronomy as Christian Scripture ought to lead to a discovery and presentation of the glory, the grace, and the calling of the one determining fact for the people of God in any generation: it is with the Lord our God that we have to do. The Law is set within that truth, and the fundamental demand of Yhwh for every successive generation is to love the Lord their God with all one's heart, soul, and strength. We are told of the saving work and fatherly care of Yhwh for his people, by Moses the old and dying preacher. And then we are told what life ought to be like for the people of God in a particular cultural and historical setting: a love of neighbor that shapes rules of war in an ancient near eastern context; love of God determining the proper view of priests, prophets, and kings; proper treatment of criminals, witnesses, trials, the guilty (among the people of God), and due care for creation all are tied together in Deuteronomy as loving God and loving neighbor. And all arise because God first loved and called his people. Deuteronomy, in its bulk, is already preached by its reading—it is a recording and presentation of sermons. Moses stands in the narrative structure of Deuteronomy and in his final words points the people of God to the single greatest fact of their lives: that it is with Yhwh their God that they have to do. That truth invades every corner of their lives, corporately and individually, so that there is not a square inch where the Lord (who redeemed them) does not say, 'It is mine.' As an American Christian it appears rather hard for me to believe that such a call does not need to be made to the people of God today, and applied with wisdom and love for God and neighbor to the body of Christ.

Deuteronomy stands as the theological heart-beat of the Old Testament. But preaching Deuteronomy today, reading the ancient manner of its rhetoric, the difficult and sometimes confusing laws, the antiquated agricultural or societal specifics, seems a great challenge. But whatever the complexities that arise, the importance of Deuteronomy as preserved and given "for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come" (1 Cor 10:11) ought to be recovered in Christian pulpits. We stand having seen the grace of God in ways more profound than that generation standing on the cusp of Canaan, or the first readers and then every generation who heard the sermons re-preached at the great and joyous feasts of Israel. No Christian preacher can ignore or should ignore that fact. Placed within

the Christian liturgy, the fact cannot be ignored or missed. Yhwh, who saved his people from the hand of Og and Bashan, went even further and saved them from the power of sin and death. The one who held his people in his strong and tender hands as a father carrying a child (Deut 1:31), out of grace and pity, stretched out the same hands upon a cross for his children's salvation.

These are not facts to be ignored in a Christian preaching of Deuteronomy. They shape the horizon from which we view the whole of the text. But the impact ought to serve to heighten the manifestation of grace, and then to strengthen the necessity to "hear": for if those who heard the Law from Moses were justly punished for their unbelief, and did not enter the "rest" promised, then how shall we escape such a great salvation, of which we have heard from the Son himself (Heb 2:2f., et passim)? The truth that it is with the Lord our God that we have to do stands as the great hope, comfort, and call to faithfulness in the Christian church—and the great cause for judgment for those who would spurn him. The call of Deuteronomy is to live in faith, and by faith, for Yhwh is God of his people, does all for their provision, and his Word is to stand over every aspect of their life. Grace begets gratitude, love requires love in return. And the Christian preacher stands, like Moses, to call with due urgency the redeemed people of God to love and good deeds: to declare the wonder and seriousness of the fact that it is with the Lord their God that they have to do, in all things.

Augustine's Wise Preaching of the Psalms

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These virtues are granted to us now in a valley of weeping, but from them we progress to a single virtue. And what will that be? The virtue of contemplating God alone. . . . We shall pass, then, from these many virtues of action to that one virtue of contemplation, by which we are empowered to contemplate God, according to the scriptural word, In the morning I will stand before you, and contemplate you (Ps 5:5 (3)). . . . And what does “contemplating” imply? The God of gods will be seen in Zion. By the God of gods we should understand the Christ of Christians. . . . But when all the neediness of our mortality is over and done with, he who is God with God, the Word with the Father, the Word through whom all things were made, will show himself to the pure-hearted. Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God (Mt. 5:8). The God of gods will be seen in Zion.¹

The passage cited above from Augustine's “Exposition of Psalm 83” is, to say the least, a type of preaching foreign to the eyes and ears of 21st century Christians. This excerpt suggests that theological preaching—more specifically, wise preaching—properly describes Augustine's sermon method in the Psalms. But why is his preaching theological, what makes it wise, and what is the relationship between them? This study seeks to demonstrate how Augustine's doctrine of wisdom affects both the content and style of his preaching in the Psalms with the bulk of attention attending to the content.

The underlying assumption of this article is that Augustine's doctrine of wisdom is readily at work in his exegetical and theological method. The case could be made that from his reading of Hortensius to his death, Augustine's pursuit of wisdom fundamentally drove his life and work. Assuming this sapiential approach, it will provide the lens through which we will read Augustine's preaching of the Psalms and evaluate how wisdom affects his sermons. This will be accomplished by considering Augustine as preacher, Augustine's doctrine of wisdom, his exegetical

1. Exp. Ps. 83, 11. All *Expositions of the Psalms* and *Sermons* quotations taken from *The Works of Saint Augustine, A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 2000).

method, key sermons from the Psalms, and finally a concluding critique of and appreciation for Augustine's wise preaching. Augustine's preaching of the Psalms is both expository and profoundly theological, and, as will be seen, is full of wisdom to be gleaned by preachers today.

Augustine as Preacher

When considering the influence of Augustine upon the Church, one might remember the profundity of *City of God* or the contemporary relevance of *Confessions*. Rarely does one first recall, however, that despite his voluminous writings on theology, philosophy, scripture, personal letters, Augustine was above all a "pastor of souls and the defender of truth." Drobner comments that "All of Augustine's actions, including his writings, controversies, and theology, were in the service of pastoral care."² Typical pastoral responsibilities filled Augustine's long days, and chief among them was preaching. Due to demand, it is believed that Augustine preached multiple times each week and sometimes every day of the week.³ The former professor of rhetoric typically chose a text a short time before he was to preach, delivered it extemporaneously to an often packed house who stood while the Bishop sat and spoke for, give or take, an hour, and stenographers quickly jotted down his message for Christians to enjoy even 1600 years later.⁴

Augustine's scripture saturated preaching style, while not altogether unique, was in keeping with wisdom being his foremost hermeneutical and homiletical principle. Scripture is without question the highest authority for Augustine. He considers the Bible to be the Spirit inspired word of God, coherent in its message and without contradiction.⁵ H. Oliphant Old notes the primacy of the expository preaching method in Augustine.

In his homiletical work, Augustine gave first importance to expository preaching. This was quite consistent with his whole theological system. Augustine had a strong theology of grace, and a strong theology of grace leads to a strong emphasis on revelation. Sermon after sermon we find our preacher intent on nothing so much as explaining the Holy Scriptures, for there it was that God revealed himself.⁶

2. Hubertus R. Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 398.

3. Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church; The Patristic Age*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 345.

4. William Harmless, *Augustine In His Own Words* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press, 2010), 122–24. And, Eric Rebillard, "Sermones" in *Augustine through the Ages* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 773–92.

5. See Karla Pollmann, "Hermeneutical Presuppositions" *Augustine Through the Ages* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 426. Pollman lists the following as sources to confirm Augustine's views on the inspiration and inerrancy of scripture cons. Ev. 1.35.54; cat. rud. 4:8; util. cred. 9.

6. Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, 345–46.

In his sermons, Augustine sought, above all, biblical fidelity, instruction in truth, emotional engagement, and appropriate response; in summary, he sought wisdom and eloquence.⁷ In book IV of *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine explains how wisdom and eloquence are the principle parts of preaching.

But since some performances are unintelligent, awkward, and boring, whereas others are clever, elegant, and exciting, the person required for the task under consideration is someone who can argue or speak wisely, if not eloquently. . . . This point did not escape even those who believed in teaching the art of rhetoric; they declared that wisdom without eloquence was of little value to society but that eloquence without wisdom was generally speaking a great nuisance, and never beneficial.⁸

In book I of *De Doctrina* and in other writings we learn that Augustine's understanding of wisdom is not limited to the content of a sermon but includes the very way in which one preaches. Wisdom and eloquence are the main ingredients of good preaching, but Augustine also acknowledges that the pursuit of these things is, itself, wise.⁹ Thus, one should expect to find evidence of this wise pursuit in Augustine's own preaching—both in content and style.

Wisdom in Augustine

In his excellent article, "Wisdom" in Augustine Through the Ages, Ronald Nash states, "Efforts to understand Augustine's notion of wisdom (*sapientia*) must include at least two necessary steps: (1) seeing wisdom in the context of Augustine's hierarchical structures of ontology and epistemology; and (2) seeing the contrast Augustine drew between wisdom and knowledge."¹⁰ Heeding Nash's advice, then, this section will give attention to Augustine's ontology and briefly his epistemology, and also to his division between *scientia* and *sapientia*.

Hierarchical Ontology and Epistemology

In his writings, Augustine is unabashedly partial to the philosophy of the Neo-Platonists. Concerning Plato he writes, "If, then, Plato defined a philosopher as one who knows, loves and imitates the God in whom he finds his happiness, there

7. "It has been said by a man of eloquence, and quite rightly, that the eloquent should speak in such a way as to instruct, delight, and move their listeners." IV:25-27? (Oxford Classic translation, 117).

8. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, Book IV:IV6-V7 (Oxford Classic, 104).

9. Examples of this thinking: *De Doctrina*, "A doctor treating a physical wound applies some medications that are contrary . . . and also some that are similar . . . and he does not apply the same dressing to all wounds, but matches like with like. So for the treatment of human beings God's wisdom—in itself both doctor and medicine—offered itself in a similar way." Augustine sees God's wisdom as both doctor and medicine; it is the perfect form of Wisdom manifested in Christ and the way of wisdom to be carried out by Christ followers.

10. Ronald H. Nash, "Wisdom" in *Augustine Through the Ages* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 885.

is little need to examine further. For, none of the other philosophers has come so close to us as the Platonists have, and, therefore, we may neglect the others."¹¹ It is no surprise, then, to find in Augustine a three-story ontology with form-like ideas at the top. Augustine understands reality in three vertical parts that he refers to as the levels of the bodies, the souls, and God.¹²

The lowest level is that of the bodies which are mutable in both place and time.¹³ This is the place where bodies move (or are moved) and where action takes place. Augustine speaks of the *rationes seminales* as seed-like principles from nature that exist at this level.¹⁴ Furthermore, this is the level where knowledge exists and is attained. The second level is that of souls as well as created spirits and angels which are immutable in place but mutable in time.¹⁵ It is on this level that Augustine speaks of the *ratio hominis*, the rational soul of man, where he distinguishes between higher and lower reasoning.¹⁶ The highest level is the realm of the eternal, God, who is absolutely immutable. It is at this level where the eternal ideas exist in God's mind and where contemplation takes place. Nash notes that "the divine forms are the exemplary cause and thus the basic foundation of all created reality. Moreover, because the judgments humans make must accord with the eternal forms, they are an indispensable element in human knowledge."¹⁷ Additionally, Bourke comments that as God is always supreme, He creates and moves both spiritual and corporeal creatures, and thus God moves the soul of man while the soul of man moves and regulates bodies.¹⁸

Augustine's epistemology corresponds to his ontology containing a lower, middle and highest level of vision. The lower level concerns seeing bodily creatures through the senses. The second level Augustine refers to as spiritual vision or cogitation which relates the powers of the mind "to the images of sensible things."¹⁹ The highest level is the intellectual vision which allows humans to attain knowledge of God, the human soul, virtues, and universals. It is this level of vision that can see wisdom.²⁰ Nash points out, "The upward path of knowledge for Augustine

11. Augustine, *The City of God*, Book VIII, Ch. 5. Transl. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 1972).

12. For further study on the significance of Platonic/Neoplatonic thought in Augustine see O'Connell, *St. Augustine's Early Theory of Man*, 1968, Armstrong, *Augustine and Christian Platonism*, Villanova, 1967, Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine*, Oxford, 1992; A. Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, London, 1939.

13. Vernon J. Bourke, *Wisdom from St. Augustine* (Houston, TX: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1984), 54.

14. Nash, "Wisdom," 885.

15. Bourke, *Wisdom from St. Augustine*, 53.

16. Nash, "Wisdom," 885-86.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Bourke, *Wisdom from St. Augustine*, 54.

19. Nash, "Wisdom," 886.

20. *Ibid.*

involves the passage from sensation to the rational cognizance of temporal things (*scientia*) to the intellectual cognizance of eternal reality (*sapientia*).²¹

Accompanying this upward path of knowledge is the ratio, the gaze of the mind (or soul) situated between the realm of bodies and the realm of God. As noted above, humans can either reason downward toward the level of the bodies (*ratio inferior*) or upward toward God and divine things (*ratio superior*).²² Augustine writes in *On the Trinity*,

But it is the part of the higher reason to judge of these corporeal things according to incorporeal and eternal reasons; which, unless they were above the human mind, would certainly not be unchangeable; and yet, unless something of our own were subjoined to them, we should not be able to employ them as our measures by which to judge of corporeal things. But we judge of corporeal things from the rule of dimensions and figures, which the mind knows to remain unchangeably.²³

Since wisdom is found with God, Augustine believes gazing upward to be the superior option. Indeed, there is knowledge to be gained by looking below, but if divine wisdom comes from above, one's gaze should not remain at an inferior level.

Scientia and Sapientia

Augustine makes a sharp distinction between knowledge (*scientia*) and wisdom (*sapientia*). In accord with his tri-tiered ontology and epistemology, Augustine locates knowledge in the lowest level, the bodily realm, and wisdom in the highest level, the eternal realm. He makes much of Paul's distinction between knowledge and wisdom in 1 Corinthians 12:8 where Paul writes, "For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit. . . ."²⁴ In Augustine's view, knowledge, while abiding in the lowest realm, is reckoned to action, and wisdom, on the highest realm, is reckoned to contemplation. "In thus distinguishing, it must be understood that wisdom belongs to contemplation, knowledge to action."²⁵ Additionally, Nash says, "Science knows true things while wisdom is a knowledge of Truth. Error is possible in *scientia* but not in *sapientia*."²⁶

To be sure, knowledge proper is not a bad thing to Augustine.²⁷ This gift of knowledge that Paul speaks of, however, is not any and all knowledge that can be attained, for in this is much emptiness and vanity. Rather, this knowledge is

21. Ibid.

22. Bourke, *Wisdom from St. Augustine*, 54.

23. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, Book 12.2.

24. All scripture references taken from the New American Standard Bible, 1995 update (LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), unless otherwise noted.

25. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, Book 12.22.

26. Nash, "Wisdom," 886.

27. Augustine was, however, increasingly disdainful toward the physical and temporal world throughout his life. Nevertheless, as it relates to knowledge, his disdain was especially for that knowledge that is rightly called foolishness.

of “those things by which are that most wholesome faith, which leads to true blessedness, is begotten, nourished, defended, strengthened. . . .”²⁸ Moreover, Augustine acknowledges that wisdom is related to knowledge, but it is of the eternal and divine sort and therefore must be called wisdom. Lewis Ayres, in his recent and important work *Augustine and the Trinity*, writes, “Whereas, in us, a verbum is born from our scientia, the Father’s knowledge is his Word and Wisdom and essence (because there to be and to be wise are identical).”²⁹ Thomas Aquinas agrees with Augustine on this point when he writes, “Therefore he who considers absolutely the highest cause of the whole universe, namely God, is most of all called wise. Hence wisdom is said to be the knowledge of divine things, as Augustine says.”³⁰

The temporal distinction between wisdom and knowledge cannot be understated in grasping Augustine’s notion of wisdom. Knowledge is located in the lowest realm, the realm of bodies and action, the realm of time. Wisdom is located in the highest realm, the realm of God and contemplation, the realm of eternity (i.e., no time). Though knowledge is good it is not the proper end. Knowledge should spur on the lover of wisdom not to remain at the lower level, but rather to pursue the higher realm of contemplation where wisdom resides. This distinction greatly affects the way in which Augustine reads the scriptures, and therefore the way we read Augustine.

The relationship between knowledge, wisdom and Christ in Augustine’s theology is also important. Augustine understands Christ to be both our knowledge and our wisdom. Ayres notes that “. . . Augustine’s early account of the Son as Wisdom is developed and incorporated into his account of the Son as Word. . . .”³¹ This is a fascinating junction in Augustine’s doctrine of wisdom as in his Christology, the eternal intersects with the temporal—the eternal Word wraps himself in temporal flesh. Jason Byassee in his *Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine* writes, “The incarnation provides scientia of God on the way to eschatological sapientia . . . that is, ‘knowledge’ appropriate to our current place

28. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, Book 14.3.

29. Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), Kindle Electronic Edition, 9261–79. See Parts II–IV of Ayres’ book for excellent and insightful work on Augustine’s understanding of the Trinity, the relationships therein, *scientia* and *sapientia*, and Christ and Wisdom to name a few.

30. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa of the Summa*, ed. Peter Kreeft (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press), 43. It is worth noting the irony of this statement that Aquinas agrees with Augustine’s notion that wisdom is “knowledge of divine things,” yet Augustine draws a bold line between knowledge and wisdom. Aquinas, on the other hand, makes this statement in the section concerning doctrine as science (knowledge). Augustine and Aquinas agree that wisdom is knowledge of divine things, but Aquinas is not necessarily drawing sharp distinctions between *scientia* and *sapientia* like Augustine. Rather, he sees the study of doctrine as a science, indeed, the noblest of sciences.

31. Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, Kindle Electronic Edition, 9232–46.

in the divine economy, on the way to “wisdom” for which we hold out faith, but cannot possess yet.”³²

Recognizing that knowledge is temporal and wisdom is eternal, Colossians 2:3 fits beautifully with Augustine’s doctrine of wisdom as Paul writes, speaking of Christ “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (emphasis mine). Believing Christ to be the Son of God and God, Himself, Augustine asserts that Christ is associated with both time and eternity. Therefore, as the God-man, the fullness of knowledge (temporal) and wisdom (eternal) are found in Him. Augustine writes, “But that the same is Himself the Only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth—this took place, in order that He Himself in things done for us in time should be the same for whom we are cleansed by the same faith, that we may contemplate Him steadfastly in things eternal.”³³ In light of Augustine’s emphasis on “totus Christus” (the whole Christ) in his *Expositions on the Psalms*, a firm understanding of this relationship between knowledge, wisdom and Christ is essential.

Wisdom in Augustine’s preaching and exegesis

Hughes Oliphant Old situates Augustine in a tradition he calls “Wisdom doxology,” and argues that “Quite obviously Augustine’s theology of preaching is thoroughly based on biblical Wisdom theology. . . .”³⁴ So, where exactly does wisdom show up in Augustine’s preaching? Due to his heavy distinction between corporeal and incorporeal, temporal and eternal, with priority on the latter, Augustine’s preaching inherits a strong spiritual flavor with a vertical trajectory. Augustine addresses his socially diverse audience with a rhetorically rich delivery, heavy on allegory though not without some literal analysis, and sensitive to matters of greatest eternal significance. J. Patout Barns suggests that Ambrose’s influence led Augustine to recognize the value of Scripture for both the educated and uneducated. “Unlike the pagan mythology, the literal reading of the Christian Scripture promoted a salutary way of life among the unlearned and its allegorical interpretation led the more adept deeper into Truth.”³⁵ This mix of literal and spiritual exegesis blended with low and lofty rhetoric beckoning its hearers to ascend to

32. Jason Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), Kindle Electronic Ed., Location 866–75.

33. St. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, Book 13.19. Note again the temporal distinctions in this quote. Augustine makes much of things in time versus things eternal. When he speaks of grace, here, he is referring to something done in time, and truth as eternal. Thus grace corresponds to knowledge and truth to wisdom.

34. Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, 388. For a full development of Old’s “Wisdom Doxology” see his *Themes & Variations for a Christian Doxology*.

35. J. Patout Barns, “Ambrose Preaching to Augustine” in *Collectaene Augustinea; Augustine Second Founder of the Faith* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 375.

the eternal, triune God is, in Augustine's view, wise preaching. The following quote from Van der Meer's *Augustine the Bishop* is particularly telling,

Many of his sermons on some verse of the Psalms seem to have a bearing on that neo-Platonist practice of inward contemplation that was peculiar to him: the tenor of Augustine's thought is that he who seeks to rise to a knowledge of God should make his own soul his starting-point, for this is a reflection and an image of God. Time and again he stresses the transitoriness and unreliability of sense experience in order to tear the soul away from the deceptive impressions of earthly reality and make it more receptive for what God's illumination, the only agens of true knowledge, permits the "heart" of man to contemplate. And although upon the cathedra he does not explicitly mention either the light of knowledge or the world of intelligible ideas, and only speaks of the workings of divine grace, his representation of those workings remains unmistakably confined to the concepts of light, seeing and contemplation, and to that of the ascent from the lower to the higher, and so to the true reality behind all images.³⁶

Augustine's high regard for the scriptures led him into serious consideration of exactly how they should be handled. So important is this to Augustine that he dedicated the better part of his *De Doctrina Christiana* to the task of how to interpret the Bible. Excavating the core components of Augustine's exegetical method reveal further the pervasiveness of his doctrine of eternal wisdom and his preference therefore.

Christological / Canonical

The Patristic period is generally characterized as holding to a Christological interpretation of scripture. As Bray points out, "Apart from Christ, the Scriptures were incomprehensible, and so it was permissible to find reference to him in any way possible."³⁷ Of this period, Bray rightly points out that it is wrong to assume that figurative exegesis is the basis of their hermeneutic. Rather, it is the fundamental belief that Christ is the center of the Bible that motivates early interpreters to move beyond the plain reading of the text.³⁸

Augustine follows suit believing that the scriptures testify to Christ, and thus his trajectory in exegesis is one in search of the Son. In fact, "totus Christus" was the "exegetical center" of Augustine's exegesis of the Psalms.³⁹ Concerning Augustine's Christological doctrine, Johannes Quasten writes,

His doctrine is distinguished from traditional teaching only by the clarity of its language, by the recurrence of the ever more insistent and clearly developed example of the union between the body and the soul, by the

36. F. Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, translated by Brian Battershaw and G. R. Lamb (London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), 435–36.

37. Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 97.

38. Ibid.

39. Harmless, *Augustine In His Own Words*, 158.

defense against all heresies which denied or obscured the perfect human and divine nature of Christ and by the presentation of the Christ-man as the shining example of the gratuity of grace.⁴⁰

In addition to his Christocentric focus on scripture, it is important to point out his canonical focus. Augustine uses the language of “canonical” at times referring to those writings considered by the church to be inspired and thus canonical.⁴¹ There is, however, another sense of the term canonical in Augustine’s hermeneutics. Augustine’s assumption that all scripture by virtue of being God’s Word is inspired and inerrant leads him to a healthy practice of considering the whole of the canon when constructing theology or finding meaning in a particular text. He writes, “Even if the writer’s meaning is obscure, there is no danger here, provided that it can be shown from other passages of the holy scriptures that each of these interpretations is consistent with the truth.”⁴² Describing Augustine’s approach, Karla Pollman reiterates the language of “normative horizon” to describe the clear propositions that form the core of scripture’s message which clarifies more obscure places in the scriptures.⁴³

Things and Signs

Augustine’s discussion of things and signs in his *De Doctrina Christiana* is fundamental to the overall message of the book; indeed, it is fundamental to Augustine’s way of reading the text of scripture. Things he understands to be of the eternal sort and that which is the end of our pursuit. A sign is “a thing which of itself makes some other thing come to mind, besides the impression that it presents to the senses.”⁴⁴ Words, in Augustine’s view, hold the dominant role as signs for other things. Thus, Scripture is full of signs pointing us to eternal things that supersede the text of the Bible urging the reader upward toward wisdom, love, God, and every eternal thing.

Literal and Allegorical Interpretation

While it is broadly believed that those in the Patristic era fall into either the Alexandrian camp leaning toward allegorical interpretation or an Antiochene camp with more literal interpretation, Augustine is not particularly at home with either side. Augustine seeks to keep his options open, per se, as it pertains to interpretation. Bray offers a third camp of Western (Latin) exegetes that includes Tyconius and his Rules.⁴⁵ This is worth mentioning as Augustine found Tyconius’ rules rather helpful though he modified them to fit his own views.

40. Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, Vol. IV, transl. Rev. Placid Solari (Allen, TX: Christian Classics), 430. Also, see Quasten’s chapter on Augustine for insights into his theological method and Trinitarian theology.

41. See *De Doctrina Christiana*, Book 2.8.12.

42. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, Book 3.37.

43. Pollman, “Hermeneutical Presuppositions,” 427.

44. *Ibid.*, Book 2.1–2.

45. Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 108.

Augustine's exegetical practices employ many techniques including both the literal and allegorical methods as well as a meticulous reading of the text, an early form of textual criticism, and the liberal arts.⁴⁶ Concerning the literal versus the allegorical interpretation of Scripture, Augustine writes, "The greatest care must therefore be taken to determine whether the expression that we are trying to understand is literal or figurative."⁴⁷ This is a burdensome task for Augustine as he believes that a passage interpreted metaphorically that is intended literally, and vice versa, is a matter of spiritual life and death. Recognizing the connection between the allegorical method and Augustine's desire for ascent, Van der Meer writes, "As to the allegorical interpretation of Scripture, this was, in the natural order of things, the best method of freeing the classical manner of exposition from the slavery of the letter and of assisting it to rise to greater heights than the pedestrian analysis of a sequence of words."⁴⁸

Double Love

Just as fundamental as things and signs for understanding Augustine's hermeneutical method is his talk of double love. Near the end of book one in *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine writes,

The chief purpose of all that we have been saying in our discussion of things is to make it understood that the fulfillment and end of the law and all the divine scriptures is to love the thing which must be enjoyed and the thing which together with us can enjoy that thing. . . . So anyone who thinks he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbor, has not yet succeeded in understanding them.⁴⁹

The "thing" to be enjoyed, according to Augustine, in general, is that which is eternal, and in particular, God himself. Augustine recognizes the commandments to love God and love neighbor as, indeed, the first and second greatest commandments in the bible. As a result, one's interpretation of scripture should always promote such love for God and man, for love, unlike faith and hope, is of the eternal sort.

Dialogue of Disciplines

Less germane to preaching proper, but useful for understanding Augustine's theological thought as a whole, and wisdom in particular, is his dialogue of disciplines. Augustine's theological method feels more like a conversation between philosophy, theology and hermeneutics than a systematic formula simply requiring the input of data in order to calculate the doctrine. Bourke writes that "it is admittedly difficult to maintain a distinction between philosophic and religious

46. Pollman, "Hermeneutical Presuppositions," 427.

47. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, Book 3, 23–25.

48. Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, 442.

49. *Ibid.*, Book 1, 39, 84–86.

thought in Augustine. He is a theocentric thinker. . . ."⁵⁰ TeSelle writing on Augustine's method says,

In order to catch Augustine the theologian at work we shall approach his thought not as a finished product, a "system" or at least a single complex of ideas, but as a process of reflection and discovery. And such a method is suited to the subject matter, for Augustine's thought proceeds by way of ceaseless inquiry; he often refrains from making final judgments, and even when he makes them he is prepared to modify them in light of fresh examination. . . . There will be a continuity in his thought, but it will be the continuity of a process of becoming; there will be coherence, but it will be a coherence that is always changing. The method of study, then, must be "cinematic." . . .—Augustine's thought must be seen as a constantly changing whole.⁵¹

Indeed, describing Augustine's method as a "changing whole" is accurate. Like a chef who consistently uses the same ingredients, but rarely mixes the recipe the same way, so is Augustine's unpredictable, yet artistic method of theology. Pertaining to the doctrine of wisdom, some evolution in Augustine's thought throughout his life is of no surprise. One scholar suggests that Augustine determined some 31 meanings of *sapientia* while another found at least 13 usages of the term.⁵² Nevertheless, his core understanding of wisdom is that described above. Additionally, Augustine's commitment to the truth remains unwavering, and it is his passion for truth and his pursuit of wisdom that employs his method bouncing between Neoplatonic philosophy and things and signs, between double love of God and neighbor to introspective inquiry about his own selfishness and desires.⁵³

Examples of Augustine's *Sapiential* Preaching of the Psalms

Following the summary of Augustine's wise exegetical and theological method, and the wisdom ingredients that make up his ever-evolving approach, we now return to Augustine's sermons on the Psalms in search of these wisdom ingredients

50. Bourke, *Wisdom from St. Augustine*, 34.

51. Eugene TeSelle, *Augustine The Theologian*, 20. Also, TeSelle cites Olivier du Roy, *L'Intelligence de la foi en la Trinité selon saint Augustin. Gene'se de sa théologie trinitaire jusqu'en 391* (Paris, 1966), p. 19, as "one of the most successful achievements" along the lines of describing Augustine's method.

52. Bourke, *Wisdom from St. Augustine*. 60, footnote 7.

53. A noteworthy source relative to Augustine's theological method is Mark Ellingsen, *The Richness of Augustine; His Contextual & Pastoral Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005). Ellingsen's second chapter on "Bible and Theological Method" considers several of the same parts of Augustine's theology and exegesis as the sections found in this paper, though this source was not discovered until after these sections complete. Nevertheless, though Ellingsen's early comments about the historical interpretations of Augustine are a bit "broad brush" his thesis that Augustine's theology is contextual and pastoral is one worth considering.

and their affects. We will consider sections of four sermons from Augustine's *Enarrationes in Psalmos* and one from *Sermones* on Psalm 17 (18). J. Clinton McCann, Jr. in the introduction to his commentary on Psalms identifies several psalms as "wisdom/torah" psalms which serve as a "stimulus to interpret the psalms theologically as well as historically." Tremper Longman and W.D. Tucker, Jr. building upon Gunkel's work also recognize wisdom psalms in the Psalter, thus four of the five sermons considered are wisdom psalms as recognized by these scholars.⁵⁴ One exception will be "Exposition of Psalm 83" from *Enarrationes* as explained below.

Exposition of Psalm 1

Blessed is the person who has not gone astray in the council of the ungodly. This statement should be understood as referring to our Lord Jesus Christ, that is, the Lord-Man. Blessed is the person who has not gone astray in the council of the ungodly, as did the earthly man who conspired with his wife, already beguiled by the serpent, to disregard God's commandments.⁵⁵

He will be like a tree planted alongside the running waters. This may refer to Wisdom itself, who deigned to assume humanity for our salvation, so that it is the human Christ who is planted like a tree by the running waters; for what is said in another psalm, the river of God is brimming with water (Ps 64:10 (65:9)), can also be taken in this sense. . . . That tree, therefore, is our Lord, who draws those who are in the way from the running waters, that is, from the peoples who sin.⁵⁶

Psalm 1 is uniformly recognized as a wisdom psalm among the scholars listed above due to its beatitude qualities and contrast of the two ways. Augustine's doctrine of wisdom makes an immediate appearance in his exegesis. The opening sentence of the Psalter Augustine understands to refer to Christ, the "Lord-man" unstained by sin. Christ is the Wisdom of God according to Paul in 1 Corinthians 1, a fact never far from Augustine's mind, and thus an exegesis that is Christological is wise both because it harmonizes with Jesus' teaching in Luke 24, and it urges the Christian toward the triune God who is the font of all wisdom. Furthermore, Augustine's "earthly" language describing the ungodly is indicative of his preference for the eternal over the temporal (i.e., the spiritual over the physical).

The next section takes Augustine's Christological interpretation further to an explicit sapiential interpretation. Here, Augustine does not suggest, as he did in the opening section, that the passage refers to "Christ," but rather that it refers to "Wisdom itself," namely Christ. Clearly, Augustine's exegetical preference is toward Christ, Wisdom itself. Furthermore, Augustine sprinkles in another wisdom ingredient with his constant canonical consideration. No less than 16

54. See Longman's *How To Read The Psalms* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1988), and Tucker's "Book of Psalms 1" in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Wisdom Poetry & Writings*, eds. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008).

55. Exp. Ps. 1, 1.

56. Exp. Ps. 1, 3.

references are made to other passages of scripture in this relatively short sermon. Indeed, a hermeneutic that seeks to synthesize the whole of scripture with its parts is in keeping with Augustine's wisdom as he believes scripture to be truly the Word of God, and the psalms as an expression of Wisdom, the "totus Christus."

Exposition of Psalm 110

It is true, of course, that God gave to the carnal Israelites the earthly Jerusalem, which is in slavery, together with her children (Gal 4:25); but that was part of the Old Covenant, appropriate to the old humanity. Those who understood that the earthly Jerusalem was no more than a symbol were accounted heirs to the New Covenant, for the Jerusalem on high is free, and she is our mother (Gal 4:26), eternal in heaven.⁵⁷

Instead of all the pleasures of this world, whether those you have experienced already or those you can increase and multiply for yourself in your imagination, set your desire on wisdom, the mother of delights that never die; but the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. Wisdom will be your joy; she will infallibly lead you to the chaste, eternal embrace of truth, in a delight beyond description.⁵⁸

The first wisdom component to note in these latter sections of Augustine's "Exposition of Psalm 110" (111) is, again, the contrast between the temporal and the eternal. In the final third of this sermon, Augustine focuses intently on the "trustworthy promises attached to the new covenant" with particular emphasis on the eternity of the New. Given the eternal nature of the New Covenant over the temporal nature of the Old, it is fitting for any preacher to highlight this difference. But for Augustine, this is a distinction he is anxious to point out as is seen time and again in his writings, and one that he ties closely to the wisdom in the next section.

Augustine opens his commentary on verse 9 (10) connecting the thought of eternity from verse 8 (9) with "the mother of delights that never die," which is wisdom (*immortalium deliciarum matrem concupisce sapientiam*). Furthermore, Augustine personalizes wisdom as the "mother of all delights," a metaphor reminiscent of another, perhaps, equally essential goal for Augustine, happiness. The relationship between Augustine's doctrines of wisdom and happiness is fascinating, though complex. Maria Boulding suggests that wisdom is "the intermediary between holy fear and eternal blessedness,"⁵⁹ but the whole of Augustine's work seems to suggest that wisdom is not merely a means, but an end in itself, like happiness. Bussanich writes, "The notion of the highest good (*summum bonum*) is connected in Augustine's thinking to his views on reason, wisdom, and truth and his commitment to the Platonic concept of eternal being." Then, quoting Augustine, he notes "no one

57. Exp. Ps. 110, 8.

58. Exp. Ps. 110, 9.

59. Maria Boulding, trans., *The Works of Saint Augustine, A Translation for the 21st Century: Expositions of the Psalms*, vol III/19 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2003), 290, footnote 30.

is happy unless through the highest good, which is seen and grasped in that truth which we call wisdom" (lib. Arb. 2.13.35).⁶⁰ Who is truly happy, if not wise? And, who is wise who is not happy? Precision about the relationship between wisdom and happiness remains, but the reminiscent language of eternal "joy" and "delight" serves as another cue to the ubiquitous wisdom ingredients found in Augustine's preaching.

Exposition of Psalm 146

If God 'humbles sinners right down to the ground,' what must we do if we do not want to be humbled right down to the ground? It is a great thing to advance to intelligible realities, a great thing to advance to what is spiritual, and it is a great thing for the heart to reach the point where it knows that something exists that is neither extended in space nor subject to variations with time. After all, what does wisdom look like? Who can think about it? Is it long? Or square? Or round? Is it now here, now there?⁶¹

Exposition of Psalm 146 is essentially an exhortation for one's life to sing as a Psalm to God despite temporal sufferings. The section cited above offers fascinating insights related to Augustine's understanding of wisdom. Notice the temporal, eternal dichotomy in the second sentence with preference for the eternal. Augustine writes that it is a great thing to advance to "intelligible realities," which he describes parenthetically as "what is spiritual," and for the heart to know something that is beyond temporal (i.e., "that is neither extended in space nor subject to variations with time"). Notice next the jump from that which is not temporal to the question, "After all, what does wisdom look like?" This is a notable insight into Augustine's thinking, for he strictly equates that which is eternal with wisdom. In responding to verse 7, "Let your first song to the Lord be one of confession," after equating eternity with wisdom, Augustine suggests that if one wishes to "be led from the way of faith to the possession of God in vision, begin with confession." Why would a believer desire to be led from the way of faith? Because faith is a temporal need, while the vision of God attained by ascending to contemplation is eternal. When one 'sees' God, one no longer needs faith, for this perfect vision of God lasts forever.

Sermon 14A; Discourse on Psalm 17 (18)

In Sermon 14A, an incomplete discourse on Psalm 17 (18) and especially verse 35, Augustine focuses his attention on the end to which people are directed. Augustine reads verse 35 as, "Your discipline has directed me toward the end, and your

60. John Bussanich, "Happiness, Eudaimonism" in *Augustine Through the Ages*, 414.

61. Exp. Ps. 146, 14. Psalm 146, while not traditionally recognized as a wisdom psalm, is accepted as such by McCann in light of John Kselman's work. McCann is not convinced of Kselman's division between v. 8b and v. 8c, but "the words 'righteous' and 'wicked' in v. 9c form a conceptual envelope that lends support to Kselman's analysis" (McCann, *The Book of Psalms in NIB*, p. 1263).

discipline itself will teach me.” Consider the wisdom-loaded language from this sermon.

We are inquiring, you see, toward what end we are being directed, and what the discipline is that is directing us, and in what sort of way this matter is to be taught. . . . When eating food comes to an end, the food is no more; when weaving a garment comes to an end, the garment is perfected. So it is toward that sort of end that we undoubtedly seek to be directed, one which means our being perfected, not our being consumed.⁶²

So what is this end, and what is this discipline? The end is Christ, the discipline is the law. Listen to the apostle: The end of the law is Christ, for the sake of justice for everyone who believes (Rom 10:4). So this then—to state it more clearly and to explain what we have sung—this then is your discipline has directed me toward the end: what your law is has directed me toward the end; your law has directed me toward Christ.⁶³

Being directed toward the end means coming toward Christ, that is, believing in Christ.⁶⁴

Philip thought that the Father alone was such an end, and so he said, Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us (Jn 14:8); but the Lord showed him that God is the end, God the Trinity. Accordingly, when you say, “Christ is the end,” you should not be excluding God the Father; and when you say “God the Father is the end,” you should not be excluding Christ. Philip apparently wished to exclude him, supposing that Christ was only what he could see with his eyes, so he cheerfully said, Show us the Father, and it is enough for us. . . . That’s where our desire ends; we won’t be seeking any further; that’s where we shall find total satisfaction, where we shall say, “It’s enough, I don’t want anything more.”⁶⁵

. . . so [the Lord] said to Philip, Have I been with you all this time, and you have not recognized me? When you are looking at the end, and do not see what you see, well that of course is why you are looking for the end, because you can’t see the end standing in front of you.⁶⁶

You were looking for the end; are you looking for something more than eternal life? This is the will of the Father, that whoever sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life. And I will raise him up on the last day. What am I to say, my brothers and sisters? What eyes do we need for obtaining this sight?⁶⁷

At least four wisdom themes are found in the brief excerpts above. First is the directional, or trajectory language. Without stretching the point too far, it is worth

62. Sermon 14A, 1.

63. *Ibid.*, 2.

64. *Ibid.*, 3.

65. *Ibid.*, 4.

66. *Ibid.*

67. *Ibid.*, 5. Also, note Psalm 130A where Augustine also teaches about the difference between “believing” and “believing in.”

noting the teleological language and interpretation by Augustine of Psalm 18 is in keeping with the thesis that wisdom is heavily influencing, if not driving, Augustine's method. Though difficult to find in this sermon, Augustine's language is often directed north, that is upward in ascension toward God the Trinity.

Secondly, Augustine's position that Christ is the end corresponds with his wisdom method. As in *De Trinitate* and *On the Sermon on the Mount*, Augustine understands Christ as the very Wisdom of God—a part of, while at the same time the fullness of, that Wisdom who is Trinity.

Thirdly, Augustine does not use the language of “signs” or “things” in his sermon, but one hears the echo of *De Doctrina Christiana* when he says, “. . . this then is your discipline has directed me toward the end: what your law is has directed me toward the end; your law has directed me toward Christ.” The law is the sign directing one toward the thing, Christ. The wisdom element is found in the temporal nature of a sign and the eternal nature of a thing. If Augustine's overriding goal is to ascend to Wisdom which is eternal, then it is fitting to find a temporal/eternal distinction with priority given to the eternal.

Lastly, Augustine's emphasis on “seeing” and “eyes” are significant. These are technical terms for Augustine closely associated with faith. Augustine believes the “eye of the mind” either gazes downward upon the temporal or upward toward the eternal, and the latter is to be preferred for in the eternal realm is where Wisdom, God the Trinity, resides. Prior to a wise ascent, however, one must believe and thereby receive “eyes to see.” In other words, faith precedes the ascent for there can be no eternal gaze without believing eyes.

Exposition of Psalm 83

While not recognized as a wisdom Psalm, Augustine's “Exposition of Psalm 83” is particularly laden with wisdom language, and thus worthy of our attention. In this sermon Augustine begins with a discussion of the wine presses and the children of Korah, and ends with God as the ultimate good. In between is a fascinating blend of canonical, Christological, and theological interpretation and method dealing largely with the twin themes of suffering and desire.⁶⁸ Sections 9–11 are particularly rich with wisdom-weighted content. In section nine, Augustine opens the discussion about how one gets to the place where he yearns to praise God eternally. In answering this question, Augustine cites Wisdom 9:15, “The corruptible body weighs down the soul, and this earthly dwelling oppresses a mind that considers many things,” then comments, “The spirit calls him upwards, but the weight of the flesh calls him down again; the tension between these two—the upward pull and the dragging weight—is a struggle, and struggle is characteristic

68. In section 2, Augustine argues for a Christological interpretation of 2 Kings 2:23–24 connecting the Latin word “calvus” (bald) with “Calvaria” (“Calvary,” “the place of the skull”). He writes, “You will already have understood from the gospel, beloved, why a bald man was a figure of Christ. You remember that Christ was crucified at a place called Calvary.” See footnote 2 in *The Works of Saint Augustine; Expositions of the Psalms*, III/18, “Exposition of Psalm 83,” ed. John E. Rotelle (New York, NY: New City Press, 2002).

of the pressing-out process.”⁶⁹ Augustine continues this thread of thought and soon thereafter writes, “But who will ascend to that place? What am I to do about this heavy flesh? . . . But what am I to do? How shall I fly there? How reach it?”⁷⁰ Answering in section 10 that it is God’s grace which helps one get to this place of yearning, Augustine argues that in His grace, “God arranges ascents in [a person’s] heart. God sets up steps for him to climb. Where? In the person’s heart. It follows then, that the more you love, the higher you will climb. God arranges ascents in his heart.” The remainder of section ten is strategically sprinkled with “ascend” language as well as mountain and valley illustrations representative of blessing and suffering respectively.

Finally, in section 11, Augustine lists the four cardinal virtues as important for the “valley of weeping,”

but from them we progress to a single virtue. And what will that be? The virtue of contemplating God alone. . . . We shall pass, then, from these many virtues of action to that one virtue of contemplation, by which we are empowered to contemplate God, according to the scriptural word, In the morning I will stand before you, and contemplate you (Ps 5:5 (3)). . . . And what does “contemplating” imply? The God of gods will be seen in Zion. By the God of gods we should understand the Christ of Christians. . . . But when all the neediness of our mortality is over and done with, he who is God with God, the Word with the Father, the Word through whom all things were made, will show himself to the pure-hearted. Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God (Mt. 5:8). The God of gods will be seen in Zion.⁷¹

Three distinct wisdom ingredients are found in this passage; dualism between body and soul that corresponds to Augustine’s temporal and eternal distinction, vertical trajectory as expressed in the “ascend” language, and the emphasis on contemplation. Having dealt sufficiently with the temporal and eternal distinction above, we must now connect the dots between ascent, contemplation and wisdom.⁷²

In concert with his three types of vision, “. . . Augustine thus sees a direct link between accepting that contemplation of Father, Son and Spirit is the goal of Christian life. . . .”⁷³ Indeed, contemplation is, for Augustine, the aim of every Christian, and the direction a wise man takes in contemplation is one that ascends. And, with such a life goal coupled with a Neo-Platonic ontology, a vertical, heavenly-minded trajectory is to be expected. The relationship, then, between ascent,

69. Exp. Ps. 83, 9.

70. Ibid.

71. Exp. Ps. 83, 11.

72. “Trinitarian faith, then, requires a constant negotiation between the language of temporality, materiality and division intrinsic to Scripture and our ability to grasp the character of the final vision.” Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, Kindle Electronic Edition, 4476–91.

73. Ibid., 4474–89.

contemplation, and wisdom is that wisdom is the aim of contemplation. Contemplation for its own sake is not Augustine's ultimate aim, but rather the desired and necessary path to wisdom. It is this path toward wisdom that Augustine traveled time and again during his preaching, leading his flock to travel with him in hopes that they, too, would be counted in the pure of heart and thus see God.

Conclusion

Augustine's example of wise preaching is but one more item added to the list of practices to appreciate and learn from the great Bishop of Hippo. His intense Biblicalism, Christocentrism, pastoral and contextual sensitivity, and consistent diet of weighty theological content served to a socially and academically diverse laity are just a few appreciable aspects of Augustine's preaching. Nevertheless, appreciation should be tempered with constructive and informed critique. Augustine's periodic recklessness with allegory, occasionally forced Christological reading, heavy dualism, and mid-sermon tangents are less than desirable. The dualism between *scientia* and *sapientia* is a particularly dangerous aspect of Augustine's thought as it drives a deep and unnecessary wedge between God and God's good world. The merging of the temporal and eternal in his Christology brings some balance, but a duality remains that is difficult to reconcile with Scripture and detrimental to a proper Christian view of creation.

Critiques notwithstanding, today's pulpits would do well to be filled with preachers who are tethered to scripture, connecting all of scripture to Christ, considerate of their cultural context and the *Sitz im Leben* of their flock, and faithful to preserve and pass along the Faith with all its richness and depth. This study scarcely skims the richness of Augustine's preaching, doctrine of wisdom, methodology, and the relationships in between, but will hopefully serve to spawn more conversations and study of the implications of Augustine's doctrine of wisdom.

Book Reviews

James K. A. Smith. *Letters to a Young Calvinist: An Invitation to the Reformed Tradition.* Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010. ix-xv + 134 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-1-58743-294-1. \$14.99. Paperback.

The Reformed tradition is a wild and woolly region with grand vistas and deep valleys. Dark and mysterious woodland dots the landscape as well, where the timid or naïve wanderer can easily get lost. This is why James K. A. Smith's *Letters to a Young Calvinist* is a welcome delight as an introduction to the world of all things Reformed – from its history, to major figures, to theological doctrines, and to even its cardinal virtues. As the title implies, the angle of “Reformed” here is Calvinistic rather than Lutheran. The register for Smith's volume is aimed the average reader, though both clergy and scholars will find insight and help here.

The volume is comprised of a series of fictitious letters in the fashion of C. S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters* or more precisely, in the fashion of Christopher Hitchens' *Letters to a Young Contrarian* and George Weigel's *Letters to a Young Catholic*. From these latter two authors, Smith discovered a format to introduce Reformed Calvinism to a broad readership. So Smith writes letters to “Jesse” to unpack the tradition and guide him through its prospects and pitfalls.

An impetus for the book came in part as a response to the upsurge in interest in Calvinism proper in a variety of rather unlikely places: amongst non-denominational churches in inner-city and the rural countryside, Anabaptist traditions, as well as institutions like the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. As Smith rightly notes, the kind of adoption of Reformed tradition in these places tends to move in the direction of Scottish Calvinism and maintains an emphasis upon soteriology (TULIP). The Continental Dutch Reformed stream of Calvinism is less dominant. So major influencers become the Old Princeton School (Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield, and W. G. T. Shedd) as well as luminaries like John Owen and Jonathan Edwards rather than Abraham Kuyper, Herman Dooyeweerd, and Herman Bavinck.

Smith sees this general rise in interest as both a kind of blessing and a curse. He notes that the Scottish vein of Calvinism was a source both rich and deep

for his own theological pilgrimage (pp. xi, 12) but he grew to embrace the Dutch Reformed stream for its comprehensive scope and linking back to the grand narrative of the Bible, from creation to new creation (pp. 97–111; 117–24). And yet he also recognizes a danger inherent in this newfound knowledge: theological pride (p. xi). The second letter “On Religious Pride” (pp. 5–9) is one of the sharpest and accessible critiques of theological hubris available in such a short space and one that should be read widely. So his letters to Jesse have a pastoral concern to open the heritage of Calvinism and guide the young Calvinist through the dangers of pride, elitism, and condescension that sometimes come with the tradition. Further, the letters highlight for Jesse the riches and beauty of the tradition, the cardinal virtues of grace and charity, and the universe of Calvinism beyond the well-worn roads of TULIP.

This reviewer was especially pleased to note the strong emphasis of the Dutch Reformed Calvinist tradition stemming from Abraham Kuyper so prominently set alongside the Scottish Reformed Calvinist tradition. Smith characterizes the Dutch Reformed tradition as setting out the “big-picture” reality of the Christian faith, and as such focuses upon the way that the gospel affects the whole of life. He rightly notes in dialogue with the tradition that we see “The God of Calvinism didn’t just spend some precreation eternity coming up with decrees about the destination of souls. The Triune God has desires for his creation, desires for your flourishing, not just in your ‘religion,’ but in your work and family and play” (p. 100). In this way, the gospel reveals that humanity is saved from sin in the atoning work of Christ but humanity is saved for new creation life, for thriving before God.

One will find as well in these letters a bevy of primary sources as well as helpful secondary sources that will guide the reader into the Reformed tradition. Through the use of “postcards” to Jesse, the reader is taken literally from Geneva, to Princeton, to Amsterdam, with the requisite lights of the tradition from each particular locale connected in the letters. The works of Michael Horton, Anthony Lane, George Marsden, Randall Zachmann, Richard Muller, and John Piper amongst others pepper the letters, giving resource for deeper investigation.

And finally, one notes the masterful way that Smith grounds Calvinism firmly on the insights of Augustine. The notion that Calvinism is based on grace of God all the way down matched with the foundational virtue of charity as a hermeneutical key are well taken and helpfully advanced in the letters. Calvin is deeply indebted to Augustine, and it is nigh impossible to understand Calvinism without acknowledging that debt.

James is to be commended for this volume. He effectively introduces the breadth, nuance, and foundation of Calvinism to a wide readership. The theological, historical, and bibliographical insights in the letters matched with pastoral tone throughout make this a very useful resource, especially for seminaries and colleges as well as small group studies in the church.

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William A. Dembski and Michael R. Licona (eds). *Evidence for God: 50 Arguments for Faith from the Bible, History, Philosophy, and Science.* Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010. 272 pp. Paperpack. ISBN 978-0-8010-7260-4. \$19.99. Paperback.

This book is a collection of fifty 3–4 page essays written by conservative evangelical scholars. Taken together, the essays are meant to provide a sort of cumulative-case apologetic for the Christian faith. The book is divided into four sections—The Question of Philosophy, The Question of Science, The Question of Jesus, and The Question of the Bible—within which scholars address various questions that would-be seekers or skeptics might have. So, for example, in the first section, on “The Question of Philosophy,” topics addressed include cosmological and moral arguments for God, Christian responses to the problems of evil and suffering, a critique of naturalism, and an assessment of the apologetic relevance of near death experiences.

The book has much to recommend it. The second half, which covers the questions of Jesus and of the Bible, contains most of the really excellent material in the book. Gary Habermas, Ben Witherington III, and Craig Blomberg are some of the heavy hitters here, and each of them offers compelling arguments on topics ranging from evidence for the empty tomb and the resurrection appearances (Habermas), the credibility of Jesus’ miracles (Blomberg), the historical reliability of the Gospels and the legitimacy of the New Testament canon (Blomberg), and whether or not Paul is the “inventor” of Christianity (Witherington). These articles and several others in the latter half of the book are exemplary models of apologetic writing; they are clear, informative, even-handed, relevant, and convincing.

I am happy to have the book on my shelf, and I am sure that in the future I will refer questioning students to particular articles within the book. “Is the Bible today what was originally written?” (Köstenberger); “What should we think about the Coptic Gospel of Thomas?” (Blomberg); “Did Jesus really exist?”—each of these titles restates word-for-word questions that Christians will be asked by seekers and skeptics alike. And each of these articles provides compelling coverage of the issues.

The weakness of the book lies in its editing. Subtitles like “50 Arguments for Faith from the Bible, History, Philosophy, and Science” may enhance book marketing but they also indicate an artificial and forced approach to the topic. The careful reader of this book will be left wishing that some number significantly less than 50 had been selected. Especially in the area of apologetics, where restraint is an essential virtue, it is unfortunate that the editors (or whomever) felt the need to pack in fifty arguments.

Several of the arguments are simply out of place. Take, for example, the following articles: Philip Johnson’s “Darwin’s Battleship,” William Dembski’s “The Vise Strategy,” and Daniel Wallace’s “Inerrancy and the Text of the New Testament.” Each of these articles reads like a sort of progress report to insiders within a particular movement. It is as though the reader has stumbled upon a bit of in-house

strategizing at the Discovery Institute or the Evangelical Theological Society. Daniel Wallace, for example, introduces the “problem” he is discussing as follows: “The fundamental doctrinal commitment of the Evangelical Theological Society—the doctrine on which this society was founded in 1949—is as follows.” To which most readers of this book (unless I am just misunderstanding the intended reading audience) will reply, at best, “Who cares?” These articles should have been omitted.

Other articles should have been omitted because they are unconvincing or uninteresting. A pair of articles by Jay Richards and Guillermo Gonzalez exhibits the ID movement at its most overreaching. Another pair of articles by Michael Licona, both of which address the question of religious pluralism, inaccurately proceed as though exclusivism and pluralism are the only options with respect to the salvation of those who belong to other faiths.

My worry about the book overall is that the benefits to the skeptical reader that are available in the many excellent articles especially in the second half of the book will be offset by the unconvincing, irrelevant, or unnecessarily in-house material in several other articles. Especially in the midst of the wave of “new atheism,” apologetics is urgent. But compelling, attractive, and persuasive defenses of Christian faith have as much to do with what is unsaid as with what is said. I hope that this book has not said too much, for there is much within it that is worth hearing.

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Richard Bauckham. *The Jewish World around the New Testament.* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010. 560 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-0-8010-3903-4. \$59.99. Paperback.

This volume contains twenty-four essays on various topics related to the Jewish world surrounding the New Testament. It was originally published in 2008 in Germany by Mohr-Siebeck and is now available in this less expensive paperback edition (though still a bit pricy at \$59.99). The essays are put in their original order of publication (except for chapter 3); appendices are added to chapters 2 and 20. Essay topics include “The Martyrdom of Enoch and Elijah: Jewish or Christian?,” “Enoch and Elijah in the Coptic Apocalypse of Elijah,” “The Rise of Apocalyptic,” “The Delay of the Parousia,” “A Note on a Problem in the Greek Version of 1 Enoch 1.9,” “The Son of Man: ‘A Man in my Position’ or ‘Someone?’,” “The Apocalypses in the New Pseudepigrapha,” “Pseudo-Apostolic Letters,” “Kainam the Son of Arpachshad in Luke’s Genealogy,” “The List of the Tribes of Israel in Revelation 7,” “The Parting of the Ways: What Happened and Why,” “The Messianic Interpretation of Isaiah 10:34,” “The Relevance of Extra-Canonical Jewish Texts to New Testament Study,” “Josephus’ Account of the Temple in Contra Apionem 2.102–109,” “Life, Death, and the Afterlife in Second Temple Judaism,” “What if Paul had Travelled East rather than West?,” “Covenant, Law and Salvation in the Jewish Apocalypses,” “The Restoration of Israel in Luke-Acts,” “Paul and Other

Jews with Latin Names in the New Testament,” “The Horarium of Adam and the Chronology of the Passion,” “The Spirit of God in us Loathes Envy (James 4:5),” “Tobit as a Parable for the Exiles of Northern Israel,” and “The Continuing Quest for the Provenance of Old Testament Pseudepigrapha.”

The above list indicates the considerable scope of these essays and makes clear that some topics are of broader relevance than others. The author notes in the preface that the essays were written over a period of thirty years and acknowledges that the topics are rather diverse but notes that all the essays share a “basic perspective on the historical place of the New Testament writings within late Second Temple Judaism.” Indeed, Bauckham insists that “The NT student and scholar must use the Jewish literature in the first place to understand Judaism. Only someone who understands early Judaism for its own sake will be able to use Jewish texts appropriately and accurately in the interpretation of the NT” (p. 1). The various essays in this book serve as case studies demonstrating the validity of Bauckham’s thesis, even though their relevance to the study of the New Testament varies. The quality of the contributions, as one has come to expect from this scholar, is consistently high and even stellar. Clearly, Bauckham has established himself as one of the leading New Testament scholars of our day, and this collection further showcases the enormous scope of Bauckham’s scholarship.

While few will read this volume cover to cover, students of the New Testament are certainly advised to consult a given essay in this volume if it impinges on their research interest. I will definitely recommend essay #14 on the relevance of extra-canonical Jewish texts to New Testament study to my students, as well as a number of other broader essays (such as those on the rise of apocalyptic, the delay of the parousia, and on life, death, and the afterlife in Second Temple Judaism). That said, given the price of the volume, I cannot necessarily recommend the purchase of this volume to students on a limited book-buying budget. In most cases, there will be only be one or two essays on one’s immediate topic of interest, and it will be more economical to use a library copy to do one’s research rather than to spend \$60 on buying a book with as many diverse essays as this one.

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Mark Senter III. *When God Shows Up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America.* Baker Academic Youth, Family and Culture Series. 3. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010. xviii + 313 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-0-8010-3590-6. \$26.99. Paperback.

What is not to like about a youth ministry book that combines organization based on jazz and movie titles as chapter headings? At first glance, a reader might surmise that Mark Senter has written another pop culture youth ministry book of which there are legion. Those who know Dr. Senter would expect otherwise and they are not disappointed. Growing from his doctoral dissertation at Loyola University

and *The Coming Revolution in Youth Ministry* (the book that emerged from his early research), *When God Shows Up* is a near exhaustive description of the history of youth ministry as it relates to the changing culture.

Senter's thesis is stated in the preface. He states: "This history of Protestant youth ministry in America is the story of a search for Christian spirituality in young people. . . . Prayer served as a central discipline and faith communities provided support and accountability. The Bible provided a portal for youth to establish and maintain a personal relationship with God" (p. xi). In further introductory comments, Senter suggests that "Approaches varied [. . .] Some used their minds to engage the God of Scripture. Others experienced God emotionally through their hearts. Still other young people found God as they served others" (p. ix). Dr. Senter understands youth, youth ministry, and youth ministers and his careful description of the historical cycles of youth ministry is an important contribution to the academic conversation in youth ministry, an emerging aspect of practical theology.

The book is divided into five parts which are cleverly titled corresponding to the various eras of jazz music in American history. However, the flow of the text does not necessarily break down into linear "eras" as Senter moves back and forth through American history as he traces the development of youth ministry. Part 1 describes the context of youth ministry development with clarification of the definitions of youth, adolescent, and spirituality. To understand youth ministry in the 21st century is to understand that until the latter half 20th century, the concept of "youth" varied according to the life expectancy of the culture and the employment and marital status of individuals.

Senter takes an interesting side trip into the cyclical nature of youth ministry, comparing to the cycles in economics and industry. It was somewhat surprising not to see reference to the work of Neil Howe and Bill Strauss who have written extensively about the generational cycles in American history as the discussion had a similar feel to their first book, *Generations*. Parts 2 through five are based upon the assumption of the cyclical pattern. Specifically, the rise and fall of church and parachurch ministries have followed patterns of robust growth, plateau, and decline.

The dramatic illustration of cycles of youth ministry was in Christian Endeavor, the initial growth of which Senter asserted "shaped modern youth ministry" (p. 167). The international membership of Christian Endeavor at the beginning of the 20th century was nearly four million in sixty-seven thousand society units in eighty denominations and fifty countries. By the middle of the century, Christian Endeavor had become more of an institution than a movement (p. 167). Dr. Senter believes Christian Endeavor had the strategy and personnel which were imitated by other successful church and parachurch ministries.

Part 4 in this section looks more closely at the teenagers themselves and how the subculture of youth has reoriented away from following adult leadership in favor of peer to peer ministry. Spanning the decades from the thirties through the sixties, the author suggested that both church parachurch "discovered teenagers" resulting in denominational youth emphasis as well as the rise of the next

generation of Christian Endeavor, namely Youth for Christ, Young Life, and Campus Crusade for Christ. Surprisingly little was said about the generational demographics – one wonders about the impact of the sheer number of teenagers that came of age in the sixties and seventies.

The last section of the book was perhaps the most compelling. Given an aging population of youth ministers, and writing as a seminary professor for a seminary journal, Senter's statement that "No significant innovation in Protestant youth ministry has arisen out of seminaries or colleges" was as chilling as it is accurate. The rapid increase of formal training coupled with a more professional environment for youth ministers would seem to contribute something in the way of creativity. However, Dr. Senter is on target – the "new wine" of youth ministry usually comes from the grass roots. It is left to colleges and seminaries to create ways to add the theological and organizational constructs to the energy and passion of youth and lay youth workers.

Senter's honesty as to the weaknesses of Protestant youth ministry as described in his book was refreshing. We are still behind the culture in terms of diversity and ability to translate American youth ministry to ethnic or international settings. He is justifiably concerned with the "disconnect" between the current generation and organized faith communities. His concluding tone is optimistic while admitting the serious challenges that lie ahead concerning reconnecting youth with adults and specifically their parents who need also to be challenged to mature in faith so that they in turn can disciple their children.

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David Naugle. *Reordered Love, Reordered Lives: Learning the Deep Meaning of Happiness*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008. xvi + 216 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-0-8028-2817-0. \$18.00. Paperback.

David Naugle's *Reordered Love, Reordered Lives* integrates themes in theology, philosophy, poetry and broader literature in attempt to answer the questions, "What do you love? How do you love the things you love? What do you expect from the things you love?" It is Naugle's contention that how we answer these questions also answers what we view our purpose and meaning of life to consist in. Why? Because, as Naugle states, as we love in our hearts, "so are we." And so, "Consciously or not, in our brokenness and pain, we attach our loves, affections and desires to people, places or things in ways and with hope that we will finally find the felicity we have been searching for all our lives. Our quest for happiness based on our loves is what our lives [. . .] and this book are all about." The remainder of the book is the development of this thesis – there is an integration between God's creation plan, the place that we attach our affections and love, and whether or not such attachments can make us truly happy.

Largely following the works of Augustine and C. S. Lewis, Naugle presents

an account of happiness ordered by Scripture's delineation of creation, fall, and redemption, or as Naugle explains: the deep meaning of happiness as God intended at creation rooted in rightly ordered loves and lives; happiness lost in the fall of humanity into sin and replaced with devastating ignorance and disordered loves and lives; the deep meaning of happiness already redeemed and one day fully restored in Jesus Christ who graciously reorders our loves and lives through the gospel in this present life (p. xiv).

Accordingly the book reads as a treatise on the brokenness of humanity subsequent to the fall (chapter 1), disordered affections and the destructive impact of living as fallen beings (chapter 2), the multiplicity of ways that investing in this life leads to death (chapter 3), coming to grips with the ultimate futility of living a life without God, and turning to him for restoration and reclaiming our God designed purpose for life (chapter 4).

Naugle rightly notes that Christians underemphasize the tenet that God wants people to be happy, and provides some important definitional matters to clear up what this means. Happiness is not person-relative (do what makes you happy), nor is it grounded in a hedonistic framework. Instead, Naugle argues that happiness is finding and embodying those principles revealed by God in Scripture, and appropriating the good things in life to their rightful place – not as substitutes for a relationship with God, but as divinely given gifts for which we offer appreciation to God. Just as Augustine explains, we are free in Christ to do anything that we want – however, the new person in Christ has a reordered love that changes what the person wants. In this regard *Reordered Love* sounds much like Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. Blessing, or happiness, follows from obeying the commands that the loving God issues; and He issues those commands not merely as an act of cosmic authority, but knowing the essences of created being (as their Creator) issues commands for the betterment of those to whom He issues the commands. Obedience is a manifestation of true humanism, Naugle explains, for in obedience we are reclaiming what was lost through disobedience. The move from loving mutable things to loving God who is immutable satisfies our greatest longing.

So what is the deeper meaning of happiness? It is found in reordering love for things with love for God. It is found in properly loving oneself, which means attending to one's own good and never loving self as much as loving God. It properly loves others and God's creation, cultivating a servant's heart and a virtuous mind.

Naugle's volume has much more than this besides. It is a wonderful read for its integration of classic literature such as Augustine's *Confessions*, Lewis' *Four Loves*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, and Karl Barth's *Dogmatics* to pop culture's interaction with this theme as found in the music of U2, Bob Dylan, and Alan Jackson. *Reordered Love, Reordered Lives* is clearly written and spiritually challenging. I highly recommend this volume for anyone interested in cultivating spiritual discipline.

Jeremy Evans
Wake Forest, North Carolina

Richard S. Briggs. *The Virtuous Reader: Old Testament Narrative and Interpretive Virtue*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010. 270 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-0-8010-3843-3. \$26.99. Paperback.

“What kind of person do you have to be to read the Old Testament?” This is the thought-provoking question that Richard S. Briggs, Director of Biblical Studies and Hermeneutics at Cranmer Hall, St. John’s College, Durham University, asks readers in *The Virtuous Reader: Old Testament Narrative and Interpretive Virtue*. Richard Briggs brings to bear his training in philosophy and hermeneutics upon close readings of selected Old Testament narratives in a search for the ethical dispositions an implied reader should bring to the text. Briggs proposes that Old Testament narratives require that implied readers bring the virtues of humility, wisdom, trust, charity, and receptivity to bear upon their reading.

In the opening chapter, Briggs grounds his study in the twin topics of virtue ethics and the implied reader. The chapter begins with a nuanced description of virtue ethics and their value for reading the Old Testament. Briggs traces virtue ethics to Aristotle and Aquinas and then outlines the modern tradition after Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) and “interpretive virtue” after Vanhoozer (1998). Briggs considers objections to using virtue ethics as part of the hermeneutical exercise, asking why an interpreter would jettison tried and true principles, such as historical-critical and theological approaches, in favor of a seldom-practiced virtue ethics approach to hermeneutics. In regard to the implied reader, Briggs follows Wayne C. Booth (1961, 1988) and Seymour Chatman (1978), stating that the “sense in which we are interested in the implied reader of our biblical texts is the sense in which such texts presuppose certain interpretive virtues on the part of the reader they are aimed at” (p. 38) – a more limited perspective than the “implied reader” category typically involves. Finally in this first chapter, Briggs argues that concentrating on a particular text for each interpretive virtue in later chapters of the book is appropriate in that Scripture itself is “best understood as accessed through the particular” (p. 39).

Subsequent chapters each give attention to one particular interpretive virtue, beginning with humility. Focusing on Moses as the most humble man (Num. 12:3), Briggs develops an understanding of “humility before the text” (p. 67), as counter-distinguished from meekness and modesty (pp. 61–62), as one key to faithful handling of Scripture” (p. 67). Briggs’ second virtue is wisdom, seen as paradigmatic in a study of 1 Kings 3, Solomon’s handling of the baby claimed by two women. In his chapter on trust, Briggs turns to 2 Kings 18 and Hezekiah for his study; in this chapter, he posits a hermeneutics of trust as over against the current hermeneutics of suspicion. Briggs proposes that trust is the “framework” within which “evidence and logic can play their part” (p. 132). Briggs’ fourth interpretive virtue is charity, or love. Here, he departs from his practice and focuses on two passages – the book of Ruth and 2 Kings 5 (Naaman) because he sees a two-pronged hermeneutic of love: one which follows the text whatever it demands (Ruth), yet graciously allows for deviation (Naaman). Significantly, Briggs privileges love in the interpretation of

texts to the church (or whomever), even when there may be some shortcomings on exegetical grounds (p. 162). The final interpretive virtue is receptivity. By receptivity, Briggs means “a responsiveness both to the text and the subject matter of the text” (p. 145); his choice of an Old Testament passage is Isaiah 6. In the book’s final chapter, Briggs proposes how his interpretive virtue approach to the implied reader of Old Testament texts can help the moral formation of the real reader in the twenty-first century. Here too he considers the limitations of his proposal (pp. 196–206) and asks what is normative about his proposal (pp. 206–10). “From one virtue to another,” Briggs writes, “in no necessary or particular order, the virtuous reader is led along a path of discipleship” (p. 208, emphasis Briggs’). He closes with a brief glance at Daniel as one who exhibits the virtues.

The Virtuous Reader is a stimulating and valuable book that cuts across the disciplines of philosophy, biblical studies, theology, and literary studies to challenge its readers to be “ideal readers” themselves – both of the Old Testament and the book in hand. The inductive approach, using particular texts, provides helpful grounding in the specifics of interpretive virtues while at the same time framing the discussion and settings its limits. Recommended.

Michael Travers
Wake Forest, North Carolina

Paul Copan and William Lane Craig. *Contending with Christianity’s Critics: Answering New Atheists and Other Objectors*. Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009. v + 293 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-0-8054-4936-5. \$19.99. Paperback.

This book is a collection of essays responding to a number of cutting-edge objections against Christianity. Though a few chapters will be difficult for the non-specialist, overall, they are well-written. One of the book’s unique strengths is the range of topics it covers, which span the fields of philosophy and theology.

The book is divided into three sections. Part one deals with God’s existence. This section has two goals. It defends theism against objections, and it argues against naturalism. As for the first goal, William Lane Craig and Greg Ganssle contribute chapters responding to Richard Dawkins, while Michael Murray responds to how some use psychology to argue against theism. Regarding Dawkins, he thinks that certain features of our universe fit better with naturalism, such as the fact that complex life develops through along process of evolution. While this notion of fittingness needs more clarification than it receives, Ganssle concedes Dawkins’ point, but he argues that there are more features of our universe that fit with theism. These include the fact that our universe is susceptible to rational investigation and contains conscious, free agents. As for the second goal, Victor Reppert and Mark Linville contribute chapters. Linville argues against Darwin’s account of the origin of moral beliefs. Darwin thought moral beliefs originate from instincts people have that are useful for survival. For instance, because of its survival value, people have an instinct to care for their children, and the belief

that people ought to care for their kin originates from this instinct. Linville contends that this view, by itself, cannot explain why people are warranted in taking their moral beliefs to be true, and, at best, it shows that such beliefs are useful for human survival.

Part two of the book deals with the Jesus of history. This section has three goals. First, it defends the reliability of the Gospels as a source of information about Jesus, along with casting doubt on other sources, such as the Gospel of Thomas. Second, it shows that Jesus thought of Himself as both human and divine, along with being the Messiah, and, third, it provides evidence for Christ's resurrection. As for the first goal, Robert Stein, Craig Evans, and Daniel Wallace contribute chapters. Stein, for example, explains a number of tests that can be used to determine whether a text is historically reliable, and he argues that the Gospels meet them. As for the second goal, Ben Witherington III and Michael Wilkins contribute chapters. Regarding Witherington, one part of his case involves looking at Jesus' claim that He was inaugurating an everlasting kingdom where He Himself would reign forever. Witherington argues only someone who thought He was both human and divine would make such a remark. As for the third goal, Gary Habermas contributes a chapter. In contrast to other arguments for the resurrection, Habermas starts with Paul's writings, focusing on 1 Corinthians 15. He contends Paul received the message about the resurrection recorded in this text from Peter and James during his first trip to Jerusalem around 34–36 AD. Given that Jesus' death occurred around 30 AD, and, given that Peter and James were eyewitnesses of the risen Christ, this shows there was reliable evidence circulating regarding Jesus' resurrection shortly after His death.

Part three of the book deals with the coherence of Christian doctrine. The goal in this section is to demonstrate the motivation behind various Christian doctrines and to respond to objections against them. Charles Taliaferro and Elsa Marty reply to objections that arise by reflecting on God's attributes, such as His omnipotence and goodness. Paul Copan contributes two chapters dealing with the Trinity and the incarnation, while Steve Porter, Stewart Goetz, and David Hunt contribute chapters defending the doctrines of penal substitution, Hell, and divine foreknowledge. For example, when it comes to the doctrine of penal substitution, Porter tries to show it is plausible by sketching out the moral framework needed to understand it. He argues punishment is an appropriate divine response to human wrongdoing, and, in some cases, it is good for God to exact that punishment on human wrongdoers. One reason why is that, by doing so, God makes clear that He takes human persons and their wrong acts seriously. Porter then argues that the goodness of such a punishment can still be achieved by God taking that punishment upon Himself in the person of Jesus, since, by doing so, He still shows that He takes human persons and their wrong acts seriously.

Copan and Craig have done an excellent job bringing together a collection of essays from first-rate scholars dealing with a wide range of objections to Christianity. Christian laity interested in apologetics will benefit from this book, as well

as students and scholars looking for a concise yet substantive introduction to the topics it addresses.

Allen Gehring
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Michael Bergmann, Michael J. Murray, and Michael C. Rea (eds.) *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. xi + 337 pp. Hardcover. ISBN 978-0-1995-7673-9. \$125.00. Hardcover.

This book, coedited by three fine philosophers, emerged from the 2009 Notre Dame conference, “My Ways Are Not Your Ways” – a gathering devoted to discussing “the God of Abraham” as portrayed in the Hebrew Scriptures. The allotted space for reviewing this well-crafted project – alas! – requires more a brief overview than in-depth discussion.

According to New Atheists like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, this God is “wrathful, severely punitive, and jealous;” indeed, he “commends bigotry, misogyny, and homophobia, condones slavery, and demands the adoption of unjust laws” such as the death penalty for adultery and rebellion against parents (p. 1). This is something of a tease, perhaps raising expectations that the book is dedicated to addressing this broader range of issues. Though some of these secondary topics are raised by the critics (e.g., Louise Antony, Edwin Curley, Evan Fales), they are often not directly addressed by the defenders of the Abrahamic God. The greater proportion of the book is dedicated to the topic of warfare with the Canaanites (and Amalekites), although John Hare adeptly addresses a topic somewhat off the beaten path – “Animal Sacrifices”.

The introduction helpfully summarizes and weighs the options and approaches regarding difficulties in the Hebrew Scriptures. For example, the editors set forth the options regarding *cherem* (“the ban”) – not to mention troubling Hebrew Scriptures in general: (a) deny the texts are divinely inspired; (b) deny God’s goodness; (c) declare the biblical text a mystery on these matters; or (d) “(try to) revise one’s own moral values, intuitions, or whatever in light of the text” (p. 12). Another complementary resource on the topic is Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Understanding the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011).

The book intends to be integrative and encourages further interdisciplinary work of philosophers, biblical scholars, and theologians – a laudable pursuit. The editors mention much-needed work in ancient Near Eastern literary styles and cultures, the relevance of interpretive traditions, and theories about biblical inspiration, divine revelation, and scripture’s/tradition’s authority (pp. 13–19). The introduction is followed by “Chapter Abstracts” – a nice overview of what is to come.

The body of the work is broken down into four parts: (I) Philosophical Perspectives: Problems Presented; (II) Philosophical Perspectives: Solutions Proposed; (III) Theological Perspectives; (IV) Concluding Remarks. The book’s quality and depth are enhanced by the structure of each of the eleven chapters (save the

last). Each chapter presentation is followed by an opponent's comments, to which the original presenter replies to round things out. I have mentioned some of the critics, but the defenders of the Abrahamic God include an impressive line-up of scholars: Nicholas Wolterstorff, Alvin Plantinga, Peter van Inwagen, Richard Swinburne, Mark Murphy, Eleonore Stump, and Christopher Seitz, among others.

Here are some of the highlights. Swinburne follows Augustine's dictum of interpreting particular Old Testament passages as metaphorical when they clearly conflict with purity of life or sound doctrine. By contrast, Plantinga and Murphy tackle the worst-case cherem scenario – that God was justified even if he commanded the slaughter of Canaanites. Plantinga states that God is the Giver (and thus rightful Taker) of life; that death is not the worst thing; that the Canaanites' sin was far more wicked than our dulled modern moral intuitions recognize; and that the Incarnation and Atonement reveal the love of God and that "whatever God did, he must indeed have a good reason, even if we can't see what the reason is" (p. 113). Murphy argues that God did not act wrongly with respect to the inhabitants of Jericho since God did not wrong them; God and humans do not participate in the same "dikaiological order." Murphy states that, analogously, parents do or demand things that are not always understood by their children – things that may appear severe or arbitrary (p. 167).

The book is full of lively engagement, pro and con. I myself found Wolterstorff's chapter ("Reading Joshua" as well as his reply to Gary Anderson) most helpful. He offers important insights based on careful literary analysis – to which left-wing fundamentalists like the New Atheists should pay closer attention; their literalistic, non-nuanced readings of Old Testament's warfare texts often amounts to a crude "the Bible says it; I don't believe it; that settles it" mentality. Wolterstorff persuasively argues that the conquest text of Joshua ("leave alive nothing that breathes" or "no survivor was left") should be understood hyperbolically, not literally: "These texts are highly stylized, metaphorical, hyperbolic" (p. 287). They are not allegory, however, as, say, Origen maintained.

The book is as about as engaging as a scholarly book can get – from the volume's formatting to the range of participants in this debate. Bergmann, Murray, and Rae are to be commended for tackling this difficult issue head-on and for encouraging us to examine further such topics in the context of interdisciplinary dialogue.

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Gene C. Fant Jr. *God as Author: A Biblical Approach to Narrative*. Nashville: Broadman and Holman Academic, 2010. vii-xvi + 201 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-0-8054-4790-3. \$19.99. Paperback.

Gene Fant brings his twin areas of expertise in theology and literature to bear upon the relationship between God's narrative in the Bible and the human narratives we ourselves write. Simultaneously accessible and expert, *God as Author* asks its

readers to consider the idea that, while it is true that the gospel is like narrative, it is also true that narratives are like the gospel – in fact, all human narratives are informed by the gospel. With this reversal – regarding human narratives from the perspective of God’s narrative – Fant explores the meaningful patterns in all narratives and accounts for their significance in our lives.

Chapters 1–3 lay the groundwork for the study of narrative patterns in human life as they are grounded in God’s story. In chapter 1, Fant briefly surveys the fields of literary and biblical criticism. In the contemporary context of a “hermeneutics of suspicion” (p. 26), Fant proposes instead a “hermeneutics of optimism” as a more appropriate understanding of how we read (and write) narratives. Starting from the point that all meaning is grounded in God and his self-revelation to us in the narrative of the Bible, Fant suggests that a hermeneutics of optimism in fact understands the nature of narrative accurately and also reflects the ultimate hope of mankind, which is grace (pp. 26–34). Chapter 2 puts forth the idea that God is an author too, in that it is his story that is told in the life of ancient Israel, in the incarnate Christ, and to some extent even in nature. Seen this way, Fant suggests, human narratives echo God’s story of creation, fall, and redemption. In chapter 3, Fant proposes a “balance-imbalance-balance” parallel to the creation-fall-redemption pattern which he sees in nature and human narrative (p. 82). The “Restoration Principle,” as he calls it, which follows the fall / imbalance part of the narrative can be seen everywhere in nature (and he provides examples) and serves as the paradigm for all human narratives. This narrative pattern ultimately points us back to God’s story as its grounding.

In the next three chapters, Fant demonstrates the pattern of God’s narrative in human narratives. It is there in the biblical narrative, of course. The biblical narrative, Fant suggests, is in fact the meta-narrative that informs all human narratives. Chapter 4 elaborates the pattern of narrative structure, seen more fully as a creation-balance-tied knot / fall-imbalance-untied knot / redemption-balance-tied knot pattern (p. 99). Chapter 5 demonstrates the presence of the pattern in literary narratives ranging from ancient oriental and near eastern narratives to modern European and American narratives. In this chapter, it is easy to see the pattern writ large over all human narratives – and easy as well to agree with Fant’s conclusion that it is truly God’s narrative we are seeing “displaced” in each of these human narratives. God gives human narratives meaning.

Finally, in the last two chapters, Fant teaches his readers how to “read redemptively” and “write redemptively.” In these chapters, Fant suggests how the great biblical narrative pattern – a pattern which we have largely forgotten or suppressed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – can help us to read and write reflectively and relationally so as to praise the God who infused the pattern into all human life from the beginning. Reading and writing this way reflects the image of God in us and brings glory to the One whose story grounds all our stories.

In *God as Author*, Gene Fant recovers for us a major theme in creation, scripture, and all human narratives, a theme that has slipped below our attention in the last two centuries. Well-supported with literary and biblical expertise and

complemented by irenic personal narratives that serve to “incarnate” his own thesis, this book is a must-read for anyone who wishes to see the shape of our lives through the lens of God’s narrative.

Michael Travers
Wake Forest, North Carolina

Timothy G. Gombis. *Paul: A Guide for the Perplexed*. New York and London: T. & T. Clark, 2010. x + 156 pp. ISBN 978-0-5670-3394-9. \$24.95. Paperback.

This relatively expensive text (for its size) offers a unique approach to the introductory study of Paul for undergraduates and beginning graduate students. In the opening chapter, an introduction, Gombis summarizes Paul’s place in the canon, rejecting pseudonymity and taking the thirteen letters bearing his name as fundamentally Pauline in nature. He argues that Acts is a generally reliable account of Paul’s life and uses Acts and data from the letters to give a detailed narrative overview of Paul’s life and ministry. With this background and a few presuppositions established, including the commitment to testing orthodoxies of both church and academy critically, Gombis weighs whether Paul’s vocation is best described as “theologian, missionary, or pastor?” in chapter 2. He emphasizes the pastoral nature of Paul’s letters, and concludes that Paul engages in all three of these tasks as a “herald of the Kingdom of God,” writing “in order to foster vibrant and fruitful communities that will embody this reality – communities that constitute the Kingdom of God on earth.”

Chapter 3 provides an excellent discussion of “The Structure of Paul’s Thought,” with a focus on redemptive history. Chapter 4 examines the participatory role of believers, by the Spirit, in this redemptive history. Gombis places heavy emphasis on cruciformity, the imitation of the pattern of life seen in Jesus and in Paul. The present reviewer was pleased to see this theme given a prominent place it does not often receive. The fifth chapter, on Paul and Judaism, covers the New Perspective on Paul (NPP), primarily by laying out competing visions of traditional Protestant interpretation of a set of notable passages before offering NPP interpretation of the same. Gombis takes the latter side wholesale, eschewing the sort of rapprochement one finds in, e.g., Michael Bird, *Introducing Paul* (2008). In keeping with this theological direction and with the participatory emphasis in earlier chapters, Gombis explores the relationship between divine and human roles in salvation in chapter 6. Tackling tricky topics such as judgment and justification, *pistis Christou*, and perseverance, Gombis stresses the priority of the “initiative and provision of God”; but also cites Paul’s expression of confidence in, inter alia, the Philippians’ “constant and consistent faithfulness from the first day until Paul’s writing.”

In chapters 7 and 8 Gombis addresses hot topics arguably more indicative of contemporary concerns than of Paul’s own agenda. With regard to women, Gombis acknowledges that Paul contains both conservative and liberal statements,

the latter via often achieved by taking Gal. 3:28 “as an interpretive lens,” but not exclusively so. Paul describes women as having authority over their husband’s bodies (1 Cor. 7:1–4): according to Gombis (p. 120), “This is to go beyond merely saying that husbands have ‘authority over’ their wives and ought to be considerate of their needs or desires.” Gombis is particularly helpful in noting the distinction between Paul’s cultural setting and Paul’s approach. His less-than-forceful conclusions from these observations are debatable, namely, his “trajectory” approach (shades of Webb) and his claim that Paul puts the brakes on egalitarian implications so as to avoid doing “more harm than good” and that we are now freer to be egalitarian.

In chapter 8 Gombis lays out the pietistic Paul (esp. Romans 13) and a vision of one type of political Paul, whose rhetoric may well be “anti-imperial,” not least given Jesus’ decidedly political titles. This Paul “speaks of the church as at least an alternative political reality; distinct from Judaism and its social and political values, and separate from Roman social and political values” (p. 144).

In all of these chapters, Gombis focuses squarely on primary texts rather than on scholars and secondary literature, with the exception of one page dedicated to introducing NPP scholars and their contributions, and a few references to Michael Gorman on “cruciformity”. Even those who disagree with Gombis on authorship or NPP might find in this text a short, readable entry to views that are certain to grab students’ attention. I cannot think of another text that digs so deeply into its topic while avoiding footnotes almost entirely. It is easy to reckon that this could be a useful trait for classroom use, capable of driving students to texts rather than secondary literature.

Of course, in the classroom, more engagement – with those supportive or critical of Gombis’s views – could be provided via lecture, or the assignment of dictionary articles, for example, not least since Gombis will leave many evangelical readers perplexed. In a book this short (141 pages of text on small pages) one hesitates to note omissions, but the failure to address the cross in terms of penal substitutionary atonement is noteworthy.

Gombis writes clearly and neatly; the book reads very well. I recommend the use of this text both by those who agree with Gombis and by those needing to (say) present an NPP approach or Paul’s take on contemporary debates (women in society and ministry); but only if an American publisher steps up to cut the price!

Jason Hood
Memphis, Tennessee

Christopher R. Seitz. *The Goodly Fellowship of the Prophets: The Achievement of Association in Canon Formation.* Acadia Studies in Bible and Theology. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009. 136 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-0-8010-3883-9. \$19.99. Paperback.

There is considerable debate over the way in which the biblical canon developed. On the one hand are those who view the Old Testament as stable and closed before

the appearance of Jesus, even as early as the fourth century. On the other hand are those who view the writings of the Old Testament as part of a larger collection of religious literature and see the Old Testament as becoming a stable, closed canon much later, usually as the result of institutional decisions. In many ways, Seitz is attempting to mediate the positions at both extremes. However, he does so without taking the middle ground, but by breaking new ground through reshaping two traditional paradigms and exploring their implications. The first paradigm models how the canon has been formed; the second, how the canon is authoritative.

Seitz begins by describing a traditional paradigm for canon formation: the process occurs in distinct stages. Often, the paradigm assumes that each stage has a bit less authority than the one that precedes it. There may be three stages (reflected in the threefold Hebrew arrangement of Law, then Prophets, then Writings) or only two (Law and then prophets, later divided into prophets, history, and wisdom/poetry). Proponents argue that the arrangement and number of books included in the Greek Septuagint supports this paradigm since the Septuagint is fourfold (Law, history, poetry/wisdom, prophets) with a number of apocryphal works. They conclude that the Old Testament canon is neither stable (since it exists in at least two variant forms, threefold and fourfold) nor closed (since there are apocryphal works included alongside the Old Testament).

In response, Seitz offers two observations. First, Seitz looks to the Prophets in order to show that this division of the canon did not develop piecemeal, but that the books themselves developed in a mutually interdependent manner. He derives his primary support from the Book of the Twelve wherein the integrity of each individual prophet is maintained while there is a significant effort to associate the prophets with one another through “literary cross-references” (p. 75) and other literary means (p. 88). Building on observations from the Twelve, Seitz argues for the same type of intentional association taking place within the canonical division of the Prophets (p. 91).

Second, Seitz points out the fixed designation “Law and Prophets.” The designation is known from the New Testament and other Jewish sources of the same general time period. Seitz argues that if the Septuagint preserved a fourfold canon at that time, then it is difficult to conceive how the Law and Prophets remained a fixed convention since the fourfold arrangement shows no sign of a twofold canonical witness (p. 64). Furthermore, the fourfold arrangement of the Septuagint is not preserved in any of its earliest witnesses. In fact, there appears to be no fixed arrangement in the Greek tradition, but the fixed expression of Law and Prophets is still operative. Seitz attributes this fact to the nature of the Law and Prophets. Just as Seitz argues for a mutually interdependent development of the Prophets, he accepts Chapman’s work arguing in the same direction for the development of the Law and Prophets. This development points to the Law and Prophets as a grammar “that is, this literary conjunction is the means (rules and syntax) by which the language of Israel’s scriptures makes its voice most fundamentally heard” (p. 33). Therefore, the presence of a rival arrangement, which Seitz argues never really existed, does not diminish the fundamental role for the Law and Prophets.

What remains for Seitz to explain for canon formation is the division of the Writings and their placement in the canon. Seitz argues that in contrast to the “Law or the Prophets, the Writings do not exhibit a concern to order the individual works in any theologically significant way” (p. 105). Instead, the Writings are connected to the Law and Prophets. This connection helps explain why these works migrate throughout the Old Testament. This migration is not intended to disrupt the fundamental character of the Law and Prophets, but it is an attempt “to make explicit by literary rearrangement a form of association [with the Law and Prophets] that the Writings were content to accomplish more implicitly and generally” (p. 111).

Seitz also addresses a model of canonical authority that “makes closure the most fundamental aspect of canonical authority” (pp. 32–33). In this model, canonization confers authority to the Scriptures at the end of a process. Seitz has reversed the model by arguing that the intrinsic scriptural authority drives the process of canonization. This authority is most clearly evident in the attempts of association between the Law and Prophets and among the Prophets themselves. Therefore, one can speak of canonical authority even if the canon is not closed because of the unique role that the Law and Prophets play as the primary grammar of the Old Testament.

Seitz’s book has opened up new avenues for discussing canon formation and authority. Certain features of Seitz’s model for canon formation are helpful and insightful. The work that he does to demonstrate that biblical authors were aware of other biblical material should inform any model of canon formation and authority. At the same time, much of his model relies heavily upon current Old Testament historical-critical results (p. 25) and will require caution when evaluating his proposal. On the other hand, Seitz’s discussion regarding canon authority is entirely on the right track. The authority of the Old Testament is not determined by religious institutions (Christian or Jewish), but rests in the works themselves. It seems unlikely that Seitz’s work will resolve the debate over the canon, but it does provide directions for moving forward.

Joshua E. Williams
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Lynn H. Cohick. *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life.* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009. 350 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-0-8010-3172-4. \$26.99. Paperback.

Lynn Cohick, associate professor of New Testament at Wheaton College, has produced a treatment of the lives of women in the ancient world that is comprehensive in its scope, measured in its assessments, well-organized, and highly readable. While written with an awareness of contemporary gender debates, Cohick steers clear of these and aims at bringing to light the complexity of women’s lived experiences in the Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds in which the New Testament

drama takes place. Her goal is “to tell the story of the average woman and her life passages, her opportunities and limits, the sorrows and joys that accompany her throughout her journey” (p. 23).

Methodologically, Cohick assesses a variety of evidence, including “epigraphic, inscriptional, and archaeological remains” (p. 20), and takes an appropriately critical posture toward the literary evidence. She does this in order to account for the rhetorical aims of the composers of the varieties of literature she encounters. As an example, Cohick cites Seneca’s discussion of divorce in which he displays a dismissive view of women that would shock modern readers. He inveighs against women, taking it for granted that they are naturally prone to wantonness and immorality (p. 22). The historical fact of it is that most surviving literature from the ancient world was written by men, and very often they discuss women in order to score other polemical points. Gaining a clear vision of the lives of women necessitates a critical posture, and Cohick employs social science models, along with literary and feminist critical tools in giving her historical account.

Cohick also sets gender properly in terms of other social dynamics in the ancient world. She claims that gender is often trumped by other factors, such as social status (p. 22). Further, while modern readers regard freedom of choice and having a number of options as being keys to personal value and fulfillment, this was not the case in the ancient world. Honor was the social currency and communal relationships were far more important than individual freedoms (p. 25).

With these in mind, Cohick then investigates the lives of women in such a wide variety of settings and roles throughout the classical period that the term “exhaustive” comes to mind. It might be better, however, to characterize this work as a comprehensive resource for understanding the lives of women in the time period in which the New Testament drama takes place – something more like a very lively and well-written encyclopedia on this topic.

In terms of analysis of her work, Cohick’s grasp of the ancient world and its social and political dynamics is excellent. Her discussion of the supposed “new woman” and Augustus’ conservative regulations to shore up morality in Rome is an example of how she rightly assesses the character of public rhetoric and the political dynamics faced by Augustus after years of unrest in the empire (pp. 71–78). Many modern appeals to these efforts at “moral reform” and the problems they aimed to solve, do not rightly comprehend the broader political and social challenges faced by Augustus.

Cohick’s discussions of New Testament texts are thorough and measured. She warns against easy characterizations of the Samaritan woman in John 4 (pp. 122–28), and notes the difficulties in making sense of Paul’s comments in 1 Timothy 2 about women being saved through childbirth (pp. 138–40).

In sum, this is an excellent resource for the study of the New Testament as it sheds light on the varieties of relationships in the ancient world. It is also a model of careful and comprehensive scholarship. Cohick’s treatment of the evidence from the ancient world is subtle and judicious, and her discussions of biblical texts are measured. Though she avoids direct engagement in contemporary discussions

of gender, she provides a model for the appropriation of ancient evidence for understanding biblical texts that those who participate in contemporary debates will do well to emulate.

Timothy Gombis
Cedarville, Ohio

Todd L. Miles. *A God of Many Understandings? The Gospel and a Theology of Religions.* Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010. xiii + 397. Paperback. ISBN 978-0-8054-4822-1. \$29.99. Paperback.

In this volume Todd L. Miles, Assistant Professor of Theology and Hermeneutics at Western Seminary, has provided a valuable resource for preachers, teachers and students. This resource serves at least two important purposes. The first is to document just how pervasive and prominent various forms of syncretism and pluralism are in contemporary religious discourse. Miles painstakingly identifies and addresses scholars such as Charles Pinnock, Amos Yong, John Hick and many others, some writing from within Christianity and others from without, whose arguments deny the necessity of faith in Jesus Christ for salvation. The second service this book provides is to gather and present passages from throughout the Bible alongside these arguments, allowing readers to evaluate them in light of the full body of scriptural evidence.

Miles takes his title from Bishop Eugene Robinson's prayer at the 2009 presidential inauguration, which began with an appeal to a "god of our many understandings" (p. 1). Robinson, a bishop of the Episcopal Church, recognized by many—including, evidently, our President—as an important contemporary Christian leader, is quoted as having been "horrified" at previous inaugural prayers for being explicitly and unashamedly Christian. Rightly, Miles takes this as indicating the appropriateness of addressing in a clear and sustained manner the logic of the various pluralisms, inclusivisms, and universalisms we encounter in the academy and the culture, as well as within Christianity today. Because so often the specific iterations of these positions are easy to recognize as logically incoherent, it is tempting to dismiss them as not warranting serious attention. In fact, however, Miles shows that, given "the enormous cultural pressure, masquerading as a commitment to the 'value' of tolerance, to reject any claim that assumes superiority to alternatives," it would be negligent to let them persist without comment.

Miles' arguments take two general forms; he is strongest when he is pointing out the logical incoherence of various pluralist positions. He writes, for example, "Simply, if the claims of Jesus are true as revealed in the Bible, the contrary claims of all other religious figures are false" (p. 148). Similarly, Miles notes the incoherence of contentions that it is impossible to make truth claims about God (p. 172). Of course, such a statement is itself a truth claim about God's nature. These and other such observations are certainly right but not necessarily original; the value Miles provides in this chapter is to highlight some of these contrary claims of

other religions as well as to demonstrate the incoherence of pluralism and the ways pluralists necessarily “deny the very essence of Christianity (and that of every other religion)” (pp. 165–66) in the course of making their arguments.

Elsewhere, Miles’ arguments center on questions of interpretation of Scripture. Here too Miles tends to make strong cases for his positions and continues to provide value by gathering together relevant passages, but readers who do not share his view of inerrancy may not always find him convincing or terribly charitable. In his argument against Christian Universalism, for example, he contends that the root of the problem is that Christians who hold to the view that all will ultimately be saved through Christ’s death and resurrection mistakenly allow their “theological presuppositions” to “distort their exegesis of scripture” (p. 102). While Miles may be right to contend that not all will be saved – and he certainly presents his case with ample quotations from scripture – one might think that those who allow their theological presuppositions to influence their scriptural exegesis are merely following Paul’s lead in doing so. In fact, we might say that this is exactly what he was doing when he reinterpreted the Hebrew Scriptures in light of his experience of the risen Lord. In other places Miles seems to overstate his conclusions, such as when he contends that there is “no reason to understand the reconciliation of all things as a universal salvation for all humans” (p. 108). He may be right that it does not mean this, but it is too strong to say that there is “no reason” to think that this is what “reconciliation of all things” means.

However, even when one may find his conclusions less than convincing, Miles’ book remains a valuable resource and is to be recommended for those beginning to do research in the areas he addresses. Furthermore, his final chapter, in which he considers the implications of his conclusions and whether, for example, “inter-religious social cooperation” (pp. 344–49) is legitimate, provides some interesting food for thought.

James R. L. Noland
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Paul Helm, Bruce A. Ware, Roger E. Olson, and John Sanders. *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God: Four Views*. Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008. ix + 273 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-0-8054-3060-8. \$24.99. Paperback.

Each contributor argues for one view along a spectrum of positions on the doctrine of God in evangelical theology today followed by responses from the others. The book commends itself for thoroughly but succinctly summarizing recent and novel views available elsewhere only in book-length treatments. Although written by theologians the book is accessible to non-specialists and presents each position’s pros and cons.

Helm advances the classical Calvinist view as the “mainstream” view, using tradition and scripture to argue for God’s absolute independence and exhaustive providence. Appealing to the classical texts for his position, he argues for

anthropomorphisms in texts *prima facie* differing from classical theism. Surveying figures in the tradition, Helm nicely demonstrates the role of non-infallible tradition and caveats about using philosophy in classical Protestant theology. Helm's attention to detail in showing differences among classical theists and indicating points even informed readers may be unaware is a highlight. Helm preemptively criticizes the other views and argues philosophical systems are secondary to scripture. Arguing that neither libertarian nor compatibilist freedom is taught in scripture, he urges mystery in the relationship between divine action and free-will analogous to other mysteries like the Trinity. Criticisms from other contributors include too facile an identification of his view with the mainstream doctrine of God while ignoring free-will theist variants in historical theology, claiming his view is the Bible's teaching, and that his critique of free-will theism focuses on middle knowledge.

Ware presents a "modified Calvinistic" view to address concerns of free-will theists. Using primarily scripture he argues for a robust classical theism with modifications of God's independence and eternity, with "real" relations to space and time. He combines middle knowledge and compatibilism to retain meticulous divine sovereignty in an attempt to obviate the "Achilles heel" of Calvinism, God's ultimate responsibility for evil. Here Ware exemplifies the *semper reformandum* aspect of the Reformed tradition in a charitable way. The originality and creativity of Ware's contribution, which he argues is more scriptural than traditional Calvinism, merit careful attention. Other contributors question the incompatibility of his modifications of divine eternity and immutability with classical theism, and whether his proposal addresses the concern attracting some free-will theists to middle knowledge: independent creaturely activity that really affects God. His reconstruction is also liable to criticisms of compatibilism, including the claim that libertarian free-will is necessary for human responsibility.

Olson presents the case for classical free-will theism, focusing on Arminianism, including its core doctrine of simple foreknowledge. He summarizes the historical, theological, and biblical support for this view. Far from being the products of modern humanism, free-will theism and libertarian free-will are venerable, ubiquitous, and essential parts of Christianity back to its earliest responses to pagan fatalism. Libertarian free-will is necessary for genuine human freedom and to extricate God from responsibility for evil, which in theological determinism makes God "virtually indistinguishable from the devil." Strengths include the debunking of common myths about free-will theism. Arminianism is a major "Reformed" tradition in its own right, with strong doctrines of sin and grace. Libertarian free-will is not an "idol" of human pride but is rooted in God's nature and the *imago Dei* in humans. Olson also admits weaknesses in his position but contends it has fewer liabilities than theistic determinism and open theism. Other contributors see shortcomings in the unsatisfactory account of the biblical data on meticulous divine sovereignty and unconditional predestination, contingency in God's knowledge, the possible logical incompatibility of libertarian free-will and exhaustive divine foreknowledge, and that simple foreknowledge seems like a half-way house on the way to

free-will theism. Exhaustive foreknowledge could still make God responsible for the moral evil he foreknows, and does not account for God's genuine responses to free creatures.

Sanders expounds the case for open theism and responds to objections in a thorough but compendious summary of what is presented at length elsewhere. Highlights include how he grounds his position in the doctrine of the Trinity, evinces the biblical support, and employs modern biblical scholarship. Noting shared concerns, Sanders shows why open theists argue traditional free-will theism like classical Arminianism is inconsistent. Exhaustive divine foreknowledge is logically incompatible with libertarian free-will, and only open theism exculpates God from responsibility for evil. With personal examples he urges open theism resonates more with practical piety in the importance of human activity, the efficacy of prayer, and consolation in suffering. Other contributors find a dissatisfactory account of biblical data on divine sovereignty and exhaustive divine foreknowledge, reliance on the presentist B-theory of time implausible in light of contemporary physics, and unacceptable modifications to classical theism.

In summary, this book does a superb job of presenting four major views on the doctrine of God available in evangelical theology today. The reader will find a concise summary of the pros and cons for each position and summaries of newer views.

Marc Pugliese
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Joel N. Lohr. *Chosen and Unchosen: Conceptions of Election in the Pentateuch and Jewish-Christian Interpretation*. Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2009. xviii + 254 pp. Hardcover. ISBN 978-1-5750-6171-9. \$39.50. Hardcover.

Joel N. Lohr strikes a raw nerve in examining the topic of election within the Old Testament. A revision of his PhD under Walter Moberly (p. xiv), he approaches the subject from a canonical view of the Scripture, only occasionally dealing with historical-critical issues. Part of the uniqueness of his approach is in his comparison of both Christian and Jewish treatments of election. His stated aim is to demonstrate, "that the unchosen are important to the overall worldview of Scripture and, although election entails exclusion, and God's love for the one people Israel entails that it is a love in contrast to others, it does not follow that the unchosen fall outside of the economy of God's purposes, his workings, or his ways. The unchosen often face important tests of their own and have a responsibility to God, and the chosen, however much such an idea defies modern-day notions of fairness" (p. xii).

The first chapter consists of an overview of Christian interpretations found in theological dictionaries, monographs (H. Rowley, Seock-Tae Sohn), and theologies (W. Eichrodt, D. Pruess, W. Breuggemann, and C. H. Scobie). He finds in these "Christian" approaches an unwarranted prediction to understand Israel's election as "always in the interest of the entire world" without any exegetical proof of such. Lohr concludes that most Christian interpreters have "skewed" the idea

of election in the OT by reading it with a view to mission. Lohr says, “such a view leads swiftly to a belief that ‘God’s election of Israel has thus served its purpose – bringing salvation to the whole world – and is of little value for today apart from this formative role” (p. 1). Secondly, the outsider has been reduced to an “object of mission.” It is these two maladies which Lohr attempts to remedy.

The second chapter contrasts these views with the approaches of Jewish authors Joel S. Kaminsky, David Novak, Michael Wyschogrod, and Jon D. Levinson. For example, Kaminsky contends, “election is not about salvation and damnation [. . .] rather, election reveals God’s mysterious love and the fact that he elects to a task, purpose, or test” (p. 43). Kaminsky helpfully provides a three-tiered system of elect, non-elect, and anti-elect, to distinguish between those who are merely out of the covenant, and those actively working against it. Lohr notes that the Jewish authors surveyed tended to emphasize the chosenness of Israel as an “abiding principle,” and not as a step on the way toward inclusivity. They also generally seem to preference the Pentateuch over the prophets (contra the Christian commentators) and hold Abram’s blessing as primarily concerning his own welfare rather than that of the nations.

Lohr largely adopts these approaches, and proceeds to put them to the test, examining several cases of “outsiders.” In chapter 3, he looks at Abram and Abimelech (Genesis 20) and in chapter 4 he looks at Pharaoh’s daughter (Exod. 2:1–10). He attempts to shed a positive light on the enigmatic prophet Balaam (Numbers 22–24) in chapter 4 and in chapter 6, he looks at the subject of Israel and the nations in Deut. 4:1–40; 7; and 10:12–22. After his concluding remarks, he adds an appendix on the relationship of the Balaam texts to the book of Numbers, and one on the notion of *cherem* in the ANE. He also includes a helpful index of Scriptural citations.

Lohr makes a considerable contribution to the question of election in comparing Christian and Jewish authors on the subject. His desire not to read Christian mission into a text both provides insight for the subsequent narratives and reveals an Achilles’ heel. Lohr’s approach helpfully explains why an innocent Abimelech requires prayer from a deceitful Abraham (Genesis 20). Likewise, Lohr’s highlighting of the role of the non-elect in distinction with the anti-elect (Kaminsky) draws attention to the import of these oft-overlooked characters. Yet, his approach offers little help in dealing with the Canaanites (anti-elect), whose demise, Lohr contends, is based less on their sinfulness than on the fact that, “they must be removed because Israel is to possess their land; further, their staying will prove to be a snare” (p. 192). Furthermore, by reading the key text in Israel’s election, Gen. 12:1–3, without reference to its canonical placement following the Table of nations (Genesis 10) and Babel (Genesis 11), Lohr seems to miss what God himself is doing in the metanarrative, and significantly alters its purpose. Overall, though, Lohr furthers this interfaith dialogue, highlighting both the nature of election and the essential role of those outside it.

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James G. Crossley, *The New Testament and Jewish Law: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: T. & T. Clark, 2010. viii + 134pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-0-5670-3434-2. \$24.95. Paperback

Jewish Law has had a bad press both amongst Christians in general and also amongst New Testament scholars. Often it is used simply as a “dark” backdrop against which to make Christianity look good. Yet not many New Testament scholars invest the time needed to get to grips with the specifics of Jewish Law – to really understand the Law. James Crossley is one of a new generation of New Testament scholars that have immersed themselves in the complexities of Jewish Law and he appreciates better than many the wide diversity and nuances of Torah interpretation amongst Jews during the Second Temple period. This has made him a fascinating mould-breaking interpreter of some New Testament texts, especially in the Synoptic Gospels. It also makes him ideally suited to write a guide such as this.

Crossley himself is neither Jewish nor Christian and takes no view in this book on whether the Law is right or wrong. His goal is simply to help readers better appreciate the Law and better understand New Testament texts by grasping some of the basics regarding what various Jews thought on some Law-related matters. This book does exactly what it says on the box: it serves as a well informed and reliable but basic introduction to Jewish Law and the New Testament. But, just so as to avoid confusion, it does not set out to serve as a guide to the ongoing debate about NT theologies of the Jewish Law.

Chapter 1 sets the scene by briefly sketching the story of Torah and its interpretation. The Torah reached its final form in the Persian period but the law codes could not possibly include enough regulations to cover all the kinds of situations which arise in life. Nor could these codes take into account changing social and historical circumstances. Indeed, the specifics of what God requires of Israel are underdetermined by the commandments (e.g., what precisely must one abstain from on the Sabbath?). Thus, as the books of Ezra and Nehemiah bear witness, interpretation of the Torah was critical right from the start and such interpretation could be considered authoritative. Later on various groups emerged with competing interpretations of Torah (some very strict and other much less so). The destruction of the Temple in 70 AD led to the rise of Rabbinic Judaism (descended from the Pharisees). Ongoing expansion and interpretation of the Law led to the Mishnah, the Tosefta, and the Talmuds which, if used with great care, can shed light on the NT texts. Crossley guides readers clearly and simply through the twisting plot with the main players and themes relevant for readers of the NT.

The following chapters explore specific matters, such as purity laws, that NT readers may find of special relevance. Each chapter sets out the biblical foundations of the matter and then various issues in subsequent Jewish interpretation as well as engaging related NT texts.

Chapter 2 considers the Sabbath. Here we find differing views on whether Gentiles may observe Sabbath and on what constituted “work.” Chapter 3 reflects on purity/impurity with special reference to food and ritual hand washing. A lot of

space is given over to explaining the complex issue of how impurity is transmitted. Whilst this may seem indulgent it actually helps shed light on the dispute between Jesus and the Pharisees in Mark 7:1–23 (an issue that Crossley has written on at greater length elsewhere and in the process has corrected common Christian misunderstandings of the pericope). Chapter 4 discusses three issues that crop up in the Sermon on the Mount – divorce, the *lex talionis*, and oaths and vows. Chapter 5 focuses on Jewish identity, specifically the importance of family, circumcision, and the issue of whether Jews may mix and eat with Gentiles. One point that I appreciated Crossley highlighting is that, contrary to the claims of some scholars, Jews were able to eat with Gentiles so long as they did not compromise their obedience to the commandments by, for instance, eating food sacrificed to idols or consuming blood. This needs to be taken into account when interpreting certain NT texts about the unity of the *ekklesia* and food.

One interesting observation Crossley makes in conclusion is that once we appreciate the range of Jewish opinions it seems that, according to recent scholarly studies, “Jesus’ views on the Law were all paralleled in early Judaism” (p. 116). Jesus need not be seen as a radical who sought to abolish the Law (as Christians have often portrayed him) but rather as a Torah-observant Jew, albeit one who saw himself as offering an authoritative interpretation of that Law.

I do not agree with a few of Crossley’s interpretations of NT texts. For instance, I do not see Acts 10–11 as about abolishing food laws and I maintain that Paul’s apparently radical “rejection” of Torah was related only to Gentile Christ-believers and was tied into an prophetic narrative in which Gentiles would worship with Israel in the last days without having to convert to Judaism – Paul, so I think, believed that Jewish Christ-believers were obligated to observe Torah. But, to be fair, Crossley only deals with such texts in passing and little hangs on them in terms of the overall thrust and value of his book. If I could summarize this book in a few simple words they would be: informed, clear, concise, balanced, relevant, and illuminating. It is by no means a last word – nor is it intended as one – but it is a trustworthy first word. A great guide for the perplexed.

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J. Gordon McConville and Stephen N. Williams. *Joshua. The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010. x-xii + 257 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-0-8028-2702-9. \$20.00. Paperback.

The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary series is designed to bridge the traditionally disparate fields of biblical studies and dogmatic theology so as to gain a deeper appreciation and embrace of the Old Testament as God’s word to the church in the present day. While a traditional biblical commentary is interested in philology, syntax, and historical issues, newer theological commentaries (Brazos Theological Commentary; Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture;

Concordia Commentary; NIV Application Commentary) do not sleight these interests but contextualize them within the larger framework of constructive theological engagement with the biblical text. Gordon McConville and Stephen Williams' Joshua commentary fits within the newer paradigm.

It is divided into three parts and follows a kind of dialogic interchange between the authors. The first is written by McConville and follows the norm of a traditional commentary with a traditional introduction that addresses author, date, composition, theological themes, and the nature of Joshua as Scripture. This is followed with McConville's close exegesis of the biblical text and is relatively unencumbered with scholarly footnotes. This streamlined approach magnifies the accessibility and readability of the commentary, though to be fair those interested in highly technical exegesis and engagement with a range of scholarly viewpoints should look to other commentaries like Anchor Bible Commentary, New International Commentary on the Old Testament, or the New American Commentary. Nonetheless, McConville's mature scholarship details major scholarly issues and important exegetical detail that impacts a theological appreciation of the book.

The third part of the volume (Theological Horizons of Joshua) follows upon McConville's commentary proper and is co-written in a kind of dialogic style by Williams and McConville. Williams tackles critical theological issues at stake in the book of Joshua itself, including the issue the land, the command to annihilate the Canaanites and the question of divinely-sanctioned genocide, the problem and threat of idolatry, and the reality of the covenant. Additionally, Williams addresses the theology of miracles and mystery in Joshua, a neglected topic that the present reviewer found to be enriching and illuminating. Williams addresses the nature of miracles and their scientific verifiability as well as a deep theology of mystery that pervades Joshua. This reinforces the notion that Scripture draws its readers into a relationship with God that is indeed mysterious yet present.

McConville follows Williams by setting Joshua in the context of biblical theology. In this, he sets the theology of Joshua in against the theology of the larger Old Testament canon and establishes a theological reading that shows a God who faces evil and violence and overcomes the threat of Chaos. In so doing God establishes peace and justice in the world. McConville comes to this reading by following the theological contours of the Old Testament (and no doubt informed by the New Testament as well) and a particular theological understanding of the people of Israel. It may be argued, then, that Joshua and the Israelites winning the battle of Jericho serves as a blueprint in the Bible for Christian life. But McConville diverges from such an interpretation and avers that the real triumph comes not through human achievement but divine grace and transformative power. At the end of the day, in the context of biblical theology, Joshua is not a mere "exemplary tale" but shows that "the life of Israel lies between present reality and the future realization of the kingdom of God. It is part of the story of the long postponement of that kingdom" (p. 192). In the end, God himself will overthrow Chaos in spite of human rebellion against him – even if the rebel is Israel. As such, Joshua presses forward to an eschatological hope.

Williams provides the penultimate reflection to the volume with a response to McConville and a discussion on reading Joshua as Scripture today. This is fertile reflection that draws together philosophical and theological insights and brings them to bear on the nature of history and the factuality of biblical events. Further Williams offers an engaging theological assessment of the God set on display in Joshua. Here Williams tackles in particular the thorny issue of the purported violent deity that accompanies Old Testament “holy war” with the tools of dogmatic theology. This is an important section that should be consulted by those interested in these theological quandaries.

Finally, McConville rounds out the volume by responding to Williams and providing a conclusion to the book as a whole. One notes the disagreement between McConville and Williams on the nature of history that is presented in the Old Testament in general and Joshua in particular. Both views, one could say, are grounded from the text. The disagreement lies in how to understand what is counted as “historical” the purpose of the giving of the writing of Joshua itself. Both writers agree that Joshua is not interested in merely giving the facts of history but diverge on the purpose of Joshua itself and how the historical question should be related to that. It is this divergence that provides much ground for further thinking, and should be read alongside the new volume by Douglas Earl, *Reading Joshua as Christian Scripture* (Eisenbrauns, 2010).

This volume is a welcome addition to Joshua scholarship in particular and to theological interpretation in general. Theological interpretation of biblical texts these days needs less talk, more action. McConville and Williams’ Joshua commentary is an insightful enactment of theological interpretation that should be received warmly and read widely.

Heath Thomas
Wake Forest, North Carolina

Steve Moyise. *Paul and Scripture: Studying the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010. 151 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-0-8010-3924-9. \$21.99. Paperback.

Steve Moyise, professor of New Testament at the University of Birmingham, has produced this very useful study of Paul’s use of the Old Testament. Moyise is highly qualified on this topic as it has been his area of interest and publication for over a decade. He writes as both scholar and teacher as this book, intended mainly for advanced students of Paul, manages to cover the major issues and main lines of interpretation very clearly and in accessible prose.

An introductory chapter provides an overview of Paul’s life, including his early years and conversion, with special attention to the forms of Scripture with which Paul likely was familiar. Moyise helpfully highlights some of the interpretive challenges, including determining when Paul is quoting from the Septuagint or from the Masoretic Text. The canonical progression of the book’s eight subsequent

chapters makes good sense. Moyise first discusses Paul's use of Genesis 1–3, including the creation of Adam and Eve and the subsequent fall. In this chapter, as with the following two chapters, Moyise handles the main lines of Paul's use of Scripture while refraining from drawing strong interpretive conclusions. He leaves this, rather, for the reader's consideration. This is commendable, though his very brief treatment of 2 Tim. 2:11–15 (p. 29), a battleground text in the gender debates among evangelicals, seemed to leave some stones unturned.

In the second and third chapters, Moyise discusses Paul's treatment of Abraham and Moses. He begins each chapter by describing how these figures appear in the Old Testament and then the roles they play in Jewish tradition. This provides the opportunity to draw lines of continuity and discontinuity between Paul and his Jewish tradition.

Paul's use of these two major figures from Israel's Scriptures leads naturally into what had become the singular issue in Pauline studies over the last thirty years—the problem of Paul and the Mosaic Law. In chapter 4, Moyise again provides a succinct yet comprehensive account of the manner in which the debate over what has come to be called “the New Perspective on Paul” relates to how Paul is viewed to be citing Old Testament texts. Paul's seemingly contradictory statements about the Mosaic Law have provoked a range of interpretations throughout the ages, none of which have been lastingly satisfying. Most have made divisions in the Law which neither Paul nor the Scriptures make or they have wrongly denigrated Judaism as a religion of “works-righteousness” (pp. 60–66). Moyise rightly notes that the issue turns on whether or not one discerns a “works-faith” dichotomy at work in Paul, supported by Scriptural texts. Moyise does not, though his treatment of the various positions remains fair and evenhanded.

The following two chapters discuss Paul's use of the prophets. In chapter 5, Moyise describes how the prophetic vision of God's fulfillment of his promises determines Paul's vision for his ministry among the gentiles. The following chapter covers the manner in which Paul's pastoral exhortations draw upon the prophetic vision of God's redeemed humanity. A final chapter contains a discussion of various hermeneutical approaches to the study of Paul's use of the Old Testament. This is followed by three appendices.

The use of the Old Testament by Paul has massive implications for the debates that have dominated Pauline scholarship over the last three decades. Moyise, covering some rough ground while writing with a light touch, provides an eminently helpful guide through this area of interpretation and maps very helpfully the theological implications for the study of Paul more broadly. This volume functions as a starting point for students working in the field of the New Testament writers' use of the Old Testament. It might also be used very well as a textbook for courses in colleges and seminaries that are focused on Paul. Pastors and interested general readers will also find much here from which to benefit.

Timothy Gombis
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Gregory J. Lockwood. *1 Corinthians*. **Concordia Popular Commentary.** Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010. xii + 373 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-0-7586-2545-8. \$24.99 Paperback.

Volumes in the Concordia Popular Commentary series are Bible book commentaries that are condensed from the more technical and academic Concordia Commentary series. The Popular Commentaries retain the full text of the original translation and commentary of their corresponding parent volume, but exclude the technical notes, minimize and transliterate any original language work, and explain all academic terminology. According to the preface, “this commentary series brings faithful Christian Bible scholarship to the people” (p. vii). The “popular” edition of *1 Corinthians* by the Reverend Dr. Gregory J. Lockwood lives up to that purpose. This is an accurate distillation of scholarship on *1 Corinthians* that is “faithful” (and decidedly Lutheran) in its approach and written for an educated but non-specialized audience.

The layout of *1 Corinthians* follows the standard layout of most popular commentaries. The author begins with an abbreviated introduction to the background material related to the city of Corinth and to Paul’s letters to the churches in that city. Following that introduction, Lockwood then begins the commentary proper. The text is divided into manageable sections. Each section begins with a fresh translation of the text. The translation is then followed by an essential discussion of the text, focusing on Paul’s meaning and how that meaning would have been understood by the church. Often this discussion requires the highlighting of certain textual features, and nearly always this discussion entails an explanation of how each text bears on larger Pauline thought and theological issues. At appropriate points the author also follows his commentary with short excurses on how various passages bear on issues affecting the modern Christian church. There are many places that New Testament scholars are likely to disagree on the interpretation of *1 Corinthians*, but Lockwood handles the text and the issues with competence and care.

As a popular commentary, *1 Corinthians* successfully navigates the middle ground between being inaccessibly academic and being overly non-technical. For example, on issues upon which scholars are likely to disagree (e.g., the unity of the text of *1 Corinthians*, the debate over the content of the “previous letter,” etc.), Lockwood typically saves the discussion for the larger, more technical parent volume, only giving his view a passing mention. On issues where churches are likely to disagree, such as the ordination of women (pp. 299–315), the ongoing use of the supernatural spiritual gifts (pp. 249–55), etc., Lockwood often provides a discussion of multiple approaches to the issue and then argues for the superiority of his approach. The only exception to this seems to be with regard to issues that are core to Lutheranism. For example, in his discussion of *1 Corinthians 11* Lockwood assumes a “real presence” view of the sacraments in his interpretation with no discussion given to other views. Given the volume’s stated purpose, however, this selective inclusion is probably helpful in keeping the content fresh and relevant to a Lutheran audience as well as keeping the volume down to a manageable size.

Probably the most interesting feature of 1 Corinthians are the excurses placed throughout the text. The author identifies by heading six excurses: Modern Denominations (pp. 32–33), Christian Maturity (pp. 54–55), Homosexuality (pp. 116–19), Spiritual Gifts in 1 Corinthians (pp. 248–55), Worship Practice Today (pp. 287–89), and The Ordination of Women (pp. 299–315). Additionally, there are other sections that would rightly be called “excurses,” though they are not identified as such by the author (e.g., “The Christian and Courts of Law,” p. 110 and “Closed Communion,” pp. 230–31). These excurses take the biblical/theological principles being discussed in the text and relate them to contemporary issues in the life and practice of the church. Lockwood’s handling of these issues are, as advertised, from a decidedly evangelical and Lutheran approach, delivered by a firm, competent hand and a generous pastoral spirit.

1 Corinthians in the Concordia Popular Commentary series accomplishes its purpose—to provide a distillation of an academic commentary to a non-specialist and largely Lutheran audience—with care and excellence and should serve as a model for the “conversion” of the highly technical work produced by Christian scholars to a form accessible to the church at large.

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Gary Smith. *Isaiah 1–39. The New American Commentary. 15A. Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2007. 696 pp. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-0-8054-0115-8. \$19.79. Hardcover.*

Dr. Smith has written an up-to-date and resourceful commentary on the book of Isaiah in two volumes. It engages an impressive bibliography of secondary literature (even for an Isaiah commentary) and covers all of the important aspects of the study of the book. In this first volume on chapters 1–39, Dr. Smith quickly establishes his command of the various critical discussions (dating, authorship/unity, the book’s historical scope relative to its genre as prophetic literature, the nature of prophetic literature itself), often taking a conservative line, but never apparently afraid to leave contested matters open (e.g., the degree to which the composition of Isaiah is riveted to the prophet himself, pp. 43, 68).

The commentary is easy to use, whether for extended reading or for quick reference. Though the NAC series uses the NIV, Smith is engaged at every point in a close reading of the Masoretic Text. The commentary portion of each volume is generally organized according to the discernible literary units in Isaiah, with the NIV translation in bold preceding the comments. The comments then progress by verse, with verse headings in bold for easy spotting. Each section of comments is further organized by various capitalized headings, (e.g., HISTORICAL SETTING, STRUCTURE, and THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS). Though the headings do not follow a consistent order and seem to be used in an ad hoc fashion, they serve to specify the particular focus of their paragraphs from the

general interpretation of a text which itself resists a singular mode of reading or engagement. Smith keeps most of his even more detailed exegesis and scholarly interaction up in the main body of each page, with footnotes typically reserved for subsidiary points and citation. (Interestingly, Hebrew words and phrases are always transliterated up in the main body and left in their traditional script down in the footnotes, but this seems to be a consistent practice of the NAC series. In any case, a solid knowledge of Hebrew is required to benefit fully from all the comments.)

One obvious feature which distinguishes Smith's commentary among the 17 others this reviewer consulted is the enormous amount of front matter to introduce the book of Isaiah – 71 pages! (Sweeney and Oswalt were next longest at 62 pages each. John Barton's 127-page Isaiah 1–39 is singularly concerned with introductory matters and offers no commentary on the text itself.) The usual methodologies are summarized (Source Criticism, Redactional Approaches, Rhetorical Argumentation, the Canonical Perspective) and the tone is fair and even-handed. Part of the reason for the extended introduction is Smith's thorough analysis of the primary literature involved in the book of Isaiah, and the issues this complex dynamic raises for interpreting it. Readers will find his engagement with text-critical issues between the MT and other text traditions (Dead Sea scrolls, Greek, Aramaic Targum) to be an illuminating resource, as he finds a way to be specific without being tedious. For example, on p. 44, he offers nine examples throughout chapters 1–39 (more are covered in the commentary section) in which there is clearly a textual problem which can nonetheless be engaged in a way that does not call into question the ability of the text to deliver up its inspired message.

Another laudable feature is the manner in which Smith maintains his attention to his interlocutors throughout both commentaries. This is often more at issue in monographs where a specific argument is being advanced, but it is refreshing to see in the commentary genre as well. Chief among Smith's influences on interpretive decisions are Wildberger and Beuken, despite the theological distance between them and himself (p. 10). The tone is consistently charitable and descriptive rather than polemical. Smith does not hesitate to draw heavily from those with whom he parts ways elsewhere. For example, his appreciation for Beuken and Wildberger puts him in close company with Childs (who also singles out Beuken as particularly formative for his own commentary), though Smith and Childs (and Beuken) handle questions of authorship and dating differently.

Although it does not pursue a particular angle in its reading of Isaiah that might make it especially useful in a given niche environment, this is a strong contribution to the general study of the book, and it ought to be on the shelf of anyone researching Isaiah. Again, high marks especially are due for the extended introductory discussion which will function as a resource we are likely to see increasingly cited alongside Barton in future Isaiah studies.

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Torsten Uhlig. *The Theme of Hardening in the Book of Isaiah: An Analysis of Communicative Action.* Forschungen zum Alten Testament. II/39. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009. xvi + 423 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-3-16-150143-2. \$167.50. Paperback.

Although there is a long tradition, at least among preachers, of examining Isaiah's call only up to the point where he responds "Here I am, send me," such an approach suffers from the fact that it ignores the second half of the chapter where Isaiah seems to be sent on an almost impossible, and certainly perplexing, ministry where he is actually to harden the people. Populist readings of Isaiah might want people to go enthusiastically into ministry, but they seldom encourage them to think that their faithfulness might result in something so discouraging. Likewise, scholarly readers of Isaiah have struggled with how to relate this call to the wider context of the book so that its implications for its interpretation are insufficiently developed. In this mildly revised doctoral dissertation completed at the University of Gloucestershire (under the supervision of Gordon Wenham and H. G. M. Williamson) Torsten Uhlig thus not only explores an important issue for the interpretation of the book of Isaiah but also a matter that is of pastoral importance for those who seek to apply the message of the book to contemporary congregations. As a piece of academic research it is primarily directed towards answering the questions as posed by scholarly readers, but there is a sensitivity to the pastoral issues that are thrown up by this throughout. Moreover, it amply demonstrates the importance of good scholarship and its relevance to pastoral issues.

The published form of the doctoral dissertation is now a well established genre, and Uhlig follows it through in the customary manner with an outline of the problem as it has emerged in the history of research before outlining his own approach. The summary of previous scholarship is brief but helpful, enabling Uhlig to develop his own concerns with communication. In essence, he notes that a prophetic book aims to communicate, and so draws on speech-act theory in dialogue with the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur to address the question of what is meant by the hardening motif. Although he is interested in Isaiah as a book, Uhlig does not ignore historical questions, interpreting the book as something which contains two principal prophetic voices, one emerging from Isaiah ben Amoz and the second around the time of Cyrus. He is aware of the difference in focus between chapters 40–55 and 56–66, seeing the former as directed by this voice to the exiles and the latter to those in the land. In spite of this diversity in origin, Uhlig argues persuasively for a unified communicative intent, showing that connective righteousness (the link between deed and consequences) is the means by which Yahweh is restoring order to creation. There are different emphases in chapters 1–39 and 40–66, but these operate coherently with one another. Hardening then emerges as a crucial element in how Yahweh deploys connective righteousness as it is traced through Isaiah 6, where Isaiah's proclamation brings about hardness in Israel, but this is gradually reversed through a number of communicative acts in chapters 40–66. It is through the communication of the Servant that

the hardening of the exiles is affected and this “de-hardening” is what enables the exiles to return to the land. Likewise, it is through prophetic proclamation that those in the homeland are de-hardened, though this preaching also continues to reveal those who are hardened still. The hardening of the people prevents proper communication, whereas those who are de-hardened are able to communicate again. Thus, in Isaiah 1–39 the prophet’s message embodies Yahweh’s judgment of their misguided communication because of its lack of righteousness, but the prophetic voice in Isaiah 40–66 removes this hardness, enabling communication and a move back towards righteousness.

What emerges from this is a complex and nuanced portrayal of Yahweh. The hardening in Isaiah 6 is neither incomprehensible nor evidence of divine absence but rather evidence of how sin prevents people from hearing Yahweh’s voice, though paradoxically it is Yahweh who works through his prophets to renew the people. Although at times the argument is dense, and there are occasionally points where Uhlig’s English is perhaps not as clear as it might be (although thankfully mostly in the footnotes), this is a provocative and theologically alert reading of a difficult issue in Isaiah. It breaks new ground in its integration of speech-act theory with connective righteousness and demonstrates the fruitfulness of the approach with fresh insights into the message of Isaiah as a book. Unfortunately the price will probably preclude individuals from obtaining their own copy, but this is an essential addition to theological libraries.

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Mark J. Boda. *A Severe Mercy: Sin and Its Remedy in the Old Testament*. Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2009. x + 622pp. Hardcover. ISBN 978-1-57506-164-1. \$59.50. Hardcover.

Mark J. Boda offers a substantial contribution to Old Testament theology in treating the themes of sin and its remedy, carefully couching this discussion in a canonical context for the community of faith. He avoids typical pitfalls of forays into biblical theology by not only looking at lexical studies, but also conceptual and imagistic frameworks – what he calls “word views” (p. 7). Thus, this work represents a consistent attempt to treat passages in their immediate, book, and canonical contexts.

Boda gives a preliminary definition of sin. It is “an offense against a divinely ordered norm” (p. 11). In the Pentateuch, the remedy for sin is initially seen in terms of divine punishment. However, this is often tempered by Yahweh’s mitigation, which can be through sacrifices which act as fines, or even the covenant curses, which serve as a preferential alternative to the death of the offender. Boda notes, “it is surprising how often admission of sin and possibly also repentance is not offered as a solution” (p. 121). God’s wrath can also be deterred by a human mediator.

In the legal code, a two-fold process was required to deal with sin. For ritual uncleanness, an individual rite was performed for cleansing. Deliberate sin required both cleansing and the forgiveness provided at the Day of Atonement. Though its contaminating influence could be dealt with, defiant sin was without remedy, throwing the offender upon God's mercy. Both moral and ritual elements are interspersed in the legislation, indicating their common purpose in facilitating the presence of Yahweh among the people.

In the former prophets, sin is again seen in covenantal terms: "the demand for exclusive worship of Yahweh alone at the central shrine" (p. 184). It deserved retributive justice, and often contains affects extending beyond the individual to the succeeding generations. The remedy involved faithful leadership, God's word, judgment and discipline, and grace. These "various divine strategies functioned together to encourage human covenantal response" (p. 188). Thus, there is a much greater emphasis on penitence as a human response to God's grace.

In the latter prophets, God remains free with respect to sin and its remedy in that, "at times he may reject what appears to be a penitent cry and at others respond with grace where there is no penitence" (p. 354). This serves what Boda deems as "the prophet's greatest contribution to the theology of sin and its remedy [. . .] the ultimate hope is shifted from human response to a divine gracious and transformative initiative" (p. 355).

In the writings, Boda finds both a "muting" of lament and the embrace of penitence. That is, although Yahweh's discipline is lamented, this voice is gradually replaced with the call to penitence as the way forward. Additionally, he claims, "according to the wisdom tradition, divine discipline is not merely punishment for sin but functions to awaken humanity to repentance so that they may receive grace and experience inner transformation" (p. 509).

Helpful is Boda's treatment of intergenerational sin, whose effects he finds to be limited to the family unit, as three and four generations often lived under one roof. "The qualification in Exod. 20:5-6 and Deut. 5:9-10 that these punishments apply to 'those who hate me' suggest[s] that punishment will only endure if the later generations continue in the patterns of the offending generation" (p. 518). However other cases like Jeroboam and Manasseh seem to indicate "an accumulation of guilt, which may affect the severity of the judgment, but this guilt is not immediately responsible for the judgment itself" (p. 519).

Notably, Boda contradicts several authors (Wenham, Lucas, Hartley, Gane) in "challeng[ing] the view that forgiveness is granted only by the divine will" (p. 75). Rather, he sees the rites in Leviticus 4 as "creating the expectation" of forgiveness. However, in doing so, he draws a fine line between the recognition of guilt and confession of sin required in these sacrifices, only finding the idea of remorse later in the Holiness Code.

Although not revolutionary, Boda's study fills a significant lacuna in biblical theology in elucidating both the continuity and tension within the various OT corpora concerning the nature of sin and its remedy. This can be seen in his primary conclusion, that "the dominant pattern of human sin/divine discipline, human

response/divine grace in all of its forms cannot be reduced to an impersonal retribution principle separated from the dynamic relationship between Yahweh and his people” (p. 521). Due to both the variety of approaches to sin and responses to human penitence, much is left to the freedom and character of God, (Exod. 33:19) who, “forgives and yet punishes, that is, he displays a severe mercy” (p. 522).

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