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On the cover: The sanctuary lamp at the entrance to the Chapel of the Holy Apostles at the base of the Luther Tower at Concordia Seminary. The Hebrew surrounding the lamp comes from Isaiah 11:2 (“...the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord”), which makes it a fitting image to honor the work of Dr. Paul Raabe. (Photo: Jarod Fenske)

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Editorials

Editor's Note

Last spring, we devoted an issue of the *Concordia Journal* to the work of Dr. Robert Rosin over his many years of service to the Seminary and the church during which he did much to extend the reputation of Concordia Seminary as a center of premier Luther studies both here in America and abroad. In this issue, we recognize the scholarly contributions of another one of our recently retired professors, Dr. Paul Raabe, who likewise played a role spanning more than three decades in extending the seminary's reputation as a first-rate institution for Lutheran scholarship and writing.

As many of his former students will attest, Dr. Raabe was (and remains) an ardent advocate and spokesman for the importance of the Old Testament to Lutheran theology within the church. As he has frequently pointed out, the Bible contains 66 books, not just 27 books. Dr. Raabe has a well-deserved reputation as an indefatigable opponent of Marcionism wherever it may be found! And so, we include in this issue a revision of an article that he originally wrote for *Lutheran Forum* entitled, "Why the AD Church needs the BC Scriptures."

He has always believed that Lutherans today need to account for the positive way the law is often portrayed in Old Testament. In other words, just as one cannot characterize in a simplistic fashion that the Old Testament is law and the New Testament is gospel, so one must also avoid the danger of denying or ignoring a third use or positive use of the law in the life of a Christian. And so, we include the article "The Good Law of Yahweh," originally published in the volume *The Law in Holy Scripture* (CPH).

Even as he could readily sniff out Marcionism in all its various expressions, Dr. Raabe worked hard to gain a voice for a Lutheran confessional approach to the Old Testament within the academy that stressed the importance of attending to the original languages and the historical grammatical method for reading the Old Testament. To that end, he presented numerous papers given at the national meetings

Editor's note

Reflections to mark the passing of Professor Emeritus Norman Nagel by his colleague Robert Kolb and his student Joel Lebenbauer will appear in the Winter 2020 issue of the Concordia Journal.

of the Society for Biblical Literature (SBL) and took a leading role in organizing sessions in the regional SBL. He was the first (and remains the only LCMS scholar) to be invited to write a commentary for the widely read *Anchor Bible Commentary* series. Taking advantage of that opportunity, he managed to write a 300-page commentary on Obadiah's 21 verses. This is a feat for which he has received more than a little good-natured ribbing. But seriously, his commentary contains several classic theological excurses from which readers will benefit greatly.

Finally, I remember Dr. Raabe as one who also likes to make forays into systematic theology such as the time when he read Pannenberg's *Systematic Theology* before I had taken the plastic wrapping off my own copies! His commitment to biblical theology (as well as systematic theology) finds expression in the final article in which he sets forth a theology of the ascension and session of Christ. He wrote this originally for one of our SMP courses but never published it. We believe it deserves a wider readership and so include it here as well.

Charles P. Arand
Dean of Theological Research and Publications

Grace, Mercy, Peace . . . Lives of Significance

It is my honor and truly my pleasure to welcome new students to Concordia Seminary. I'm also pleased to welcome your families, your mentors, returning students, and everyone in the chapel this morning. Just as heartily, I welcome you who are joining us by livestream. Welcome to all to Concordia Seminary!

For quite a few years I've had the habit of taking newspaper front pages that caught my fancy and having them framed. My collection of framed front pages is eclectic. I do have the 2005 Chicago Tribune celebrating the World Series victory of the Chicago White Sox. I did not frame the Cubs! And I have Mark McGwire's record homerun page framed as well. But of all the framed front pages I have, most of them are serious and remind me why we have congregations, why we have church ministries, why we have this Seminary. I brought this one with me. It's from the New York Times of August 19, 2016. On the front page is a photograph of a five-year-old Syrian boy being taken to the hospital in an ambulance. The caption says, "Five year old Omran Daqneesh was rescued Wednesday after an airstrike in Aleppo, Syria." Five-years-old. It should be the time of innocence and play but Omran's face is filled with dust, dirt, with blood and bewilderment. Here's another front page. This also is from the New York Times, June 26 of this year. You may remember the photo. This is the caption: "Horror and Heartbreak. The deaths of two migrants who are trying to cross the Rio Grande led to widespread anguish on Tuesday. The bodies of Oscar Alberto Martinez Ramirez and his 23-month-old daughter Valeria were found near Brownsville, Texas." A father and his daughter dead at the edge of the river. Pass this around, pass it through the pews, okay? And don't pass it fast. Take your time and let the picture burn itself into your memory. One more, although I don't have a newspaper for this. This is local, only a few miles away. Today, this Friday morning, Xavier Usanga was supposed to be in second grade at Clay Elementary School. He's not because a couple weeks ago he was killed by a gun. He is the eleventh child killed in St. Louis this year. Answer me this: With all the suffering and the sin in our cities, in our nation and in our world, why are you holing up in a secluded gothic seminary to study theology? I mean, really? The world wonders, "What's that about?"

Editor's note

This is an edited version of President Meyer's sermon for the opening of Concordia Seminary's 181st academic year. The text is John 9:1–5, the healing of a man born blind.

The disciples want to talk theology. As Jesus passes by, he sees a man blind from birth and his disciples ask him, "Professor, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" These students saw that human being as an object lesson for talk about sin. They wanted to use him to theologize. Jesus resisted the trap to theologize about a human being. Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day. Night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." I can't speak for other seminaries in the United States but at Concordia Seminary doing theology is not an end in itself. We get into the word of God, into our confessions, into books of theology only as a means to bring the works of Christ to hurting individuals. No individual is ever to be an object for our theological speculation. Instead, we go to that person who is in darkness with the light of Christ.

The theme for this academic year, as you know, is "Grace, Mercy, Peace . . . Lives of Significance." The grace of God is his totally undeserved favor because of Jesus Christ. The blind man certainly didn't merit the grace of God, but neither do we by our presence and our studies and our work here. God's grace is totally unmerited. As the hymn says, "Nothing in my hands I bring. Simply to Thy cross I cling." The grace of God comes to us in mercy. Better to say it "mercies," the plural, all those acts of loving kindness with which he surrounds us day in and day out, more than we know. "Every morning mercies new fall as fresh as morning dew. Every evening, let me pay tribute with the closing day, for Thy mercies, Lord, are sure; Thy compassion doth endure." In receiving the grace and mercy of God in our past, present, and future, you and I have peace. Diane and I were watching the news the other morning. The news and a cup of caffeinated coffee really get my engine going. Diane said in the midst of the news, "The whole country has gone berserk." That is true. More than ever before in my lifetime the whole country, the world has gone berserk. In this world gone mad, you can apply this to yourself in the singular: each and every one of you who has been graced and receive the mercies of God are a presence of calm. Jesus says, "My peace I give unto you; not as the world gives do I give unto you. Let not your hearts be troubled" (Jn 14:27). The prophet Isaiah says, "You will keep them in perfect peace whose hearts are stayed on you because they trust in you" (Is 26:3). It is well with your soul because you have and will continue to receive the total gift, the grace of God in his manifold mercies that come in Jesus Christ.

This has come to you as a mission. The mission of God had you in its sights. In eternity, the Lord Jesus Christ was ordained to come into your life with the works of God and his light. Now we are not cocooned in the seminary and we dare not be cocooned in country club congregations. Now we take the mission of God and the goodness of this light of Christ into the world. Martin Luther said this, "A Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not

a Christian.” There are, you know, two tables to the Ten Commandments, not just the first table. Luther goes on, “He lives in Christ through faith and in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself and to God and by love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor.” When Jesus came upon the blind man, when he was approached by a leper, when he saw the sick, the demon-possessed, and even not just the dying, the dead, he brought to them in a personal way the works of God. When you see an addict, a person who is incarcerated, a marriage that is struggling maybe beyond repair, when you see someone who is homeless, when you come upon someone who is hospitalized, homebound, hopeless, when you meet with a struggling single parent, when you come to any struggling soul just trying to make it in this life, bring the works of God and the light of Jesus. There was a TV commentator on a couple of weeks ago who was talking about the mass shootings, and what he said applies to so much that’s going on in our country and in our world. The commentator said that the shooter can take his own life because he sees no value in his life. And the shooter can take the lives of others because he sees no value in their lives. When you come across the myriad people in your life who do not know the grace and mercy of God and therefore do not understand that their lives are significant, personally with his grace, mercy, and his peace, then you go to them not as an object to theologize but as an extension of the love of Jesus for the people for whom he died. Never meet a stranger because everyone that you meet is someone for whom Jesus died.

So we will begin the 181st academic year. Yes, we do theology here. We get into the books here as a means to bring the good news of God to hurting lives. Sometime in the next year or so you will be reading a homiletics book by Dr. Thomas Long. Dr. Long is a homiletics professor at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University. Early in the book Dr. Long makes a significant point which we all need to keep in mind. The pastor who is preparing a sermon for Sunday goes to the scriptures on behalf of the people. As you and I study theology, we are doing this on behalf of the people, on behalf of the children who are being victimized by a violent society, on behalf of their families who grieve and may be dysfunctional, on behalf of anybody in any kind of darkness. When you and I study theology and when we prepare Bible classes and sermons and lectures, we go to the scriptures on behalf of the people. That means we now are going to hit the books with earnestness for the sake of the people for whom Jesus died and rose again, that their lives too might be significant in this life and for the life to come. Jesus says, “We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day. Night is coming when no one can work.” Amen.

Dale A. Meyer
President

Upon the Retirement of Paul Raabe

Paul: The Scriptures don't seem to give us a lot of instructions for occasions like this and only a few examples. I suspect that your namesake gives us at least part of the explanation for that in his letter to Philemon. Being parted from one another is such a temporary situation for us that we need not waste a lot of time learning to do it well. We are parted for a short time but together forever.

Still, something needed to be done here this morning, and I could think of no better way to honor you and respect your achievements than to assemble a series of readings, a catena of texts, calling to mind what you have done among us, who you have been among us, and who we are today because you have been among us.

First, then, a reading from the Acts of Paul by Andrew¹ Ἐπαρχείας Θύρας (of the County of the Door):

No one has done more in a post-Reformation lifetime to eradicate Marcion [and his -ism], in all its forms and permutations, from our circles, wherever he might poke his head or sow his seeds of influence, and this in a church body where we grew up without an OT lesson in the lectionary.

Of course, there is more to Paul Raabe. I first came to know him when he was leading the Red Knights of Milwaukee Lutheran High School, expanding the scoring prowess of outside shooting that his brother Tom had established over at Concordia prep. Even in his older age, Paul still has a decent jump shot.

He went on to learn something about education at Seward, then joined the seminary corps at the feet of Horace Hummel, whose influence and richness of biblical theology as grounded in the Old Testament now falls to the third generation. And there was

Editor's note

This encomium was delivered by Jeffrey Oschwald at a special reception celebrating the retirement of Paul Raabe on May 16, 2018.

that MA in classics at Wash U, too. Our lives came together at the feet of David Noel Freedman, with more than a few “somewhat Lutheran” interactions with George Mendenhall along with other West Semitic and Akkadian niceties (remember grilling each other on cuneiform signs?) in the ANE studies at Michigan. Those were the years when the old system was struggling to go to four-year collegiate programs, and Paul was instrumental, from his position at Concordia, Ann Arbor, to bring all LCMS language instructors together to “talk shop,” something Paul has encouraged throughout his life.

Then back to St. Louis as a faculty colleague, where thirty-five years of teaching and exceptional service now come to conclusion. As we all know, Paul has been a champion of a close, careful, and competent reading of the biblical text. Say what the text says, even when difficult, no less, and no more.

He has been a champion for Lutheran theology, not just within our Lutheran circles but into all the world: through teaching, publication, influence, and actually mixing it up out there. His Obadiah commentary in the prestigious Anchor Bible (brokered, I might add, while driving around St. Louis with David Noel Freedman in my little old Honda Civic—and yes, it was only one chapter, but hey, no one else from our circles was asked!) was a model of scholarly method. We never did get the Isaiah gig, Paul, though Eerdmans had given us the contract. And now I’m the delay with getting the first volume at CPH moved into press, but we’ll get it done!

Paul has a pedigree and is a prodigy of service to our Lord and his church, from a mission-minded reverend father and church musician mother, anchored in the good earth of Nebraska and Wisconsin—and now to the more Near Eastern soil of Arizona, all seasoned with good humor and humility. And still that jump shot, and even better aim at any vestiges of Marcion: may we never forget!

Next, a reading from the Epistle of Saint James² to Saint Paul:

It is with great joy that I am able to congratulate Paul Raabe on his retirement, though it is with some sorrow because I am not able to be present, and because he is, in fact, retiring. Paul Raabe has been nothing less than one of the pillars of Concordia Seminary in the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Yes,

a pillar. He has been a faculty member for thirty-five years, which is longer than the tenure of Martin Scharlemann, of Robert Preus, of Horace Hummel, of Norman Nagel—longer than the tenure of just about anyone we know. And it's not just a matter of longevity. It is also, and especially, a matter of influence. No one—no one—has fought more bravely and continuously for the cause of the Hebrew language and for the Old Testament at this institution than has Paul. No one has flown the flag for exegesis being the centerpiece of the seminary MDiv curriculum as consistently as has Paul. And no one has been any more ready to engage in discussions of the shape of seminary education than has Paul.

In addition, many here today do not know how absolutely first-rate the scholarship of Paul Raabe is. First, he evinces absolute devotion to the text of Scripture, and I mean that in the most literal way. Almost no one I know bows to the sacred text as does Paul, daring never to emend a reading to solve a problem or to offer a conjecture to make a text more palatable. Following his Doktor Vater, David Noel Freedman, Paul allows the text to control the conversation, grasping the truth, as well all must, that if understanding of a particular verse or chapter is lacking, the problem does not lie in the text; rather, the problem lies in the sinful and insufficiently educated interpreter of that text. Watch Paul do the poetry of the Psalms sometime, if you have not until now and if you still have a chance. The attention to detail, the appreciation of the poetry, the readiness to engage the pragmatics/ the impact of the text—from this attention, appreciation, and readiness we can all learn much.

Au revoir, my good friend and colleague. You have years of service ahead of you, as well as joy in bringing the excitement of the sacred Scriptures to younger minds.

At Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, you will be greatly missed.

To which we add a brief reading from the Prophet Joel³ of the fifth century B-CTCR:

I joined the CTCR staff in 1991; even then I was aware of Paul's important contributions to the CTCR's work, since he served as drafter of the CTCR's 1989 report on "The End Times"—one of the most popular and "best-selling" reports of all time!

Paul was elected by the CSL faculty in 2001 to serve as a

seminary representative on the CTCR and served three consecutive three-year terms in that capacity (2001–2009). He was a delight to work with on the CTCR. He had a great sense of humor, brought keen exegetical skills and insights to the table, was not a “shrinking violet” but engaged in conversations and debate in a respectful and fraternal way, and was a team player with just the right mix of churchmanship and institutional realism (skepticism?). I would describe him as the model CTCR member: He knew theology and he knew the church; he loved both, but (appropriately) his first love was the former, always centered in Christ and his Word.

His most tangible “hands-on” contribution during his time on the CTCR was his yeoman like service as the primary drafter of the CTCR’s report on *The Creator’s Tapestry: Scriptural Perspectives on Man-Woman Relationships in Marriage and the Church*, which took many years (during which years he endured several lively “man-woman consultations”) to complete. Like nearly all CTCR reports, this was a “group project” and so (like nearly all CTCR drafters), Paul may or may not have been completely thrilled with every facet of the final product. But, to his credit, he stuck it out until the end, and I think this report has held up very well as a substantive, thorough treatment of a very important and sensitive topic. We (CTCR staff) still cite it and recommend it frequently.

In some ways, however, the greatest contribution and most lasting mark left by Paul on the CTCR may have been his nomination of Larry Vogel (more than ten years ago) to serve on the CTCR staff, shortly after I was called to serve as executive director. I had never met Larry and did not know him at all, so all I had to go on was Paul’s strong and consistent recommendation. Larry was the “dark horse” candidate at the time, but he presented himself very well . . . and the rest is history, for which I am exceedingly thankful. So, if you’re hearing this—thanks again, Paul! Rich blessings on your retirement and future service, and, as Larry Vogel will also likely be retiring in the not-so-distant future . . . do you have any other “dark horse” candidates you would recommend to replace him? I’m counting on you!

We all continue to count on you, Paul. We thank you for all that you’ve done and all that you’ve been among us, and we thank God for you.

We pray:

Gracious Father, you never tire of finding ways to bless your people, what a great cloud of witnesses you have surrounded us with! You send your word to your prophets and apostles, evangelists and teachers, and then you send them to us. We thank and praise you today for the gifts you have given your people through Saint Paul—not Saint Paul of Tarsus, though we give you thanks for him, too, but Saint Paul of Fairview, Kansas.

We thank you that, when you sent out this “messenger among the nations,” his road led not to Damascus but to Concordia.

We thank you that this Saint Paul’s persecution of your people has all taken place within the classroom where he has tirelessly driven his students from their hiding places in error and confusion to the light of your truth.

We thank you that through this Saint Paul you have again and again over the course of these thirty-five years called us to “Rise up!” to battle for your church and her pastors, teaching them that the Law and the Prophets and the Psalms really do testify to your Son, teaching them that when we lose the languages we do risk losing the gospel, calling them from new moon to new moon and from Sabbath to Sabbath to worship you.

We thank and praise you for Saint Paul of Fairview, for through him you have richly blessed your church. As he prepares to move on to ventures new, and we shed a few Miletian tears, we ask that you continue to bless this servant of yours, keep his feet in the way of peace, and let him go forth in your joy, knowing you will supply his every need. To you, O God our Father, be glory now and forever. Amen.

Jeffrey Oswald

Endnotes

- 1 Andrew Bartelt
- 2 James Voelz
- 3 Joel Lehenbauer

Reflections from a New Location

The editors of *Concordia Journal* asked me to offer a few reflections from my new location.

I now teach at Grand Canyon University in Phoenix. I am a professor in biblical studies and the senior editor of their journal, *Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies*, published by Wipf and Stock (available free online). GCU is a non-profit, interdenominational Christian university in the heart of Phoenix. They are doing great things to build up this impoverished area of Phoenix. The university is booming. The campus has 400 acres and over 22,000 onground students (13,000 in the dorms) with 25 percent Hispanic American students and 7 percent African American students.

My colleagues are committed to *sola scriptura* and to the Nicene creedal faith. They have received me warmly, and we frequently talk biblical and theological “shop” together. Our conversations are proving to be most fruitful. We do not have to fight constantly about *prolegomena*, matters of biblical authorship and historicity, whether or not the historical Jesus did this or that. I am finding that our differences usually stem from different church histories and deal in the area of systematics, but when we discuss biblical texts we often agree as to what the text is saying and how it is saying it. When our convictions disagree, having a biblical text in common clarifies where and why we disagree and can further the conversation in a helpful way. But to my delight I am discovering that we agree on a whole lot of things, precisely because we are studying the same biblical texts in the framework of the creedal faith.

The religious scene in America strikes me as total chaos and confusion, in the Hebrew idiom utter *tohu wabohu*. It is a storm with strong winds blowing in every direction, including strong winds of nominal Christianity and secularism. America needs a resurgence in biblical, creedal Christianity in line with the Great Tradition, and orthodox Lutherans should be in the vanguard of the effort. In short, orthodox Lutherans need to be talking biblical and theological “shop” with non-Lutherans more, a lot more.

Paul R. Raabe

Articles



About the Author

Paul Raabe

Paul Raabe is professor emeritus at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

He retired in 2018 after 35 years of distinguished service as professor of exegetical theology. He also served as chair of the Department of Exegetical Theology (1998–2010). He now teaches at Grand Canyon University.

His areas of interest and expertise include the Hebrew Prophets and poetry, Old Testament theology and biblical theology.

Raabe also served as an instructor at Concordia College, Ann Arbor (1979–1983); and as a guest instructor at Lutheran Seminary in Baguio, Philippines (1996); Lutheran Seminary in Gothenberg, Sweden (1998); and Seminario Concordia in Sao Leopoldo, Brazil (2012). He was a member of the editorial committee for the *Concordia Journal* from 1986 to 2000. He has served on The Lutheran Church—

Missouri Synod's Commission on Theology and Church Relations. He also has participated in archaeological excavations in southern Israel and northern Syria.

He has published two books, *Psalm Structures: A Study of Psalms with Refrains*, and *The Anchor Yale Bible: Obadiah*. He co-edited *Fortunate the Eyes That See* and *The Press of the Text*, a Festschrift in honor of Concordia Seminary professor Dr. James W. Voelz. He has authored many articles and presented more than a dozen scholarly papers, and is currently writing for the *Concordia Commentary* series on Isaiah.

He received his Master of Divinity from Concordia Seminary (1979). He also holds a bachelor's degree from Concordia University, Nebraska; a master's degree from Washington University, St. Louis; and a PhD from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Why Are the BC Scriptures Necessary for the AD Church?

Paul R. Raabe

A person in my Bible class asked an interesting question. He is an engineer, used to thinking in terms of efficiency and getting the job done in an efficient manner. He asked: “Why do the BC Scriptures even exist? Why was there a BC history of Israel at all? Why didn’t the Creator just take care of the sin problem immediately? Why doesn’t the overall storyline simply go: Adam’s fall, then Jesus?”

That is an interesting question. It forces Christians to address the big picture. To be sure, one should be wary of trying to delve into the hidden recesses of God’s mind. After all, God is God, and we’re not. Nevertheless, the question does press a big issue. Why are the BC Scriptures, what Jesus and the apostles called “Moses and the Prophets,” still an essential part of our Bible? Why should Christians even study the first thirty-nine books? Would our Christian theology and identity remain intact if we were to limit ourselves to the Gospels and Epistles?

For Jesus and the New Testament writers the authority of Moses and the Prophets, ancient Israel’s Scriptures, was a given. The challenge was to make the case that Jesus and his life, death, and bodily resurrection brought ancient Israel’s Scriptures to fulfillment. Now, two millennia later we face in the reverse direction and confront the opposite challenge. Given that Jesus and his life-crucifixion-resurrection lie at the heart of our theology and life, now what do we do with the BC Scriptures? Even though they comprise three-fourths of our Bible, are they necessary? Instead of biblical Christians should we simply be New Testament Christians?

Editor’s note

This essay is a revision and expansion of an earlier essay: “Why the BC Scriptures Are Necessary for the AD Church,” Lutheran Forum 32/2 (1998): 11–15.

Many Christians today pay no attention to the first thirty-nine books. Brent A. Strawn shows how the Old Testament in American Christianity has become a “language” that is dying, like pidgin or even creole.¹ People might know a few Old Testament soundbites but not much more.

Such neglect is, at least, understandable. After all, Jesus has come. Good Friday and Easter have happened. The church has no temple in Jerusalem, no animal sacrifices, no Aaronic priesthood, no political king. Our enemies are no longer the Ammonites or the Assyrians. The promised land is no longer limited to the land of Palestine. The laws of the Pentateuch cannot simply be transferred over to the church. We no longer require circumcision. A church is not a theocracy. We live in the eschatological AD time and cannot reestablish the BC realities. Given this changed situation Christians are tempted to treat the BC Scriptures as sub-Christian or merely prolegomena, as “flyover territory.” There is also the pressure in our post-Holocaust age to demonstrate sensitivity by simply conceding Moses and the Prophets to the synagogue and limiting the church to the Gospels and Epistles.

Actually, the temptation to ignore the BC Scriptures is an age-old one that surfaced already in the second century with Marcion. It is a powerful temptation. Yet the task for Christians and churches to deal in a serious way with the BC Scriptures cannot be avoided. Therefore I wish to press the question: Why are the BC Scriptures necessary for the AD church? What benefits do the BC Scriptures offer AD churches and Christians? Here I suggest a few reasons in order to generate reflection.

First, the BC Scriptures keep our feet on the ground. Everywhere they presuppose and affirm the goodness of God’s creation. The ancient Israelites were a down-to-earth people, for the most part agriculturalists and owners of sheep and goats. They rejoiced in their concrete physical life. Their hope was not to become deified or divinized but to live in fellowship with the God of Israel in a fully human way, the way their Creator had made them and intended them to be. To live under your own vine and fig tree, to enjoy the fruits of your own fields, that was the good life. “It doesn’t get any better than this.”

No one steeped in the earthy BC Scriptures would be tempted toward Platonic dualism, docetism, asceticism, or spiritualism, alternatives as prevalent today as they ever were. The BC Scriptures keep our Christian life facing outward toward the concrete needs of the neighbor in the external world rather than turning inward toward the world of the soul. They invite us to rejoice in our flesh-and-blood

(Left) A portion of the book of Isaiah as found in the Great Isaiah Scroll from the Dead Sea Scrolls found at Qumran (credit: Wikimedia Commons).

Everywhere the Gospels and Epistles are shaped by the language and categories of the BC Scriptures.

creatureliness, in the way the Creator created us. In fact, the first article of the Creed depends to a great extent upon the BC Scriptures. It was no coincidence that Marcion under the influence of Gnosticism wanted nothing to do with either the BC Scriptures or the Creator of the heavens

and earth. Against Marcion the early church fathers rightly emphasized that it was the Creator who redeemed and that what he redeemed was his own creation and not something alien to him. The work of the new creation presupposes the work of the Creator.

Second, the BC Scriptures help us reaffirm the physical side of things. Especially in our postmodern, heavily digital age the temptation is strong to become gnostic where everything is about the mind and the imagination. For the BC believers, the fullness of life was to praise the God of Israel with the physical lips at the temple: “Will the dust praise you [O Lord]? Will it tell of your faithfulness?” (Ps 30:9; cf. Pss 6:5; 115:17; Is 38:18–20). You can’t praise the Lord with your physical lips if your body is dead and buried. The laws about ritual purity focus on the external and physical dimension. Israel’s God is the God of physical life and wholeness, so that contact with a corpse or a flow of life-blood or a scaly skin disease rendered one unclean, requiring that the unclean go through ritual purification. We can appropriate this kind of material by emphasizing the future bodily resurrection, when our physical bodies will be raised incorruptible, immortal, imperishable, and glorified, whole and without blemish.

Third, the BC Scriptures are necessary for our speech about “God.” What do you mean by the word “God”? Which God do you serve and worship? A cartoon in an old *New Yorker* pictures an angel standing before a big office door with a sign that reads “God.” Before entering the office the angel asks the secretary: “Is he the God of the Old or the New Testament this morning?” The cartoon exhibits a Marcionite viewpoint that makes a radical contrast between the God in the BC Scriptures and the God in the New Testament. Against such a dichotomy, we Christians need to stress that our God is the God of ancient Israel, the God of Abraham and Moses and Joshua and King David and Elijah and Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezra and Nehemiah. Our God is not some Gentile invention, not some “Christian god.” Our God is not an impersonal “force” permeating the universe nor a vague philosophical abstraction. Our God has a BC track record reaching its fulfillment in Jesus. By reading Moses and the Prophets we read of our own God’s actions and words, done and spoken in human history. The Creator of the heavens and earth in time adopted Abraham and his genealogical descendants as his own special people. The Creator made himself the

God of Israel. This God of ancient Israel is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus, Israel's Messiah, his Son in the flesh.² He has revealed himself at different times and places in BC time, and his climactic revelation in Jesus remains in continuity with that previous history.

Fourth, the BC Scriptures are necessary for understanding, preserving, and proclaiming the gospel itself.³ To people with no familiarity with the BC Scriptures, talk of Jesus is meaningless. People can make the wrong connections about Jesus. For example, Jesus is not a new Socrates drinking hemlock but the Servant in Isaiah.⁴ The Pentateuch makes it clear that sinners need a priest and an atoning sacrifice. The BC history and institutions of ancient Israel gave a foretaste of what was to come; thereby they established the lexicon of the gospel. The gospel's very terminology is rooted in the BC Scriptures: Messiah ("Christ"), son of David, David's Lord, second Adam, Israel embodied in one, new and greater temple, suffering servant, prophet, priest after the order of Melchizedek, king, lamb of God, sacrifice, atonement, justification, kingdom of God, covenant, and so on. Everywhere the Gospels and Epistles are shaped by the language and categories of the BC Scriptures.

The BC Scriptures present two overarching movements, one "from above" and one "from below." They often speak of God "coming down" to save and dwell with his people. God "came down" to deliver his people from Egyptian bondage. God led Israel's troops into battle to drive out the enemies. God tabernacled in their midst. The Scriptures also give a "from below" depiction by speaking of Israel's own mediators to God, such as Moses, the Aaronic priests, and the Davidic king. Israel could not approach God directly; they needed a human mediator. Both movements come together with the incarnation when one of the Trinity became one of us. Jesus is one of the Trinity in the flesh, the incarnate God of ancient Israel toward us, the Son of his Father. Jesus is also one of us, our human brother, the one human mediator to the God of ancient Israel, who is also his God (Eph 1:17). Both lines come together with Jesus.

Christians emphasize that Jesus is the fulfillment, but the fulfillment of what? Of every sort of human ideal or dream or philosophy? Is Jesus the fulfillment of contemporary spirituality or Western egalitarianism and individualism? Will Jesus lead the charge to establish social justice in America? Will Jesus help you reach your own personal financial and health goals? Without seeing how the gospel is rooted in the BC Scriptures, people can treat the person and work of Jesus as a waxen nose, reshaping it into a mirror image of themselves and their own self-determined needs or fads or ideologies. The result is a myriad of "Jesuses": Jesus the teacher of liberal morality; Jesus the hippie; Jesus the Hindu sage; Jesus the Nazi; Jesus the Marxist revolutionary; Jesus the scrapper; Jesus the Hollywood superstar; and on and on and on.⁵

We need the BC Scriptures lest we have a fulfillment without an older promise, lest we end up with a "Christ event" standing in isolation from any preceding

plan and activity of God. Such a view characterized Marcion; as Jaroslav Pelikan states: “This continuity Marcion denied, in the name of the newness of the Gospel of Christ. Any continuity or sequence (*ordo*) was unnecessary, for the coming of Christ had been sudden and immediate.”⁶ Against driving a wedge between the BC Scriptures and the Gospels-Epistles, Christians need to stress the soteriological and gospel-centered unity of the two parts of the Bible, that both parts convey one grand overarching narrative that reaches its fulfillment with the public ministry of Jesus of Nazareth and its consummation with his future coming again in glory. Our faith rests in the good news that comes from the God of ancient Israel, the good news about the fulfillment of ancient Israel’s history and promises by Jesus, Israel’s Messiah, God’s Son in the flesh.

Fifth, the BC Scriptures are necessary for a proper understanding of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit who came upon the Judges and King David is the same Holy Spirit who anointed Jesus as the Messiah and remained on him. The Holy Spirit poured out on Pentecost and at work through the gospel in the Church is the same Holy Spirit promised by ancient Israel’s prophets. Just as we need the BC Scriptures for understanding the Father and the Son, so also we need them for understanding the Holy Spirit.

Sixth, the BC Scriptures constantly set before us “the scandal of particularity.” To say that Jesus is the only mediator to God is a scandal to fallen human reason. Reason protests: “Why should there be only one way?” Yet throughout the BC narrative we see that the Creator of all made certain particular choices in history. His overall goals are universal, but his paths and instruments are particular: only Abraham and his line; only Israel; only the line of Judah and David; only the line of Levi and Aaron; only the tabernacle and temple; only certain kinds of animals for sacrifice; only in Zion; and so on. That Jesus would be the only mediator is consistent with the Creator’s *modus operandi* as demonstrated throughout BC history. Instead of protesting the Creator’s particular choices, faith affirms them and rejoices in them.

Seventh, because most of us American Christians are Gentiles, we need the BC Scriptures to properly understand our place in God’s plan. We Gentiles do not form our own independent people of God, parallel to Israel. On the contrary, we Gentiles are the foreign branches from a wild olive tree that have been grafted into the cultivated olive tree, God’s Israel (Rom 11). By being incorporated into the Messiah, who is Abraham’s offspring reduced to one, we Gentiles are the offspring of Abraham and heirs of the ancient promises (Gal 3:16, 29). Speaking to Gentile readers the Apostle Paul explicitly states: “And if you (plural) belong to the Messiah (=Christ), then you (plural) are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Gal 3:29). We Gentile Christians have Abraham as our forefather.

For Gentiles there is no future simply remaining Gentile, theologically speaking (Rom 9:1–5; Eph 2:11–12). The Creator of all made ancient Israel his own chosen

people, and he attached himself to them as their God. God never gave promises directly to Gentiles as Gentiles. Only through ancient Israel would Gentiles be blessed. To be saved, to be blessed, to have fellowship with the God of Israel, Gentiles need to be attached to Abraham and ancient Israel. The only hope for Hispanics

and Chinese and Germans and Americans is to be brought to the God of Israel and his Zion, not to build their own Gentile religion or Gentile temple. Ancient Israel's prophets repeatedly stressed this centripetal movement, that the day would come when Gentiles from the ends of the earth would be drawn to the dwelling place of Israel's God. The God of Israel has been fulfilling those BC promises for 2000 years now, and we are part of the fulfillment. Because we Gentiles belong to Israel's Messiah, the BC Israelites are our own forefathers. To read their history is to read our own people's history (e.g., 1 Cor 10). By faith we now belong to the one people of God who have a history stretching into BC times.

Eighth, the BC Scriptures reveal how the God of Israel would typically work in "sacramental" ways, using visible, concrete instruments to convey his spiritual gifts. That the Lord of the church promises to work in such a way in AD time is not a *novum*. We can still learn much about liturgy and worship by studying books like Exodus, Leviticus, and Chronicles. Liturgical actions, ceremonies, and rituals are not per se anathema to the God of Israel. It says something about the identity of Christian churches that the Psalms of ancient Israel hold such a prominent place in the public worship of Gentile Christians. For the Psalms provide us with God-pleasing language for prayer and praise to the God of Israel though Jesus the Messiah, the one mediator. The BC Scriptures provide a rich resource for our theology of public worship.

Ninth, the BC Scriptures establish the historical and eschatological framework for Christian theology and life. The BC Scriptures prevent us from letting the present tense dominate and eclipse everything else, from speaking only of today and only of the way things are here and now. The Creator worked out salvation for his rebellious human creatures in and through ancient history beginning in BC time. Salvation history did not in fact go "Adam's fall, then Jesus." We have to consider the BC history of Israel and how that led up to the public ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, because that is the way the Creator actually worked out the world's salvation. Faith honors the way God did it.

The BC Scriptures also force us to think and speak in terms of the future. In contrast to cyclical mythology they set our faith and life into a historical timeline

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that moves toward the future consummation. There is a future-oriented thrust throughout the BC Scriptures, explicitly announced by the prophets and implicitly evident in the narratives as they trace the wanderings of the patriarchs or the trip of Israel from Egypt to the land or from exile to Zion. We AD believers still have “one foot in BC” as it were; we still

live in the not-yet. Along with the prophets and psalmists of ancient Israel we too yearn for the future, saving intervention of God, the kingdom of God in all its future consummation and the future coming of Israel’s Messiah, whom we confess is Jesus of Nazareth.

The BC Scriptures prevent the Christian proclamation from flying off into the realm of Platonic ideas or turning inward to the private and individualistic world of the subjective psyche. Christianity cannot be reduced simply to a teaching on various static topics. Its backbone is a large story, a metanarrative. The BC Scriptures help us keep this grand narrative in focus. We Christians operate with a past tense and a future tense, not only a present tense.

Finally, the BC Scriptures contain certain accents that otherwise might be overlooked if we were to read only the New Testament. One thinks of wisdom literature and its invitation to acquire wisdom in the fear of the Lord, to inquire into the enigmas of life and the art of living, to investigate with human reason and observation the whole created order from the ways of humans to the ways of ants. The narratives that show the faithful serving in the governments of this age, such as Joseph, Daniel, and Esther, encourage Christians in their vocation as citizens in the earthly city. Consider the way that faith delights in the good and righteous law of God, as expressed in the Psalms for example. How beneficial it is for suffering Christians to pray along with the Psalms of lament in the name of the One who suffered, died, and was raised from the dead. Ancient Israel’s BC story can help us understand our own story. Like them in the wilderness we have been delivered from bondage and are being led on a difficult path to the future new and greater promised land, the new creation. Like them in exile we yearn for the ultimate Zion and trust God’s promises. Like them in their hymns we rejoice in being gathered into the presence of the holy and life-giving Lord. In countless ways Christian faith and life would be diminished if we were to neglect or downplay the BC Scriptures. Everywhere on those pages we read and hear the words inspired by the Holy Spirit who is the Spirit of Christ, making us wise unto salvation and that are profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness.

Christianity did not first begin 2000 years ago with Jesus. Let Moses and the Prophets become a vital part of your Bible. By hearing both Moses-Prophets and Gospels-Epistles together and refusing to separate them churches will hear the voice of Israel's God, who in these last days has spoken by his Son.

Endnotes

- 1 Brent A. Strawn, *The Old Testament Is Dying: A Diagnosis and Recommended Treatment*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017). See also Katharine Dell, *Who Needs the Old Testament? Its Enduring Appeal and Why the New Atheists Don't Get It* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017) for a response to the New Atheists and contemporary Marcionites.
- 2 The noun "God" (*theos*) occurs over 1300 times in the New Testament and 99.9% of the time it refers to the First Person of the Holy Trinity, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. There are about eight texts that refer to Jesus as God; hence we also confess that Jesus is the God of Israel in the flesh. As the Nicene Creed formulates it, Jesus is "God from (*ek*) God." The New Testament also calls the Holy Spirit "God" (Acts 5:3–4). As the Nicene Creed states, the Holy Spirit "with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified." Nevertheless, in the New Testament the word "God" typically refers to the First Person.
- 3 For an easily accessible exploration of this point, see Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992).
- 4 I'm reminded how John Dominic Crossan reconstructed the historical Jesus as a cynic philosopher. John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994).
- 5 See Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (Macmillan Publishers, 2003); Richard Wightman Fox, *Jesus in America: Personal Savior, Cultural Hero, National Obsession* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004); Stephen J. Nichols, *Jesus Made in America: A Cultural History from the Puritans to "The Passion of the Christ"* (Grand Rapids: IVP Academic, 2008).
- 6 Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971) 78.
- 7 The turn of phrase comes from John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967), 208.

Delighting in the Good Law of Yahweh

Paul R. Raabe

In the liturgy Lutherans pray: “Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways to the glory of your holy name.”¹ That prayer reflects good Old Testament theology. The Psalms are replete with similar prayers. They express the prayer of faith, the godly desire to love what Yahweh loves, to delight in God’s good commandments, to walk in God’s upright ways. Only faith in Yahweh, the God of Israel, can talk that way. Followers of Baal or Chemosh or the other gods and goddesses of the nations do not talk that way, for they desire to walk in other paths. The psalmists want to be taught the true paths by the true God and to walk in those godly ways. Why? Because those paths taught by Yahweh are true, good, righteous, upright, holy, salutary, praiseworthy, and perfect. Those who fear, love, and trust in Yahweh above all things love his ways. The ways of Yahweh deserve to be taught and extolled, not the ways of the nations nor the ways of the wicked. As The Large Catechism puts it: “From all of this we see once again how highly these Ten Commandments are to be exalted and extolled above all orders, commands, and works that are taught and practiced apart from them.”²

I. The Torah Psalms

The Hebrew word *Torah* means, simply, “instruction.” It is a *tau*-prefixed noun formation from the root *yarah*, “to instruct.” It is important to remember this basic meaning of the word *Torah* when reading the Old Testament’s laws because they

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Despite his sin and in light of God's mercy, the psalmist also yearns to walk in God's ways.

are first and foremost instruction and teaching from Yahweh. Unlike the law books of today, which are written in a cold, impersonal and objective style, the laws recorded in the Old Testament display a strong didactic character. They often take the form of direct address with second person verbs.

In Deuteronomy, the laws comprise part of Moses's sermons to the people; they are preached laws, filled with exhortations and motivational clauses.

The "instruction," or *Torah*, of Yahweh is extolled in many places throughout the Old Testament. Here I draw your attention to the Psalms. Many of the Psalms praise the *Torah*. A common petition is that Yahweh "teach me" (hip'ul of ירה; pi'el of למר; hip'ul of ידע). The psalmists desire to be taught by God and to be taught the instructions of God. They do not want to follow the advice of the wicked and the godless. They want the God of truth to teach them, and they want to follow God's way wholeheartedly: "Teach me, O Yahweh, your way; I will walk in your truth; unite my heart to fear your name" (Ps 86:11).³ God "teaches" his people the ways to go, and his people respond by praising God and his ways.

Let us consider some examples. Psalm 32, a well-known penitential psalm, begins by proclaiming how blessed is the one "whose transgression is forgiven" (32:1). The psalmist confessed his sin and God forgave him (32:5). Then, later in the psalm, God speaks: "I will make you wise and I will instruct you in the way in which you should walk; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. Do not be as the horse or as the mule which have no understanding" (32:8-9).⁴ God teaches his people and urges that they be teachable. Notice how both the emphasis on God's forgiveness and the emphasis on God's instruction in the way to go belong together. Clearly, we should not think of a works-righteous legalism here.

Psalm 143 provides a good example of the close connection between faith in God's steadfast love and the desire to walk in God's way. The psalmist prays: "And do not enter into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you" (143:2). The psalmist does not claim to be without sin; he implores God's undeserved mercy and steadfast love. Despite his sin and in light of God's mercy, the psalmist also yearns to walk in God's ways. The psalmist seeks God's steadfast love, God's teaching, and God's leading. He prays:

Let me hear your steadfast love in the morning; for in you I trust; make me know the way in which I should walk; for to you I lift up my soul." (Ps 143:8)

Teach me to do your will, for you are my God; let your good Spirit lead me on level ground." (Ps 143:10)

This desire to be taught and led by God strikes a dominant note in the prayer within Psalm 25:

Your ways, O Yahweh, make me know; your paths teach me.
Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my
salvation; for you I wait all the day. (25:4–5)

Good and upright is Yahweh; therefore he instructs sinners in the way.
He leads the humble in justice, and he teaches the humble his way.
(25:8–9)

Who is the man who fears Yahweh? He [Yahweh] will instruct him
in the way he should choose. (25:12)

The God to whom the prayer is addressed is Yahweh, “the God of my salvation.” Because Yahweh is “good and upright,” he is the God who can be trusted to teach and lead in good ways. To be taught and led by Yahweh is a great gift and much to be desired. Once again, closely associated with the petition for instruction is the petition for forgiveness:

The sins of my youth and my acts of rebellion do not remember. (25:7);

For your name’s sake, O Yahweh, forgive my iniquity, for it is great.
(25:11)

Forgive all my sins. (25:18)

Any legalistic works-righteous interpretation of these psalms would greatly distort their meaning.

Psalms 1, 19, and 119 are so dominated by the praise of the *Torah* that they are labeled “Torah Psalms.”⁵ Psalm 1 declares blessed the one who refuses the counsel of the wicked but meditates on Yahweh’s *Torah*. Like a tree planted by water he bears much fruit. The *Torah* is likened to water that nourishes and fructifies a tree. The psalm goes on to contrast the wicked: “Not so the wicked but like the chaff which the wind blows away” (1:4). The wicked vanish so quickly that they do not even get a verb. They have no roots and no water source. The message is clear: Don’t be chaff; be a tree by the water.⁶

Psalm 19 extols the *Torah* with six sentences, each of which uses a nominal clause followed by a participial phrase, as seen in parallel columns below (except for the last colon, which breaks the pattern by using a finite verb).

The <i>Torah</i> of Yahweh is perfect,	restoring the soul.
The testimony of Yahweh is sure,	making the simple wise.
The precepts of Yahweh are upright,	making the heart glad.
The commandment of Yahweh is pure,	enlightening the eyes.

The fear of Yahweh is clean,
The judgments of Yahweh are true;
standing forever.
they are altogether
righteous.

The instruction of Yahweh gladdens the soul and heart, enlightens the eyes, and makes one wise. Those who love Yahweh find his *Torah* more desirable than gold and sweeter than honey (Ps 19:10).

The most famous Torah Psalm is Psalm 119. Psalm 119 is structured around eight key words functioning as near-synonyms for the law of Yahweh: “saying” (אִמְרָה), “word” (דְּבַר), “statute” (חֹק), “commandment” (מִצְוָה), “judgment” (מִשְׁפָּט), “testimonies” (עֲדוּת), “precept” (פְּקוּדָה), and “Torah” (תּוֹרָה). These key words occur 177 times in 176 verses, basically one Torah-word per verse. Four verses omit a key word and four verses compensate by using two key words; the psalm throws in an additional occurrence for extra measure so as to overflow with Torah-words.⁸

Psalm 119 exalts Yahweh’s instruction. Repeatedly throughout the psalm, one finds expressions of delight in the *Torah*, petitions to be taught by Yahweh, and declarations of the wish to keep the commandments. Because Yahweh is good and righteous, his statutes are good and righteous: “You are good and you do good; teach me your statutes” (119:68); “You are righteous, O Yahweh, and upright are your judgments” (119:137). Love of Yahweh and love of his law go together. As the psalmist loves the ways of Yahweh, so he hates the ways of the wicked:

Incline my heart to your testimonies and not to false gain; make my eyes turn away from looking at vanity; in your ways revive me. (119:36–37)

Hot indignation seizes me because of the wicked, those who forsake your *Torah*. (119:53)

From your precepts I gain understanding; therefore I hate every false path. (119:104)

The double-minded I hate, but your *Torah* I love. (119:113)

Therefore all your precepts concerning everything I consider right; every false path I hate. (119:128)

Falsehood I hate and I abhor; your *Torah* I love.” (119:163)

Who is your teacher and what do you desire? Either the wicked teach you or the God of Israel teaches you. Either you learn the ways of the wicked or you learn the ways of God. Either you delight in and meditate on the instruction of falsehood or you delight in and meditate on the instruction of truth. Those are the two radically different roads possible, and this psalm and others like it encourage the hearers to set

their hearts on God's road. That is the framework needed for understanding these psalms.⁹ They do not intend to promote legalistic works-righteousness or pharisaical pride but to shape our loves and our hates, what we admire and what we despise. They are designed to form and inform God-pleasing prayer and praise.

*Either you learn the ways
of the wicked or you learn
the ways of God.*

II. The Narrative Framework for Israel's Laws

The laws given to ancient Israel appear in three major places: Exodus 20–23, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy 5 and 12–26. It is important to understand these laws within their narrative context. The biblical narrative begins with creation, the fall, the first promise, and the spread of sin and death throughout the world. Then the narrative narrows down to Abraham and his descendents. The maker of the heavens and earth calls Abraham and promises him offspring, the land of Canaan, blessing, and that through him and his seed all the families of the earth will be blessed.

Now fast-forward 400-plus years. Abraham does have many descendants, but they do not live in the land of Canaan. Instead they find themselves in bondage in Egypt. It is not merely an economic or political bondage, but it is also a theological bondage. Israel is not free to serve and worship Yahweh, at least not openly and publicly; they are forced to serve only Pharaoh. They do not deliver themselves and they can not deliver themselves; they are helplessly and hopelessly stuck in bondage. Nevertheless, their God looks on them in his abounding steadfast love; he remembers his covenant with Abraham and “comes down” to deliver them (Ex 3:8). Yahweh defeats Pharaoh with a strong hand and an outstretched arm and brings Israel out of Egypt. Only God and God alone redeemed Israel from bondage.

Yahweh does not only deliver Israel *from* bondage to Pharaoh. He also delivers Israel *for* a different future and a different life. The creator of the heavens and earth brings the people of Israel to himself at Sinai and makes himself their God and makes them his own people.¹⁰ Yahweh renews the covenant he previously made with Abraham, but now he makes it with Israel as a whole nation.¹¹ Moreover, Yahweh promises to bring Israel into the land of Canaan, just as he promised Abraham. The narrative is nicely summarized by God's speech to Moses in Exodus 6:2–8:

I am Yahweh. And I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as El Shadday, but with respect to my name Yahweh, I did not make myself known to them. And I also established my covenant with them, to give to them the land of Canaan, the land of their sojourning-places in which they sojourned. And moreover I

have heard the groaning of the Israelites whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and I have remembered my covenant. Therefore, say to the Israelites, “I am Yahweh, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage. And I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. And I will take you to myself for a people, and I will be your God; and you will know that I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you to the land which I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession. I am Yahweh.”¹²

Israel has been redeemed from bondage and has been brought to God and made God’s own special possession. It was all by God’s undeserved grace and mercy and abundant steadfast love. They have been delivered from one way of life, called “bondage,” and delivered for a different way of life marked by service to Yahweh. The

*Only God and God
alone redeemed Israel
from bondage.*

Israelites were purchased and won from death, as it were, so that they may be God’s own and “live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.”¹³ Now, at Sinai, Yahweh reveals to the nation of Israel the new way of life they are to follow

in the land of Canaan. God did not free them from bondage only to put them back under bondage again. God freed them from bondage for a life of freedom in service to God. That life of freedom in service to God has a definite, describable shape to it, and that shape is given in the pentateuchal laws.

III. The Ways of Yahweh or the Ways of the Nations

In Deuteronomy 4:6–8 Moses says to the people:

Keep and do [the statutes and judgments], for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the eyes of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.” For what great nation is there that has a god as near to it as is Yahweh our God whenever we call to him? And what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as all this Torah which I am placing before you today?

The logic of this kind of passage and others like it can be unpacked in this way. The nations grope in the darkness as they follow the dictates of their own confused minds. They don’t know which way is up. Israel is to live among the nations, but Israel is not

to emulate the nations. Israel is to keep Yahweh's statutes and thereby gain the respect of the nations and even attract the nations to Yahweh and to Yahweh's *Torah* (cf. Dt 26:19).

The laws given by Yahweh describe the shape of Israel's future life in the promised land. These laws envision Israel living in the land of Canaan, yet they call Israel to a life quite unlike that of the Canaanites. Throughout the Pentateuch, the reader frequently comes upon warnings for Israel to avoid imitating the other nations. For example, Leviticus 18:3–4 states:

According to the deeds of the land of Egypt, where you used to dwell, you shall not do, and according to the deeds of the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you, you shall not do, and in their statutes you shall not walk. My judgments you shall do, and my statutes you shall keep by walking in them. I am Yahweh your God.

Yahweh's command, in essence, is this: "Don't walk in *their* benighted statutes; walk in *my* enlightened statutes."

The conduct of Israel in the land is to be distinctly different from that of the surrounding nations in several ways. Israel is not to worship the gods of the surrounding nations or to follow their practices (Ex 23:23–24). Israel is prohibited from worshiping Yahweh by following the worship practices of the other nations (Dt 12:2–4, 29–31). According to Deuteronomy 18:9–14, Israel should not follow the abominable practices of the nations by engaging in child sacrifice or by attempting to communicate with the supernatural world through divination, soothsaying, augury, sorcery, casting spells, and necromancy.¹⁴ Leviticus 18 prohibits Israel from emulating the nations in terms of incest, adultery, human-sacrifice to Molech, homosexuality, and bestiality.¹⁵

Israel is commanded to annihilate the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites precisely "in order that they may not teach you to do according to all their abhorrent things which they do for their gods, and you sin against Yahweh your God" (Dt 20:18; cf. Ex 23:33). Yahweh is to be their teacher, not the idolatrous nations. What will happen if Israel does imitate the nations? Then Israel will experience the same judgment as the nations. Just as God drives the nations out of the land because of their great wickedness, so he will drive a goy-like Israel out of the land as well (Dt 8:20; 9:4–5; Lv 18:24–30; 20:22–23).

A few general observations from specific laws will illustrate how they functioned to shape Israel's life. The laws are addressed to each individual Israelite and to Israel as a whole. Ancient Israel was a theocracy, both a nation and a worshiping community at the same time. Therefore the laws address a wide array of concerns, from worship to warfare, from parents to property, from disputes to disease. The traditional threefold division of the laws into moral, ceremonial, and civil soon breaks down when

God's law accused and condemned both individual Israelites and Israel as a whole.

social, and economic considerations inform them. The laws make sense when studied contextually.

The first commandment is always first and foremost. Deuteronomy repeatedly accents that the commandments are to be kept with joy from a wholehearted “fear” and “love” of God. The commandments do not call for action done to merit God’s favor or for slavish and reluctant action but for glad-hearted action that flows from faith. The God whom one is to fear and love is always the specific God named Yahweh, the God who mercifully brought the Israelites out of bondage and made them his own people. It is of paramount significance for understanding the laws to see them in connection with the opening statement: “I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Ex 20:2; Dt 5:6). The identity of the one giving the laws is not some malevolent deity or some abstract philosophers’ god; instead, he is the revealed God who not only created but also redeemed Israel, who showed himself to be “gracious and compassionate and abounding in steadfast love.”¹⁶ To disobey this God is to disobey the loving Savior. There are also frequent warnings that disobedience eventually provokes God to wrath.¹⁷ God takes his commandments seriously and punishes the transgressors. We should not, however, think of the God giving the laws as angry, malicious, and desiring to punish. The legal material repeatedly reminds Israel that the one who is speaking is the same one who saved them.

IV. The Law Always Accuses Sinners

Those who trust in Yahweh and in his steadfast love extol his law and commandments. They desire to walk in God’s ways. But if we look at the picture from a different angle and ask if sinners measure up to God’s commandments, then the Old Testament uniformly answers with a strong “No!” Sinners transgress God’s good law. The law always accuses sinners. This is what happens when the good, holy, and righteous law of God meets transgressors and lawbreakers. The accusing and condemning function of God’s law manifests itself throughout the Old Testament. Already with the giving of the law at Sinai, provision was made for atonement and forgiveness of sins through the sacrificial system. The entire sacrificial system presupposes that the Israelites would disobey and break commandments. Why else

one studies the laws. Ceremonial considerations inform some “moral” laws, moral considerations inform some “ceremonial” laws, and so on. Although the laws address a host of issues, they should not be understood as a random or irrational jumble of commands. Certain theological,

would they need atonement and forgiveness?

God's law accused and condemned both individual Israelites and Israel as a whole. The main reason given for their exile is that they continually broke the first commandment. Because of their continual idolatry and apostasy, they provoked Yahweh to anger and brought down upon themselves the curses of the Mosaic covenant. This is how the biblical historians and prophets explain the destruction of Samaria and Jerusalem and the exiles of the north and the south. The Old Testament historians narrate the history of Israel as one of continual rebellion against Yahweh on the part of Israel, to which Yahweh responded with acts of judgment. There is only one exception to this narrative of sin and judgment: the time of Joshua, when, according to Judges 2, the people faithfully served Yahweh. After that generation died, every succeeding generation rebelled until the axe of judgment came down and Israel as an independent nation ceased to exist. According to the usual chronology, the North was exiled circa 732 BC, Samaria was destroyed in 722 BC, most of Judah was exiled already in 701 BC, and Jerusalem was destroyed in 587/6 BC.

V. A New and Different Future

Throughout the entire Old Testament, one reads of Yahweh desiring an obedient Israel. Although the history of Israel turned out to be marked by disobedience, God still desired an obedient people. It is not as if God gave up on that idea and turned to a backup plan. On the contrary, God announced through the prophets that in the future there would be an obedient Israel. God himself would see to it. The prophets repeatedly announce a future for Israel and the nations that would be radically different from the sorry past.

According to the prophets, the status quo was completely unacceptable, characterized as it was by lack of faith in Yahweh, by going after other gods, by injustice and wicked behavior, by the total inability to do what is right and the constant inclination to do what is wrong. So the prophets announced the coming judgment against Israel and all the nations. But that would not be the end of the story. Out of the ashes God would create a new and different reality. The prophets promise the messianic King who will rule in perfect righteousness, unlike the kings of the past. Isaiah's servant songs announce an obedient servant, the servant of Yahweh who suffers not for his own sins but for the sins of others. The prophets also declare that God will build a new Israel out of the remnant, and this new Israel will be different.

Jeremiah's well-known promise of a new covenant sets forth these promises: Yahweh will write his *Torah* on Israel's heart; Yahweh will be their God and they will be Yahweh's people; and they will all perfectly know Yahweh. This new reality will be grounded on the gift of divine forgiveness; "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more" (Jer 31:31–34). Ezekiel has a similar promise: "I will give to you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove the

heart of stone from your flesh and I will give to you a heart of flesh. And my Spirit I will put within you and I will cause you to walk in my statutes, and my judgments you will keep and you will do” (Ez 36:26–27). The people were supposed to make for themselves a new heart and a new spirit (Ez 18:31), but because they failed, now God promises that he himself will give them a new heart and a new spirit and that his own Spirit will enable them to be his obedient Israel.

The prophets depict the future not as a mere repetition of the past but as something radically different. Part of that difference is a different Israel. In place of the old faithless and disobedient Israel there will be a new Israel, a faithful and obedient Israel enabled by the Spirit to walk in Yahweh’s ways. The future will be different, not only for Israel but also for the nations. Isaiah announces the future time when the nations will stream to the exalted Zion:

And many peoples will come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of Yahweh, to the house of the God of Jacob, so that he may teach us from his ways, and so that we may walk in his paths.’ For from Zion will go forth the *Torah*, and the word of Yahweh from Jerusalem”. (2:3)

Instead of teaching themselves their own constructed and false ideas, instead of walking in their own wicked ways, the nations will be taught by Yahweh and will walk in Yahweh’s ways. The future life and conduct of the Gentiles will be different, and that difference is characterized as walking in the ways of the *Torah* given by the God of Jacob. According to the prophets, one of the gifts that Yahweh will give Israel and the nations is a new and different life, a life with Yahweh and a life of walking in Yahweh’s ways. That is the way the Old Testament ends, with a promise of a future marked by obedience.

VI. Reflections in the Light of the New Testament

To this point, Old Testament theology of the law has been described from within the Old Testament itself. To hear the Old Testament witness from within the Old Testament itself is a legitimate and necessary task, an essential part of the exercise of doing biblical theology. Limiting oneself to the Old Testament, however, is not the entire theological task from a Christian point of view. Therefore, the scope of this study includes the New Testament and offers brief reflections on the significance of the Old Testament material for Christian theology and life.

The Old Testament’s prophetic hope of a new and different future, a future marked by obedience, has great significance for Christology. The church confesses that Jesus of Nazareth is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. He is the righteous and faithful Messiah, the innocent Suffering Servant. This also means that Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Israel, “Israel condensed into one,”¹⁸ the obedient and

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faithful Israel. Matthew provides a good illustration of this point through his emphasis that Jesus is to be seen as Israel.¹⁹ Jesus recapitulates and fulfills Israel's history; for example, he is called out of Egypt and tested for a period of forty days in the wilderness. He fulfills the promises given by God to ancient Israel. Therefore, it is not surprising that Matthew also stresses the obedience of Jesus toward God his Father. God desires an obedient Israel, and Jesus Christ is first and foremost that obedient Israel. Only on the basis of Christ's perfect obedience are those baptized into Christ reckoned before God as his obedient Israel.

The rich Old Testament theology of the law of God also has great significance for understanding the Christian life.²⁰ One of the gifts from God is a new way of life. Just as the *Torah* depicting Israel's alternative life was a gift and received by the faithful with joy, so also the alternative life God gives Christians is a gift. Not only "justification" but also "sanctification," the new obedience, the new way of godliness and holiness, is to be received with thankfulness. The Holy Spirit has converted the baptized, has regenerated them, has liberated their will, and given them new impulses and a new orientation. The Spirit so transforms them that now it can be said of them that they "fulfill the law" by serving the neighbor in love, though it must also be said of them that they keep the law imperfectly because of sin (Rom 13:8–10; cf. Gal 5:13–14; 6:2).²¹ As St. Paul states in 1 Corinthians 9:20–21, the Christian is neither "under the law" (ὑπὸ νόμου) nor "without the law" (ἄνομος) but "in the law of Christ" (ἐννομος Χριστοῦ). "In the law of Christ" is the third alternative to legalistic bondage under the law on the one hand and antinomian libertinism on the other hand.

What should receive more stress in catechesis, sermons, and Bible classes, in my opinion, are both the goodness of the law and the joy of obedience. The law of God should not be demonized.²² It is not sin, as St. Paul reminds the Romans (Rom 7:7). Just as God is good, so his law is good. "The law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good" (Rom 7:12), and even "of the Spirit" (Rom 7:14). That is why one must say more than only "Christ frees from the law." Because the law is God's law and therefore good, righteous, holy, and of the Spirit, Christians delight in it. Furthermore, "obedience" is not a dirty word. Sinners do not have all the fun. Actually, sin is quite boring and tiresome. Fun, excitement, and real action are in the daily adventure of obedience and service to Christ. To live under the end-time rule of God inaugurated by Christ is to live in an alternative universe in which what is "right" is good and delightful and what is "wrong" is bad and boring.

The theological structure is the same for both Testaments. Just as God freed

ancient Israel from bondage for a new and different life of service to God, so also—but in a far greater way because of eschatological fulfillment—the good news of Jesus Christ frees all sinners from their old ways to a new and different way. The New Testament often presents a contrast between the old pre-baptismal way of life and the new baptismal way of life, a theology of “before and after” one might say. Consider, for example, 1 Peter 1:14–19 in which the appeal is made to the readers that they leave behind their former lives and dedicate themselves to a different life of holiness:

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” . . . You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. (RSV)

In this text, the contrast between “before” and “after” is again evident. The readers are exhorted to live by the will of God, for they have spent enough time acting like the Gentiles. As the readers live by the will of God they receive abuse from the Gentiles, who “are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excess of dissipation, and they blaspheme” (1 Pt 4:3–4). Because the readers no longer join the “Gentile” crowd, their former, pagan friends are surprised and upset by this change of behavior, so upset in fact that they “blaspheme” (βλασφημέω).²³

The apostle Paul picks up on the same theme in Ephesians 2 by setting forth two pairs of contrast: First, whereas the readers used to be “dead” in their sins, now God made them “alive” with Christ; second, whereas they formerly “walked according to the age of this world” (2:2), now God created them in Christ “for good works, which God prepared beforehand that in them we should walk” (2:10). What do these “good works” and this alternative way of life look like? Paul goes on in Ephesians 4–6 to specify this life with significant description and instruction. For example, Ephesians 4:28 urges: “Let him who steals steal no longer; but rather let him labor, performing with his own hands what is good, in order that he may have something to share with him who has need”(NASB). Notice the contrast being stressed between the one *ethos* and the other *ethos*: “Stop robbing people and instead get an honest job so you may give generously to the poor.”

VII. Conclusion

It seems to me that today, more than ever, the baptized need to be taught how radically different the ways of the Lord are from the ways of the world. Ancient Israel was called to live *among* the nations but *unlike* the nations. In the language of the Gospel of John, the church is to live in the world but not *of* the world (17:14–16).

Lest the ideologies of the day become the pattern for the church to follow with the result that she uncritically and unwittingly marches to the imperatives of the cultural *Zeitgeist*, the church needs to be taught the distinction between the patterns of life advocated by the world and the very different pattern of life set forth by God.

I am not encouraging legalism. The law always accuses sinners, and Christians continue to be sinners. Our justification is always “apart from works,” even after baptism and even at the final judgment. Christ remains the mediator after one’s baptism. What I am stressing is the simple observation that both Testaments devote a great deal of space to describing the life and conduct of God’s people. Not only external actions matter but also internal movements of the heart. Conversely, not only internal movements of the heart matter but also external actions. This is true for individuals but also for the church. What does the church look like, how does she conduct herself, and how does her behavior differ from that of other groups? These questions deserve serious attention, lest the church actually behave as if she were just another religious organization among a smorgasbord of religious organizations, trying to sell her religious commodities to religious consumers.

Finally, the Old Testament’s promise of an obedient Israel relates to eschatology. The Christian life of new obedience remains inchoate and imperfect since we continue to be sinners. We still live in a “not-yet” condition as we wait for the day when the Old Testament promise of an obedient Israel reaches its eschatological consummation. Only at the Parousia will we have no original sin. Only then will our thoughts, words, and deeds become perfectly holy and pure, perfectly obedient to the will of our Creator. Only then will Jeremiah’s promise reach its consummation, when it can be said of us that we “know the Lord” perfectly without the need of a teacher and that we live as God’s people with the *Torah* written on our hearts in perfect obedience. That is a day to long for with eager anticipation because with the psalmists of old we delight in God’s good law and we desire to walk in his good ways to the glory of his holy name.

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Endnotes

- 1 *Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982), 158, 178.
- 2 LC, “Ten Commandments,” 333 (K-W, 431).
- 3 Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in this essay are the author’s own translation.
- 4 It remains unclear where the quotation of the divine speech ends—either at the end of v. 8 or v. 9. In any case, v. 8 should be taken as a divine speech set within the psalm. The clause “I will counsel you with my eye upon you” points toward this interpretation. The phrase “my eye upon you” refers to divine protection.
- 5 For stimulating comments on the significance of these psalms within the Psalter, see James Luther Mays, “The Place of the Torah-Psalms in the Psalter,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106 (1987): 3–12.
- 6 See also Jeremiah 17:5–8.
- 7 For a good treatment of Psalm 19 that shows how the whole psalm makes coherent sense, see Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50* WBC 19 (Waco: Word Books, 1983).
- 8 On the complex patterns of Psalm 119, see David Noel Freedman, *Psalm 119: The Exaltation of Torah* Biblical and Judaic Studies from UCSD 6 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999).
- 9 The Torah Psalms exhibit a “Newtonian” perspective, as it were (i.e., a perspective based on our experience), that views reality as we perceive it, rather than an “Einsteinian” view that looks at things from God’s eternal perspective; see James W. Voelz, “Reading Scripture as Lutherans in the Post-Modern Era,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 14 (2000): 309–334.
- 10 On the covenant formula, “I will be their God and they will be my people,” see Rolf Rendtorff, *The Covenant Formula: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation*, trans. Margaret Kohl Old Testament Studies (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998 [original 1995]).
- 11 For good theological treatments of the relationship between the Abrahamic covenant and the Sinaitic covenant, see John P. Milton, *God’s Covenant of Blessing* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Press, 1961), and Walter R. Roehrs, “Divine Covenants: Their Structure and Function,” *Concordia Journal* 14 (1988): 7–27.
- 12 On the passage and its significance for biblical theology, see Elmer A. Martens, *God’s Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981).
- 13 Cf. Small Catechism, “The Creed,” 4 (K-W, 355).
- 14 On these practices among the Canaanites, see Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy* JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 172–175.
- 15 On these practices among the nations, see Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 251–260. On Molech, see George C. Heider, *The Cult of Molek: A Reassessment* JSOT Sup 43 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), and John Day, *Molech: A God of Human Sacrifice in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Leviticus 18 also prohibits sexual relations with a woman during menstrual impurity (18:19), a prohibition that is part of Israel’s unique system of ritual purity.
- 16 This frequently recurring phrase is virtually a creedal statement in the Old Testament (e.g., Ps 103:8).
- 17 On the wrath of God in the Old Testament, see Bruce E. Baloiian, *Anger in the Old Testament* American University Studies Series 7, Theology and Religion 99; (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), and H. G. L. Peels, *The Vengeance of God: The Meaning of the Root NQM and the Function of the NQM-Texts in the Context of Divine Revelation in the Old Testament; Oudtestamentische Studiën 31*; (Leiden: Brill, 1995).
- 18 I owe this phrase to my colleagues Horace Hummel and James Voelz.
- 19 For a good treatment of Jesus as Israel in Matthew, see David E. Holwerda, *Jesus and Israel: One Covenant or Two?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 27–58.
- 20 For a classic treatment of the Christian life of new obedience, see Adolf Köberle, *The Quest for Holiness* (1936; repr., Evansville, IN: Ballast Press, 1997).
- 21 Werner Elert asserts that the “law” throughout the Scriptures is always the law of retribution; see *Das christliche Ethos* (Tübingen: Furche-Verlag, 1949), 90. This assertion is patently false. When Paul states in Rom 13:8–10, for example, that Christians “fulfill the law,” he does not mean that they fulfill the law of

retribution or the law that threatens with the wrath of God. By the term “law” (νόμος) in this passage, Paul means simply the content of God’s will for human conduct as expressed in the Ten Commandments. We must reckon with the polysemy of the word *law*, even in Pauline usage; see Paul R. Raabe, “The Law and Christian Sanctification: A Look at Romans,” *Concordia Journal* 22 (1996): 178–185. This view also is reflected in Lutheran theology, as can be demonstrated by numerous texts in the Lutheran Confessions. Ap. IV, 136 maintains that “the keeping of the law must begin in us and then increase more and more” (K-W, 142). Ap. XII, 82 states in the German version that the regenerate receive the Holy Spirit and “therefore they begin to become friendly to the law and to obey the same” (“*Darum fangen sie an, dem Gesetz hold zu werden und demselbigen zu gehorchen*”). The Large Catechism introduces the creed by stating that the Apostles’ Creed “is given in order to help us do what the Ten Commandments require of us” (LC, “The Creed,” 2 [K-W, 431]). Furthermore, the Large Catechism introduces the Lord’s Prayer by saying that “nothing is so necessary as to call upon God incessantly and to drum into his ears our prayer that he may give, preserve, and increase in us faith and the fulfillment of the Ten Commandments and remove all that stands in our way and hinders us in this regard” (LC, “The Lord’s Prayer,” 2 [K-W, 440–441]).

- 22 Sometimes at least in Lutheran circles the law is spoken of only in negative terms. For a discussion of twentieth-century debates over the role of the law, see Scott Murray, *Law, Life, and the Living God: The Third Use of the Law in Modern American Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002).
- 23 The verb can denote “to malign, defame” the readers, but in this context it more likely means “to blaspheme” God; see Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter Hermeneia*; ed. Eldon Jay Epp (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 284.

Human Suffering in Biblical Context

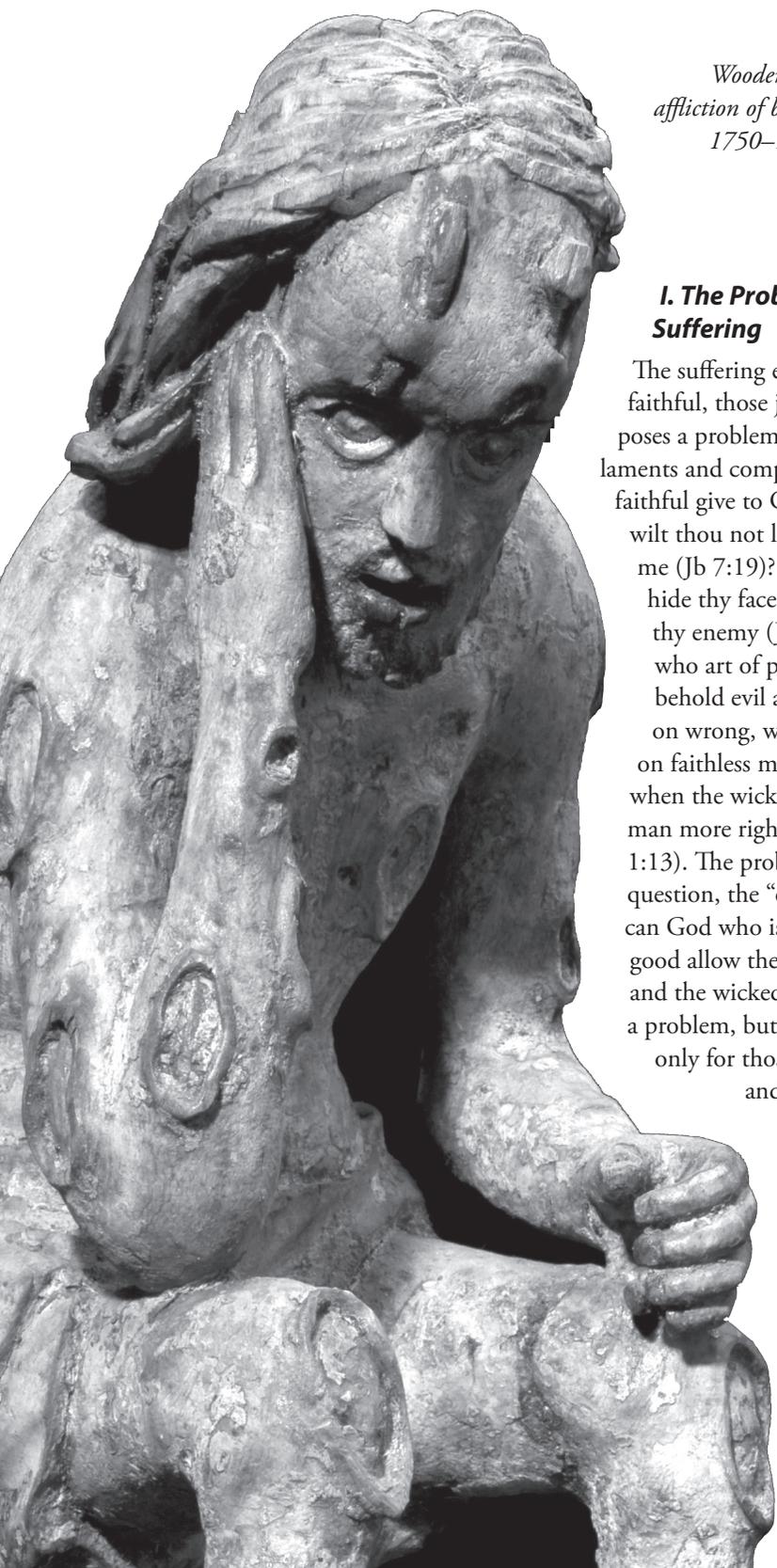
Paul R. Raabe

What Christian has not experienced suffering? In the words of Eliphaz, “Man is born for trouble” (Jb 5:7). Human suffering has always been and still is a major problem for Christian theology. A Christian family or congregation must wrestle with it whenever one of its members becomes seriously ill or injured. Christian ministers address it repeatedly in their pastoral care, hospital calls, and funerals. Thanks to the media, each one of us participates in all the catastrophes and atrocities of the world. The intensity and amount of suffering that occurs in the world today are second to none in history. All of this makes the book of Job one of the most timely and practical books of the Bible.

If ever there was a righteous person who suffered, it was Job. The suffering Job has always fascinated readers. The book of Job has been studied by humanists, philosophers, atheists, Jewish scholars, Christian theologians, and laypeople of every generation.¹ Yet in spite of such attention, the book of Job is one of the most misunderstood books of the Bible. The purpose of this article is to put Job into its biblical context, and to help the reader of Job develop the “reader competence” necessary for understanding and applying it. To achieve this purpose this article will summarize the dominant biblical themes that relate to human suffering.² It will not be exhaustive—who can exhaust the Bible?—but will simply paint in broad strokes.

Editor's note

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Wooden figure of Job with an affliction of boils, possibly German, 1750–1850. (Credit: Science Museum, London.)

I. The Problem of Human Suffering

The suffering experienced by the faithful, those justified by faith, poses a problem. It evokes the laments and complaints which the faithful give to God: “How long wilt thou not look away from me (Jb 7:19)? Why dost thou hide thy face and count me as thy enemy (Jb 13:24)? Thou who art of purer eyes than to behold evil and canst not look on wrong, why dost thou look on faithless men, and art silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?” (Hb 1:13). The problem is the theodicy question, the “eternal why”: how can God who is omnipotent and good allow the faithful to suffer and the wicked to prosper? It is a problem, but it is a problem only for those who, like Job and Habakkuk, affirm three assumptions: there is one God who governs all things according to his will; God is good and loving; suffering is real and bad.

First, there is only one God who omnipotently governs all according to His will. The whole Bible, of course, assumes this (Ps 66:7; 89:9–13; 93; 103:19; 104; Mt 6; Acts 17:24–28; 1 Cor 8:4–6; etc.). There are no “accidents” in the ultimate sense. Job too assumes this (Jb 9:4–10; 12:7–25; 26).

Second, God is good and loving. This affirmation became virtually a creed for ancient Israel (Ex 34:6–7; Jl 2:13; Jon 4:2; Ps 136). Job had assumed this (Jb 10:3, 11–12), but in his suffering he sometimes questioned it (see below).

Third, human suffering is a reality. The Bible throughout has a very realistic perspective. Suffering is not an illusion. Also, affliction and pain are in and of themselves bad. They are a disruption into God’s good creation. Suffering along with death was not there before the fall and will not be experienced by God’s people after the eschaton (Gn 1–2; Rv 21–22). Death, which invades a person’s life in various forms including illness and emotional turmoil, is an enemy; it attacks life and wholeness (Ps 30; 1 Cor 15:25). “Wherever the diminution of life manifests itself as weakness, sickness, imprisonment, hostile threats, danger before the law, or anxiety, there the sphere of death has broken into the human realm.”³ Death, with its concomitant suffering, is ultimately something from which to be delivered. Job’s laments attest to the reality and “badness” of suffering; “I am not at ease, nor am I quiet; I have no rest; but trouble comes” (Jb 3:26).

These three assumptions constitute the “worldview” of the book of Job. If the reader denies or softens one of them, the book loses its punch; there is no problem with which to wrestle. The situation of the faithful suffering and the wicked prospering poses no problem for polytheists, dualists, atheists, agnostics, naturalists, and fatalists. Today as in the past these assumptions are being called into question. Here I would like to highlight some of the most popular lines of attack.⁴

The first assumption, that God alone omnipotently rules, is being challenged by Process Theology.⁵ It argues against an omnipotent God and instead posits that God’s power is limited or at least self-limited. This is basically the position of the popular book by Rabbi H. S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*:

God would like people to get what they deserve in life, but He cannot always arrange it. Forced to choose between a good God who is not totally powerful, or a powerful God who is not totally good, the author of the book of Job chooses to believe in God’s goodness.⁶

However, this is certainly not the kind of God that is revealed in God’s speeches in Job 38–41. He might not *immediately* destroy Behemoth and Leviathan for example, but that does not mean that he *cannot* (41:11).

In an unintentional way, some of Pentecostalism’s accents end up undermining the first assumption also. Usually Pentecostalists emphasize that Satan causes sickness.

The answer to the question of why the faithful suffer is not simply “Satan did it.”

The Bible does speak this way on occasion (Lk 13:16; 2 Cor 12:7) and we need to affirm it. To be sure, the Satan⁷ was the *immediate* agent of Job’s affliction. But when people can only say it this way, when they

overemphasize this side of the coin, they come close to a sort of dualism that posits two “gods,” one good and one evil. In contrast, Job 1–2 in harmony with the rest of the Bible reveals that the Satan and God are not on the same level; they are not equal. Everything, even the devil, is under God and under His rule. The answer to the question of why the faithful suffer is not simply “Satan did it.”

Also the third assumption is being challenged by some. There are those who deny that temporal death per se is an alien intrusion into the created order. Karl Barth, for example, argued that temporal death is a natural and created limit to human life.⁸ Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christian Science are well-known examples of religions which maintain that the ills we seem to suffer are illusory, the result of faulty thinking. North Americans seem especially susceptible to a watering-down of suffering and death’s reality and “badness.”⁹ The values promoted in the public arena often amount to blind optimism, a civil religion of unconquerable progress. We are exhorted to “think positively,” to deny suffering, to suppress the cold, stark reality of death. When someone dies people say, “so-and-so departed” or “left us” rather than simply “so-and-so died.” The narcissistic pursuit of private happiness causes people to be apathetic toward human suffering. Unless the reader can truly feel Job’s deep and profound anguish, unless the reader is troubled deep within the soul by Job’s pain, he or she will never be able to understand and appreciate the book of Job.

It is remarkable how delicately the prologue and epilogue of Job maintain the balance between these three assumptions. The affliction Job experienced is designated “evil” (*hārā’āh*) by the writer (42:11). This affliction, however, was not God’s original idea. It originated with the Satan who essentially disputed the fact that God is worth loving for his own sake and not simply for the material prosperity that he gives (1:9–11; 2:3–5). The Satan “incited” God against Job (2:3). Yet, the Satan did not have any independent power and authority to afflict Job. He asks God, “But put forth thy hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse thee to thy face” (1:11; cf. 2:5). God then gives Job into the Satan’s power (1:12; 2:6). In fact, God acknowledges that he ultimately is the one who afflicted Job when he says to the Satan, “you incited me against him to ruin him without cause” (2:3). The writer of the book also recognizes that God ultimately was behind the suffering when he states in the end that Job’s friends and relatives “comforted him for all the evil that Yahweh had brought upon him” (42:11). Throughout the book Job recognizes God rather than the Satan as the afflicter, and rightfully so. God alone is the Lord. Yet God has always been and still

remains good and loving toward Job. God gives Job the honored title “my servant” at the beginning and at the end (1:8; 2:3; 42:7–8) and graciously “blesses” Job (42:10–17). Ironically, God’s just wrath is kindled against Job’s friends in the end, and only by means of offerings and Job’s intercession will God not destroy them (42:7–9). None of these three assumptions is rejected by the writer of the book.

II. The Ultimate Origin of Human Suffering¹⁰

The ultimate origin of human suffering is the fall into sin and God’s consequent curse. Before the fall God declared everything he created “good.” “The man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed” (Gn 2:25). God’s will for them was life (Gn 2:9, 16–17). After Adam and Eve fell, they felt shame and became afraid of God (Gn 3:7–10). There was interpersonal conflict (Gn 3:11–12). Because of their sin, God gave Eve pain in childbearing and cursed the ground, making Adam’s work painful (Gn 3:16–19). Now the earth would produce “thorns and thistles”; creation itself was cursed and “subjected to futility” by God (Rom 8:20–22). The

We continue to experience the effects of the fall, which include pain, grief, illness, interpersonal strife, and natural disasters.

first pair were sentenced to death and driven away from the tree of life (Gn 3:19–24). The following chapters in Genesis depict the spread of sin and death over the whole human race both before and after the flood. (Note the refrain “and he died” in Gn 5 and the limited lifespans in Gn 11.) One of the first events recorded in the patriarchal narratives is that “there was a famine in the land” (Gn 12:10). In the words of St. Paul, “sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned” (Rom 5:12).

Because we still live in this fallen age and this cursed world and because we are still sinners, we continue to experience the effects of the fall, which include pain, grief, illness, interpersonal strife, and natural disasters. Yet, it is important to stress that such suffering had an historical beginning and will have an end for believers. It is not eternal. To revise Arius a bit, there was once when suffering was not and there will be a time when it will be not for God’s own.

III. The Immediate Origin of Human Suffering

When sufferers cry out “Why, O Lord?” they are usually not inquiring into the ultimate historical origin of human suffering. Nor is this the concern of the book of Job. Rather, their cry and that of Job concern the immediate origin of their own suffering. Job is not pondering the intellectual and somewhat abstract problem of

theodicy as such. Job is wrestling with the meaning of *his own* suffering. The book is not so much an example of didactic “wisdom” literature as it is a “lament” and “petition” by a suffering believer.¹¹ Job experienced what Luther called *Anfechtungen/Tentatio*.¹² “Why dost thou hide thy face, and count me as thy enemy?” Job cries out to God (13:24). Job felt God’s wrathful “arrows” and yet knew that he had been faithful to God. It is a faith question and a faith struggle.

Job’s true crisis was a crisis of faith, not of suffering. And so is ours. All of us at times find ourselves in Joblike circumstances. We will not likely face the extreme disasters that befell Job, but a tragic accident, a terminal illness, or a loss of job may have us shaking our heads and asking ourselves, “Why me? What does God have against me? Why does he seem so distant?”¹³

The immediate origin of human suffering can be categorized into three groups: suffering due to divine punishment for specific sins; suffering due to an unknown cause; and suffering due to persecution for the faith. The first two can be designated “affliction” such as illness or loss of a loved one, and the third can be designated as a “cross.”¹⁴ The book of Job is wrestling with the first two.

Affliction

Job’s three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar (and somewhat Elihu) all assume a causal nexus between specific sins and suffering. They assume that the faithful prosper materially while the unfaithful suffer afflictions. But each friend has his own distinctive viewpoint, which he rather statically maintains.¹⁵ In contrast, Job’s view fluctuates but overall his faith grows; he progresses from untried faith to tried faith (see below).

Bildad and Zophar argue from effect to cause. Job’s afflictions prove that he committed some unrepentant sin in the past. Bildad conditions it: if Job were innocent, God would restore him. Job should search his heart (chap. 8). Zophar simply asserts it. In fact, Zophar “comforts” Job by informing him, “Know then that God exacts of you *less* than your guilt deserves” (11:6). Eliphaz, while still maintaining the causal nexus between deeds and physical well-being, is more positive. He concedes Job’s piety and tries to console Job that surely God will soon restore such a righteous man (chap. 5). Later on Eliphaz hypothesizes that maybe Job committed sins of omission (22:7–11).

That God punishes people for specific sins is, of course, a common teaching in the Bible: Miriam and Uzziah became leprous (Nm 12; 2 Chr 26); the fiery serpents (Nm 21); the plague in the wilderness (Nm 25); the book of Judges; Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5); the Corinthians at the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11:30); and so on. That God blesses the faithful is also a common biblical teaching: Abraham, Isaac,

and Jacob; the book of Joshua; Nicodemus; the Ethiopian eunuch; Cornelius; many early Christians (Acts 4:34); and so on. Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 list numerous curses with which God justly inflicts the rebellious and blessings which God graciously bestows on those justified by faith.¹⁶ Also, Old Testament “wisdom” literature threatens curses and promises blessings (Ps 37; Proverbs). The problem with the view of Job’s friends is that they argue from effect to cause. Job is afflicted; therefore he must have committed some specific sins. They deny the possibility that one can be an *innocent* sufferer. Also, they wrongly assume that such divinely promised curses and blessings must occur now, in this life and this history rather than eschatologically.¹⁷

Job himself is a classic biblical refutation to the working “theology” of his friends and the theology of Pentecostalism, “Health-Wealth-andHappiness Gospel,” “Name-it-and-Claim-it” theology, Reconstructionism, and all forms of “success theology.”¹⁸ Job rightly insists that he is innocent. He has kept faith in God (31:28). This is not a false “workrighteousness” sort of pride. Job admits that he is a sinner (13:26), but he maintains that he readily confessed his sins to his God, “If I have concealed my transgressions like Adam, hiding my iniquity in my bosom . . .” (31:33 MT). There is no secret, unrepented sin in his past for which he deserves such affliction. In fact, God himself says so at the beginning: “Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, *who fears* God and turns away from evil?” (1:8; 2:3). The Satan incited God against Job “to ruin him *without cause*” (2:3).

Now, I suppose, one could simply say that we are all sinful and unclean and indeed deserve nothing but temporal and eternal punishment. That is certainly true and I doubt that Job would deny it. But some sinners suffer temporally more than other sinners! Job was a confessing believer, one justified by faith, one whose faith was active in love. In that sense Job was “innocent.” That is also what the psalmists mean when they maintain their “integrity” (e.g., Ps. 26). The reader will never be able to understand the book if he or she cannot reckon with the possibility of a person being afflicted yet “innocent.” Job’s friends denied the possibility but Job rightly affirmed it, and this provoked the debate (27:1–6).

On the other hand, Job at times (and only at times!) derived the opposite conclusion from that of his friends. Since Job is innocent, therefore God must be unloving and even capricious (9:12). Job knows that God is omnipotent but thinks that God uses his omnipotence for destructive rather than beneficial purposes (9:5–10; 12:12–25). God’s omnipotent rule is not very comforting (23:13–16). Job parodies Psalm 8, “What is man, that thou dost make so much of him”; in other words, why does God go to such a bother in so ruthlessly pursuing puny man? (7:17–19). He cries to God, “Leave me alone!” (10:20; 14:6). God seems to be unjust, “It is all one; therefore I say, He destroys both the blameless and the wicked” (9:22). In

fact, the wicked prosper, contrary to the friends' doctrine (chap. 21). Thus the friends consistently and Job at times are stuck in an "either-or" world view. Either God is good and Job is wicked (friends), or Job is good and God is wicked (Job occasionally).

To this limited human perspective, God in his speeches from the whirlwind gives a broader divine perspective (chaps. 38–41). He does not contest Job's "innocence." The friends are wrong about Job. But God does contest the conclusion that he is wicked and capricious. "Job and the three friends created from a knowledge *about* God a knowledge *over* God."¹⁹ They tried to enslave God with their human concept of immediate retribution. To do that is anthropocentric and egocentric. So God responds by talking only about his rule over nature. Humans are not even included in the portrayal.

There is rhyme and reason to what God does but it is beyond human reason. There is an "order" to things but it is a divine order and not a human one. Would Job know enough to water the uninhabited desert if he were God (38:25–27)? Would Job feed the wild animals—rather than immediately destroy them—by providing prey for them if he were God (38:39–41)? God might not immediately destroy the terrible Behemoth and Leviathan but he does hold them in check (chaps. 40–41), just like he holds back the proud sea (38:10–11) and the Satan (chaps. 1–2). The implication is that one day God will defeat and destroy the wicked enemies. The point of the whole discourse is clear: God is the living God; God defends his freedom and hidden ways against a human wisdom that tries to overstep the border between Creator and creature.²⁰ Job gets the point, "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know" (42:3).

God never reveals to Job the immediate origin of his affliction. The reader, of course, knows. The reader of Job 1–2 knows about the test set up by God and the Satan. Is Job's faith self-centered or not? Is God himself worthy of love? But Job never finds out about this. The point is obvious: the immediate origin of some affliction is simply unknown, hidden in the unrevealed will of God. Not all affliction is God's punishing response to specific sins (cf. Lk 13; Jn 9). Yet, God is not capricious. His ways are not our ways; his ways are beyond human reason.

Cross

The book of Job deals with the issue of suffering "affliction." But some suffering consists of bearing the "cross" for the sake of the faith. Its immediate origin is the hostility of the world, the devil, and the flesh to the word of God. Both Testaments

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are loaded with examples of faithful persons being persecuted for the sake of the faith: Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Paul, John, and so on.

Bearing the cross is not only a

possibility for believers; it is a *necessity*. When God called Jeremiah, He predicted that Jeremiah would be resisted, “Do not be dismayed by them. . . . I make you this day a fortified city, and iron pillar, and bronze walls against the whole land. . . . They will fight against you . . .” (1:17–19). The necessity of persecution was laid on Jesus himself. Luke’s Gospel stresses this divine “must”: “Behold, this child is set . . . for a sign that is spoken against . . .” (Lk 2:34); “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected” (Lk 9:22; cf. 9:44; 12:50; 17:25; 18:31–33; 22:22; 24:25–27, 46). Jesus in turn lays the same necessity on his disciples, “Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple” (Lk 14:27; cf. 6:22–23; 9:23–24; 12:11; etc.). The same necessity is repeated by John (Jn 15:18–25), Paul (2 Tm 3:12), Peter (1 Pt 2:21), and others. This theme is so common in Scripture that Luther can even identify the cross as a “mark” of the church:

The holy Christian people are externally recognized by the holy possession of the sacred cross . . . And the only reason that they must suffer is that they steadfastly adhere to Christ and God’s Word, enduring this for the sake of Christ. . . . Wherever you see and hear this, you may know that the holy Christian Church is there.²¹

Whenever the church and Christians are faithful to the Lord, they can expect such suffering. This “necessity” fundamentally contradicts any type of overly optimistic “success theology” or “theology of glory.”

IV. Source, Purpose, and Recipient of Human Suffering

Beneath the question that sufferers often ask, “Did God *send* this affliction or is he simply *allowing* it?” lies a more profound question which seems to be intended: What source and purpose does this suffering have? Does this affliction come from a wrathful or loving God? Is God angrily trying to destroy me with this affliction or is he lovingly using it to help me? In short, what kind of God is behind it and what kind of purpose does it serve?

These are Job’s earnest questions. What troubles Job is not so much the pain of the affliction per se, although the pain is certainly great. What troubles him, what *terrifies* him, is the thought that God in his *wrath* is against him and is seeking to destroy him. It seems as if a wrathful God is relentlessly hounding him to death. “Am I the sea, or a sea monster, that thou settest a guard over me” (7:12)? “Why hast thou made me thy mark? Why have I become a burden to thee” (7:20)? Job experiences God as an enemy, “He has torn me in his wrath, and hated me; he has gnashed his teeth at me; my adversary sharpens his eyes against me” (16:9). It seems as if God is conducting target practice and Job is the target! “He set me up as his target, his archers surround me” (16:12–13).

In order to respond to such questions, we need to clearly distinguish between law

and gospel. There are really two distinct lines of interpretation which the Scriptures give to human suffering. The first is that suffering comes from God's just wrath for the sake of punishment given to contented sinners/unbelievers. The second is that suffering comes from God's undeserved love for the benefit of the sufferer and others, a benefit given to repentant sinners/believers. However, these two lines are not on the same level. The law serves the gospel; God's wrath serves his mercy; God's "consequent will" serves his "antecedent will." God's ultimate purpose is to have mercy, to bring the recipient closer to himself. Thus, there is not one uniform scriptural message regarding human suffering that can be applied to all people at all times.²² There are two messages, but the first serves the second.

Law

The law understanding of suffering is common in both Testaments. Earlier I cited some well-known examples of divine punishment for specific sins. An Old Testament book whose major theme is this "law message" of suffering is the book of Judges. There we see the pattern of the five "R's"—Israel's *rebellion*, divine *retribution*, Israel's *repentance*, divine *rescue* and the gift of *rest*—continuously repeated. (The pattern is summarized in Judges 2.) Israel's apostasies "provoked Yahweh to anger" (2:12) so that He gave them over to their enemies. But when the people cried to Yahweh (3:9, 15, etc.), He raised up "judges" and "saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for Yahweh was moved to pity by their groaning . . ." (2:18). After the "judge" died, the cycle repeated itself. It is important to note that Israel's apostasy *provoked* God to anger. God's wrathful punishment is his "consequent will"; it is deserved. But its function is to lead *stubborn* sinners to repentance, to bring them low (6:6). When it achieves that purpose and they cry to God, God out of his undeserved mercy (his "antecedent will") delivers them. One finds the same theme in Joel (the locust plague), Amos (4:6–11), and Revelation (9:20–21; 16:9–11).

Such temporal suffering for the impenitent is a type of foretaste of the eternal suffering to come. In the words of Amos addressed to stubborn sinners who refused to heed these *visible calls to repentance*, "prepare to meet your God, O Israel!" (4:12). The coming day of Yahweh will be a day of darkness and not light, "as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him" (5:18–20). Paul stressed the same point in Romans 1–2. The wrath of God is presently being "revealed against all ungodliness" in that God gives up stubborn sinners to their sin (1:18–32). In spite of the fact that they now receive "in their own persons the due penalty for their error," they remain impenitent (1:27, 32). They thereby store up for themselves divine wrath for the eschatological day of wrath (2:1–9). The present experience of wrath prefigures the eschatological experience of wrath. However, insofar as their present suffering is *not yet* the future suffering, it is a sign of God's patience, his desire that no one should perish but that all should come to repentance (2 Pt 3:9). Present suffering for the impenitent is God's

warning to repent before it is too late, a blockade on the road to hell.

How often one sees this “law-function” of suffering produce its divinely intended effect for individuals and even groups. When a stubborn “delinquent,” who earlier refused to hear the church’s message, suddenly becomes seriously ill, very often he or she becomes open to what the pastor has to say. The suffering brings that person low so that God can perform his “proper work” of creating faith and hope through the Gospel. It is reported that recently God used a cattle plague “to kill in order to make alive” a whole tribe, the Muslim Fulani people of northern Nigeria.²³ However, this “law-message” of suffering is not the only one given in Scripture. Job’s friends tried to apply it to Job, but Job was not an impenitent sinner—a classic example of confusing and misapplying law and gospel!

Gospel

The other scriptural interpretation of human suffering is the gospel understanding: suffering comes from the loving God in Christ and is given to a believer for the benefit of that believer and others.

First, suffering for the believer is from the love of God in Christ and not from the wrath of God: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1; contrast Rom 1:18f. and Jn 3:36). Although Job experienced and interpreted his suffering as coming from God’s wrath, the reader of Job 1–2 knows that this was not true. God was lovingly *for* Job before, during, and after the ordeal, although his love was hidden to Job during the ordeal and was not revealed to Job until the end.

Second, believers’ suffering is used by the loving God for their benefit. God through it fosters and purifies faith, increases perseverance, and makes the recipients mature. Scripture portrays this positive purpose with two dominant images, that of a loving father disciplining his child (Dt. 8:5; Prv. 3:11–12; Heb 12:5–11; Rv 3:19; cf. Prv 13:24) and that of refining precious metal with fire (Ps 66:10–12; Is 48:10–11; Zec 3:9; 1 Pt. 1:6–7; 4:12). Afflictions and crosses provide the occasion in which God moves his own *from untried faith to tried faith*. God through suffering removes the stumbling blocks which can get in the way of faith so that God’s grace alone is sufficient (2 Cor 1:9; compare the purpose of Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” that “was given” him by God through the agency of “a messenger of Satan” in 2 Cor 12:7–10.). In the “furnace of affliction” God refines and makes His children mature (Rom 5:3–5; Jas 1:2–4; etc.). In fact, God through

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such suffering “made mature” Jesus (τελειόω Heb 2:10; 5:8–9). The reader of Job’s speeches can see Job’s faith growing throughout the dialogues, although it fluctuates. From Job’s wish that he were never born (chap. 3) to his belief in a Redeemer (chap. 19) and his confidence in his future justification (chaps. 23, 27, 31), one sees Job move from an untried faith to a tried faith.²⁴

Finally, the suffering of believers also serves to benefit others. A classic example is the story of Joseph, whose unwanted “trip” to Egypt ended up preserving Egypt and the promised line of Jacob during the famine: “You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (Gn 50:20; cf. Rom 8:28). The story of Job, by being written down, has benefitted countless generations. Frequently, being exiled or scattered because of persecution has provided the faithful with witness opportunities (Elijah in Zaraphath—1 Kgs 17; Daniel; the apostles—Mk 13:9; the early Christians—Acts 8:1–4). Paul especially emphasized the benefits his suffering had for others. In his affliction and weakness Paul was a *visible testimony to the theology of the cross* (1 Cor 4; 2 Cor 1, 4, 6, 11–12; Gal 6:17; etc.).²⁵

V. Gospel Comfort for Despairing Sufferers

The multifaceted scriptural gospel provides the pastor with a rich resource for strengthening the faith and hope of despairing and penitent sufferers. By tapping into this rich variety, the pastor can avoid a monotonous repetition of the same motif when addressing sufferers. Here I will briefly summarize some of the dominant themes that the Scriptures provide for broken-hearted sufferers under three headings: past, present, and future.

Past

The emphasis of the New Testament is, of course, what Christ has done *for us* by his suffering, death, and resurrection. A theme that is deemphasized or even denied by many contemporary theologians but one that is vital to the topic of human suffering is Christ’s *vicarious* suffering and death. He suffered eternal death and hell in the place of all sinners. Like a lightning rod he received God’s just wrath in the stead of all who deserve God’s wrath (Is 52:13–53:12). In the words of St. Paul, Christ became a curse for us to redeem us from the curse of the law, in other words, God’s *condemning* law (Gal 3:13). His death propitiated God’s wrath and won God’s favor for sinners (Rom 3:25–26).²⁶ In other words, Christ’s suffering took the *sting* out of our suffering. That Job’s suffering might be due to God’s wrath against him is what so terrified Job. It still terrifies sufferers. What could be more comforting for a despairing sufferer than to hear about the *vicarious* suffering of Christ?

The other theme to be highlighted here is that of Christ’s victory. Christ’s words and works culminating in Good Friday and Easter signaled the arrival and established

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the presence of the eschatological kingdom of God.²⁷ By driving out the demons and raising the dead, Jesus was defeating the devil and the power of death. His healing of the sick indicates that he bore not only sin but also the consequences of sin (Mt 8:16–17). He came to reverse the results of the fall

and to inaugurate the new creation when “lamb and wolf lie down together” (Mk 1:13; Is 11). The new age has dawned; the power of death, sin, and the devil has been broken. “D-Day” enables us to endure until “V-Day.” Again, what could be more comforting for those who are persecuted and afflicted?

Present

When God appeared to Job and thereby demonstrated that he was for Job that put to rest Job’s troubled heart: “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you. Therefore I retract (my accusations against you) and repent of dust and ashes,” in other words, forsake the position of lamentation.²⁸ Knowing that God in Christ is for us and that nothing can separate us from his love is the comfort Paul gives in the well-known section of Romans 8:31–39. Because God in Christ is for his own, they already have all things by faith (1 Cor 3:21–23; Eph 2:6). Jesus pronounces a “blessing” over the faithful who suffer (Mt 5; Lk 6). The knowledge that God is for his own and has heard their prayers accounts for the regular shift to doxology that occurs in the lament psalms (Pss 54:4–7; 56:9–13; etc.).²⁹ In fact, God is not only for us; he is with us in the midst of our sufferings (Ex 3:12; Jo 1:9; Mt 28:20). God’s mercy toward and presence with His sufferers make the suffering bearable.

Future

Both Testaments repeatedly instill in sufferers hope by setting forth the divine promises. Biblical hope is not a secular optimism in the flow of history.³⁰ Nor is the object of this hope simply a time without suffering, although that is certainly part of it (Rv 21:4). Rather, the object of this hope is first and foremost God/Christ: “O Israel, hope in Yahweh” (Ps 130:7; cf. 1 Tm 1:1). Our hope is the coming day of Yahweh, the Parousia of Jesus Christ. Along with that day comes the day of victory over death and sickness, victory over our enemies, victory over sin, and the consummation of the kingdom of God. That is the day when even “creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay” (Rom 8:21). The hope of the coming of the Lord is what gives sufferers the strength to “be faithful unto death” (Rv 2:10). The hope of seeing God even after death is what preserved Job in faith: “from my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold and not another”

(19:26–27). The future joy is what motivated even Jesus to “endure the cross, despising the shame” (Heb 12:2). In the light of that future joy the suffering of the present is a “slight momentary affliction” (2 Cor 4:17; cf. Ps 30:5).

VI. The Proper Response of Sufferers

Westermann asks an important question:

It would be a worthwhile task to ascertain how it happened that in Western Christendom the lament has been totally excluded from human relationship with God, with the result that it has completely disappeared above all from prayer and worship. We must ask whether this exclusion is actually based on the message of the New Testament or whether it is in part attributable to the influence of Greek thought, since it is so consistent with the ethic of Stoicism.³¹

Have we in the West lost the ability to give laments to God? Are we so influenced by American values—“keep your chin up” . . . “Play with pain” . . . “Handle the pain with courage” . . . “Think positively”—that we no longer know how to “cry out of the depths?” Are we, in short, Lutheran Stoics? If so, the book of Job serves as a good corrective. In contrast to his friends who only talked *about* God, Job gave his pain and complaints to God. God is big enough to take it. In fact, in the end God commended Job and condemned the friends: “My wrath is kindled against you (Eliphaz) and against your two friends; for you have not spoken to me (*‘elay*) rightly as my servant Job has” (42:7–8). God wants all of us including our feelings and complaints. What he does not want is for us to withhold part of ourselves from him or to complain *about him to others* (Ez 33:17; Mal 2:17; 3:14–15).

Lamentation given to God is the language and prayer of suffering. The lament psalms, the laments of Habakkuk and Jeremiah, the cry of the Israelites in Egypt (Ex 3:7), the book of Lamentations, the “groaning” that Paul speaks of (Rom 8:23), and the cry of the martyrs under the heavenly altar (Rv 6:9–10) are all examples of God-pleasing prayers. Even Jesus “offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears” (Heb 5:7). The place to start for sufferers is not to deny their feelings but rather to “take it to the Lord in prayer.” Positive thinking won’t help much (Jb 9:27–29). For this the biblical laments offer a great resource.

When one offers up to God laments, this is evidence of that person’s faith. Prayer-language is faith-language. When people pray in this way, they do it because they have confidence in the Lord’s mercy and believe that He will hear their prayers. Job began by condemning the day of his birth (chap. 3) and by longing to die (6:8–13), sentiments that were spoken to his friends. As the dialogue continues, Job addresses God more and his friends less. The reader sees how Job’s faith in God grows, even though at times it oscillates between confident faith and doubt.

When Job's faith is at its strongest, *he hopes in God against God*. When he feels God's wrath, when his senses tell him that God must be against him, nevertheless—the great “nevertheless” of faith—he holds on to God's mercy, sure that God will hear him (9:15; 14:13–17; 16:18–21; 19:23–27; 23:3–12; 31). “Though He slay me, yet will I wait for Him; I will defend my ways to His face. He will be my salvation” (13:15–16).³² This is faith in God in the midst of sorrows, *in spite of* everything—even death. This is the faith of the psalmists who praise God in the midst of suffering because they know they have already been delivered *in hope* (Ps 57:4–11; 116:10–19). This is the faith of Habakkuk, “Though the fig tree does not blossom nor fruit be on the vines . . . yet I will rejoice in Yahweh, I will joy in the God of my salvation” (Hab 3:17–18). This is also the faith which disproves the Satan's “materialist” worldview. Everything does not boil down to a quid pro quo economics. God is worth loving for his own sake apart from material prosperity and good health. True faith loves the Giver, not the gifts.³³

The doxologies that the psalmists and Habakkuk can sing in the midst of suffering bring us to the New Testament emphasis on rejoicing in suffering. Numerous texts exhort sufferers to rejoice, because of the privilege of “sharing” in Christ's sufferings (Col 1:24; 1 Pt. 4:13) and being “counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” (Acts 5:41) or because of what suffering produces in them (Rom 5:3–5; Jas 1:2–4) or because of the outcome of such suffering, the hope of glory (Mt 5:12; Lk 6:23; Heb 10:34).

Thus, the proper response for sufferers moves from lament through faith to joy. The lament side keeps our feet on the ground. Suffering is painful and “bad,” an alien and hostile power in God's good creation, from which we long to be delivered. A superficial “Smile, God loves you” ignores its reality and agony. But the faith and joy side attests to the conquering power and “goodness” of the gospel. When one has Christ, one has everything worth having.

When we deal with despairing sufferers we need to “suffer with” (sympathize) them, help them give their laments to God, and avoid a premature exhortation to joy. But we dare not leave them in their lamentation. Rather, we should share with them the gospel of Jesus Christ, which produces faith and joy in the midst of and in spite of suffering. For this pastoral task one could do no better than to begin with the book of Job.

Endnotes

- 1 For a nice survey of various interpretations of Job, see N. N. Glatzer, *The Dimensions of Job: A Study and Selected Readings* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).
- 2 On the biblical themes dealing with suffering, see E. Kutsch, "Von Grund und Sinn des Leidens nach dem Alten Testament" in *Kleine Schriften zum Alten Testament*, eds. L. Schmidt and K. Eberlein, (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1986), 336–347; E. S. Gerstenberger and W. Schrage, *Suffering* trans. J. E. Steely, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977); D. J. Simundson, *Faith Under Fire: Biblical Interpretations of Suffering* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980); J. C. Becker, *Suffering and Hope* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987). For an older but very helpful collection of short essays, see R. C. Rein, *Cross and Affliction* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1939).
- 3 Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, trans. K. Crim (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986): 165.
- 4 A good summary of the contemporary attempts to answer the theodicy question is found in R. F. Vieth, *Holy Power, Human Pain* (Bloomington, IN: Meyer-Stone Books, 1988).
- 5 For a helpful summary and critique of Process Theology, see R. H. Nash, ed., *Process Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987). See also Ronald Goetz, "The Suffering God: The Rise of a New Orthodoxy," *Christian Century* (April 1986): 385–389. One of Process Theology's major problems, it seems to me, is that it does not distinguish between God's irresistible "Law power" and God's resistible "Gospel power."
- 6 (New York: Avon, 1983): 42–43.
- 7 The Hebrew term, *hāsātān*, "the Satan," is technically a title rather than a proper name, "the Adversary, Accuser."
- 8 For a discussion, see Hans-Georg Fritzsche, *Lehrbuch der Dogmatik IV* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988): 473–481. A diminution of temporal death's alien and hostile character is also found in Hans Schwarz, "Twelfth Locus: Eschatology" in *Christian Dogmatics II*, eds. C. E. Braaten, et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984): 562, and D. J. Hall, *God & Human Suffering* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986): 61–62.
- 9 For a perceptive critique of North America's incapacity to suffer, see Hall, *God & Human Suffering*, 31–48.
- 10 The Augustinian tradition emphasized the origin of suffering whereas the Irenaean tradition emphasized the purpose of suffering. See John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).
- 11 Claus Westermann rightly stresses this point in his *The Structure of the Book of Job* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981).
- 12 See Won Yong Ji, "Significance of *Tentatio* in Luther's Spirituality," *Concordia Journal* 15, no. 2 (April 1989): 181–188.
- 13 Philip Yancey, "When the Facts Don't Add Up," *Christianity Today* (June 1986): 22.
- 14 The distinction and terminology derive from Rein, *Cross and Affliction*.
- 15 For a very helpful treatment of the friends' arguments, see D. J. A. Clines, "The Arguments of Job's Three Friends," in *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature*, eds. Clines, et al., JSOT Suppl. 19 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982): 199–214.
- 16 For a convenient listing of such curses and blessings, see D. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah Word Biblical Commentary* 31 (Waco: Word, 1987): xxxiii–xlii.
- 17 One should understand the curses as law-threats and the blessings as *gospel*-promises. Both are to be understood as primarily eschatological (cf. Prv 23:17–18). See H. D. Hummel, *The Word Becoming Flesh* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979), 95.
- 18 Compare D. R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel: A Historical and Biblical Analysis of the Modern Faith Movement* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988); Bruce Barron, *The Health and Wealth Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1987).
- 19 J. van Oorschot, *Gott als Grenze* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1987), 197, emphasis and translation mine.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 192–209.

- 21 LW 41:164–165; WA 50:641–642.
- 22 The attempt to develop one coherent theological interpretation of human suffering is common in contemporary literature, but it fails to properly distinguish between law and gospel.
- 23 The story is reported in “Cross and Caduceus” from the Health and Healing Ministries of the LCMS (Fall 1988).
- 24 See the articles by Hulme and Mitchell in *Concordia Journal* 15, no. 2 (April 1989). Compare also C. R. Seitz who stresses that Job progresses toward wisdom, “Job: Full-Structure, Movement, and Interpretation,” *Interpretation* (January 1989): 5–17.
- 25 For an interesting discussion of how Paul’s own suffering served to reveal the theology of the cross against the Corinthians’ theology of glory, see K. A. Plank, *Paul and the Irony of Affliction* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987). A. T. Hanson also presents a helpful treatment of Paul’s suffering, *The Paradox of the Cross in the Thought of St. Paul* JSOT Supplement 17 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987). However, he argues that Paul regarded his suffering as possessing an atoning, salvific value. This fails to distinguish between the uniqueness of Christ’s own historical suffering and his suffering in which Paul “shared.” Paul’s suffering had revelatory value and Paul kept preaching the gospel *to the benefit of others* in spite of persecution, but it did not have atoning value (Rom 3:25; 1 Cor 1:30).
- 26 For a good refutation of C. H. Dodd’s view, which denies that the ἱλάσκομαι word group denotes “propitiation,” see Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 144–213.
- 27 One of the best—though older—treatments of Jesus’s words and works in the Synoptics, in my opinion, is Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, trans. H. de Jongste (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1962.)
- 28 On this phrase, see N. C. Habel, *The Book of Job* OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 575–583.
- 29 See Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, trans. K. R. Crim and R. N. Soulen, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981).
- 30 For a critique of Ernst Bloch’s view of hope, based on the Old Testament, see W. Zimmerli, *Der Mensch und seine Hoffnung im Alten Testament* Gottingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1968).
- 31 Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, 265.
- 32 On this passage, see F. I. Anderson, *Job* Tyndale 13 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1976), 166–167.
- 33 Basically the sides were God and Job versus the Satan, Job’s wife, and Job’s friends. On Job’s friends as the advocates of the Satan’s worldview with its tight nexus between deeds and physical well-being, see D. N. Freedman, “Is It Possible to Understand the Book of Job?,” *Bible Review* (April 1988): 26–44.

Christ's Ascension and Session

Paul R. Raabe

With the Second Article of the Nicene Creed we follow the biography of the Son of God, the Second Person or “he” of the Holy Trinity. He “was begotten of his Father before all worlds . . . begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.” The Father through his Son made all things. This one, the eternal Son, “came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary and was made man.” As we follow his life story we should always keep in mind that the Son of God after his incarnation does everything in, with, and through his human nature. He led a thoroughly human life in a thoroughly human manner. This incarnate Son was crucified, suffered, and buried. On the third day the same incarnate Son in his human nature was bodily raised from the dead.

During the forty days after his resurrection the incarnate Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth, visibly appeared to his disciples on different occasions. This was the same Jesus of Nazareth who had been crucified, but Jesus was not the same. During his pre-resurrection life, one of the Trinity made flesh, God-with-us-in-human-nature, humbled himself and took the form of a slave. We call this his state of humiliation, referring to what was happening in the Son’s human nature. With his bodily descent into hell to proclaim his victory, his resurrection, and his ascension, the incarnate Son entered into his state of exaltation, an expression that also refers to what was happening in his human nature.

Here is a brief summary. Although he was equal with God the Father, he did not make full and constant use of that divine power but made himself nothing. He

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was found and encountered by other people in fashion as only a man (Phil 2:6–8). His contemporaries considered him a noteworthy man or a prophet, but they did not say “There goes God.” The incarnate Son of God took the form of a slave and made it his own. His manner of life was that of a mere man with typical limitations. He could have constantly revealed his divine majesty as he did at his transfiguration, but he chose to come in weakness. He took to himself and made it his own “the form of a slave.” So he was a helpless infant, in danger of being killed by Herod. He grew up in the ordinary human way, as an infant, a toddler, a small boy, a teenager, a young man. He became a carpenter in a small town called Nazareth. He went through our typical human experiences except he did not sin. He took to himself and made his own our fallen human frailties, weaknesses, vulnerabilities, and mortality. He was tempted by Satan. He was under the Mosaic law. He was subject to the governing authorities of the age. He was arrested and tried. He was executed by Roman crucifixion.

But now with his bodily resurrection his human condition has changed. He no longer becomes weak and tired. He can no longer be seized and arrested. He can no longer be tempted by Satan. He is no longer under the Mosaic law or the governments of the world. Now he is no longer in the form of a slave. Now he makes full and constant use of his deity in, with, and through his human nature. So for instance, after spending time with two disciples in Emmaus, “he vanished from their sight” (Lk 24:31). Later, the risen Jesus suddenly stood among his disciples in Jerusalem (Lk 24:36). According to John 20, the disciples had gathered together behind locked doors for fear of their opponents when suddenly “Jesus came and stood among them.” The risen Jesus in his body no longer voluntarily submitted to restraints such as locked doors. Neither space nor time can confine or hinder his bodily presence. He is able to do what he promised, to be with his church on earth to the end of the age (Mt 18:20; 28:20). In the consecrated bread and wine he is able to make his body and his blood present for his disciples to eat and drink, as he promised.

The same incarnate Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth, with his human nature, continues to be with his church in different ways, in different modes of presence. But he is no longer with us in the same visible way he was with his first followers in Palestine AD 30–33 (or 27–30). Nor is he typically with us in the same way that he visibly appeared to his first disciples during the forty days after his resurrection. We no longer see him standing before us with our natural eyesight or hear his voice directly with our natural ears the way the first-century eyewitnesses did. We can no longer take hold of his feet the way the women did on the first Easter Sunday (Mt 28:9). We can no longer cling to him with our hands the way Mary Magdalene did (Jn 20:17). He is no longer with us in a visible, localized, measureable mode of presence.

What has changed? Jesus ascended into heaven.

Heaven

Forty days after his resurrection Jesus ascended into heaven. What does the word *heaven* mean? The Scriptures clearly teach that God is omnipresent.

All of God is present at every place at the same time. As Psalm 139 affirms: “Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!” God is present everywhere in the universe. In fact, even the universe cannot contain or sequester God. As King Solomon affirmed in his dedication prayer for God’s temple in Jerusalem: “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built! (1 Kgs 8:27; see also Acts 17:24).

Yet this Creator who is fully present in every place is not a static god. He does not just exist here and there and over there. He is the living God. The Old Testament reveals him as the God who does specific actions within space-time human history. That means certain actions at certain places and certain times. Yahweh, the God of ancient Israel, the maker of heaven and earth, intervenes in human history and carries out specific actions. To do this, God moves from place to place. The Old Testament reveals God as moving from place to place to do certain actions. For example, at the time of the exodus from Egypt God spoke to Moses from the burning bush and said: “I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land” (Ex 3:8). Notice God “came down” to do a certain action in Egypt at the time of Moses. Also see the prayer to God in Isaiah 64:1: “Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down.”

The Old Testament depicts God as noticeably doing certain actions within time-and-space history on earth. At the time of the exodus from Egypt God came down and entered into human history in a noticeable and recognizable way. But where was God coming from? Not from another country on earth but from *heaven*.

The Old Testament uses the word *heaven* in three different ways. Heaven is what we would call the atmosphere, where the birds fly. Heaven is also what we would call outer space, where the sun, moon, planets, and stars are. And heaven is where God dwells.

It is this third way that is important for our discussion. The Old Testament depicts God, the Creator of all things, in personal terms. God sees, hears, speaks, acts, moves, and dwells. So where does God dwell? What is his address? The Creator does not make his abode in any given nation on earth in a way that is directly and immediately accessible. Human armies cannot march against God and seize him. “He that sits in the heavens laughs” at the futile plans of earthbound creatures (Ps 2). The divine monarch is transcendent, sovereign over all, and inaccessible to human reach.

This Creator who is fully present in every place is not a static god.

The 98-foot statue of Christ at El Picacho, the hill that overlooks Tegucigalpa, the capital city of Honduras (Credit: Wikimedia Commons/Czrubi).



To convey these thoughts the Old Testament writers typically speak of God's abode as "in heaven" (Dt 26:15). God as King rules over all and his throne is in heaven (1 Kgs 22:19; Ez 1:26; Pss 9:7; 11:4; 93:2; 97:2; 103:19; Lam 5:19). Heaven is the place created by God where God dwells and manifests his presence and majesty directly and immediately to angels. The term heaven simply refers to the abode of God's direct and visible presence. It is the throne room of the majestic King.

This place is not on earth. From our earthbound vantage point we say that heaven is up above. But by the term *heaven* we do not mean in the sky, on another planet, or among the stars. This place is inaccessible to human reason. Our telescopes cannot see it. We should not think of this place like we do other places within space and time. It is not a confined space or a place that can be measured. As St. Paul says, human words cannot explain or describe heaven. It is beyond the abilities of fallen human reason (2 Cor 12:2–4).

Jesus Ascended into Heaven

The statement in the Nicene Creed that Christ "ascended into heaven" corresponds to the earlier one that the Son "came down from heaven." Now the incarnate Son, after accomplishing his saving work, "ascended into heaven." Israel's Messiah was crucified, bodily raised, and ascended into heaven.

During the forty days after his bodily resurrection Jesus visibly appeared to his disciples. Matthew, Luke, and John all record some of these appearances. During this time Jesus was convincing his skeptical disciples that he in fact had bodily risen from the dead. He also instructed them about his mission, how to properly understand the BC Scriptures, and what their mission would be as his disciples. During his last visible appearance with his disciples Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, slowly, and willingly removed his visible bodily appearance from them. Both Luke and Acts record this event.

Luke's Gospel narrative ends with the ascension. Luke provides a lengthy account of Jesus's last trip to Jerusalem (Lk 9:51–19:27) and introduces this travel narrative with a reference to the ascension: "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem" (Lk 9:51). Luke appropriately finishes his Gospel narrative with Jesus's ascension: "Then he led them [his disciples] out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven" (Lk 24:50–51). Jesus would no longer walk with his disciples like he did before his death. Nor would he typically appear to them in a directly visible way like he did on certain occasions during the forty days after his resurrection. Now in his visible human appearance he ascends.

Luke begins his second volume, the book of Acts, also with the ascension. Luke introduces the volume with his prologue: "In the first book [the Gospel of Luke], O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when

he was taken up” (Acts 1:1–2).

The first volume dealt with what Jesus “began” to do and teach. Now the second volume will deal with what the resurrected and ascended Jesus *continues* to do through his apostles and their word. So we should not think of the ascended Jesus as absent from his church, as restricted or confined in heaven. Rather, the ascended Lord is continuing to work in the life of his church on earth. But he is doing it now as the ascended Lord Jesus.

Appropriately then, Luke introduces his second volume with an account of the ascension:

He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.’ And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven. (Acts 1:7–11)

We should not think of Jesus having to travel slowly through outer space in order to reach heaven. Jesus could have suddenly disappeared as he had done earlier (Lk 24:31). With his human nature he was not confined by spatial restrictions. In his state of exaltation he was now making full and constant use of his divine power in his human nature. But this time he willed to be taken out of their sight slowly by a cloud. In this way Jesus made it clear that he would no longer typically appear to his

In his state of exaltation he was now making full and constant use of his divine power in his human nature.

disciples in a visible and circumscribed way. He could still do that when and where he willed, as for example, when the ascended Lord stood by the Apostle Paul (Acts 23:11). But the ascended Jesus typically did not and does not visibly appear in this way. Instead, he ascended into heaven.

So what are the disciples to do from now on? Carry out the mission entrusted to them, until the day when Jesus will return “in the same way.” His visible, circumscribed ascension prepares for his future, visible, circumscribed return in glory from heaven (1 Thes 4:16). The Apostles’ Creed spells out the connection: “from whence [=from heaven] he will come to judge.”

The Ascended Jesus is Worshiped and Honored by the Heavenly Host

The ascension was a significant event in the life of our Lord. With the ascension the incarnate Son of God with his human nature publicly entered into heaven, the place where God the Father directly displays his majesty and presence to his angels and the souls of deceased believers. The incarnate Jesus is worshiped and honored by all the heavenly host as the victorious Lord and King. Revelation 5 provides an account of the event from heaven's vantage point. The victorious Lamb took the scroll from God the Father so that from now on all future human history will be under the rule of Jesus Christ, not only as God—which is true by definition—but now also as man. The one who was slain in his human nature is now the honored Lord in his human nature. And all the heavenly creatures praise and worship him: “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” (Rv 5:11–12).

The Ascended Jesus Is Seated at the Right Hand

The incarnate Son of God, who was crucified in the flesh and raised from the dead in the flesh, also ascended into heaven where he manifests directly and immediately his visible presence and divine glory and majesty to the angels and all the company of heaven. There all the company of heaven worships and praises him, as the book of Revelation emphasizes.

The Nicene Creed goes on to confess that he “sits at the right hand of the Father.” In order to understand what the session at the right hand means, we must begin in the Old Testament with Psalm 110. Here King David says: “The LORD [=Yahweh] says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’” David refers to another human as “my Lord.” God exalts and honors this human messianic King by inviting him to sit at God’s right hand. This is a figure of speech. It pictures God the Father as sitting on his heavenly throne where he rules over all things. Of course, there is no literal, wooden chair where God the Father sits. Nor does God the Father have a literal, physical right hand or right side, since he is incorporeal. It is a figure of speech, depicting the First Person of the Trinity as a ruling monarch.

God exalts the human messianic King to God’s right hand, thereby exalting him to the highest place of honor and installing him into God’s universal rule over all nations and powers. God promises to place all the messianic King’s enemies under his feet so that they will all be subjugated and subject to the human King. In other words, God the Father will now rule over all things through his human messianic King.

The New Testament repeatedly cites this passage as being fulfilled by Jesus of Nazareth (for example, Mt 22:41-45; Mk 12:35–37; Lk 20:41–44). The Apostle Peter explains in his Pentecost sermon: “This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves

are seeing and hearing. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says . . .” (Acts 2:32–36).

With his ascension, Jesus of Nazareth, the same one crucified, was “exalted at the right hand of God” in fulfillment of Psalm 110. Stephen, before he was martyred, was privileged to see Jesus in heaven, the same one who had been treated as a common criminal now glorified at the right hand of God (Acts 7:55–56).

The Ascended Jesus Sends His Holy Spirit

As Jesus himself promised, after his ascension Jesus poured out his Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Lk 24:49; Acts 1:8; 2:33). According to John’s Gospel, Jesus stressed this sequence: “But I say to you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away. For if I do not go away, the Paraclete/Helper/Advocate/Comforter will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you” (Jn 16:7). He began to fulfill this promise at the first Pentecost and continues to fulfill it through his gospel. He fulfills his promise to you.

The Ascended Jesus Rules over All Things

Christ’s ascension to the right hand means, first of all, Christ’s exaltation above all other powers and authorities. Philippians 2 summarizes the story. Although equal with God his Father Jesus did not exploit it. Instead he took the form of a slave, humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the disgraceful death on a Roman cross. With his ascension this lowly Jesus, the incarnate Son of God in his state of humiliation, was exalted. God the Father highly exalted him and gave him the name above every name. This lowly man who was tried by human governments was now exalted above all governments. This lowly man who was mortal was now exalted above death. This lowly man who was tempted by Satan was now exalted over Satan and all angels and rulers of darkness.

In Ephesians the Apostle Paul emphasizes how all things have now been made subject to the ascended Messiah: God the Father “seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him [=Christ] who fills all in all” (Eph 1:20–22).

Christ’s ascension to the right hand means, first of all, Christ’s exaltation above all other powers and authorities.

Notice the repetition of “all/every.” Christ as man is over every authority; all things are under his feet. And he is head over all things to the benefit of his church. How comforting this is to know that our Jesus Christ is working out all things to the benefit of his sheep. The Apostle Peter also stresses that Jesus

has all other authorities under his feet. “Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him” (1 Pt 3:22). Therefore Christians need not fear the persecution of earthly governments. Jesus, the one who died for us, is the Lord over all.

All things have been subjected to Christ, even death itself. But it does not look like it. Christians still die. Therefore the writer to the Hebrews says: “Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he [God the Father] left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him” (Heb 2:8). So we eagerly await his visible coming again in glory, the consummation of all things, and the end of physical death itself.

The Ascended Jesus as Intercessor

The incarnate Son of God now intercedes for us: “who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us” (Rom 8:34). Therefore we need not fear. Nothing or no one can separate us from the love of Christ or from the love of God the Father in Christ. Unlike Old Testament priests, who were temporary, Jesus as the new and greater high priest lives forever. He rose from the dead and was exalted: “Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb 7:25). His ascension means that Jesus lives forever to intercede for his people.

The Ascended Jesus as Forerunner

The Letter to the Hebrews emphasizes that with his ascension Jesus Christ is our forerunner. With Jesus we see our own destiny. He was crowned with glory and honor and brings many others “to glory” as his brothers with his Father as our heavenly Father (Heb 2:9–10). As the new and greater high priest, after the order of Melchizedek, Jesus has entered into the heavenly Holy of Holies, into the direct and immediate and visible presence of God the Father himself. He did it as our forerunner: “We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek” (Heb 6:19–20). As our forerunner Jesus ascended into God’s presence so that we too may have fellowship with God already now and one day come into God’s immediate and visible presence. As one of us the incarnate Son is our trailblazer, “the founder and perfecter of our faith” (Heb 12:2).

The Ascended Jesus Fills All Things as Man

We should not think of the ascended Jesus as restricted or sequestered in heaven. Jesus is “exalted above the heavens” (Heb 7:26). With his session at the right hand of God the Father, Jesus was installed into God’s universal rule and dominion. Now Jesus

rules over all things not only as deity but also as man. He rules over all in a human manner, never apart from his human nature. Now he makes full and constant use of his divine power in, with, and through his human nature.

Yet Jesus does not do this from a distance. In Ephesians the Apostle Paul teaches about Christ's ascension: "the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things" (Eph 4:10). With his ascension Christ "fills all things." As God this is true by definition. The new event with the ascension is that Christ now fills all things as man. The whole Christ in both his deity and his humanity carries out his lordship by being present close up. The ascended Christ "gave gifts to men." He continues to provide to his church ministers for the benefit of the church on earth, so that the church might "grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Eph 4:15). Jesus is Lord, not from a distance but with us here on earth.

Baptismal Incorporation into the Christ-Event

Via baptism the God of Israel incorporated us into the biography of the Messiah, into "the Christ-event." Hence we were crucified with Christ, died with Christ, were buried with Christ, and were raised with Christ. The apostle Paul can even say that we are now seated "in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2:6). We now by faith share in his exaltation. Already now by faith we have been blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing "in the heavenly places" (Eph 1:3).

In Short

The ascension of Jesus of Nazareth is good news. Jesus the Messiah of Israel, David's Lord, was crucified shamefully. This crucified Messiah was bodily raised and exalted above all. He now reigns at the right hand of the God of Israel. He reigns over all governments, over all powers and rulers of darkness, over death itself. Jesus of Nazareth is the exalted Lord. To whose benefit? To your benefit! One of the Trinity became one of us, our brother. Your brother now reigns for you! "The Lamb who was slain has begun his reign. Alleluia!"

Up through endless ranks of angels, Cries of triumph in His ears,
To His heav'nly throne ascending, Having vanquished all their fears,
Christ looks down upon His faithful, Leaving them in happy tears.
Death-destroying, life-restoring, Proven equal to our need,
Now for us before the Father As our brother intercede;
Flesh that for our world was wounded, Living, for the wounded plead!
To our lives of wanton wand'ring Send Your Spirit, promised guide;
Through our lives of fear and failure With Your pow'r and love abide;
Welcome us, as You were welcomed, To an endless Eastertide.
Alleluia, alleluia! Oh, to breathe the Spirit's grace!
Alleluia, alleluia! Oh, to see the Father's face!
Alleluia, alleluia! Oh, to feel the Son's embrace!

(Lutheran Service Book 491)

*Homiletical
Helps*

Anatomy of a Sermon “Holy Rude” By Francis “Rev” Rossow

Glenn Nielsen

From the editor: In the following analysis, the actual sermon by Rev Rossow is represented in italic type, which you can read all at once by following the gray bars in the margin. Glenn Nielsen’s analysis is interspersed in regular type. The outer margins are set wider to provide space for taking notes.

When I was asked to do a commentary on a sermon by Rev Rossow, I hesitated. Rev is one of the most respected professors to have ever taught at Concordia Seminary. He is in his nineties now, but will still teach a class on C. S. Lewis or how literature can bring us the Gospel. He was teaching at the Seminary even before I arrived as a student in 1977. He has taught hundreds of pastors how to preach, and to do so creatively.

In fact, I took two classes from him myself. He taught me Homiletics II and Creative Homiletics. I have been teaching homiletics for almost thirty years now at the Seminary, and his influence on me is still being felt by my students. I treasure my years with him as a student, a colleague, and as a friend. Indeed, when my family and I first moved to House 6 on campus in 1990, he and his wife Eunice, lived across the street from us on North Seminary Terrace. I still remember them banging pots and pans on New Year’s Eve when the clock turned to midnight.

Yet, I have taken on this assignment so that I too can show that respect by taking a closer look at this sermon titled Holy Rude, and also by reflecting on three items that Rev taught and modeled for me all these years.

First, he instilled in me the compulsion (a good thing) to preach the gospel in every sermon, and to do so creatively. To this day, in every sermon I preach, I want Jesus, and the life giving work he has done for us, to

be the most memorable part of the sermon. No student I have gets away without preaching Jesus's death and hopefully his resurrection. Rev also brought to light for me the full literal gospel of Jesus's damnation on the cross, taking our hell for us. "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me" has appeared in many, many of my sermons. I still remember one of his creative ways of preaching that, where he spoke of a sermon manuscript that forgot to put the apostrophe in the word "he'll," leaving the word "hell." For Rev that turned on his "Gospel handle" light (those who have had Rev will catch that reference) as he then saw Jesus as the apostrophe that separated hell from us, something he promised "he'll" do for us. Preach the gospel creatively!

Second, preach the text. I know some of the exegetical professors would squirm when Rev used some creative way to preach the gospel because he would take homiletical license with the text. A word or phrase would be used in a way the grammar or context didn't really allow. But for the sake of the gospel being proclaimed, Rev would do that. And yet, he wanted the text to be faithfully mined before doing that. I remember a children's sermon I turned in to him for a Homiletics II assignment. He liked the object lesson I used, but said it was the wrong text. The Bible passage didn't say what I was telling the children. He would not let the text become a pretext for something else to be said. To this day, my students will tell you that I am a stickler for the text driving the sermon: its content, intent, metaphors, mood, and even how we do the law in the sermon. Preach the text faithfully.

Third, use the English language well. Oh, the dreaded red pen! Anyone who turned in a sermon to Rev could expect it returned with any grammatical mistakes pointed out. One time he even put "gross illiteracy" on the side of one of my sermons. He wanted us to preach from a correct and accurate use of the language. You can move from the well written to a clear and engaging proclamation, but you seldom get clear and engaging from a poorly written manuscript. I remember going to Dr. Wayne Schmidt, a former, now sainted, professor at the Seminary. I would ask him if I was using a comma correctly or not. Why? Because Rev wrote on one of my sermons, "comma splice." I didn't even know what that was, let alone know how to correct it. Now I do. What that taught me, though, was not to use many commas in my sermons, which is actually a good thing. Clauses are difficult for us to hear. Easy to read, but not for listening. Simple, short, direct sentences are better. But I digress. Use language well.

Well, I best turn my attention to this sermon, titled "Holy Rude." I chose this sermon because I remember Rev preaching it. And I remember him

preaching it because he wrote a Theological Observer in a *Concordia Journal* issue that I remember reading (available now on concordiatheology.org). He wrote the Observer in 1977. He preached the sermon for the Theological Diploma Service at Concordia Seminary in 1993. I'm writing this in 2019. Now I don't remember every sermon he preached in chapel. I don't even remember some of mine. But this one I do. And I wanted to see why.

The sermon begins with the customary pleasantries, greeting those who are there for the special occasion. Nothing to look at here. Or is there?

I am sure that I speak not only for myself but also for the faculty and staff of Concordia Seminary in congratulating the honorees present this morning. You have every reason to be proud and happy on this occasion.

Congratulations and thanks are in order also to all the wives, parents, family members, relatives, friends, home congregation pastors, and vicarage and field work supervisors whose prayers, counsel, moral support, and financial help have contributed considerably to the goal you honorees have reached today.

Speaking for myself, it has been a pleasure to have taught most of you in class and to have joined a number of you in athletic and social activities. Again and again in my teaching experience, I have discovered that by the time the seminarians reach their last year here, there's a mighty thin line—if any at all—separating student from teacher in respect to intellectual and pastoral skills. That realization both thrills me and humbles me. I, for one, have no doubt that this year we are presenting to The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod an outstanding group of candidates for the ministry. I am optimistic about the future of our church.

The third paragraph stood out for me. Just a thin line between graduating student and Seminary professor? That seems to be taking the compliments just a bit too far. But by the end of the sermon, this paragraph is more true than I could have realized when I first heard it. But you'll need to wait until the end of this commentary to see why I say that.

The next paragraph displays Rev's honesty about the origins of the sermon. As I said above, I remembered the original article, but I was not at the faculty retreat. I applaud his integrity in letting us know he is reusing something, and I applaud his reusing it as well. The group of hearers for a sermon changes. The world changes. Much changes. Some would say that means you can never preach a sermon a second time. Much of that is true, but not all. Good illustrations, gospel approaches, and textual themes are ripe to be used again (and again). Repetition is not bad, but helps people to remember when done intentionally and for good purposes. I've been

preaching at Grace Chapel in North St. Louis County for some twenty-five years. I don't rephrase an old sermon, but they have heard certain stories or seen some visual aid more than once.

Possible proof of the sincerity of my comparison of you students with us faculty is my decision this morning to direct a theme toward you honorees that I have previously addressed only to colleagues at a faculty retreat in Cape Girardeau nine years ago. Although I have revised the theme considerably for this occasion, the idea—and even some of the words in which that idea is clothed—will be “old hat” to many of the faculty present this morning. And for that I apologize. But to everyone else present today the theme, I hope, will be not only new but, above all, helpful. That theme is “Holy Rude.”

The next paragraphs introduce Rev's creative handle for proclaiming the gospel. I'll admit I did not know what the “Holy Rood” was. He definitely needed to explain the word. But here I would do something more than simply employ an explanation. Spelling the two words was important, but that called for thinking through the two spellings while Rev kept talking. Making this explanation visual would have helped. You see, we live in a visual world. Much of our information (some estimate it at 80 percent) comes through our eyes. So I am a huge believer in keeping the sermon as visual as possible, and would have had a couple signs with the words spelled out. For the “Holy Rood,” I might have even had a cross pictured. Rev relies on the written/spoken word, as do many. I have come to rely on being even more explicitly visual. But I love his creativity here, and he will carry it through the rest of the sermon. When Rev preaches, you can expect some wonderful twist or turn in the use of language that makes the sermon memorable and holds it together.

“Holy Rude”—that theme will require some explanation. Some of you may have run across the peculiar expression “Holy Rood” in the literature of a few centuries ago. It's another designation, of course, for the cross or the crucifix. For example, a nobleman in one of Shakespeare's history plays says, “By the Holy Rood / I do not like these several councils.” (In other words, “By the cross I do not like these several councils.”) The term “Holy Rood” is hardly used today. I think its disappearance unfortunate.

At any rate, I'd like to revive the term for this occasion. I'd like to do what I'm surprised Shakespeare failed to do (in view of his fondness for the practice) and that is pun on the term. “Rood” in the expression “Holy Rood” is, of course spelled “r-o-o-d,” and I see no point for the present in bothering you with

its linguistic history. But permit me today to spell the word “rude” the way we usually spell it, “r-u-d-e.”

Now comes the gospel proclamation. The texts are utilized. The cross is proclaimed. Rude becomes holy because of what Jesus has done on that crude tree. Notice how Rev takes us to Jesus being sin for us and more. Jesus is also made the curse for us, hinting at the full literal gospel of Jesus’s damnation for us. If I had a small quibble, I would have made the move from rude to holy rude even more emphasized at the beginning. It plays such a prominent role in this sermon going forward that I wish our minds had been more directed to this rude made holy move. But read and revel in Rev’s gospel words for you as you read how Jesus made not only the cross holy, but the other ordinary, rude moments in his life holy.

Spelled that way, “r-u-d-e,” doesn’t the designation “Holy Rude” capture the paradox of the cross? That rude, crude tree (more shameful than the gallows of modern times) has been made holy by the death of one of the many in history suspended on it, Jesus Christ, the Son of God. How society regarded the cross at one time is evident from our first text today: “[Christ] humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.” “Even the death of the cross” tells the story. Jesus was so humble and obedient that he even went that far. The cross, you see, not only hurt—it humiliated. It added insult to injury. The ultimate insult, at least in Jesus’s case, was that he was made sin for us and made the curse for sin, and God rejected him in our behalf for our salvation. No wonder Paul describes it as a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks.

But today we revere the cross. We construct it of precious metals and proudly display it as an ornament in our church or on our person. The cross has become the most sacred Christian symbol there is. The rude has become holy because in it we have recognized that foolishness of God which is wiser than men and that weakness of God which is stronger than men. In short, the cross has become a “holy rude,” the result, no doubt, of the continuance through many centuries of the practice begun by St. Paul, a practice he himself describes in our second text: “But God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In fact, “Holy Rude” in this sense is characteristic not only of the end of Jesus’s life but also of all his prior earthly career. The Second Person of the Trinity takes on flesh. He becomes bone and skin and muscle and appendage. In short, God becomes man, thereby making rude holy. Plain and ugly things like manglers and swaddling clothes and shepherds because of Jesus’s birth at

Bethlehem take on an almost idyllic, romantic charm. We surround these items with halos, another instance of “Holy Rude.” A wedding at Cana sanctifies wine and festivity. A donkey ride into Jerusalem becomes a thing we celebrate with Alleluias and palm branches.

The next two paragraphs bring the Holy Rude into our lives and show the mastery of the English language Rev brings to the preaching task. He begins with the theological label of “means of grace,” but does not let that go undeveloped or unconnected to how the ordinary becomes holy. Start with the sentence that begins with “No hocus pocus” and watch the idea come to life with carefully chosen words and phrases. He says that “marketplace language” becomes the vehicle for good news. Well, his language does much the same thing—by the Holy Spirit, of course. Crisp, vivid words. Common and everyday items. And the means of grace become holy before our mind’s eyes. I have wished many a time that I could turn a phrase or write a sentence like Rev could. The next paragraph duplicates this masterful use of language with the sentence “paunchy, sweaty, bumbling, stuttering . . .” to let us see that, despite the rudeness of our sinfulness, we are now holy as God’s saints in Jesus—and as shaped to be holy by the Holy Spirit.

And yet, I have a concern about Rev’s preaching style for the digital age we now live in. Could it be too literary, too beholden to the written word? This sermon is meant to be delivered from the manuscript, with more a read quality than oral proclamation. That is Rev’s style. It is authentically him. And it plays fairly well for a Seminary set of hearers. But for the typical congregation, filled with those who listen distractedly and are used to an oral immediacy in delivery, I question whether it will play as well. Personal and conversational; sustained eye contact and facial expressions easily seen; content embodied with vocal variety and emotions evident are all essential if our people are to stay engaged with the sermon’s proclamation. The print culture’s way of communicating has been superseded (but not eliminated) by people formed by the iPhone, YouTube, and social media. Rev’s artistic use of language is a delight for me, but I preach differently when I stand before the typical American congregation today.

An institution here, an institution there, and what happens? Why, the rudest things imaginable become vehicles for salvation. “Means of grace” is the term we Lutherans apply to baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and the gospel, and it’s a term almost too dignified for what it describes, for there isn’t a one of the three that isn’t in a sense disappointing. No hocus pocus, no hieroglyphics, no magic

formulas, no incantations, no mystical rites, no elaborate rituals—but what? Water and bread—what could be more ordinary? Wine—what could be more unspiritual? Words—what could be more monotonous? Household staples, an alcoholic beverage, and marketplace language through Jesus’s institution become the vehicles for that good news by which the Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts and good in our lives, vehicles, therefore, that we treasure. Once again our Lord has made the rude holy.

Come to think of it, “Holy Rude” captures not only the paradox of the God-Man but also the paradox of us. We too, thanks to Christ, are the “Holy Rude.” Take it in either sense, the justification sense or the sanctification sense. A death on the cross and God suddenly calls bad good, sinners saints. Jesus dies in our place, and by a divine decision beyond our comprehension (but not beyond our God-given faith) paunchy, sweaty, bumbling, stuttering, money-grasping, lust-driven, food-logged creatures like you and me are declared righteous by God, a declaration on the basis of which God graciously gives us eternal life. How about that? And then, miracle of miracles, whom God declares righteous he begins to make righteous as well. We begin to become in fact what God calls us in grace: saintly, righteous, good. That rude, crude creature of clay called man, thanks to the Holy Spirit’s artistry through the good news of Jesus, begins to shape up into a holy being in the image and likeness of God himself.

The final paragraph before the brief conclusion is where Rev applies holy rude to the men entering the pastoral office. Again, a rich description brings the men into the rude to holy theme. Read closely the sentence beginning with “Extroverts and introverts” and you will encounter another series of descriptive words that capture all who sit there in one way or many ways. Remember when I said I was put off when Rev asserted that the line separating the graduates from Seminary professors was mighty thin? Well, here his words come true. All who enter the ministry do so as those who are rude—feeble and frail in many ways despite the various gifts each pastor may have. All who enter the *holy* ministry do so by God’s call and equipping. Graduates and professors, indeed, all pastors, are alike in the sense of God’s call which makes us each a holy rude.

I wish the sermon did not yet end, though. I would have liked a real life story, perhaps from Rev’s own ministry, that brought to life in a specific instance how a pastor carried out his ministry as one who was rude made holy. I think of the story I told in the sermon I gave for a Theological Diploma service. I was fairly new to the ministry. An evening meeting was interrupted by a phone call. It was the local hospital calling to let us know one of our youth group leaders had been hit by a car. He was in the ER:

broken legs, scrapes over much of his body, his face bloodied, arm crushed. What would I say or do? I felt inadequate for the moment. But as I walked into the ER and Gary saw me walking toward him, I saw him mouth just one word: Pastor. At that moment I was a Holy Rude. And so would the graduates soon be as well.

What is true of people in general is true of the ministry in particular. Here too “Holy Rude” applies. God, I suppose, could have gotten the good word out about Jesus in all sorts of ways, many of them dramatic and impressive. But it is not for us today to speculate about what God could have done or might have done. It is rather our business to recognize what God did. And what he did was this: He chose to get the good word out through people, through ministers, who despite their special vestments and honorable titles, are of the earth—earthly. Extroverts and introverts, family men and recluses, culture vultures and clods, sports enthusiasts and bookworms, overweights and underweights, high-voiced and low-voiced, chancel prancers and liturgical bumpkins—these are among the kinds of men God calls into his holy ministry. And equipped with his power, it is they who get God’s job done. How did St. Paul say it? “We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.” In the light of that biblical truth, you members of the 1993 graduating class are also the “Holy Rude.”

Time to stop. Granted, “Holy Rude” as I have used it today is a lame pun. But if it has in some small way stimulated your understanding of the gospel-event, your appreciation of the means of grace, and your respect for the ministry, then this very pun has become sanctified. It too, I pray, is a “Holy Rude.”

Well, Rev finished by saying it was time to stop. Same for this “Anatomy of a Sermon.” But first I need to say, “Rev, your final words are more true than what you may have meant when you preached them. You have stimulated my understanding of the preaching task. You have helped engender my appreciation for creatively proclaiming the means of grace. You have been instrumental in my holding the preaching task as a sacred privilege. And not just with this sermon, but ever since I first sat in chapel and heard you preach, and then sat in your classes, and then served with you on the faculty, and continue to call you my brother in the ministry. For all that and more, you have my highest respect.”

Reviews

SCULPTOR SPIRIT: Models of Sanctification from Spirit Christology.

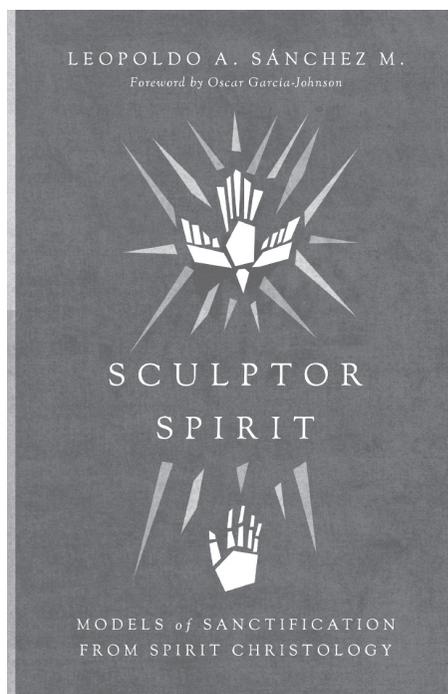
By Leopoldo A. Sánchez M. IVP Academic, 2019. 278 pages. Paper. \$15.46.

Leopoldo Sánchez presents his readers with an evocative image—that of a sculptor who molds a mass into its desired shape—in order to depict the manifold ways the Spirit forms persons after the “image” or “likeness” of Christ (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18). What he offers in this book is a multidimensional depiction of how the Holy Spirit conforms us to Christ’s image—drawing on the Scriptures, theologians across time, and contemporary studies of spirituality and religion in North America. Locating his proposal within the context of contemporary Spirit Christology, he also draws on early church fathers and Martin Luther, and writing on the state of spirituality in North America attending especially to the millennial generation (born ca. 1981–2001), the religiously unaffiliated (or “Nones”), and groups such as the US Hispanic population.

Not intended to be a full-fledged pneumatology, the book is rather a depiction of how a Spirit Christology engenders models of sanctification that correspond to the Spirit’s work of patterning us after Christ’s image. Sánchez’s multidimensional portrayal of sanctification or holiness does not merely “argue *about*” life in the Spirit, but rather “invites” hearers of the word “*into*” stories of the Spirit in God’s economy

of salvation” addressing their deepest spiritual yearnings and struggles (4).

This book draws on Sánchez’s earlier work in *Receiver, Bearer, and Giver of God’s Gift: Jesus’ Life in the Spirit as a Lens for Theology and Life* (Pickwick, 2015), which sought to complement a Logos-oriented Christology with a Spirit Christology. However, the specific direction of its argument emerged out of Sánchez’s work with students, pastors, and church leaders seeking to link sanctification not only to Christian growth in faith and love, but also to Christian practices such as preaching and teaching, prayer and worship, spiritual care, mercy and justice, vocation, and missional engagement with individuals and communities. Through this work,



Sánchez sensed the need for a “models-based approach” to sanctification, given the reality that holiness is a “rich, complex, multidimensional reality that Christians experience differently at different points in time” (6).

Chapter 1 locates the book’s proposal within the context of the field of Spirit Christology. It assesses earlier European work (G. W. H. Lampe and Yves Congar) alongside more recent North American studies (Eugene F. Rogers and Ralph Del Colle) and concludes by linking these approaches to Sánchez’s argument for the need for images describing the Holy Spirit’s formation of saints after Christ’s likeness.

Chapter 2 lays the historical-theological foundation for the book’s approach, drawing on early church fathers: Irenaeus of Lyons, Cyril of Jerusalem, Athanasius of Alexandria, Basil of Caesarea, and Ambrose of Milan. In an analysis of these classic explorations of human participation in the Spirit “whom the Son bears and gives to others,” Sánchez seeks not only to underpin his proposal within a trinitarian framework, but also to demonstrate how these dogmatic arguments are inseparable from their devotional and catechetical value.

The next five chapters present a comprehensive, though not exhaustive, “models-based approach” to the Holy Spirit’s work. Each chapter consists of three parts: biblical images, catechetical resources from the church fathers and Luther, and a discussion of related theological and spiritual issues, and practices in the Christian life. Chapter

3 focuses on *renewal*: the Spirit’s work of conforming us to Christ in his death and resurrection through the daily repentance that seeks reconciliation to God and neighbor. Chapter 4 speaks in *dramatic terms* of the Spirit’s work of making us vigilant, resistant, and resilient children of God in the midst of spiritual attacks through prayer, meditation on God’s word, and other disciplines. Chapter 5 uses *sacrificial* language to describe how the Spirit’s work of shaping us after Christ’s servanthood forms us into an interdependent community—as Christ’s body—sharing joys and burdens. Chapter 6 uses the lens of *hospitality* to spotlight the ways the Spirit leads the saints to reach out and welcome marginalized and neglected neighbors. Finally, chapter 7 speaks in *devotional* terms to describe how the Spirit shapes us in conformity to Christ’s pattern of life, empowering us to share in God’s gifts of work, rest, and play.

Chapter 8 relates these models of sanctification to contemporary studies of religion and spirituality in North America in order to assess their missional usefulness. In this chapter, Sánchez contends that these various models provide pastors and church leaders with compelling narratives and paradigms for engaging Christians and non-Christians in conversations about the spiritual life through dialogue, modeling, and invitation.

A concluding chapter brings together the themes of the book around an extended meditation on the image

of the Spirit as “sculptor” and invites the reader to pursue further theological questions. The appendix is especially helpful. It provides a chart relating each of the five models of sanctification to its description of the Christian life, biblical and catechetical images, issues in the Christian life, depiction of the work of the Holy Spirit, view of growth, and relevant spiritual disciplines. One does not need to read this book sequentially. Its organization throughout is explicit enough to enable readers to start at the place most useful to them.

This impressive volume makes a significant contribution to the academy and church. Deeply grounded in historical and contemporary theology, it is nonetheless oriented toward the practice of the Christian life, focusing on how the Holy Spirit conforms us to Christ and calls us to attend to the neighbors within and around our communities—which in our time, include the young, “Nones,” and Hispanic communities. I highly recommend it for not only scholars, students of theology, pastors, and church leaders, but also for any Christian—or non-Christian for that matter—interested in spiritual formation. Likewise, I highly recommend it not only for academic courses in dogmatic theology or pastoral care and spiritual formation, but also for churches serious about faith formation and missional outreach to their neighbors.

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**LAW & GOSPEL IN ACTION:
Foundations, Ethics, Church.
By Mark Mattes.**

*Edited by Rick Ritchie. 1517 Publishing,
2018. 395 pages. Paper. \$22.95.*

A collection of essays and a handful of Old Testament sermons ranging in length from a few pages to twenty-eight pages, and an intended audience from gatherings of lay people to readers of scholarly journals, Mattes’s work from the first two decades of this century spans a number of topics. Besides a single author, the disparate entries are bound together by the common thread of Lutheran theology—particularly that niche of Lutheran theology practiced in the tradition of Gerhard Forde—and then categorized loosely under the three headings of the subtitle.

Writing within and for his context as an ELCA theologian, Mattes carries out his work with admirable respect for both Scripture and Confessions, taking both seriously as norms for the life of the faithful Lutheran theologian. Holding so steadfast a position, he situates himself as a sharp critic of much of the theology that is practiced in his own church body, and so extends, it would appear, the legacy of his often contrarian teacher. The author even thoughtfully, and at least for me satisfyingly, offers a frank and compelling answer (7) to the question that immediately presents itself, one I suspect that readers must inevitably wonder, but may be too polite or distant to ask: “why do you stay?” Mattes does stay, and as fundamental

and far-reaching as his disagreements with his own denominational brothers and sisters may be, he exhibits throughout the essays the wonderful gift of a generous spirit and a willingness to assume the best about the motives and work of those he critiques. While rightly pointing out the failure of Cynthia Moe-Lobeda's "metanarrative of emancipation" (139) in her work on public theology, he grants that her goals are noble, and later notes an appreciation for some of her key charges against capitalism (142, 147).

Somewhat less generous, however, is his treatment of David Yeago and Reinhard Hütter whom he deems guilty of making a "Thomistic turn" in their effort to battle antinomianism in the church (117). The extent to which these theologians actually follow in the train of Thomas and endorse a human *telos* that eventuates in "our participation in God" is far less obvious to me than it seems to be to Mattes. In any case, what is certainly true is that not everyone who links ethics with striving for a *telos* must choose a *telos* of "being drawn into God's own life" (121); and the "ultimate good" for which one aims could as well be a life lived outward in selfless service of neighbor and not only one "Thomisticly" turned in on self (118). But, Mattes is committed to the strain of Lutheranism that he names as "Radical" and is content with the sole ethical motivation of gratitude and the confident assertion that once faith comes "humans naturally and spontaneously live as Christs in the

world" (12). While Mattes usefully employs the idea of two kinds of righteousness at other points in these essays (213), a great deal more clarity could have been brought into his discussions about Lutheran ethics by following Luther's own example in the great Galatians commentary and thinking through things all the way in terms of the two kinds of righteousness. This would allow the law to achieve a quite positive and instructive role in the life of the believer—an idea that Mattes comes close to acknowledging, but seems reluctant to grant (149).

The weighty second section on ethics concludes with essays on discipleship ("grounded in the classical Lutheran distinction between law and gospel," it is not surprisingly, "a matter of death and new life") and social justice. An emphasis on the unique role of the church in proclaiming the free gospel of forgiveness not only predominates throughout, but is offered as the one right work of the church (198). Indeed, the author's dogged determination to think only in terms of death-dealing law and life-giving gospel in every situation lives up to the book's title and reflects Mattes's convictions about what makes Lutheranism Lutheran. This approach will quite likely offer a familiar and reassuring degree of comfort to many LCMS readers, but may too readily reinforce those assumptions without appropriately challenging them in light of other important ideas that are as well-grounded in Lutheran thinking as law and gospel.

The penultimate section on the church offers solid thinking about the life and purpose of the church and the training and work of her pastors. Mattes's argument for the vital necessity, and devastating disappearance, of what he calls "builder pastors" resonates with validity equal to or exceeding most sociological explanations for the decline of the church (269). Reading this section, one is reminded that sometimes the best answers to the problems that beset the church are actually the ones that are simplest and readily at hand—though often employed only with great effort and cost. Mattes is right, "The pastoral candidates we need will be biblical, confessional, resilient, and evangelistic" (277). This is simple and solid and true; and it is good counsel for those tempted to cast about in disciplines far and wide to discover, it is hoped, the new answers seemingly demanded by new situations.

Years ago, a wise theologian who had lived and worked long and faithfully, remarked to me that in the conflicted world of theological academia one takes his friends wherever he can find them. I've come to regard these words not as empty sentiment or even rueful resignation, but as a standard worthy of pursuit. It's good to be on the lookout for friends. In that spirit, Mattes is far and away a friend who sees well the reality of the church in the world today, both the challenges and the opportunities, and offers a faithful way forward. That we may disagree on an issue or two about which we are both

likely to contend rather zealously . . . well, after all, what are friends for?

Joel Biermann

GOD'S TWO WORDS: Law and Gospel in the Lutheran and Reformed Traditions.

Edited by Jonathan A. Linebaugh. Eerdmans, 2018. 253 pages. Paper. \$35.00.

God's Two Words is a collection of essays alternating between Lutheran and Reformed voices on the topic of the law-gospel distinction. The anthology begins with Lutheran and Reformed theologians engaging their own respective traditions of doctrine and practice. These afford a few interesting insights but are mostly affirmations of the two traditions by people who already hold them to be true (although there are exceptions!). More fruitful for a deeper understanding and appreciation of the law-gospel dialectic, though, are the latter essays, where the authors step outside of their own traditions to assess and critique the other tradition.

Of particular note is the pair of essays, "A Lutheran Response to the Reformed Tradition" by Erik. H. Herrmann and "A Reformed Response to the Lutheran Tradition" by Katherine Sonderegger. Herrmann finds the Reformed tendency to locate the starting point for the doctrine of law and gospel at creation to be deficient, because it results in a smooth continuity of covenantal dispensations and, ultimately, a muddling of law and gospel. However,

he also proposes that the Reformed position serves to counterbalance excessively existential Lutheran applications of the distinction. Sonderegger, on the other hand, critiques the Lutheran practice of the law-gospel distinction as expressed in C. F. W. Walther's fourth thesis on the proper distinction of law and gospel, which concludes, "without this knowledge Scripture is and remains a sealed book." With great insight, she demonstrates the weaknesses and strengths of this exegetical master key, but in the end dismisses it as too narrowly focused on salvation to the exclusion of the greater themes of "divine sovereignty, divine aseity, and glory and life" (195).

Despite a common vocabulary and more points of intersection than one might assume at the outset, there is a persistent feeling that something larger is at stake. This is true not only across the confessional traditions but also within the respective traditions, especially when the question of the law's third use comes up. It seems that either legalism or antinomianism is unavoidable. This dilemma cannot be solved simply by clarifying the natures of the law and the gospel and their relation to each other. Jonathan Linebaugh's introductory essay begins to scratch the surface to expose the deeper issues when he frames the law-gospel dialectic with questions of the nature of God and his work, and the nature of man as sinner and as justified (9). Unfortunately, these questions are not taken up directly, but occasionally they come into view.

Citing the Lutheran theologian Hermann Sasse, Mark Mattes relates the words of law and gospel to the nature of God and his alien and proper works (198–199). If God is foremost a law giver, then the gospel is a momentary diversion from the real and proper work of God, which is to issue commands and demand obedience. On the other hand, if God is foremost a gift giver, then his true nature is revealed not in what he demands, but in what he dispenses, namely the forgiveness of sins. By including both law *and* gospel in the proper work of God, the Reformed ultimately lose the gospel, which is subsumed under the eternal law.

In the concluding essay, Kevin J. Vanhoozer offers speech-act theory as a way to help sort out the classical law-gospel distinction (228–229). Despite some immediate problems with how he breaks down the locution, illocution, and perlocution of God's speech, the introduction of speech-act theory is a good reminder that the law-gospel distinction cannot be properly done in isolation from the giver and receiver of the speech. Vanhoozer is merely recognizing the same thing that Erik Herrmann notes of Luther's insight from his Genesis lectures. Commenting on the prohibition against eating from the tree of knowledge, Luther states, "For Adam this Word was Gospel and Law; it was his worship; it was his service" (174, n. 54). Before the advent of sin there was no law-gospel distinction. It was just God's word, from which Adam received every good, a word that governed his entire life. Only

after the fall is the law-gospel distinction a necessity because man has lost the original right relationship. By setting himself up against God, he receives God's commands as condemnatory, his promises as hollow, and by nature changes the one into the other.

A fitting conclusion is provided by Katherine Sonderegger's observation of the Lutheran tradition of distinguishing law and gospel. "It is, I believe, a particularly elegant, devout, and challenging form of *Christology*: it is a thoroughgoing christological interpretation of the Bible, an unembarrassed proclamation of Scripture, whole and entire, as Word of God, incarnate for our salvation" (195). After all the theological distinctions have been made, if we do not arrive at Christ it is all for naught. But when the law-gospel distinction arrives at the crucified one, then we see God for who he is and ourselves for who we are. The promise of forgiveness restores us to that right relationship, to receive God's word as our source of every good and that which governs our entire lives.

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PAUL: The Pagan's Apostle.

By Paula Fredriksen. Yale University Press, 2017. 319 pages. Hardback. \$35.00. Paper. \$22.00. Kindle. \$10.99.

Seeking to connect Paul's Jewish identity to his missionary efforts, Paula

Fredriksen in *Paul: The Pagan's Apostle* reconstructs Paul's context, providing an engaging and vivid painting of the Roman world in the first century. Fredriksen illustrates a world fraught with beliefs in ethnic gods, ancestors, and spirits that must be placated for harmony to exist in the world. Within this Eastern Mediterranean worldview, Jews, while seeing their god as the highest god, assimilated into communities in the diaspora by recognizing other gods and encouraging their neighbors in the worship of these lesser gods—going so far as to participate in local rituals dedicated to ethnic gods. At the same time, pagans discouraged conversion to Judaism but allowed people in their communities to recognize the god of Israel as one of the many national gods in the world. Those that recognized the god of Israel in pagan communities would be known by Jews as god-fearers. With this compromise, pagans and Jews could exist in the same communities, worship their own gods, and keep cosmic peace between the gods. Fredriksen places Paul into this world with cosmic powers and forces that must be overcome for the Messiah to reign and rule.

According to Fredriksen, Paul's vision of the Messiah was to ingraft "eschatological Gentiles" into the promise of Abraham. In Judaism, the curse of the law was the barring of the Gentiles to be a part of the covenant people (124). Through Christ, these "ex-pagan pagans" would be "Judaized" according to Paul's standard—the

renunciation of all foreign gods while worshipping the one true God alone, adhering to the Ten Commandments, and so on, without giving up their ethnic identities (74). The problem with other rival Judaizers is that they sought to make Gentiles into Jews rather than to allow the Gentiles to remain Gentiles (130). Circumcision is limited to Jews—circumcising a Gentile can never make him a Jew no matter how pious he is.

Vividly and eloquently, Fredriksen makes a compelling case for her vision of the first-century Jewish context. Fredriksen pushes Christians out of their comfort zones to re-examine Paul's own place in the first-century Roman world, making the case for the *and* approach to Paul and his letters. Concerning the polarization of Paul's message, she writes, "Paul's agonistic rhetoric, with its contrasting binaries of law and gospel, works and grace; his resolute opposition to proselyte circumcision; his anger with apostolic challengers; his absolute certainty that he knew what was about to happen—once time slipped away and the later gentile churches settled into history, these features of his letters took on the pattern of polarized opposites: Law *or* gospel; works *or* grace, and as Paul's later theological champions would characterize his position, Judaism or Christianity" (173). While much is learned from the *and* approach of Fredriksen for Christians, such as confessing the goodness of God's law, the necessity of works, the unity between the Old Testament and Paul, and so on, she does not adequately address the

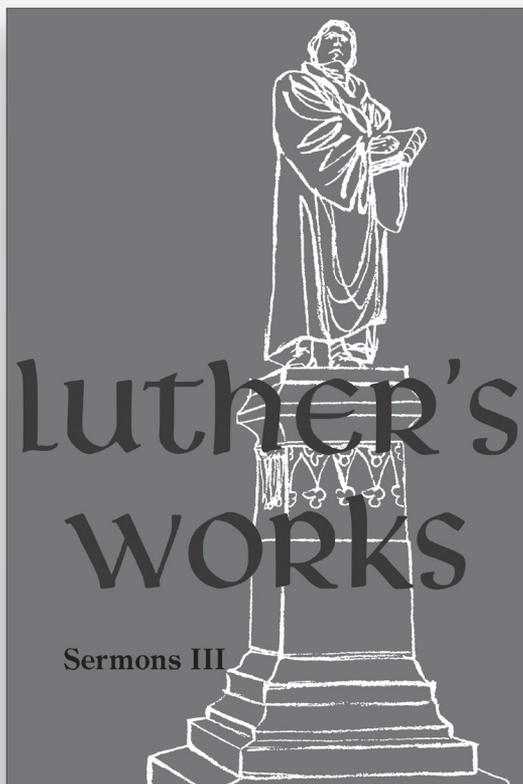
problems that would result from the *and* approach to Judaism *and* Christianity—separate but equal churches.

Fredriksen seemingly posits that Paul promoted a segregationist policy between Jewish and Gentile followers of Christ—a Torah observant church for the Jews and a somewhat Judaized church for the Gentiles (164). Fredriksen places too much emphasis on the isogogical context she places Paul in rather than letting the text speak for itself. As a result, I remain unconvinced of Fredriksen's reading of Galatians 3, where, in her vision of Paul's message, ethnic divisions in the *ekklesia* can continue to stand (149). Nevertheless, Fredriksen's book is an extremely accessible book to both laity, pastors, and scholars. She provides a rich historical reconstruction of the Roman Empire and the supposed cosmic entities inhabiting it in the first century. Readers will find Fredriksen's richly described world interesting and exciting. I recommend *Paul: The Pagan's Apostle* for anyone who wants a greater understanding of Second Temple Judaism and first-century Christianity in the pagan context of the Roman Empire.

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