REVIEWS

On Classical Trinitarianism: Retrieving the Nicene Doctrine of the Triune God. Edited by Matthew Barrett. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2024. ISBN: 978-1-5140-0034-2. xxxiv + 798pp. £59.99.

Controversy in the Church is always uncomfortable. From the false teachers in the New Testament, right through to the online arguments of the present day, the Christian Church has faced periods of theological confusion and conflict. But the pain of such moments also has a positive impact, for the discomfort of controversy has often led to the declaration of clear and consolidated truth. Such was certainly the case in the fourth century; controversy raged, but ever since the Church has benefitted from the Creed that such upheaval prompted. Seventeen hundred years later, *On Classical Trinitarianism*, edited by Matthew Barrett and incorporating a wide range of authors from Protestant, Roman Catholic and Eastern perspectives, offers a vast and fascinating collection of studies, each of which aims to retrieve the Nicene doctrine of the Triune God. Such retrieval is necessary, for many of the Trinitarian challenges of the Early Church have reappeared. Back then the Council of Nicaea sought to *find* clarity; today there is a need to *retrieve* clarity.

The book is in three parts. Part One, entitled 'Retrieving Nicene Trinitarianism', offers eleven essays taking the reader from the Ante-Nicene Fathers, through the remaining Early Church period, into the Middle Ages, eventually reaching the English Particular Baptists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The opening chapters ground the reader in the developments and controversies leading up to the Creed's formulation, the remaining chapters examine its reception and impact. The reader is led through a fast-moving yet detailed analysis of theological giants; Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Athanasius, Hilary, Maximos, John Damascene, Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas are all examined. The result is a rigorous introduction to the pro-Nicene contemplations and contributions of each. Moreover, alongside examining the work of renowned theologians in turn, the essays collectively orient the reader in the underlying metaphysical commitments of Nicene Trinitarianism. But although rooted in the fascinating contexts of the Patristic, Medieval, and Reformed eras, the chapters also engage with recent challenges to, and divergences from, Classical Trinitarianism. Thus, each chapter diagnoses the need for retrieval and the authors engage with recent drifts towards subordinationism, mutability, and Social Trinitarianism. Concepts, contexts, and controversies are all explained with clarity, yet at the same time

the reader is consistently encouraged to embrace the majestic mystery of all that Nicaea seeks to describe.

Part Two examines 'Trinitarian Hermeneutics and Dogmatics'. The emphasis falls mainly on the latter and the majority of chapters focus on a core attribute of Theology Proper, or upon an aspect of orthodox Christology and Pneumatology. Divine Simplicity, Aseity, Immutability, Impassibility, Incomprehensibility and Love are all explored, along with three chapters on Eternal Generation, two on the Spirit's Procession, and a repeated emphasis throughout of the need to maintain a clear distinction between the Creator and His creation, and between who God is in Himself (*theologia*) and His works of creation, providence and salvation (*oikonomia*). Notable contributions include Charles Lee Irons' rich and stimulating scriptural defence of Eternal Generation and discussion of the translation of *monogenes* as 'only begotten'. This is ably complemented by Fred Sanders' examination of the Doctrinal Functions of Eternal Generation. Exploring Eternal Generation no doubt stretches the mind, but these contributions help the reader to reach further into the fullness and beauty of our Saviour's Sonship. Furthermore, the procession of the Spirit is given fascinating examinations by Christopher Holmes and Adonis Vidu, each of which reaffirms the connection between Pneumatology, Christology and Nicaea's Doctrine of the Trinity. Like Part One, these chapters frequently draw on the insights of theological giants, particularly Aquinas, while at the same time engaging with more recent claims such as Rahner's Rule and the Eternal Functional Subordination of the Son.

Finally, Part Three focuses more directly on recent developments under the heading 'The Renewal of Nicene Fidelity Today'. Attention is given to the problems of Social Trinitarianism, both as directed towards Theology Proper and as applied to issues of politics, family and church leadership. As Blair Smith wisely notes in his chapter, such social and ethical concerns are legitimate and appropriate, but they must be met as they are addressed by Scripture, not by adopting a trinitarian theology that risks departing from orthodoxy. This advice is reinforced by the contribution of Carl Trueman, which offers a persuasive case for retaining the metaphysical categories employed by the Nicene theologians. Several chapters again take aim at Eternal Functional Subordination, which may at times risk feeling repetitive, but each analysis is nevertheless informative and helpful.

The scope of this book is vast and impressive and Barrett is to be commended for presenting such a robust volume that explores Historical Theology with humility, and tackles recent controversies with courage. From a Scottish perspective, a more detailed focus on Covenant Theology would have been a welcome addition, particularly given its value in

guarding against Eternal Functional Subordination of the Son. Moreover, the covenantal paradigms set out in Scripture make a key contribution to Trinitarian theology, and there is wisdom in maintaining fine distinctions between these and other, more Platonic, concepts.

Overall, the book is a remarkable accomplishment. In the year that marks the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, *On Classical Trinitarianism* provides a rich, rigorous and relevant retrieval of the Trinitarian orthodoxy. Such a resource is immensely valuable and highly recommended.

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Scottish Missions to China: Commemorating the Legacy of James Legge (1815-1897). Edited by Alexander Chow. Leiden: Brill, 2023. ISBN: 978-90-04-50963-4. 264pp. £47.50.

At a time when China's influence in world affairs is inescapable, and when Chinese Christianity could become the missionary story of the twenty-first century, this academic study into the legacy of James Legge and the wider Scottish missionary enterprise in 18th century China is very welcome. It began life as an international conference in 2015, organised by the Centre for the Study of World Christianity and the Scottish Centre for Chinese Studies. It marked the bicentenary of the birth of James Legge (as well as that of that of his Scottish colleagues in Chinese missions William Chalmers Burns, Alexander Wylie, and William Milne), and the full conference included sixteen presentations and two public lectures, as well as a personal reflection from Legge's great grandson.

For the published volume, eleven of these papers have been included. Brian Stanley has added an afterword on 'James Legge and the Missionary Tradition in British Sinology'. The book is divided into four parts. The volume is organised into four parts. The first, 'The Man James Legge,' considers his engagement with four notable Chinese persons (Pfister), the psychological roots of his resilience (Bowman), and his experience in Oxford, where he was the first Professor of Chinese (Jasper). The second part, 'Scottish Missions to China,' includes William Chalmers Burns in China (Reimer), the contribution of female missionaries (Baradziej), and the Anglo-Chinese College as a bridge between East and West (Zhiqing). The third section, 'Translators and Translations,' comprises studies of the translator's identity and its paradox (Huilin), Legge's hermeneutical methodology as revealed in his translation of the Daxue (Shushing), Legge's concept of the 'people' in the Book of Documents, and 'Finding God's Chinese Name' (Chow). The volume concludes with 'Legge and His

Legacy,' which includes Stanley's afterword and Christopher Legge's 'Personal Reflection'.

James Legge's academic significance is evident in his translation of the Chinese Classics into English, in which he gave positive philosophical and religious value to the works of Confucianism and Taoism, and pioneered a missionary role in interpreting China to the Western world.

Several of the papers provide important contributions to the debates about the complexities of translation from Chinese to English. However their full value is limited to those who can understand the nuances of the Chinese language. For the missiologist, Chow's paper on 'Finding God's Chinese Name' is of particular interest, as it shows Legge changing his mind on this 'term issue', concluding that the *Shangdi* of the Confucian classics was the Christian God.

The fact that this was an academic symposium is significant, as it shows that these matters of missionary engagement with Chinese thinking and culture are not limited to Christian circles. However, the general Christian reader is not neglected in this book. Marilyn Bowman, whose biography *James Legge and the Chinese Classics* (Friesen Press, 2016) is now the main secondary work on his life, presents a picture of a remarkable man whose faith, work ethic, and wisdom enabled him to cope with numerous challenges and tragedies without being diverted from his calling, and David Jasper shows that although Legge was honoured with the Chair of Chinese at Oxford University, he never fitted into life in that bastion of the Anglican establishment.

This book gives Legge a place in the forefront of Scottish missionary history. He is not as well known as William Chalmers Burns (1815-68) and James Hudson Taylor (1832-1905) but his significance, both in Scottish missions, and in the wider Christian mission in China, is huge. He was criticised by missionaries for his pro-Chinese approach, which led to his constructive engagement with Confucianism, and to his opposition to European policies regarding China. Instead of translating English books into Chinese (Burns translated Pilgrim's Progress, while Alexander Wylie produced Chinese versions of western scientific texts), Legge embarked on the massive project of translating the Chinese Classics into English, and after leaving China in 1873, in 1876 was appointed first Professor of Chinese at Oxford University. His translations remain important today, and were significant in the nineteenth century, both for enabling Europeans to understand Chinese thought, as well as for showing that Chinese Christianity was built on an indigenous foundation of beliefs and practice.

One aspect of Legge's formation that is not developed is his upbringing in the independent 'Missionar Church' in Huntly. The principles of

independency held by his family led him to refuse to join the established Church of Scotland, which could have led to his becoming Professor of Humanities (Classics) at King's College, Aberdeen. Instead, he remained true to his dissenting principles for the rest of his life. These beliefs caused him to embrace radical politics and oppose the British trade in Opium, which caused so much devastation in China, to engage in deep friendships with Chinese people, and ultimately prevented his second wife Mary being buried in a parish churchyard in Oxford.

The 'Missionar Church' itself has a worthy place in the history of Scottish Christianity, as it produced several other missionaries for the London Missionary Society, namely Dr William Milne (1775-1822), Bible translator and joint founder of the Anglo-Chinese College, his son William Charles Milne (1815-63), a school friend of Legge who sailed with him to China in 1839 and worked in Bible translation, plus George Cran and James Dawson, who served in South India between 1804 and 1832. It also produced several significant Congregationalist ministers, including George Macdonald, whose fantasy literature inspired the writing of C.S. Lewis.

Although the name of Andrew Walls (1928-2021) is not mentioned in the book, his shadow lies over the whole event. In his youth, Walls aspired to serve as a missionary in China, but events put paid to that. In 2008 he wrote, 'It is impossible to predict what part Chinese Christianity will play in the new global configuration of church and world, but it is unlikely to be peripheral.' He died in 2021, and this Legge conference at the centre he established in Edinburgh bears the marks of his vision.

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The Broken Body: Israel, Christ and Fragmentation. By Sarah Coakley. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2024. ISBN: 978-1-4051-8923-1. 294pp. $39.95.

Writing a 'good' theological essay is no small task, and that is even before one tries to grasp the difficult nettle that is theological taste. Despite the sheer number and teeming diversity of essay collections now available, it remains a dying art. This decline is not only due to shifts in academic theology and publishing but, I suggest, to a certain faint-heartedness. If this sounds like a bold and deliberately provocative claim to make in a review, so be it: to essay quite literally means 'to attempt'. A 'good' theological essay does not simply explore ideas or critically collate existing work; it takes risks in attempting to push theology forward. It is one in which the author ventures into the awkward and thankless vocation of being a theologian. Theology is a risky enterprise.

That so many 'good' theological essays—those which offer courageous and innovative ways not only of looking at old questions but of asking fresh questions and bringing exciting perspectives to theology—should come from a single pen, that of Sarah Coakley, is a sign, in contradistinction to many others, of the flourishing of the art form. Coakley is a formidable and courageous thinker who is willing to do this risky work on the page.

The essays in this book were originally offered in different contexts and are here revised, a prologue and additional chapter attached, and collected around three prescient themes, each of which corresponds to distinct, though overlapping and loosely connected, sections of the book. These themes include lively explorations of issues in historical and contemporary Christology (divine kenosis features heavily, as well as the reconception of the Chalcedonian Definition through an apophatic lens); nuanced considerations of the network of relations between Judaism and Christianity. Here, we see the themes of forgiveness and gender explored through careful readings of material from rabbinic and Pauline traditions. In particular, Coakley makes imaginative and largely convincing use of biblical references and illustrations. She also offers constructive insights into eucharistic-sacramental concerns (sacrifice, gift, and gender, all with a distinctly Anglican flavour and broad import, receive particular attention).

Coakley engages with both the relatively novel and the familiar, rendering the latter new by current events. Both of these areas are presented with a solid underpinning of thoughtful research and reflection. While some of the material could be further developed—Coakley notes that this is 'a book of essays that should be read as prolegomena to any future Christology, rather than as a full and substantial Christology per se' (p. 15)—and might benefit from continued consideration and light revision, the coherence of the thinking and the grasp of the subject matter are never in question.

Essays are living things. They grow and support each other. However rich a particular collection becomes, it will always interact with other essays, journal material, and the expanding wealth of resources now available in digital form. Essays are both our bread and butter in the discipline and evidence that we are developing special interests. Coakley is an essayist of incomparably 'catholic' tastes—she appears interested and well-read in a broad range of topics.

What emerges is an impressively integrated piece of work, with much potential for building incrementally and systematically on a well-explained foundation. There are very few instances in the entire piece of writing where I have felt any need at all to seek clarification. It is an excel-

lent study in interdisciplinarity. As the footnotes testify, the command of complex subject matter is considerable. Coakley is well known for her skill in constructing theological arguments though both her own wide and resourceful reading and her active participation in ongoing conversations. She has read a formidable array of material, organised it according to a clearly explained scheme, and presented it accessibly without oversimplification.

Perhaps this is unsurprising: the necessity of Anglicanism and forms of reformed Protestantism outside of Calvinism (until perhaps the recent charismatic turn) to constantly return to the sources of Catholic Christianity in their identity formation is well known. This means that Anglican/English-speaking scholarship, especially post-Oxford Movement, is adept at the very sources to which other traditions were returning in the mid-twentieth century, alongside much closer working relationships post-war and as a result of the ecumenical movement, both in terms of conferences and in shared access to each other's learning outside of some of the more denominationally confined structures. There is potentially a similar move at work today as Christianity in the West comes to terms with the loss of Christendom and numerical decline, provoking a reaction on one end and a parallel search for what unites the various denominations and understandings of Christianity in response to this decline in power in different ways. Coakley's voice provides much grist to the mill here, as ever.

In *The Broken Body*, we have a unique and provocative collection of prolegomena to future theological developments—a significant attempt to essay, to break up and open traditional themes and offer new insights. As is characteristic of Coakley, the Holy Spirit is crucial for understanding how the Church and the world participate in the broken up and open life of Christ, and the need for an understanding of this work in its proper Trinitarian context is clearly shown. It is thus, in the end, a reason to hope. Coakley ventures the risk of being a theologian and inspires others to join her.

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When Christians Disagree: Lessons from the Fractured Relationship of John Owen and Richard Baxter. By Tim Cooper. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2024. ISBN: 978-1-4335-9295-9. $18.99.

Tim Cooper, professor of Church History in the University of Otago, New Zealand, has taken the advice of a friend and turned what was a technical, academic work, *John Owen, Richard Baxter, and the Formation of*

Nonconformity (Ashgate, 2011) into this more accessible (and affordable) work. This reviewer is glad that the advice was acted upon, because this book—better than any other popular-level work on the Puritans in recent memory—moves the reader beyond the usual accolades to explore what might be called Puritanism's 'gritty' side: the fact of rivalry and personality clashes. As he does so, Cooper provides the reader with an important introduction to current authorities and literature in Puritan studies. Both of these emphases: candour about and currency in Puritan study are sorely needed at this time. We have, after all, been awash in Puritan reprints since the 1960's. To a considerable extent, this spate has not taken us far beyond Puritan 'fandom'. So insightful an observer as Gerald Bray has noted that the resurgence of interest in Puritanism has proved to be part of an 'evangelical theological recessional' (*History of Christianity in Great Britain and Ireland*, IVP, 2019, p. 581).

Cooper offers us a skilful portrait of two contemporaries, each of whom sought the further reformation of the Church of England. But they clearly differed as to social background, access to higher education, and geographic location (particularly as this related to England's Civil War). Owen had the advantages of a comfortable upbringing, an Oxford education, and important social connections which opened numerous doors for advancement. His pastoral ministry was exercised away from scenes of battle. There was an accompanying haughtiness. By contrast, Baxter experienced a difficult childhood, gained no access to higher education, and lived and served in a region of England devastated by Civil War. Baxter had the tendency, shared by other autodidacts, towards outspokenness.

The literary jousting of Owen and Baxter in the Civil War and Commonwealth periods was something painful to observe (and for us to read about). Cooper is right: they had need of a peace-maker or intermediary (p. 121). Owen's bold high Calvinism stoked fears in Baxter (who was also a predestinarian) of the antinomianism which he had witnessed at first hand within the Parliamentary Army. Yet Owen was not the Antinomian that Baxter feared him to be.

Cooper insightfully reflects on how the literary sparring which went on between Owen and Baxter too easily replicates itself in the internet world of our time (p. 24). Face to face communication brings with it needed constraints and the possibility of better understanding.

But with these plaudits, there are also reasons to demure. There are strands of the story that need to be emphasised more fully than Cooper has done in this admitted popularisation of his longer work. While both Baxter and Owen are clearly classifiable as Puritans, i.e. preachers associated with 'the godly', they were of dissimilar outlook as to the desirability of a national church. Baxter, because he sought the success of a revived

national church, persevered with church schemes that would have comprehended all Protestants in the land (pp.23,26, 90); he sought inclusion (on stout Protestant terms) in the Church of England right up to the time of the 1662 Ejection. He was personally familiar with King Charles II. One would need to reckon him a *conforming* Puritan up to the point in time when this became impossible. Owen, by contrast, needs to be seen even more clearly than Cooper portrays him, as one who had rejected the national church idea and who aimed to gather separated churches that rivalled the parish system. These were not simply personal differences of emphasis, but rival expressions of Puritanism.

In addition, one would never know (according to *When Christians Disagree*) that the Civil War period was also the era when, in addition to the military alliance brought into existence between English and Scottish parliamentary forces, there were serious attempts made at achieving a cross-border theological convergence through the labours of the Westminster Assembly of Divines. (One finds only a passing reference to that Assembly on a timeline at p.133). This strikes the reviewer as odd; there *is* clear reference made (pp. 94-95) to Owen's involvement in theological consultations under Cromwell (aimed at setting the boundaries of religious toleration for the1650s). But this was the era when the agreed-upon Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms along with the Directory for Public Worship had been commended for nation-wide use. Owen, with Cromwell, was working to counter this. While reference is made to Owen's activity in Ireland as a military chaplain under Cromwell, only the slightest reference is made to Owen's similar activity in the Cromwellian invasion of Scotland (see p.44). During that invasion of Scotland, Owen took the opportunity to preach against the Presbyterian form of government, causing great consternation.

A similar constriction occurs in connection with the introduction of the Act of Uniformity in 1662, failure to comply with which led the exclusion of some 2,000 ministers from the Church of England and Wales. The statement is made (p.25) that 'no sincere Puritan could easily pledge to utilise the *Book of Common Prayer* as required.' The recent research of Stephen Hampton (*Anti-Arminians: the Anglican Reformed Tradition from Charles II to George I*, OUP, 2008) and Jake Griesel (*Retaining the Old Episcopal Divinity: John Edwards of Cambridge*, OUP 2022) have shown how unsafe this generalisation is. The recurring issue here is whether the complex relationship between Owen and Baxter has been adequately placed in its wider setting. Not only were they dis-similar Puritans, but Puritanism had not been eradicated from the National Church, though each of them stood outside it.

Tim Cooper's *When Christians Disagree* is a wonderful doorway into the world of mid-seventeenth century English Puritanism. The interpersonal relationships of two notables who were too often at odds serves as the portal. Having utilised this entryway, let the reader go on to examine Cooper's weightier volume, which offers fuller details.

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Evangelicals and Abortion: Historical, Theological, Practical Perspectives. By J. Cameron Fraser. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2024. ISBN: 978-1-6667-8451-0. 220pp. $23.00.

Abortion is an immensely important, highly controversial, and deeply sensitive subject. And because it is all these things, we are often very hesitant to talk about it. In the USA, it has been a very prominent topic for years, but here in Britain, most people gravitate away from almost all difficult conversations, thus leaving the church reluctant to speak about an issue that deep down we know is of the utmost seriousness. For this reason, *Evangelicals and Abortion* by J Cameron Fraser is a very welcome and helpful publication. Written by a Scot, living in Canada, with very close ties to the USA and vast pastoral experience of the issues raised in the book, *Evangelicals and Abortion* focuses much on the controversies around abortion in the USA, but does so from the perspective of a highly informed onlooker. In doing so, Fraser offers a work that is balanced, thorough and informative, providing an immensely helpful resource for evangelicals in both the US and worldwide.

The book is divided into three parts; the first explores the historical developments around abortion and evangelicalism, the second examines theological issues, and the third draws practical implications. Fraser's opening chapter sets out the main thesis of the book; that abortion is first and foremost a religious issue, rather than a question of politics, science, or women's rights. The latter are by no means unimportant, but the issue of abortion centres on questions of the nature and value of the life in the womb. These, Fraser points out, 'are deeply religious questions.' In this historical section of the book, Fraser's aim is to examine how evangelicals have, and should, approach these questions.

Chapter Two traces recent developments in regard to evangelicals and abortion. Fraser offers a very helpful definition of evangelicalism and then focuses particularly on American Evangelicalism and how abortion has become an immensely prominent topic, deeply intertwined with American politics. But, as Fraser helpfully demonstrates, the situation is

much more nuanced than any simplistic 'pro-life means you are Republican' assumptions.

The reader is taken further back into history in Chapter Three. Here Fraser provides a very helpful study of how abortion has been approached from the Early Church, Middle Ages, through the Reformation, and up to the present day. The chapter touches on Graeco-Roman views, Jewish debates, and Early Church writings. Regarding the question of the soul's origin in the unborn child, the reader hears the views of Augustine, Chrysostom, and Aquinas. Moving through the centuries, the opinions of Calvin, Luther, Owen, Barth, and Bonhoeffer are all consulted.

Chapter Four then explores developing evangelical views in the twentieth century, particularly in light of the legalisation of abortion in the latter half of that century. Among evangelicals, there is consensus that life begins before birth, but no consensus on when exactly that happens, or on whether there are situations where abortion may be permissible. Interestingly, Fraser also includes examples of prominent evangelicals, such as Bruce Waltke and John Stott, whose viewpoints appear to have changed over time.

Part Two then focuses on the theological issues related to abortion. First, Chapter Five traces developments in the interpretation of Exodus 21:22-25, a key passage relating to the life of the unborn child. Fraser highlights that discussions over this passage have led to stronger agreement that human life begins at conception. The consequential question then asks what it means for an unborn human life to be made in the image of God. This is the focus of Chapters Six and Seven.

Fraser explores the doctrine of the image of God in relation to the unborn child and notes that care needs to be taken in attaching too close a connection between image-bearing and the exercise of capabilities. Fraser wisely highlights that such ties risk implying that those unborn and yet to develop these capacities, and indeed those born but who are for some reason incapacitated, do not qualify as image bearers. A more helpful approach suggested by Fraser, is that image-bearing should be grounded more in terms of sonship, rather than capabilities. Then in Chapter Seven he explores some related implications of the unborn child being made in the image of God. Topics such as contraception, IVF, miscarriage, stem cell research, vaccinations, and capital punishment are all discussed, with many stimulating observations offered.

Part Three then explores some practical implications of the ongoing issue of abortion for evangelicals. To begin with, Chapter Eight examines the suggestion that adoption is the appropriate alternative to abortion. Fraser, writing as a parent with an adopted child, offers a balanced and careful discussion, highlighting the value and benefit of adoption yet also

recognising that the slogan 'adoption, not abortion' may fail to adequately recognise the complexities and hardships that can often arise for all parties.

Chapter Nine takes up the recent decision of the US Supreme Court to reverse *Roe v. Wade*. Fraser traces some of the key arguments, statistics, and controversies that this decision has prompted both politically and in the church. The analysis initially focuses on the US, but there follows a wider examination of developments in abortion laws in other countries. He also includes a very helpful analysis of how the support given by pro-life organisations to pregnant women has often been unfairly portrayed in the media.

Finally, Chapter Ten raises the crucial point that the power of the law is often defeated by the power of public opinion. Thus, imposing abortion bans may seem like a positive step to the pro-life movement, but if public opinion still remains heavily polarised on the issue, decisions such as the reversal of *Roe v. Wade* simply fuel a backlash of counter measures from those who remain in favour of abortion. Lasting change comes through persuasion rather than imposition, and such persuasion can only come through the life-changing message of the gospel. Abortion, ultimately, is a religious question.

Fraser writes from an unambiguous pro-life position. Yet he does so with great care, compassion, and diligence. The book is not afraid to highlight unwise steps taken by the pro-life movement and he rightly highlights the importance of 'greater humility, realism, and Christlikeness in pro-life advocacy.' Some readers may feel that the book focuses too much on the situation the USA. However, this is without doubt the arena where abortion issues have been most publicly prominent. Moreover, the book provides the non-American reader with very helpful insights and explanations of the developments that have taken place there. And even more importantly, Fraser offers rich and edifying theological insights into the life and value of the unborn child. As always, Fraser writes with clarity, care, and compassion, and the result is a volume that is to be highly recommended.

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Romans: A Commentary. By Beverly Roberts Gaventa. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2024. ISBN: 978-0-664-22100-3. x + 552pp. £57.25.

I first encountered Beverly Roberts Gaventa's engagement with Romans in a series of special lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary nearly fifteen years ago. Throughout the week, Dr. Gaventa spoke about the epis-

tle with the passion, insight, and aplomb that have characterised her academic career. Whether or not this commentary was in view back then, it certainly flows from many years of dedicated, in-depth study and reflection.

Gaventa dedicates this volume to Phoebe of Cenchrae, whom she believes read the epistle aloud to the Romans when it was first delivered, with gratitude for her and 'the host of other women whose contributions to understanding the letters of Paul have been lost, discounted, or neglected' (xii). This dedication not only sets the perspective of this Romans commentary apart from its predecessors, it also foreshadows what is to follow. This is a book that sets out to explore the nooks and crannies of its subject in search of meaning, looking behind and beneath Paul's language to understand and elucidate the Christological argument and the ecclesiological context of Romans for contemporary readers.

Her main purpose, set forth in the preface, is to offer 'a coherent account of Romans' rather than report or seek to settle scholarly debates associated with the letter. In that vein, footnotes and direct engagement with academic literature are kept to a minimum. Make no mistake, however; Gaventa has done her homework. The substantial thirty-seven-page bibliography at the front of the volume attests to the depth and breadth of her research. This minimisation of professorial discussions is a deliberate choice on her part. She starts with and remains focused on the words of Paul.

One strength of her approach to the vast secondary literature on Romans is that she makes a point to broaden her scope beyond the most recent theories and interpretations. The observations of Origen, Ambrosiaster, Chrysostom, and other ancient commentators make appearances in her dialogue with the text not only because they contain 'gems' of insight but they also offer a grounded/ing perspective beyond the modern and postmodern study of Romans. These ancient voices remind us that Paul has equally inspired and exasperated serious readers for centuries.

Another strength, in line with her previous commentary work (e.g. her 2003 volume on Acts) is Gaventa's refusal to cordon off theological considerations from literary and historical questions pertaining to the text. Romans is, after all, a letter 'about God and God's doings in the world' (p. 1). Everything in the epistle is theological to one degree or another. Treating the historical and literary aspects of the epistle separately employs an artificial compartmentalisation foreign to Paul's perspective and purpose(s). If we hope to understand Paul – in Romans as well as in his other writings – Gaventa rightly contends we must never set aside the inherently theological nature of his rhetoric. That does not mean defining the 'theology' of Romans is easy. Paul is not endeavouring to set

systematic doctrine for the church, and Gaventa does not attempt to help him do so.. Rather she remains focused on the fact that Paul is proclaiming and wrestling with the advent of Jesus Christ, a divine 'intrusion' that, for him, leaves no aspect of life or the world untouched (p. 5).

A third strength of this commentary is Gaventa's choice to read Paul with 'a hermeneutic of generosity' (p. 3). This is not a methodology to ignore or minimise the painful, tragic ways in which Paul (and Romans in particular) has been used to justify abusive behaviour and coercive systems of control. Gaventa acknowledges this reality and recognises that the study of Romans is challenging for a number of people. Her caveat may not be foregrounded or explicit enough to satisfy some readers. Those looking for expressions of righteous indignation in the textual analysis itself will have to look elsewhere. But by giving Paul the benefit of the doubt, endeavouring to read as she would want to be read, Gaventa is able to treat challenging and controversial stretches of Romans with an informed, sober, and astute nuance that may very well help wounded and/or cynical readers find their way through the letter.

The fruits of this approach are on full display in her treatment of the 'list of vices' at the end of chapter 1 (pp. 63-76) and the first seven verses that begin chapter 13 (pp. 355-69). Gaventa emphasises the rhetorical strategy of this introductory section, with the twist at the beginning of chapter 2 being where Paul lays his emphasis. If we linger in the itemised 'dishonourable desires,' we miss or misunderstand Paul's point: no one is excused, no one is favoured (p. 72). Gaventa's translation of *o anthrope* as 'you, there!' rather than 'O, man' is particularly effective at capturing Paul's confrontation of the Romans' presumed self-righteousness. Likewise, at the beginning of chapter 13, Gaventa pauses to review 'the long struggle' to interpret this passage, reaching all the way back to Polycarp, before exploring the intratextual challenges presented by this text within Romans as well as the broader (undisputed) Pauline corpus. She then suggests a way forward through the lens of chapter 12. Because Paul's concern is strengthening and protecting the communities of faith, 13:1-7 can be read as discouraging foolish resistance – specifically not paying one's taxes – rather than elevating rulers beyond reproach. They, like everything and everyone, are subjects of God's will not necessarily agents of it.

The one drawback to this commentary is the formatting. It can be challenging to find specific points of analysis within Gaventa's extensive exegesis. Rather than individual verses, the work is organised into sections which are not subdivided into smaller units. As a result, one must wade out into Gaventa's explorations of the text. In its depths there is much treasure to be found; but finding it entails going for a swim rather than strolling along the shore. Thus, this is not the only Romans commentary

you will ever need, but it will most assuredly enhance your understanding of the epistle in ways other commentaries cannot.

Rev Dr Todd Thomason, PhD Candidate, University of Edinburgh

Strange Religion: How the First Christians Were Weird, Dangerous, and Compelling. By Nijay K. Gupta. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2024. ISBN: 978-1-58743-517-1. x + 240pp. $18.99.

With the passage of several thousand years, it can be difficult to appreciate the ways in which the early Christians went against the grain of other ancient religions. Without careful consideration, we might assume that Christian distinctives have remained the same over time. In *Strange Religion*, Nijay Gupta shows that the early church was indeed strange among first-century worshippers, but not according to modern categories. What made the first Christians a nuisance, Gupta argues, was how they disrupted the Roman *pax deorum* ('peace with the gods,' p. 23). He unpacks this disturbance throughout the book.

Part 1 explains Graeco-Roman religious practice and its broader aims. The goal of Roman religion was not communion with a deity but community prosperity. This was achieved through following prescribed rituals, which moved the gods to dispense domestic tranquillity. Whether you believed in the gods you sacrificed to was irrelevant. So, when Christians insisted on personal faith that made such rituals irrelevant, they were seen as disturbers of the *pax deorum*. The new Christians lacked historicity and a unique ethnicity, which also raised suspicions. Average Romans would not have been aware of Christianity's historical ties to Judaism. The multiethnic demographics of the church also made it impossible to trace their heritage back to a particular people.

Part 2 describes what beliefs of the new faith challenged Graeco-Roman religion. Adding another god to the religious marketplace would not have been disruptive, but Christians proclaimed a crucified Jew as unrivalled supreme Lord, which disrupted everything. Christian belief in God's Spirit dwelling within them explained why they did not meet in temples, and they trusted in Jesus' final sacrifice instead of giving burnt offerings. All of this amounted to a 'religious-technical revolution' (p. 90) which further disrupted the *pax deorum*. While Roman literature foresaw only an inevitable decline, Christians believed the time of God's fullness had only just begun (Mark 1:15; Gal. 4:4-5).

Gupta moves to Christian worship in Part 3. He describes the well-known charges of secrecy and incest against the church. These accusations arose because Christians met in private homes and affectionately greeted each other as brother and sister. They did not meet in a public

temple with trained priests who knew how to placate a distant god, but in homes, with no priests, as a family (p. 145). In Part 4, Gupta explores the strangeness of Christian behaviour. Roman religion made no ethical demands on worshippers, but Christians sought to imitate Jesus. Instead of jostling for a high position in the hierarchy of the gods, the Son of God descended to the lowest position, died the most shameful death, and expects his followers to emulate his humble example (Phil. 2:5-11). Lest he mischaracterise the first Christians as perfect, Gupta closes by describing the divisions, complicity with Roman slavery, and antisemitism that haunted the early church.

There is much to praise in Gupta's presentation. He is concise, getting the work done in less than 250 pages. He provides support for his arguments from a wide variety of ancient Graeco-Roman texts but gives enough context to help those unfamiliar with classical sources. He also provides helpful metaphors (the city culture of Portland, coconut water, hotspots, eyewear) that illustrate his points. Gupta takes readers back to first century religion and successfully shows just how 'weird' this new faith was and how refreshing it can be.

Just a few changes would make the book even better. Ancient religion and its modern counterpart are not exact parallels. Roman religion did not concern itself with personal morality. Ethics fell into ancient philosophy's domain. Gupta does not clarify this until chapter 3. Because ethics takes up so much space in current religious discussions, this distinction should probably be made earlier in his presentation. Evangelical readers may take issue with how Gupta reads complicity with slavery (1 Cor. 7:21-23; Eph. 6:5-6; Col. 3:22) and antisemitic attitudes in inspired texts (1 Thess. 2:14-16). Gupta could perhaps give more weight to Paul's good faith attempts in promoting freedom for slaves (1 Cor. 7:21) and consider evidence that demonstrates Paul's genuine affection for his Jewish brothers and sisters (e.g. Rom. 9:1-5).

In all, this is an excellent book. It is especially helpful for those seeking to understand why the average pagan worshipper would perceive the Christians to be such a threat. The book is a refreshing reminder of the raw ingredients that made up the early church, and a plea for believers today to be 'weird' in ways true to the ancient faith.

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Sola: Christ, Grace, Faith, and Scripture Alone in Martin Luther's Theology. By Volker Leppin. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024. ISBN: 978-1-5064-9188-2. 228pp. $36.00.

In this dense but readable collection of essays, Leppin continues his wider experiment to situate Luther as a medieval theologian rather than someone characterised by a radical break from the thinking that 'went before' him. This book builds on Leppin's profound Luther scholarship and, thanks to the careful translation by Brandt, is made available to the general English reader.

Sola brings together essays presented at various conferences and seminars during the 2017 Reformation Jubilee celebrations. With minimal changes to the original texts, Leppin weaves together the seven essays to demonstrate that Luther's theology was firmly grounded in his medieval heritage, and that the '*solas*' of the Protestant tradition are not as exclusive to Protestantism as might first be thought.

A thread of ecumenical thought runs through this book. Whereas Protestant Luther research, especially in Germany, has mainly taken place within a confessional, binary context in which the Protestant and Roman Catholic arguments have tended to be put into conflict, Leppin looks for the points of unity in Luther's inherited traditions.

In chapter one, Leppin explores the late-medieval critique of indulgences and highlights that such a critique was not unique to Luther or the Protestants but was already established in Roman Catholic theology. In chapter two, Luther's debt to his Abbot and confessor, John of Staupitz, is centred, particularly in relation to the tension between interior and exterior spirituality. Leppin challenges the idea that salvation was entirely dependent on Christ only emerged in the Reformation. Instead, he points to the broader medieval commitment to the passion of Christ, especially within the monastic-mystical tradition, as influencing Luther's thinking. In chapter three, Luther's reading of Augustine and Meister Eckhart's pupil John Tauler is highlighted as the influence behind Luther's turn to the centrality of grace. Leppin emphasises that Augustine and the scholastic tradition provide the language and theology of salvation by grace alone.

Chapter four highlights the tension between continuity and innovation within Luther's reformation thought. Leppin argues that rather than breaking with the medieval tradition, Luther preserved and reframed scholastic and monastic-mystical motifs in a new mode and with a fresh emphasis. In Chapter five, Leppin shows that the questions around issues of authority, particularly the authority of scripture, need to be understood against the backdrop of the Leipzig Disputations. The question of author-

ity was already a live debate within the medieval theological world, which was sharpened for Luther as a result of Leipzig. The medieval church never challenged the supremacy of scripture. The key question was the authority of the interpretation of scripture. In chapter six, Leppin argues that Luther's approach to scripture, particularly the role of scripture in explaining scripture and the reliance upon conscience and the Holy Spirit, emerges from the monastic-mystical tradition Luther inherited. The chapter also raises an important reminder that Luther did not read the Bible in the same historical-critical manner that is more common for theologians today.

Then in chapter seven, Leppin provides an interpretation of 2 Corinthians 3:6 in the mode that Luther utilised and engages with Luther's thought. This highlights the importance of understanding the tension between the Spirit and the Letter of scripture in Biblical interpretation for Luther in his medieval context. The chapter concludes by providing an example of how Luther developed and continued the underlying methods of the medieval tradition whilst diverging from their presentation and application.

Leppin argues that the *solas* are not pitted against medieval theology. Instead, they emerged from a slow and gradual development process over many years culminating in Luther's theology. By making close use of source texts, combined with his experience in this field, Leppin makes a persuasive argument to re-read Luther, especially the *solas*, within a medieval context and not as the result of a radical break from a previous tradition.

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The Old Testament as Literature: Foundations for Christian Interpretation. By Tremper Longman III. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2024. ISBN: 978-1-5409-6131-0. 304pp. $34.99.

The Old Testament as Literature by Tremper Longman is a readable and lucid analysis of the literary qualities and character of the Old Testament (OT). In the first of a tri-partite series he sets out to provide a theoretically robust analysis of the OT as literature and provides key concepts, categories, and points of departure for anyone interested in taking the OT seriously as a literary document. Building on over four decades of serious scholarly labour and inquiry Longman can distil in 250 pages a wealth of previously published research along with newer formulations and insights. He is not naïve about the complications of the task which arise in discussing ideas such as 'The Old Testament', Literature, Genre,

Intertextuality, Narrative Prose, and Poetry each of which could easily receive chubby footnotes. Simply put the book discusses both *theory* and *practice* (p. 15). In what is part intellectual history, part theory, and part thought-provoking exegetical information the student and scholar both, will find material that will be useful for their own edification. The book is broken up into three parts: *Literary Theory and the Conventions of Biblical Narrative and Poetry*, *The Analysis of Illustrative Prose-Narrative Texts*, and *The Analysis of Illustrative Poetic Texts*.

In chapter 1, he sets out to answer the preliminary, and not so obvious question of: where is meaning found? He defends a 'nuanced authorial-intention approach to interpretation' (p. 19). The schema sketched here is one that runs: Author → Text → Reader. When he speaks of intentions, he admits that he is not privy to the minds of ancient people, thus readers must 'discern the author's intention through the text itself' (p. 21). In chapter 2, he gives an intellectual biography of the literary study of the OT highlighting key moments and figures along the way (pp. 30-54). Firmly putting his finger on the deep *historical* impulse found in biblical scholarship since the Enlightenment, he notes that until at least the 1970's historical-critical questions dominated the topography of scholarship (31). This all changed with a watershed SBL presidential address given by James Muilenberg in 1968 (though there were of course antecedents!). One needed to move beyond the task of excavation endorsed by historical-criticism and form-criticism, to see the OT as it stands, having its own literary integrity and proclivities. This 'literary turn' as scholars have catalogued it (in retrospect) reached a zenith with the publication of Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* in 1981. A work that still influences literary approaches to this day, and especially his own, as Longman styles himself a card carrying '*Alterian*' (p. 32). In the succeeding decades to the current moment a medley of approaches—from deconstructionist readings to feminist and post-colonial ones—show themselves alive, well and here to stay (pp. 33-46).

In the following chapter in contrast to the sampling of various literary theories and their applications to OT studies he gives his own presentation of *genre theory* and how it shapes reading strategies. For Longman, genre is admittedly modern (though with Platonic and Aristotelian roots) and can broadly be defined as '…a group of texts that share common features. These features might be formal, linguistic, thematic, content-related, or a variety of other similarities.' (p. 55). Rather than 'genre' being pure and fixed in all cases (contra Gunkel) he states, 'Genre categories…are not rigid, watertight compartments. Rather, they are classifications with fuzzy edges or boundaries' (p. 58). That is, a given text can participate in more than one genre at a time (p. 59), sit at the fringes or periphery of a

genre, or can begin to participate in a different genre *over time*. An excellent example given in the book is Psalm 2 initially a kingship hymn, it comes to be read as one ripe with *eschatological messianic* expectation (cf. Ps. Sol. 17, 4Q174, 1 En. 48, Acts 4:25 *et al*.). The discussion here regarding genre is crucial as the concept forms the skeletal substructure of the book and is arguably his big idea.

The next two chapters of the section are a surgically precise explication of the two basic genres that are constitutive of the OT: Narrative Prose and Poetry (pp. 67-152). Drawing on the work of narratologists, Longman shows interdisciplinary prowess as he applies the same methods used in literary studies to analyse OT literature (see excurses on pp. 69-71). In his discussion of characterisation for example, he makes the important point that whatever may lay *behind* the textual depictions, the characters (from Adam to Moses to Ezra and so on) are *literary constructs* and this even applies to the main character: *God* (p. 91)! Because this is so, their names, their referentiality, and their physical descriptions must be studied. A classic text here is 1 Sam. 17 where Goliath gets a lengthy and robust physical description contra David the mere shepherd boy (p. 93). Even amid much precision to be commended here one wonders how he'd classify the legal material in the Torah (Ex. 21-23, Deut. 12-26, Lev. 17-26 etc.), and even more interestingly according to what kind of, (if any!) organisational/literary principles do they adhere? Moving to the poetry section, he shows a nuanced and up to date engagement of the structure and function of Hebrew Poetry building on the work of premier scholars like Kugel (pp. 110-121). While the treatment of parallelism is a *sine qua non* for a discussion of poetry, simile, metaphor and metonymy receive their just due too.

Last in line in the bulky section is a chapter on 'intertextuality'. He is right to see it as a 'literary phenomenon' (p. 154). He also demonstrates awareness of the crucial distinction between more diachronic versus synchronic oriented approaches (p. 155). He even provides a few examples of instances he would classify as having intertextual relationships (e.g. Job 7:17-21 and Psalm 8). Though I don't find this portion of the discussion unhelpful I do see this see it to be in many respects inadequate. One wishes that there could have been a more in-depth and nuanced engagement with the obsession the Bible has with itself, as its persistent self-referentiality shines bright as a characteristic of the literature. Many a scholar in the last three decades has advanced the study of precisely this feature of the OT (see Levinson, Sommer, Tooman, Lyons, Teeter, Mastnjak, Stromberg, Kynes, *et al*.). The pioneer, of course, was and is Michael Fishbane, whose *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* paved the way for many stated above (along with the current reviewer) to illu-

minate the reuse and interpretation of scripture *in* scripture. However, he only receives a brief mention under the rubble of many footnotes (p. 159 f.n. 10). The depths of literary interpretation that are opened once one grasps how the OT is already referencing, revising, reusing with wordplay, rewriting, alluding, expanding, analogising and so on, within the parameters of the corpus unlocks another dimension for the reader.

In Part 2, Longman finally takes the theory unearthed in the previous section and applies it in a more sustained fashion to both the Torah and Prophets (pp.172-196). To kick things off, he looks at the garden expulsion story of the primeval humans found in Genesis 3 (pp. 172-78). Longman helpfully and uncontroversially sets the passage in it in its wider literary context of Gen. 1-11 (p. 172). And further (more controversially) makes the preliminary call that the first 11 chapters of Genesis present 'a figurative depiction of a historical event' (p. 172). This deeply informs his analysis. As is typical of prose narratives the perspective is that of the third person omniscient narrator (p. 175). The narrative moves forward based on the dialogue of the four main characters (serpent, man, woman, and God) (p. 175). He then proceeds scene by scene making note of and unpacking the meaning of the story along the way and concludes with what seems too close to theological moreso than literary conclusions (p. 178).

The reading here could in my view, have been enhanced by attention to other demonstrable textual features such as: etiologies, which Gen. 1-11 as a whole is at pains to present (why humans die, why work is toilsome, why birthing is laborious, why snakes move how they do and so on); eponyms (*'adam* and *chavah*) 'human' and 'life' Adam as the eponymous ancestor who all humans descend from and Eve likewise represents where all of life comes from; and lastly intertextualities, there are many features of this text that set the pattern and precedent for what follows. For example, the question given in Gen. 3:13 closely reflects what is stated in 4:10 and later with Pharoah and Abram in Gen. 12:17. Or the repetition of humans being moved further and further 'east" Gen. 3:24, 4:16, and culminating in Gen. 11:2. Not to mention the expulsion of the primordial couple here and it's parallel of the people of Israel exiled to the east (to Babylon) in defiance of God's command like the couple. Or the boundaries that are crossed in the near context of Gen. 1-11. In Gen. 3 humans seek to transgress the boundary between them and the gods (upward). In Gen. 6 gods come down and mate with human women (downward). And in Gen. 11 the nations seek to go up to storm the heavens (upward), each all follow the boundary + punishment pattern. This transgressive boundary crossing is set in motion in the primeval expulsion story (among many other things!).

In the final section we are given various readings of the Hebrew poetic texts from the psalms, sapiential literature, and prophets (pp. 198-246). Most insightful here is the discussion Longman gives of Qohelet a book he knows remarkably well as demonstrated in his NICOT commentary of the same text and its parallels with his doctoral work on Akkadian Autobiographies. He accentuates the prominence of *voice* and how it is key to interpreting the book. Recognising the interplay of the frame narrator's evaluation of the words of Qohelet within the book is key in making sense of the text *qua* literature (p. 229).

In conclusion, Longman gives a helpful introduction to the literary features of the OT and how to take them into account in the reading process. Most impressive is his discussion and theorising of genre and its necessity for any literary reading. I also deeply appreciated a thread of 'complexity' that runs throughout. The fact of the matter is that the process on offer here is not as straightforward as Longman makes it look. He says so at multiple turns just how complicated the task is (already on p. 19!). This is because of: the nature of our data/sources and the deep distance that stands between the modern interpreter and the ancient text. *How does one talk about authorial intention when the authors are anonymous? How do we talk about 'The Old Testament' when different Christian traditions have different Old Testaments? How can we talk about genre in a specific time-period when these texts are longue durée, that is likely composed over a long period of time by multiple hands? How do we speak of 'diachronic' intertextual readings when most scholars do not agree on the date of any given two compositions, or if they can be dated at all?* These difficulties (and many others) make our task much taller than many may assume based on the finesse with which Longman can move across the corpus. The good thing is *The Old Testament as Literature provides helpful ways of managing and approaching the issues*. A close and careful reading of Longman aids in equipping the interpreter with the necessary skills and categories to do a close and careful reading of the OT as the ancient, artistic, and sophisticated literature that it is.

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Fully Alive: Tending to the Soul in Turbulent Times. By Elizabeth Oldfield. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2024. ISBN: 978-1-3998-1076-0. 272pp. £18.99.

In her thoughtful work, *Fully Alive: Tending to the Soul in Turbulent Times*, Elizabeth Oldfield offers a profound reflection on how to navigate the challenges of modern life while tending to the soul. With a deep

understanding of the spiritual struggles many face, Oldfield invites readers to embrace practices that not only sustain them but also help them flourish in a world characterised by rapid change, uncertainty, and often, disconnection. Combining theological insight with personal reflection, Oldfield's book calls readers to a more intentional, spiritually rooted life amidst the chaos of contemporary culture.

Fully Alive is both personal and theological, offering a blend of storytelling, introspective commentary, and biblical wisdom that is both engaging and deeply reflective. The book acknowledges the overwhelming speed of life today, with its technological demands, societal pressures, and the challenge of sustaining meaningful relationships in an increasingly fragmented world. Despite these challenges, Oldfield emphasises that the soul can not only survive but thrive when we engage in practices that anchor us to God and his purpose for our lives.

The overarching theme of *Fully Alive* is human flourishing—understood not as mere survival, but as living fully in the presence of God and embracing the abundant life Christ offers. Oldfield expertly blends theological reflection with real-life application, making the book accessible not only to scholars and theologians but also to those in the pews seeking practical advice on spiritual formation. The book is organised into four major sections that address key components of spiritual life in today's world: the importance of attention to the inner life, the role of spiritual practices, the power of tradition, and the relevance of grace.

A significant portion of Oldfield's focus is on the value of slowing down and cultivating attentiveness to God. In a world constantly demanding more of our time and energy, she argues that cultivating a mindful awareness of God's presence is key to flourishing. Practices such as prayer, meditation, and sabbath rest are shown to be essential not only for spiritual health but for sustaining a sense of peace and well-being. Oldfield calls her readers to embrace these practices with humility and commitment, not as a means to achieve success or perfection but as a way to stay grounded in the present moment and open to God's transformative work.

While the book is deeply theological, Oldfield avoids the temptation to dive into complex jargon or abstract theories. Instead, she focuses on creating a pastoral, practical guide that helps readers see the immediate relevance of spirituality in their daily lives. Her reflections on faith are grounded in real-world experience, and she challenges readers to live in a way that aligns their hearts with the loving presence of God. This makes *Fully Alive* appealing to both academic audiences and everyday readers looking for ways to integrate their faith more deeply into their lives.

At the heart of *Fully Alive* lies a robust theology of human flourishing. Oldfield draws from the rich tradition of Christian thought, emphasising that true flourishing is found not in personal achievement or worldly success but in living according to God's design for human beings. She explores the biblical concept of shalom—God's vision for peace, wholeness, and well-being—and shows how this extends beyond mere physical or material well-being to encompass emotional, relational, and spiritual health.

Oldfield's theology is deeply incarnational, underscoring that God's presence in the world is not distant or abstract but tangible and close. She draws heavily from the teachings of Jesus and the Christian tradition to make clear that flourishing is about learning to live in relationship with God, others, and creation. One of the book's most compelling theological points is its emphasis on the sufficiency of God's grace to sustain us, even when we are exhausted, overwhelmed, or disillusioned. Oldfield reminds her readers that it is in these moments of weakness that God's grace shines the brightest, inviting us to trust in his provision rather than relying on our own strength.

While *Fully Alive* offers deep and enriching insights into spiritual growth, some readers might find that the book occasionally drifts into a tone of repetition. Some of the theological concepts are reintroduced throughout the book, which may be off-putting for readers looking for new or fresh perspectives. However, the strength of the book lies in its pastoral tone and the practical application of spiritual practices, which may outweigh these occasional repetitions for many readers. The gentleness and accessibility of Oldfield's writing make it more of a resource for sustained spiritual growth rather than a one-time read.

Fully Alive is an invaluable resource for anyone seeking to cultivate a deeper, more vibrant spiritual life. Elizabeth Oldfield's reflections on grace, community, and spiritual practices offer a much-needed antidote to the frenetic pace of modern life. The book serves as a guide for navigating the complexities of contemporary existence by embracing the soul-nourishing practices that have always been central to the Christian faith. For readers who are weary and in need of spiritual refreshment, *Fully Alive* is both an invitation and a balm—reminding us that flourishing is not found in striving but in receiving the grace that God offers.

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Jesus and Divine Christology. By Brant Pitre. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2024. ISBN: 978-0-8028-7512-9. 416pp. $39.99.

The notion that Jesus never claimed to be divine was popularized by the quest for the historical Jesus beginning in the 18th century and has been the majority view of critical scholars ever since. Brant Pitre directly confronts this idea in his new book, as he argues that Jesus did speak and act as if he were divine during his ministry. Pitre traces the development of this topic from both early and modern historical Jesus scholars and calls for a re-evaluation of the theory that Jesus never claimed to be divine. From the outset of the book, Pitre builds a foundation on the high Christology of the early church. Since early Christians undeniably viewed Jesus as divine, Pitre argues that the most logical reason for this is because Jesus did claim to be divine during his ministry. He bases his argument on several key factors, including the context of Second Temple Judaism in which Jesus' teaching was situated as well as the methodology used to determine which of Jesus' statements in the Gospels are deemed authentic. These two factors run as consistent themes throughout the book, and many of the arguments that Pitre makes tie back to these themes.

One of the first ways that Pitre supports his argument that Jesus spoke and acted as if he were divine during his lifetime is by examining Jesus' reputation as a miracle worker. Pitre argues that it is not simply that Jesus had the reputation of being a miracle worker, but it was the *kinds* of miracles that Jesus was purported to have performed that point to the understanding of his deity. Pitre labels these miracles that reveal Jesus' divine identity as 'epiphany' miracles. Pitre examines the setting of some of these miracles to draw comparisons between what Jesus did in his ministry and what God did in the Old Testament. This includes instances such as Jesus calming the storm by speaking to it, Jesus walking on water, and Jesus' glory being revealed at the transfiguration. All these miracles contain accounts of Jesus himself possessing the authority to do things that, against the backdrop of the Old Testament and Second Temple period, only God is understood to have done. In this, Pitre does an excellent job of tracing the thread of how Jews living in the Second Temple period would have viewed Jesus' actions and claims with even more seriousness and would have caught more subtle references to his divinity that modern audiences might miss.

As the book progresses, Pitre continues to trace this thread through Jesus' parables and his apocalyptic teaching. Pitre argues that Jesus' parables not only concealed the truth of his teaching from his opponents but also concealed his identity from them while simultaneously revealing his divine identity to his genuine followers. He then examines

Jesus' parabolic statements, such as his higher demand for love than a person's own father or mother or his response, 'No one is good but God alone' after being called 'good teacher' as examples of his divinity being subtly revealed. Pitre argues that statements like this would have been more clearly understood in the Second Temple context by those willing to accept them. Regarding Jesus' apocalyptic teaching, Pitre traces this thread through Jesus' claims to be Daniel's 'Son of Man' and the Davidic Messiah who has the authority to usher in the end of the age, arguing that Jesus' contemporaries would have viewed someone who made such claims to clearly be more than human.

Pitre's final arguments have to do with the charges of blasphemy that were levied against Jesus during his ministry. Pitre develops the argument that, while others in the Second Temple period claimed the status of being the Messiah, the charges brought against Jesus through his trial and crucifixion were more severe and unique than others at this time. Through this, Pitre argues that there must have been more to Jesus' claims than simply being the human Messiah, and those who charged him with blasphemy would have understood this. This was the case at Jesus' trial and ultimate crucifixion, but also in the claims during his ministry where he is charged with blasphemy. This was a convincing, strong case to close out Pitre's overall argument and is a solid contribution to this question and field of study.

This book's biggest strength lies in the immense amount of research that clearly took place to support each argument that Pitre makes. Pitre is meticulous in his quoting and extensive footnoting, leaving no stone unturned for each point that he argues. He begins each chapter and key point with quotes from a variety of scholars, ranging from more critical and liberal to more conservative. He does not avoid arguments or build strawmen but addresses the strongest arguments for or against each point that he makes. Another strength of the book is that it does not just address surface-level proof-texts as some others that address this subject do. He does not just examine the content of Jesus' statements but explores how Jesus' words would have been understood in the context of Second Temple Judaism and compares them to contemporary issues at that time. This adds much depth to his arguments and provides a fresh perspective on this topic at the same time. Because of this, however, the book's audience is somewhat limited to an audience that has some working understanding of the culture of Second Temple Judaism, as Pitre does not spend much time explaining more basic components of this culture. As long as the reader has some working knowledge of this period or is willing to read other sources alongside this one, this book is an extremely helpful contribution to this subject.

Overall, this is an exceptional work on the topic of how Jesus presented his divinity in his teaching and actions. Anyone interested in the topic of Jesus' divinity will gain from reading this book, not only from Pitre's own arguments, but also from the extensive list of sources that he interacts with and cites.

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Cultural Sanctification: Engaging the World Like the Early Church. By Stephen O. Presley. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2024. ISBN: 978-0-8028-7854-0. 230pp. £18.99.

A common criticism of many Protestants, especially in the twentieth century, is their ambivalence towards church history before the Reformation. This attitude stands in sharp contrast with the Reformers themselves and Protestant scholars who followed them, who read and admired many of the medieval scholastics and ancient church fathers. For those interested in Patristics, the multi-volume works edited by Philip Schaff (1819-93) – himself a Reformed Protestant – and the volumes of the Ante-Nicene Fathers have served readers well for over a century. These volumes are now joined by new critical editions from OUP (Oxford Early Christian Texts) and reader editions in the Popular Patristics series from St. Vladimir's Seminary Press. Alongside these developments is a renewed appreciation and retrieval amongst Protestants of the Church Fathers, which this book by Stephen Presley is just the latest example.

Presley's book is not a history book *per se* but more a work of cultural analysis or apologetics using the writings of the Church Fathers as a lens to view and critique our present moment. His main argument is that Christians in the US (and by implication, in other Western countries) are now in a similar situation to second-century Christians; that is, we dwell in a culture where Christianity is increasingly in the minority and where more and more people are hostile to Christian beliefs and practices. In this, Presley builds on the work of (amongst others) Charles Taylor and his concept of 'social imaginaries' and Carl Trueman's critique of expressive individualism. Although we would term our cultural moment 'Secularism', instead, Presley argues that it is more akin to ancient Paganism.

This context of post-Christianity poses a challenge to the Church that it has not had to face for over a thousand years. Presley identifies and critiques two common reactions: that of isolation, as exemplified by Rod Dreher's *The Benedict Option* (Prentice Hall Press, 2017) – or confrontation, before presenting his preferred option, cultural sanctification. Presley defines cultural sanctification as:

> …recogniz[ing] that Christians are necessarily embedded within their culture and must seek sanctification (both personal and corporate) in a way that draws upon the forms and features of their environment to transform them by pursuing virtue. This Christian performance of sanctification involves defending the faith, sharing the good news of salvation found in Christ, and visibly embodying all the virtues of the Christian spirituality in ways that persuade others (p. 57).

Those readers familiar with Tim Keller's work will see affinities here with Keller's 'Third Way' approach to cultural engagement, itself indebted to the neo-Calvinism of Kuyper and Bavinck or, using the categories of Reinhold Niebuhr, 'Christ *transforms* culture'.

In five chapters, Presley goes on to elaborate on how the early church worked out cultural sanctification that eventually transformed the Graeco-Roman world. In chapter one, he discusses how early Christians defined themselves through catechesis and worship or belief and practice (such as baptism). In chapter two, Presley looks at the political dimension of the ancient world, especially how the early Christians lived under a government that was, at best, ambivalent towards them. Chapter three examines how the early church defended and promoted itself amongst the other philosophies and worldviews that vied for people's attention. Chapter four looks at the public life of ordinary people and how early Christians' distinctive way of living earned them a voice in the public square. And finally, chapter five presents the unique eschatological hope that enabled the early church to endure and thrive under great trials.

Presley is a great writer with the ability to bring the ancient world to life. For example, in his introduction, Presley recounts his experience of the baptistry in St. John the Lateran in Rome with vividness and immediacy, as if the reader were standing alongside him. Presley is also able to summarise clearly and concisely the thoughts and arguments of the Early Church Fathers, which makes this book an easy read for the uninitiated. It is also clear that Presley is well-read and conversant with many of the patristic writers and their works, which he references. In the opinion of this reviewer, Presley makes a good case for his thesis and backs up his argument well.

However, this reviewer does have a few caveats. First, as this book is a popular introduction to some of the first Christian writings, Presley's broad approach can give the impression that the writers he engages with all spoke with the same voice. There is little sense of the multiple perspectives represented in the Early Church. Second, Presley does not give specifics on how precisely the reader can apply the teachings of the Early Church Fathers to their context and the current cultural issues. For exam-

ple, in chapter one, Presley claims that the early church built its identity on catechesis and patterns of worship. But what might this look like in the twenty-first century? Here, the reader will need the help of other resources, such as Carl Trueman's *Crisis of Confidence* (Crossway, 2024; previously published as *The Creedal Imperative*, 2012). This reviewer believes it would be helpful to have included similar suggestions for further reading. Third, although Presley acknowledges the differences between the second century and the twenty-first (pp.18-20), this point gets lost. For example, whereas in the first five centuries, Christianity was the new kid on the block, challenging the existing order, in the twenty-first century, Christianity is the belief system being challenged. We are no longer speaking truth to power; we *are* the power! This reviewer would have preferred more time spent reflecting on these differences and whether this changes how we read and appropriate patristic thought today.

Even with these caveats in mind, this is still an excellent book, and if it encourages more Protestant Christians to read historical theology, especially the primary texts, then it will have succeeded admirably.

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Mission of God and the Witness of the Church. Edited by Justin A. Schell, Dane Ortlund, and Miles V. Van Pelt. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2024. ISBN: 978-1-4335-8158-8. 144pp. £12.99.

With a background in both biblical theology and mission studies, Justin A. Schell was the ideal author to take on the great challenge of interpreting the mission of God in the Bible in a succinct yet thought-provoking manner.

In a time when *missio dei* is treated as a given missiological framework, and little is written to constructively critique the 'missional hermeneutic' movement from a biblical-theological perspective, this short book is a breath of fresh air. Schell gives a broad yet practical definition of mission in his introduction; a definition that focuses on God's self-revelation rather than human neediness, and on divine-human relationship rather than the specific idea of 'sending'. In the first chapter, examining the God of mission adds additional foundations to the argument that God's mission is graciously revelatory and intrinsically relational. Such a clear explanation at the beginning of the book enables the author to later go on to argue that 'mission' existed pre-Fall, indeed before the very creation of time and space.

The Mission of God and the Witness of the Church overtly (and somewhat proudly) utilises a redemptive-historical approach. Schell proposes this as a theocentric alternative to contemporary missional hermeneutical

approaches, which he claims are in danger of becoming overly anthropocentric and/or cosmocentric. From Chapter Two onwards, the reader is taken on a whistle-stop, but not haphazard, chronological tour of the Bible, with the objective of demonstrating the common 'missional' thread of revelation and relationship, both running through and cutting across the Old and New Testaments.

We begin in the Garden of Eden, where a relational mandate, rather than the more commonly presented 'cultural mandate', is revealed to humanity (Chapter Two). Following the breaking of the divine-human relationship due to sin, the survey of the rest of the Old Testament emphasises God's self-disclosure, from the delivery of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt to the 'I am' statements of Isaiah (Chapters Three and Four). Not only does God reveal himself to Israel, but he also provides the means for his people to be a witness to surrounding nations. The reader is briefly shown how Yahweh provides law, temple, and kingdom for his people in the Old Testament to give the opportunity for foreigners outside Israel to see God's glory and power through the witness of his people (Chapter Five).

Schell presents these events of the Old Testament as types pointing forward to God's ultimate self-disclosure through his own son Jesus Christ, who offers everlasting relationship with God the Father. There is, therefore, simultaneously continuity and discontinuity from the Old into the New Testament. In keeping with the redemptive-historical focus, Schell interprets the Great Commission not as a supplementary command, but rather as a summary of the whole Gospel of Matthew as it reveals Jesus and his inaugurated kingdom (Chapter Six).

Chapter Seven logically moves on to Luke-Acts and the activities of the church following Pentecost, continually pointing back to Old Testament ideas which are fulfilled in Christ and embodied by his church as reunified witnesses to the ends of the earth. As the book draws to a close, it opts for an overview of the concluding books of the Bible. Despite the lack of a standard conclusion, the eighth and final chapter is still able to highlight several key themes from the preceding chapters, such as the context of humanity in creation, restored relationships and the global nature of the church.

Throughout the book, key terms from biblical theology and missiology are defined clearly and in context, making the writing easy to read, but the content not overly simplified. In a rare occurrence, this work's accessibility to the layperson does not hamper the refreshment it offers to the mission theologian. Schell's presentation of proclamation in mission as special revelation (which is required for salvation) and works of mercy and justice in mission as general revelation (which ultimately does not

save in and of itself), is a fresh and particularly helpful contribution to the contemporary discussion of the mission of the church. The book would, however, have benefitted from acknowledging the recentness of the development of the *missio dei* interpretation as it is understood in mission theology today. The concept of *missio dei* is ubiquitous in missiology, but it is important to remember that it is interpreted and used in different ways in the field.

While containing little practical application for the local church, which is unsurprising given the biblical theological rather than missiological framework of the book, *The Mission of God and the Witness of the Church* can operate as a springboard for the biblical theologian to engage in further reading in the area of mission studies. I would recommend J. H. Bavinck's work on general revelation for additional and stimulating reading on the role of revelation and relationship in the mission of God and his church.

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T&T Clark Handbook to the Historical Paul. Edited by Ryan S. Schellenberg and Heidi Wendt. London; New York: T&T Clark, 2022. ISBN: 978-0-5676-9196-5 (hardback), 978-0-5677-0765-9 (paperback). xvi + 490pp. Hardback $171.00; Paperback $54.95.

The *T&T Clark Handbook to the Historical Paul*, edited by Ryan S. Schellenberg and Heidi Wendt, is a distinctive collection of essays 'attempting to shed what has been the governing paradigm' in historical Paul studies (p. 4). Aimed at scholars and researchers engaged in historical Paul studies, this work features a diverse group of contributors with expertise in Pauline studies and Greco-Roman history, philology, culture, and literature. While the editors are upfront about some of the differing views amongst the authors, there is a unifying purpose throughout the essays. There is a clear emphasis on redefining historical methodologies pertaining to Paul and what appears to be a reimagining of sorts of the socio-historical approach (what the editors refer to as social and cultural contextualisation). Schellenberg and Wendt describe the goal of the work as 'a thoroughgoing redescription, one that redraws the boundaries of what counts as evidence for the historical Paul with all dimensions of that person subject to scrutiny and revision' (p. 4). They view the preoccupation of previous historical Paul studies as constrained by rigid boundaries. The precedent of studying Paul for the content of his thought rather than the historical person has, in their view, produced a 'conventional image of Paul' detached from his cultural milieu (p. 2). What makes this

work unique is the desire to break free from conventional boundaries and reevaluate Paul 'as a contextually plausible social actor' (p. 3). To achieve this, the editors organise the contributions into three primary sections: (1) Sources and Methodology, (2) Biographical Problems, and (3) Epistolary Micro-Biographies. The handbook's breadth and depth are extensive, so I will focus my comments primarily on one essay from each section.

Part 1 ('Sources and Methodology') pursues issues related to 'relevant sources and the history of their transmission and interpretation' (p. 4). Contributors in this section grapple afresh with the challenge of determining the Pauline corpus. The outlier in this section is Eve-Marie Becker's survey of the discussion of Paul's personhood and notion of self as it relates to the history of religions school, philosophical and sociological paradigms, and the heuristics of modern biography. Leif Vaage's essay, 'The Corpus Paulinum', stands out as an innovative and intriguing proposal. Vaage argues for a 'new historiographical approach to Pauline biography' (p. 53), which is comprised of four steps: (1) exclude Acts, (2) utilize Papyrus 46, (3) exclude the notion of 'discursive authenticity,' (i.e. meaning the exclusion of the idea that ancient texts correspond directly to the living human being), and (4) establish the 'matter of facts' (based upon scholarly consensus) (pp. 15-17). Vaage also makes the thought-provoking claim that the idea of human embodiment necessitates the historical task of biography, albeit a task that will produce varying iterations of the historical Paul.

Part 2 ('Biographical Problems') discusses several topics such as Paul's travel and homelessness, manual labour and sustenance, beatings and imprisonments, appearance and health, singleness and celibacy, Jewish titles (Ioudaios, Pharisee, Zealot), literacy and education, mythmaking and exegesis, divination and miracles, religious experience, death, and chronology. The eleven essays in this section comprise the bulk of the book, offering fresh perspectives on topics often overlooked and underresearched in Pauline studies. Timothy Marquis's essay on Paul's travel and homelessness probes questions of Paul's motivations for travel. It raises the issue of how Paul's travel throughout the Roman world '…problematises our attempts to isolate certain human phenomena from others, or from their larger sociohistorical contexts' (p. 88).

Marquis shifts the focus away from the Acts account of Paul's 'so-called' missionary journeys to the broader idea that Paul's travel was essential to his ministry, serving as a tool for his apostolic authority and a vehicle for his rhetorical messaging. Marquis claims, 'In narrating his travels, Paul found an opportunity to reframe his self-image' (p. 101).

Finally, Part 3 ('Epistolary Micro-Biographies') assesses Paul's canonical letters or sets of letters to establish 'a clarity of focus seldom seen

in biographical treatments of Paul' (p. 4). These letters include Romans, The Corinthian correspondence, Galatians, Philippians and Philemon, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, Colossians and Ephesians, and the pastoral epistles. Kathy Ehrensperger's essay on Romans highlights some key biographical features of Paul, such as his self-perception as a δοῦλος (slave) and ἀπόστολος (messenger), his distinctly Jewish identity as well as his travel plans tied to the purpose of collecting an offering. Ehrensperger also underscores the importance of Paul's relationship with Phoebe through an acknowledgment that she is a 'leader in the Christian movement' (p. 303). She argues that Paul's self-portrait in Romans is more revealing than some of his other letters. Ehrensperger emphasizes that Paul was 'part of a movement, a significant network, a team, all sustained by enthusiastic collaborators', highlighting his embeddedness in a collective effort rather than a solitary endeavour (p. 305).

In summary, *T&T Clark Handbook to the Historical Paul* operates within the philosophical framework that 'ideas have no life in the world apart from the individual and social bodies in which they dwell, and that, consequently, to study them unmindful of these bodies is necessarily to distort their historical significance' (p. 5). This volume successfully achieves its original aims, expanding the historical boundaries and social dimensions of historical Paul studies. With the wide-ranging essays, there is little to critique. However, the inclusion of a chapter exploring the historical Paul's relationship to Jewish apocalyptic literature and the social dimensions of early Jewish interpretive methodology might have enriched the collection. Additionally, a chapter on Paul and spatiality would have complemented the emphasis in several essays on Paul's self-perception and the mapping of his world through rhetorical messages and physical travel. Overall, this handbook serves as a valuable and welcome partner for contemporary engagement with historical Paul studies.

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The Transfiguration of Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Reading. By Patrick Schreiner. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2024. ISBN: 978-1-5409-6596-7. 208pp. $26.99.

New Testament scholars may be familiar with Patrick Schreiner as a prominent contributor to contemporary biblical scholarship. A recurring theme in Schreiner's works is the glorification of Christ in New Testament and biblical theological studies. In this book, Schreiner explores the glorification of Christ through his dual sonship at the transfiguration. He argues that the transfiguration, often overlooked in scholarly discourse, not only anticipates an eschatological future but also offers a retrospective

view of the primordial Christ. Schreiner contends that modern scholarship typically interprets the transfiguration as a preview of the ultimate messianic reality, depicting the worship of Jesus solely in relation to his risen and exalted identity, while neglecting his pre-existent nature. For Schreiner, however, the transfiguration preserves both Jesus' earthly mission and divine nature, presenting a crucial intersection between *ad intra* and *ad extra*—between who the Son is and who he will be (p. 22).

Beyond exegetical insight, Schreiner's work addresses methodological concerns at the intersection of several theological disciplines. This book operates within three primary fields—New Testament studies, biblical theology, and systematics—advocating for greater integration among them. In the following chapters, Schreiner interprets the transfiguration through three distinct frameworks: traditional, trinitarian, and christological. This project marks a significant step towards addressing the one-dimensional reading of Scripture that has emerged from rigid disciplinary divisions.

Schreiner's approach begins with the traditional rules of exegesis and then traces the themes of the transfiguration intertextually *throughout* the story of Scripture to uncover its full theological meaning. Chapter two situates this traditional exegetical approach within the *quadriga*, or fourfold senses of Scripture. Schreiner examines the transfiguration through four levels of meaning: the literal (historical), spiritual (typological), tropological (moral), and anagogical (eschatological). Here, readers see Schreiner's commitment to Christian dogmatics, influenced by the patristic and early Christian interpreters. However, he limits the use of the fourfold senses to the second chapter, which addresses the narrative setting of the transfiguration, arguing that extending it further would make the rest of the book too repetitive. By providing a formal introduction to the fourfold senses in chapter two, Schreiner likely feels a sense of freedom to adopt a more organic exegetical approach in chapters three and four, allowing him to bring dogmatic sensibilities to the forefront.

In chapters three and four, Schreiner attends to the mystical and symbolic dimensions of the transfiguration. Chapter three, *The Glorious Signs*, focuses on a trinitarian 'grammar', while chapter four, *The Glorious Sayings*, interprets the various discourses spoken at the transfiguration through a christological 'grammar'. He concludes his analysis by shifting from Jesus' dual sonship to interpreting the transfiguration in relation to other christological events, thereby expanding its meaning within the broader narrative.

While Schreiner intends for all three interpretive frameworks or 'grammars' to be utilized together for a multidimensional reading of Scripture, his decision to treat the different components of the transfiguration—

setting, signs, and sayings—separately raises the question of whether he successfully integrates systematic and biblical theology as seamlessly as intended. One could argue that the *quadriga* could sufficiently satisfy the dogmatic grammar, with the tropological and anagogical senses encompassing the theological aspects Schreiner seeks to integrate.

Nevertheless, Schreiner successfully highlights the importance of the transfiguration within the biblical narrative, correcting the misconception that the event is out of place. For scholars, the event stands in stark contrast to what is otherwise perceived as a smooth narrative. However, this book presents the transfiguration as a key element in the larger redemptive narrative, proclaiming both the cosmic and eschatological Jesus.

This book is a valuable resource for both seminaries and churches, engaging with high-level theological and biblical discourse. Schreiner's introductions effectively frame the chapter's purpose, engaging readers with personal anecdotes and tangible illustrations, making the content easily accessible for those unfamiliar with New Testament discourse and beneficial for both pastors and theologians alike. Written for an American context, Schreiner seeks to challenge the assumptions of his Western Protestant Evangelical audience. As he notes, "It [the transfiguration] was generative for how the earliest Christians spoke about the gospel, Christ, and God himself…" (p. 34). Compared to the traditions of the Eastern Orthodox church, Western traditions have oversimplified the profundities embedded in the unassumed event of the transfiguration. Consequently, this has had detrimental effects on Christology, as seen in the Western reticence to engage with *theosis* in the same manner as the Eastern Orthodox churches. It is worth considering whether the simplification of the transfiguration and its subsequent effects on christology are equally pronounced in Western non-evangelical contexts, such as Anglicanism or Catholicism.

Regardless, Schreiner's focus on the transfiguration provides a fresh approach that challenges traditional interpretations, particularly in Evangelical contexts. By examining this pivotal event through multiple theological lenses, Schreiner offers a more nuanced understanding of Christ's identity, taking His glory seriously and providing valuable insights for scholarship. This book challenges its audience to engage more deeply with the transfiguration, allowing the mystery of Christ to transcend narrative and instead rest within a symbolic grammar that points to the trinitarian and christological depths.

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Acts 1–9:42. Volume 37A, Word Biblical Commentary. By Steve Walton. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2025. ISBN: 978-0-310-59938-8. 697pp. £57.00.

Since the early 1980s, the Word Biblical Commentary (WBC) series has set the high watermark for academic biblical commentary in the (broadly and historically understood) evangelical tradition. A noticeable gap in the series has been the Book of Acts, especially given that John Nolland's three volumes on Luke have sat in libraries for over three decades. Steve Walton's commentary on Acts has been greatly anticipated and moves the WBC one step closer to completion.

There is no anticlimax here, Walton's commentary proves to be more than worth the wait. If anything, the publication of the commentary is timely, arriving during exciting juncture in Acts scholarship. The past two decades have seen a significant reassessment of issues like such as eschatology, narrative craft, genre, authorship, and relationship to Judaism (to name only a few). Walton is conversant with these developments, but the commentary is focused on the Acts itself, rather than offering a commentary on other commentaries or this history of interpretation. The detailed, though not distractingly excessive, footnotes point the interested reader to further studies (footnotes are a welcome recent development in the WBC, since Zondervan started publishing the series). The first volume finishes at Acts 9:42, with the Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria narratives coming to a close. Peter lodging with Simon the Tanner, for Walton, marks a transition in the text's geographical narrative purview.

The commentary opens with an introduction about how to use the commentary and describes its unique theocentric approach. In the introductory material, Walton provides a fantastic introduction to the notoriously knotty textual issues of Luke-Acts, manuscript tradition. The commentary, for the most part, follows the NA28/UBS5, but judiciously considers other textual witnesses when relevant. This chapter provides one of the clearest introductions on the matter that I have encountered; it will be appreciated by teachers and students alike.

Those who have used a WBC volume before will already be familiar with its format. After introductory material (normally critical issues related to date, author, and audience), each section of commentary beings with bibliography, then a translation, translation notes, comment on form/structure/setting, a detailed verse-by-verse commentary on the text, and finally an explanation that brings the preceding strands of insights together. The format is logical, but it may feel cumbersome for those unfamiliar with the WBC. Aware of this, Walton suggests that readers start at the final explanation section because it 'pulls the threads of the discussion

together to offer an interpretation of the whole pericope. I often say to students and pastors that this is the section of the Word Biblical Commentary to read first' (p. 87). After understanding the bigger picture, the detail makes more sense. This good advice, not only for this volume, but serves as a primer on getting the most out of any WBC volume. It will help the uninitiated navigate the commentary and avoid falling into a rabbit warren of text-critical issues and translation notes at the outset.

Although the sections of the commentary may appeal to different readers, they do not read as disparate sections. An example of this Walton's discussion of Acts 2:46. Rather than grammar and syntax being a sideshow, Walton shows how grammar is significant to our understanding of wider text. Walton argues that the repetition of the conjunctions in Acts 2:46 (τε… τε) means that 'both participle clauses are dependent on… "they shared food"' (p. 227). The implication is that, rather than happening in private homes, these early meals took place publicly *within* the Temple complex, with an evangelistic intent. Walton finds continuity with Jesus' public meals, as described in the first volume, Luke. Walton follows this thread into the explanation section, where inclusive meals are activity of Christian witness. Walton's exegesis helps us to see the activity of the early church in a new light and, in this reviewer's opinion, has relevance to the ongoing discussion on the 'partings of the ways' between Judaism and Christianity.

Walton's translations offer a clear, but not clunky, rendering of the Greek. A good example is his translation of Acts 6:1. Instead of glossing Ελληνιστῶν and Ἑβραίους as 'Hellenists' and 'Hebrews' (as glossed in the NRSVus and ESV), Walton opts for 'Greek speakers' and 'Hebrew speakers'. The significance of this is teased out with reference to parallel uses in Jewish and Graeco-Roman literature and sensitivity to the wider socio-cultural context, showing that this is deeper than mere linguistic difference. In keeping with his integrative approach, Walton draws out the implications of his translation. The neglect of the Greek speaking widows means that the 'credibility of the believing community is here at stake' (p. 421). Despite the technicality of the discussion that leads up to this point, Walton is eminently readable and has a knack for a memorable turn of phrase, 'The communal solution to this communal issue leads to communal growth' (p. 423). While Walton's translation and interpretation helpfully parses the social dynamics in Acts 6, the figure of Paul could complicate matters. From Tarsus (Acts 21:39) Paul would presumably fit into the category of 'Greek speaker' and their synagogal networks (Acts 6:9), but Luke also describes him as fluent in Aramaic (Acts 21:40; 22:2; 26:14). This translation decision makes it especially interesting how

Walton will gloss Ἑλληνιστάς in Acts 11:20 and approach its textual variants in the forthcoming volume.

A noteworthy aspect of this commentary is Walton's strong exegetical case for Luke's high Christology. Walton argues that in Luke's use of Joel 3:1,2 (LXX) Jesus is given the role normally given to Yahweh with the pouring out of the Spirit. This makes sense of the Christian worship of Jesus because, 'Jesus properly deserves the worship that Israel's God alone should receive (e.g., 7:59; cf. Luke 23:42)' (p. 199). This is not a one off. Walton later demonstrates, via the LXX and Second Temple literature, that the description of Jesus as the 'holy and righteous one of god' (p. 264) in Acts 3:14 means that 'Jesus exhibits key characteristics of YHWH' (p. 286). Taken together, these arguments underscore Walton's broader claim that Luke intentionally portrays Jesus with the identity and prerogatives of Israel's God, making a contribution to ongoing discussions of early high Christology.

The release of another multi-volume commentary on Acts will no doubt invite comparison with Craig Keener's landmark, meticulously referenced, four-volume commentary (Baker Academic, 2012–2015). Some might even ask: is another multi-volume study of Acts even necessary? Despite their broad scope, the two commentaries differ significantly. In many ways, Keener's commentary serves as a comprehensive reference volume which cites nearly all scholarship on Acts up to 2015. The first volume is a collection of essays on the major critical issues, and the commentary on the text is broken up by numerous and lengthy excursuses on key topics. Walton's commentary, however, is an different beast. As Walton explicitly states in the introduction, 'The text is the focus of our discussion, not the scholars and their opinions' (p. 86). Both commentaries make an essential contribution, but differ markedly in method, focus, and scope.

Walton made a conscious decision to defer the normal introductory material about authorship, audience, and date until his third and final volume. While respecting this decision, it still would be helpful to have summary statements of underlying assumptions on major critical matters. There are hints within the commentary, such as where Walton describes Luke's audience as 'predominantly gentile' (p. 397). Although it does not alter Walton's conclusions, it would be interesting to know if statements like 'Access to God will now be through Jesus, not the temple and its ceremonies' (p. 128) applied not only to the characters within the narrative, but Luke's intended audience. If the text was written (as most scholars now argue) after the Jewish War and the destruction of the Temple, why would Luke make this case to a majority Gentile audience? Such lingering

questions are only provisional because readers can look forward to these questions being resolved in the forthcoming third volume. For readers who are interested in Walton's 'big picture' ideas will appreciate his collection of essays in *Reading Acts Theologically* (T. & T. Clark, 2022), which makes a useful companion volume to this commentary.

This excellent commentary is not only a welcome addition to the WBC series, but also a touchstone publication in Acts scholarship. The commentary will become a staple resource for pastors, students, and scholars alike. Walton is also to be praised for the clarity and candour of his prose. He writes about Luke's often complicated grammar with a deft pedagogical touch, not only providing and explanation, but showing how grammar and syntax are relevant to interpretation. The commentary is not only an essential resource for future studies on Acts but also an exemplary model of generous scholarly engagement, theologically informed exegesis, and quality writing that is clear, accessible, and never needlessly complicated.

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