

Reviews



ECCLESIASTES, by Craig G. Bartholomew.
Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009. Pp. 448. \$39.99
(hardcover).

“Ecclesiastes,” says Professor Bartholomew of Redeemer University College in Ontario, “takes the reader on a roller-coaster ride as its main character, Qoheleth, sets out to explore the meaning of life. It is a sign of the richness and depth of Scripture that we have such a book in the canon, and of God’s desire to meet us where we are and to lead us to full life in Christ amid the brokenness of the world” (17).

The structure of this commentary corresponds to the author’s understanding of the structure of the biblical book:

- *Introduction*: matters of title, canonicity, history of interpretation, authorship and date, social setting, text, genre and literary style, structure, reading Ecclesiastes within the context of Proverbs and Job and its connection to the torah, message, Ecclesiastes and the New Testament.
- *I. Frame Narrative: Prologue (1:1–11)*. The narrator speaks about Qohelet in the third person.
- *II. Qohelet’s Exploration of the Meaning of Life (1:12–12:7)*. Qohelet speaks.
- *III. Frame Narrative: Epilogue (12:8–14)*. Again, the narrator speaks about Qohelet.
- *Postscript*: postmodernism, psychology, spiritual formation, and preaching.

The introduction identifies three turning points in the “reception history” of the book. The first came with Jerome’s allegorical and christological reading in the fifth century that “dominated interpretation of the book for over a thousand years.” In the sixteenth century,

Luther, Melancthon, and Brenz introduced the second stage with a “literal and theological reading of Ecclesiastes quite contrary to that established by Jerome” (21). Finally, historical-critical readings controlled interpretation of the book from the post-Enlightenment period to the present.

The author surveys Jewish and Christian readings with special focus on Origen, Jerome, and Luther, who, in sharp contrast to Jerome, “read this text as a strong affirmation of communal and civic life” (32). Bartholomew identifies the form-critical work of Gunkel and the discovery of the Egyptian Teaching of Amenemope as giving rise to a new appreciation of the significance of the Bible’s wisdom literature. He concludes by considering contributions of recent scholars such as von Rad, Crenshaw, Lohfink, Murphy, and especially M. V. Fox, whose work he considers to be “by far the most significant in recent decades” (40).

With a majority of recent scholarship, Bartholomew dates the book in the third century B.C., “written for Israelites who lived in a period when Yahweh’s promises seemed to have come to nothing and there was little empirical evidence of his purposes and promises” (94). He considers the book as a whole, with the “frame narratives” in 1:1–11 and 12:8–14, as essential to understanding the total argument. The introduction concludes:

Ecclesiastes thus exhorts Israelites struggling with the nature of life’s meaning and God’s purposes to pursue genuine wisdom by allowing their thinking to be shaped integrally by a recognition of God as Creator so that they can enjoy God’s good gifts and obey his laws amid the enigma of his purposes....Ultimately,

therefore, Qohelet affirms joy, but not of course cheap joy, much as Bonhoeffer affirmed grace, but costly grace, not cheap grace. (95)

The major part of the book considers each of the twenty-three sections of Ecclesiastes under the rubrics translation, interpretation, and theological implications. “The Son of David” in 1:1 is a literary fiction; we are to think of Qohelet as “a Solomonic figure: wealthy, particularly wise, and with great authority” (104). Bartholomew translates the thematic word *Nebel* as “enigma” throughout—thus, “Utterly enigmatic,” says Qohelet, “utterly enigmatic, everything is enigmatic” (vv. 2; 104).

With Part II, Qohelet himself comes onto the stage, introduces himself and his quest for meaning, and then proceeds to scrutinize different aspects of life and experience to see if meaning is to be found. In the light of his autonomous epistemology, he keeps coming to the conclusion that all is enigmatic. Regularly this conclusion is juxtaposed with the *carpe*

diem passages that evoke the joyful appreciation of life that he has learned from the Israelite tradition (119). These *carpe diem* passages are 2:24–26; 3:10–15, 16–22; 5:18–20; 8:10–15; 9:7–10; 11:7–12:7.

While dealing thoroughly with textual, literary, and historical issues, each of the exegetical sections is pointed toward the use of that section in preaching and teaching. Section titles suggest application: “The Problem of Death and One’s Legacy” (2:12–13); “Knowing What Is Good for One” (7:1–13); “Living with the Uncertainties of God’s Providence” (11:1–6). The “Theological Implications” consider a wide range of authors and themes, ranging from Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Thomas Merton, Wendell Berry, and Stanley Hauerwas to Bono, George W. Bush and Tony Blair, Annie Dillard and Vince Lombardi. The “Postscript”—which considers Derrida, Teresa of Avila, Jung, and Kirkegaard, among others—ends with an appreciative note about the current popularity of the Wisdom books of the

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Old Testament “among the exploding numbers of Christians in ‘the South’ . . . Contemporary African and Asian Christians recognize the genre of wisdom as ‘an old friend’” (388). The book concludes with full bibliography and indexes.

I have found this to be an excellent commentary and commend it to anyone wishing to investigate Ecclesiastes, especially for use in preaching and teaching. The editor has asked that I consider this commentary in connection with my own book, *Encountering Ecclesiastes* (Eerdmans, 2006; reviewed in *Word & World* 28 [2008] 433–434). The preacher who is looking for a fresh approach to a Lenten series could follow the chapter themes in my book and supplement those materials in the light of Bartholomew’s comments. The results might be something new for Lent—but then we’ve learned from the Preacher that there is indeed little that is new under the sun.

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THE MYSTERY OF ACTS: UNRAVELING ITS STORY, by Richard I. Pervo. Santa Rosa: Polebridge, 2008. Pp. ix + 182. \$20.00 (paper).

Those who study both the Acts of the Apostles and Christian congregations can attest that the book of Acts is *terra incognita* for a sizable percentage of “mainline” churchgoers. Although people might remember the basic contours of the Pentecost story and assorted details from the three (differing!) accounts of Saul’s “Damascus Road” experience, Acts remains largely unaddressed, unknown, and unappreciated. No wonder that readers who do venture into Luke’s high-spirited second volume often find themselves unsure about what to do with it.

Yet, *The Mystery of Acts*, an introductory book by a longtime Acts scholar, seems moti-

vated by a different concern: the need to correct readers who might mistakenly presume to know already exactly what to do with Acts.

This volume addresses Bible readers who may assume that Acts provides the definitive, complete history of the early church. Richard Pervo, whose résumé includes four very influential scholarly tomes about Acts, pursues a relatively straightforward and focused goal: to guide pastors and laypeople into thinking critically about the story that Acts tells and to help them detect and understand the theological agendas that Acts advances. His book is certain to disturb some who cannot abide the suggestion that a piece of the New Testament might communicate something other than the (historical) truth, the whole (historical) truth, and nothing but the (historical) truth. But that risk seems well worth taking if Pervo can help others arrive at a deeper, more informed appreciation of Acts and the purposes it might have served for the Christians who first read it long ago.

Pervo’s text is introductory without being simplistic. He assumes a casual familiarity with—or, at least, a tolerance for—biblical scholarship and its standard jargon, but he also supplies a short glossary to help individual readers and book groups remain on track. Those who are largely ignorant of the story that Acts tells will need to familiarize themselves with the basic content of Luke’s volume before they work through Pervo’s.

Part of the “mystery” about Acts is its ability to provoke critical questions about its own origins and purpose: How can a book so thoughtfully written leave so much unsaid? Pervo begins by explaining several of the enigmatic aspects of Acts, focusing on *how* it tells its story and what that story neglects to include. Next comes a survey of the literary contours of Acts. He asserts that the narrative artistry of Acts and its recurring theological motifs betray the biblical author’s true purposes. Pervo sees the narrative at pains to portray unity within early Christianity and to legiti-

mate the church's (particularly Paul's) mission to Gentiles. He reiterates these points, building a cumulative case by interrogating particular details from Acts.

Throughout this case, Pervo describes how theological assertions drive the story, while historical exactitude (or, more accurately, historical comprehensiveness) sits in the back seat—or perhaps it lies bound and gagged in the trunk. Still, the rhetorical force of the biblical author's literary skills and theological objectives “does not mean that everything [the writer of Acts] says is erroneous, but that much of what he says has been squeezed into his formulas, packed into a single envelope, or selected on the grounds that it suits his purposes; and therefore that considerable caution is advised.” Further, a careful, critical analysis of Luke's impressive gifts as a storyteller makes “substantial contributions to an understanding of why his story has become *the* story of Christian origins,” even as it raises “considerable doubts about the general and particular accuracy of that story” (81–82). When Pervo, bringing his study to a close, devotes two chapters to a sustained, sequential overview of the whole of Acts, he further buttresses his principal claims by zeroing in on the historical gaps and improbabilities that populate Acts.

Of course, all history involves narration, and all narration is the product of authors' stylizations. When Pervo charges Acts with failing to meet the criteria of history-telling, the criteria he has in mind are those governed by limited and modernist definitions of “history.” Pervo knows well that both historians and novelists draw from the same literary toolkit, as do theologians. If only comprehensive and objective reportage counts as “history,” then Acts is not history. But, then, not much else is, either. These arguments are not new, although they may be to members of Pervo's intended audience. Those people will learn, however, that the implication of these arguments is not that Acts has lied to its readers; instead, some of them have missed what

Acts is really trying to do. Pervo thus sets Bible readers on the first step toward a more nuanced understanding of what Acts is up to—a better understanding of just what kind of a “history” it purports to relate.

The historical criticism that Pervo applies to Acts is not an expression of religious skepticism, not the kind of criticism that necessarily rejects any suggestion of divine activity in the world. Pervo grants Acts the right to tell a theological story. His point is simply that this story betrays its own servitude to its author's interest in defending certain developments in early Christian missions. Luke appears to have withheld information about the events and people behind, around, and in conflict with these developments. Acts may shed some light on the true story of Christian origins, but it can hardly be considered *the* one and only story.

Is Pervo's verdict good news, then, or bad? That depends upon what we expect from Acts and from our scriptures. The task of reconstructing the full history of Christian origins falls outside the scope of Pervo's book. Nevertheless, Acts has something to contribute to this reconstruction, to be sure, and the specific ways it does so remain the subject of considerable debate. But suppose that the primary contribution of Acts is to characterize the nature of God and the gospel. That still makes the book a kind of history, one that is important for congregations to examine both in critical study and in their attempts to articulate their faith.

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THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY, by Robert A. Muthiah. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2009. Pp. 194. \$22.00 (paper).

Robert Muthiah offers an unusual approach to the priesthood of all believers in this book. Muthiah's aim is to show how an egalitarian

tarian understanding of the church would fare better in a postmodern context. His “eschatological vision for the people of God is one in which a single priesthood, a priesthood comprised of all believers, exists” (46). His approach combines classical interpretations with newer perspectives to envision a priesthood of all believers that encompasses all people, with no higher status for the office of ministry. Muthiah then takes this interpretation and analyzes it alongside three postmodern institutions: globalization, individualism, and technique. He concludes his study using the resulting ecclesiology to illustrate practical applications in various activities.

Muthiah’s interpretations of the priesthood start in the biblical record. The New Testament figures heavily in this exploration, as one would expect. Giving most weight to 1 Pet 2:4–10, he concludes that the New Testament record provides for an understanding of ministry that does not privilege a priest or minister above others. Instead, it is the whole people of God to whom the priesthood is given. It is a “royal priesthood” (47), a term that for Muthiah becomes interchangeable with the “priesthood of all believers.” He also explores the early church’s ecclesiology. The variety found in the analysis of the historical records helps bolster his case for a nonhierarchical priesthood.

The more recent historical practice of the office of ministry also receives some examination. After briefly discussing the Reformers, Muthiah closely follows Vatican II and its focus on the elevation of the laity. Yet, he does not explore the Catholic argument for an ontological change in ordination. He does give certain theologians a good deal of space. His examination of John Howard Yoder reveals that the royal priesthood benefits from Yoder’s challenge to the rise of the “religious specialist” (35). Miroslav Volf’s free-church leanings are welcome to the design of Muthiah’s royal priesthood, and Muthiah agrees with much of what Volf says about ordination being neither

a delegation of office from the congregation or a delivering of a charism from episcopal authority. Regarding ordination, Muthiah believes that in an egalitarian priesthood, everyone would be ordained every time (repeatedly!) she saw herself blessed by charism(s) from the Spirit.

The crux of Muthiah’s argument lies in bringing this conception of the royal priesthood to bear upon three postmodern “institutions.” While it is difficult to conceptualize postmodernism, it would have helped if Muthiah had offered an interpretation. As it stands, he uses three institutions—globalization, individualism, and technique—through which he hopes to demonstrate how the priesthood of all believers engages the postmodern situation. Throughout this discussion, he uses various authors to flesh out the understanding of the institutions. He follows each institution with a short analysis of how the royal priesthood and the particular institution engage each other.

The final chapter in Muthiah’s book is aimed at practical approaches for the congregation. He lifts up five practices and examines how a royal priesthood would engage in these activities. He uses witness, the Lord’s Supper, discernment, friendship, and confession to illustrate what “good Christian practices” would look like (134). His section on witness is particularly helpful. Talking about how witness is an expectation of all believers, Muthiah demonstrates how witness happens in word and deed. Another section of note is his conversation about confession. Muthiah advocates for a return to private confession for all, with everyone serving in the priestly role, not just the ordained. The extension of responsibility for ministry to all people is what is especially helpful in Muthiah’s theoretical and practical understanding of the royal priesthood. For many congregations, the ordained and paid staffs are those primarily responsible for ministry. While I do not agree with a completely egalitarian priesthood, Muthiah’s goals

of a shared ministry might be found in these practical suggestions, without necessarily restructuring a church's understanding of the office of ministry.

If you are among those interested in a theology of the priesthood of all believers that elevates the laity and does away with the office of ministry, this book is for you. Muthiah's attempt is well intentioned; in a postmodern world, Christianity is finding it more and more difficult to find traction with culture and society. Muthiah's answer is to raise all people to be ministers in the church, and by doing so, provide an egalitarian view of how to do church. This perspective is not welcomed in much of the established Christian church, although there have been subtle movements towards empowering the laity. Muthiah's own rationale for empowering the laity does provide some helpful insights, while failing to be convincing in totality. His exploration of the postmodern institutions and their relation to the royal priesthood also provides some interesting perspectives. While I am not sure why he chose these institutions, and I had hoped for more analysis at places, Muthiah's section on postmodernism could be of interest to some. The final section on practical applications could be useful in particular parish settings. While overall the book may attempt too much, the specific sections provide mostly reasonable, if somewhat biased, viewpoints on an egalitarian priesthood of all believers and its relationship with postmodernism.

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FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT, by John R. Levison. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009. Pp. ix+429. \$45.00 (cloth).

One of the most pressing theological issues facing Lutheranism concerns the global phenomenon of Pentecostal/Charismatic

Christianity. The Pentecostal and Charismatic movements are the fastest-growing segments of Christianity in the world, and their testimony to the power of the spirit is seeping into Lutheran ranks, especially as our seminaries welcome students and faculty from churches and schools in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. This influx of theologies that are informed by a robust doctrine of the spirit affords Lutherans an opportunity to rethink the spirit's role in word and sacrament ministry. John Levison's book, *Filled with the Spirit*, therefore comes at an opportune moment, providing Lutherans with a provocative set of reflections and questions on the spirit.

Levison's entrée is the work of Hermann Gunkel, one of the most influential Old Testament scholars of the twentieth century. Gunkel's short volume on pneumatology, *Die Wirkungen des heiligen Geistes*, is not well known. Most are familiar with his pioneering work in form-criticism. In *Die Wirkungen* he makes the following assertions: (1) Christian pneumatology must be separated from "the German idealist sense [of spirit], as the substance of human potential..." (xvii); (2) early Christian pneumatology must be understood in light of early Judaism (xvii); (3) the theology of Paul must be distinguished from that of the early church (xviii). While Levison does not engage Gunkel on every page, his work provides an important starting point and background for Levison's arguments.

Part I engages Israelite literature and begins by departing critically from interpreters who distinguish between the spirit given at birth and the "wonder-working" power of the spirit as seen, for example, in Judges. Levison argues against the distinction and proposes instead that "inspiration" should be understood neither exclusively as a "subsequent endowment" nor as "a purely physical reality" (12–13). Levison makes his case by looking at a diverse set of Old Testament texts in light of the following theses: (1) The spirit is "the fundamental force that keeps the entire world

alive” (33). (2) The language of filling (*ml'*) does not refer to a special influx of power but to a surfeit of skill: “the emphasis lies upon the lavishness of this filling much more than upon the initial gift of this spirit” (58). (3) A firm fist “is raised in the face of death” in Ezekiel 36–37 where Ezekiel realizes “that Israel is unable to catalyze its own liberation from exile” (92). In short, the spirit given at birth and the spirit that brings about remarkable events are deeply intertwined in the Old Testament.

As an aside, Levison incorrectly attributes the destruction of Samaria to Esarhaddon (681–669 B.C.E.) (87). Cuneiform documents, however, clearly attribute the conquest of Samaria to both Shalmaneser V (727–722 B.C.E.) and Sargon II (722–705 B.C.E.), not Esarhaddon.

Part II is particularly important for Lutherans, for in it Levison addresses the problematic belief that Greco-Roman Judaism was essentially a “spiritually impoverished religion that functions as a negative foil for the birth of early Christianity” (116). The exact opposite is true, he argues: Greco-Roman Judaism witnessed an explosion of literature on the spirit, in part because of general fascination with the topic of “inspiration” (117). From the cultivation of the spirit of understanding in Ben Sira (118–127) to the Stoicism-influenced conception of the cosmic spirit in the Wisdom of Solomon (142–150), Judaism of the Greco-Roman world was anything but a religion devoid of the spirit. This meaty middle section (112 pages!), therefore, provides a potent remedy to the common caricature of Judaism as a legalistic religion lacking in reflection on God’s Spirit.

Part III deals with the early church’s experience of *pneuma*. According to Levison, the early church parted ways with Jewish thinking by rejecting the notion that the spirit given at birth was a “locus of virtue, a reservoir of wisdom, the headwaters of knowledge” (423). While vestiges of such a belief remain (e.g., in

Luke’s description of John the Baptist as one who became “strong in spirit,” 241; see Luke 1:80), the lack of texts drawing from this stream of thought suggests that Christians placed little confidence in “the capacity of the human spirit to cultivate virtue and holiness” (246). Christianity, rather, accepted the belief that “filling with the spirit” was an endowment for believers in Christ.

Levison’s discussion of Paul’s pneumatology is also instructive, for, as he notes, Paul’s letters are “awash in the spirit” (253). Paul’s thinking on the spirit is not systematic, but creative and “impulsive” (425), being deeply influenced by Ezekiel 36–37 and the belief that to be in Christ is to be a new creation wrought by the spirit (425). For Levison, therefore, Paul’s insistence on new creation in Christ makes it nearly impossible for him to believe that humans at birth have “received the divine breath in full measure” (311). On this point, Levison finds Philo a closer adherent to the faith of the Old Testament than Paul.

Levison has provided a compelling, eloquent, and sensitive reading of texts related to God’s Spirit. While I am left wondering why he never glances at the “rearview mirror” to provide a summarizing assessment at the end of the book (the one-and-a-half-page epilogue is hardly adequate), I cannot but heartily recommend this volume. And although not written for the “general public,” someone educated in religion could easily tackle Levison’s volume. Undoubtedly, an advanced group of parishioners would greatly benefit from using *Filled with the Spirit* in a study on the spirit. At the very least, a pastor concerned with broadening her theological horizons will find it to be a rich resource. *Filled with the Spirit* is a category-altering book with the potential to reshape how one ministers and lives as a spirit-empowered agent in the world. Consequently, it is best read slowly and attentively. And given the rise of global Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity, Lutherans cannot afford

to neglect the refinement of their thinking on the spirit. Levison's thoughtful volume provides just such an occasion.

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GERMAN HISTORIES IN THE AGE OF REFORMATIONS, 1400–1650, by Thomas A. Brady Jr. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. 496. \$27.99 (paper).

Thomas A. Brady Jr. has yet again made a marvelous contribution to the study of the Reformations and early modern central Europe. Throughout his professional career, Brady has devoted himself to locating the religion of the period in its proper political, social, and ecclesiastical contexts. In the case of the Reformations, Brady believes that one ought to perceive the unfolding in light of a broader context, i.e., the vicissitudes of the Holy Roman Empire. Such a conviction has led Brady to examine a local, a regional, and an imperial case, and to produce three well-known monographs, respectively: *Ruling Class, Regime and Reformation at Strasbourg 1520–1555* (Brill, 1978); *Turning Swiss: Cities and Empire, 1450–1550* (Cambridge, 1985); and *Protestant Politics: Jacob Sturm (1489–1553) and the German Reformation* (Humanities Press, 1995). Now he has summarized his life's work in the present volume, which argues that "the creation of the early modern Holy Roman Empire and the religious reform that produced the German confessional system form two phases of a single transformation of the medieval German lands into the early modern German world" (406). Divided into four parts, the book, in fact, has two main sections: one in which Brady presents the complex social and political matrix in which both the imperial and religious reforms occurred, and a second in which he offers a historical narrative extending from the fifteenth

to the nineteenth century, when Napoleon's decree marked the end of the Holy Roman Empire.

The Reformations did not take place in a vacuum, but in the history of the Holy Roman Empire and on the ground of the "German lands," not Germany, the nation. Hence, in Part I Brady reconstructs the historical setting of the Holy Roman Empire in the late medieval period. The clouds of depression hung over almost every aspect of the temporal and spiritual realms throughout Europe. The German lands were no exception. What characterized German history, though, as Brady points out, was how German governance recovered from the crisis and met the request for change petitioned for by all four estates of the lands—peasants, burghers, nobles, and clergy.

The remaining three parts, then, form the second section, in which Brady unpacks the reforms that took place between 1400 and 1650 in three phases—political reform, churchly reform, and formation of the confessional orders. In Part II, Brady examines the political reforms up to the 1520s at both the imperial and the territorial levels. The Western Schism dramatically weakened the authority of the papacy and the Church. As a result, king-emperors and princes took charge of making changes without guidance and inspiration from the Church. For instance, both the territorialization of power and the imperial Diet, each of which played a crucial role in shaping later German history, found their roots in the imperial reform that was launched during the Luxemburg dynasty. That reform originally was driven by political and military needs. The effectiveness of the reforms and the continuously strong leadership in governance vividly contrasted with the instability and powerlessness of the Church. This situation reached its end in Luther's reforming theology, which "opened the way to a reform of the church that worked with, not against, the massive intensification of aristocratic power that territorialization engendered" (70).

Following that comment, Brady proceeds in Part III to examine the movements and outcomes of the so-called Protestant reformations, which began with Luther's public debut around 1520 and closed with the beginning of the recovery of the Catholic Church in the 1570s. Chronologically, Brady highlights the key events in this period, such as "the evangelical movements" in town and countryside resulting in the urban reformation and the Peasants' War; the cooperation of temporal and religious party members in entrenching the foundation and enhancing the advancement of the Reformation; and the coexistence of the Protestant and the Catholic, until the latter began to recover around 1580. Brady admits that the way he presents these events is unconventional, but it illustrates the book's most important theme: "the growth of the religious confessions and their configuration into what may be called 'the old confessional order'" (159), which he further explains in Part IV.

Building upon "the confessionalization thesis," in the final chapters Brady spells out how three German confessions—Lutheran, Catholic, and Reformed—developed in their unique characteristics, how they fought for the space to grow, how the conflict was settled in

the Peace of Westphalia, and how all these events shaped the social structure of public life in the post-reformations period and, to some extent, strengthened the hybrid governance of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation until the early twentieth century.

I have to confess that this very cursory summary of Brady's masterful argument can hardly do justice to this book, which is clearly the product of years of careful and extensive research and reflection. Drawing on representative works from both sides of the ocean and a wide range of original sources, Brady weaves together a persuasive narrative that offers readers a comprehensive view of the complex and evolving ways in which the early modern German world was formed. It surely will productively challenge scholars to reshape and better nuance discussions of German history and the Reformation, and the transitions from Medieval to Modern society on the basis of the interactions among economic, social, political, and religious forces. In short, Brady is to be warmly thanked by historians for this distinguished contribution.

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