



**TRAGIC VISION AND DIVINE COMPASSION: A CONTEMPORARY THEODICY**, by Wendy Farley. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990. Pp. 156. \$13.95 (paper).

Why does an all-powerful, righteous God permit human beings to do evil? This question has traditionally been studied under the heading of *theodicy*—an inquiry into the justice (*dike*) of God (*theos*). For philosophers of religion, the problem of evil is something of a mind-game; but for theologians, it has been an embarrassment, and for pastors, a source of pain. How can we speak frankly and compassionately to those who have suffered devastating losses? All our words are inadequate. At best we are forced to speak in clichés; at worst, our defenses of God take on an air of moral indifference, or even cruelty.

The problem of evil has elicited a number of traditional responses. For example, in seeking to justify the devastating side-effects of a drug treatment, we often point to the larger goal of bodily healing. This is a version of the “aesthetic defense,” which argues that discrete evil acts do not mar the goodness of the whole. Similarly, the penal defense (Christ died to atone for acts of evil) and the eschatological defense (things will be better in heaven) have played some part in the history of this problem.

But these responses are powerless, says Wendy Farley, when we are faced with “radical suffering.” Radical suffering, she argues, is that which degrades or destroys human nature—and especially the human capacity to love, to hope, and, when necessary, to resist. Over the past century we have become all too familiar with such radical suffering: we have read Ivan Karamazov’s description of the innocent suffering of children; we know about torture and abuse; and we have been witnesses to the ultimate denial of God’s justice—the Nazi atrocities. In the face of such crimes, the arguments of theodicy seem utterly meaningless.

Concerned about this inadequacy, Farley proposes an alternative: that we should understand suffering through the medium of *tragedy*. The world is necessarily the scene of conflict and suffering—due to competing loyalties, incomplete knowledge, and sheer bloody-mindedness. “The very structures that make human existence possible make us subject to the destructive power of suffering” (29).

Given the necessity of such structures, Farley argues, our best response is not to attempt to justify suffering, but to have compassion on victims. Compassion in this sense is not merely pity, but rather a sympathetic loving attitude which resists suffering and seeks to preserve human dignity. As such, human efforts at compassion are but a microcosm of divine compassion, which redeems the created world by speaking out against its injustices and by standing in solidarity with its victims.

All this has much to commend it, of course. By recognizing the essentially tragic structure of the world, we can stop trying to justify or explain the evil which human beings commit; instead, we can try to fight against those actions and to heal the wounds which they inflict. Indeed, this approach sounds so reasonable and sensible that it seems surprising that no one has

thought of it before. Indeed, someone *has* thought of it before.

While Farley mentions several of the traditional Christian approaches to theodicy, she says almost nothing about the most celebrated defense of all: the argument that human freedom is simply incompatible with unmitigated goodness. This position, generally known as the free-will

defense, has had a number of incarnations in the history of theodicy, but its roots can be traced to St. Augustine. Augustine argued, in effect, that God's omnipotence does not require that God be capable of creating square circles. In other words, we should not blame God for failing to make creatures who (1) are perfectly free, and yet (2) always choose the good. Admittedly, Farley goes beyond the standard free-will defense, especially in her use of tragedy and her phenomenological description of compassion. Nevertheless, her general approach is quite congruent with the broad Augustinian tradition.

Yet in this book, Augustine arrives on the scene only to be blamed, variously, for "predestination" (12); for failing to attend to the problem of radical suffering (51); and for Panglossian naïveté (32: "All that is, is good"—though the source of the citation is unclear). Considering the significance of Augustine's theodicy for the history of Christian thought, he surely deserves more adequate treatment.

Of course, Farley makes the usual disclaimers that she has been unable to acknowledge all her sources, and that she has tried to be "ruthless in weeding out scholarly digressions" (13). However, the reader may wish that she had let a few digressions stand, in order that her own view could be situated in the history of theodicy.

Why would a writer feel compelled so dramatically to reject the very theological tradition in which she stands? My own suspicion is that she has read that tradition through a particularly debilitating set of spectacles—one lens of which is colored by Calvinism, the other by the Enlightenment. As a result, Farley's reading of the history of theodicy is not always reliable.

Consider an example. Farley notes that, according to St. Thomas, God's act of creation is explained not as the result of some *desire*, but as the unavoidable side-effect of God's eternal self-contemplation. Farley takes issue with this position, arguing that "the implication of this metaphysics is that self-enclosed identity is the ideal of perfection" (105). Where, she asks, is the relational element in God's perfection?

Well, it is in the Trinity, of course. To St. Thomas, that would have been utterly obvious. God's self-contemplation is *already* relational, because God is triune. Of course, if one attempts to read Thomas as a monotheist, then his position *does* look a bit daft. Here, as often, Farley turns to a traditional theological source, but assumes that it was written with post-Enlightenment presuppositions. Consequently, she does not recognize the degree to which her own arguments could have been supported by the very tradition which she abandons.

A similar incongruity appears when Farley discusses divine compassion. She is forced to reject any link between compassion and atonement, because she interprets the latter only through penal (substitutionary) categories. She thus rejects any appeal to the literal meaning of *com-compassion*, i.e., to a "benevolent but impotent deity who 'suffers with' the world" (112). Farley seems concerned that such a God will be unable to speak with prophetic power against oppressors. Yet surely we have learned from liberation theologians that the first step toward *justice* for the poor is the ability to *stand alongside* the poor, and to live as they live. Only a God

who suffers with creation can inspire the sort of belief which has the power to resurrect the world out of its sufferings. Our belief is justified precisely because God has experienced our griefs. Even the half-penny sparrows do not suffer alone: “not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father” (Matt 10:29, NRSV).

Traditional theodicy was undertaken not as an attempt to solve an abstruse philosophical problem, but rather within the context of the suffering Christian community. Farley seems to recognize this, for she underscores the role of Scripture and church as mediators of divine compassion. Stripped from this context, of course, theodicy indeed becomes banal, even ludicrous. But had Farley *begun* her book with church and Scripture, she might not have felt the need to reject traditional theodicies so adamantly. To the suffering community, those accounts made sense—not because they were logically coherent, but because they were meant to be accompanied by embraces and active solidarity—by a willingness to “suffer along with” those who were afflicted.

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Farley’s book needs to be read with discretion, for its attacks on the tradition of theodicy are often insubstantial or tendentious. However, the book also makes a positive contribution—especially in its advocacy of a tragic vision and an active compassion. Her own constructive position, like that of St. Augustine, can help us speak about God’s responsibility for evil without resorting to callousness and clichés.

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**A THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS: THE DEATH OF JESUS IN THE PAULINE LETTERS**, by Charles B. Cousar. Overtures to Biblical Theology. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990. Pp. 208. \$11.95 (paper).

Although Martin Luther seems to have coined the phrase “theology of the cross,” it is generally acknowledged that such a theology is rooted, and to some degree explicated, in the letters of Paul. Moreover, this theology has its modern proponents (Jürgen Moltmann, Eberhard Jüngel, and Douglas John Hall, to name but three). Nevertheless, the term “theology of the cross” can be a slogan without sufficient content or definition. In this situation a study of the Pauline foundations of this way of doing theology has been needed for a long time. The work of Cousar not only meets the need but offers a rich and engaging study of Paul that is a pleasure to read and a vigorous challenge to theology, proclamation, and life in the church and world.

The book consists of five chapters plus an introduction and conclusion. The author indicates in the introduction that Paul speaks of the death of Jesus in various ways, not just one, and that this variety must be respected. He also integrates Luther’s understanding of a “theology of the cross” (Heidelberg Disputation, 1518) into the discussion, saying that it has to do with theological method, the way one does theology from the ground up and in its entirety, not with one topic (such as the atonement) among others.

The first chapter is on “Jesus’ Death and God” (25-51). Here Cousar gives attention to

Paul's language concerning the death of Jesus, showing that the apostle interprets it theologically, i.e., that the main actor in the drama is God, not Jesus (or even the political or religious leaders of the day). The cross therefore reveals the character of God. In an interesting discussion that follows from this point, Cousar reviews the traditional attributes of God (power, righteousness, wisdom, faithfulness, freedom, and love), showing how they are understood by Paul in light of the cross and in contrast to much of the classical theological tradition.

The second chapter, "Jesus' Death and Human Sinfulness" (52-87), seems to be the centerpiece of the book. The author raises the essential question, "How is it that Christ's death makes any difference in the situation of sinful humanity?" (57). Cousar reviews all the soteriological statements in the letters of Paul, drawing upon critical scholarship, making his own observations, and presenting his work in ways that communicate to a wide audience. For him, the "heart of Paul's gospel" is that "the death of Jesus...effects a complete change in the situation between sinful humanity and God" (61). He reviews passages which speak of justification, redemption, atonement, reconciliation, and participation in Christ's death. He also compares and contrasts Paul's understanding of the meanings inherent in Christ's death with those attached to it in the history of doctrine (Anselm, Abelard, and the *Christus Victor* theory).

The remaining chapters take up issues related to the death of Jesus. These include the relationship of the resurrection of Christ to his crucifixion ("Jesus' Death and the Resurrection," 88-108), the marks of the church ("Jesus' Death and the People of God," 109-134), and the Christian life ("Jesus' Death and the Christian Life," 135-175). In an illuminating discussion Cousar points out that, while Paul speaks of the baptized as participants with Christ in his death (Rom 6:1-11), he speaks of their participation with him in his resurrection only in the future (6:5, 8). In his review of pas-

sages related to the identity of the Christian community, Cousar discusses its discipline, unity, and holiness. At one place he remarks that, on the basis of Pauline texts, there is "the possibility of an additional mark of the church, not mentioned in the creed—suffering" (170). The final chapter contains a careful and sensitive discussion of suffering and affliction in the life of the Christian, based on Pauline texts that are mainly autobiographical. In the conclusion to the book (176-189) the author sums up and goes beyond the discussion of the chapters to make some major points, emphasizing such things as how the term "all" appears in texts that depict the scope of God's redemptive work in Christ (186) and how that presents the church with a task in the world.

The book belongs to a distinguished series designed to engage biblical texts theologically. In his own way, Cousar does excellent work in hearing and explicating the meaning of the ancient texts for their time and in exploring their contemporary relevance and urgency. He brings into his discussion illustrations from ancient, Reformation, and modern theology and also from the mass media. Rather than throwing the discussion of texts into confusion by doing so, the actual result is greater illumination of them. Modern theologians drawn from include K. Barth, R. Bultmann, E. Käsemann, G. Aulén, D. J. Hall, and others, providing commentary on how the death of Christ has been treated by major theologians of our time. The book is lively and interesting. In a time when Christians may well agree that "Jesus saves," but do not know how to begin to talk about it, this book can help by introducing Paul's way of thinking, which is

probably the clearest articulation we have in the New Testament and since.

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**SOWING THE GOSPEL: MARK'S WORLD IN LITERARY -HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**, by Mary Ann Tolbert. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989. Pp. 336. \$27.95.

In his inimitable style Roy Harrisville once observed that "Mark's Gospel has become a kind of 'Pork Chop Hill' over which opposing systems and methods of interpretation join battle, suffer defeat, and regroup to do battle again." With this volume Mary Ann Tolbert enters the fray, marching in league with the company of interpreters who fly the banner of the literary-historical method. "This book," writes Tolbert in the opening paragraph,

intends to be a work of *literary history*, that is, it attempts to situate the Gospel of Mark within the literary currents of its own historical milieu. The special combination of a literary and a historical approach to the Gospel is needed...in order to answer the two most persistent complaints about Mark in modern scholarship: (1) that no consistent interpretation of the Gospel in all its parts has yet been elicited from studies of it and (2) that the narrative as it now stands appears obscure or muddled. (1)

The execution of the book's purpose is undertaken in two parts. According to the first Tolbert defines the method. According to the second the method is employed in the investigation of the Markan text and message. The book's success may be evaluated on these two fronts.

In part one of the book Tolbert attends to the matter of developing a methodology which is appropriate to her aim with respect to Mark. In her words: Methodologically, the goal of the study is to

formulate a practical literary analysis of the whole Gospel as a foundation for articulating a consistent interpretation of it. While practical criticism is generally eclectic in nature, that eclecticism should not be arbitrary but should be guided by goal-specific and text-specific criteria. (80)

Tolbert elaborates the meaning of "goal-specific" and "text-specific" criteria in the following terms: (1) The focus of the study brackets "out of consideration both issues

relating to the pre-Markan tradition and interpretations resting primarily on the authority of Matthew or Luke." The aim is to examine the text of the Gospel as it has been received, using the overall structure as a guide to discerning the thematic emphases and meaning. (2) The inquiry, seeking to illuminate the text as it would have been understood by the original readers, must be attentive to the way in which the text has been influenced by Greco-Roman rhetoric and the

popular culture of Mark's time. (3) At the same time, the interest of the study is to examine the text in terms of its capacity to address contemporary readers. Tolbert explains the methodological import:

Whatever modern literary theories we employ to supplement ancient works on rhetoric and popular literature must both blend well with these perspectives and also be altered to suit the differences between modern and ancient narratives in plot development, characterization, and the like. (82)

In the course of delineating the scope and nature of the literary-historical method Tolbert develops a persuasive case for its application in the study of Mark's Gospel, particularly at the point of understanding the message of the text as it stands in canonical reception. In this sense the volume makes a genuine contribution to the cause of advancing appreciation for and application of literary-historical analysis of Mark and, by inference, of the other Gospels as well. With the literary-historical method interpreters are encouraged to respect the integrity of the text and its historical milieu.

Tolbert's discussion of methodological considerations with respect to the study of Mark are worth the reader's attention. Particularly in light of the fact that inquiries which purport to examine the Gospels as literature have sometimes been rather free-wheeling enterprises, it is constructive for the study to attend to the criteria which will guide the inquiry, and to which the inquiry will be accountable.

Quoting grandmother, Tolbert concludes the methodological prolegomena with the observation that "the proof of the pudding is in the tasting," and thus turns her attention in part two of the study to the text and message of Mark.

Tolbert shares with others the contention that the parable of the sower (4:1-9) and the parable of the tenants (12:1-9) serve as plot synopses, governing the development of the narrative. As she puts the matter:

As primarily mimetic narratives, the parables are designed to show in concise format the general principles organizing the story as a whole. Along with the prologue and the introductions to the two major divisions of the Gospel, the parables function, similarly to the prooemium of an epic, drama, or history, to inform the audience "beforehand what the work is about"....By recalling these brief and highly mnemonic stories told by Jesus, the audience can interpret correctly the general point being illustrated in each episode or by each group of characters as the story progresses. The parables are meant to function, then, as sources of continual orientation for readers, and the narrative of the Gospel as a whole embodies and expands the typologies established by them. (125, 128)

The parables suggest, in the view of Tolbert, that the Markan purpose is to explain the mystery of faith. Why have most people failed to believe that the kingdom of God has come in Jesus? The answer, Tolbert contends, lies in the dirt of the parable, the good earth and the bad earths.

The metaphorical bad earths are those whose response to the word is characterized

by fear and manifested in hardness of heart, resulting in betrayal, denial, and death.... Those who believe what [Jesus] says reveal God's rule in their own hearts; that is, *for those who have faith that the kingdom has come, it has come in them*. And such faith transforms their lives, an event that the Gospel often graphically represents as miraculous healings. Faith that they will be healed heals them. Hearing Jesus' good news and responding in faith converts potential into power. The fearless, trusting confidence of children supplies an analogy for this faith.... (173-174)

The purpose of Mark, concludes Tolbert, is to "persuade its hearers to have faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ, to follow the way he forged into inevitable persecutions, the cross, but also eternal life, and to become themselves sowers of the good news of

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God's coming kingdom," thereby hastening its coming (302).

Tolbert is most certainly correct about it, to a certain point. The aim of Mark's narrative is to illuminate the mystery of faith in Jesus. The literary-historical method equips the interpreter to explore the narrative's resolution of the question. This far one may concur with Tolbert's study. But beyond this point her study virtually begs to be challenged.

If Tolbert's reconstruction of the Markan literary and theological program is correct, then it appears that the evangelist has failed to offer faith any basis for justifying or defending itself. Furthermore, it is, as a matter of fact, difficult to see where in it all there is any good news.

On the one hand, Tolbert asserts that Mark's purpose is to leave

each reader or hearer with the urgent and disturbing question: What type of earth am I? Will I go and tell?... Each individual who hears the word sown by the Gospel of Mark, the word that human corruption and suffering will now finally be abolished by the glory of God's kingdom, is given the opportunity—as have all the characters in the story—to respond in faith or in fear. (299, 298)

On the other hand, Tolbert argues that for Mark the matter of faith and unbelief has been determined ahead of time. The word of Jesus as reported by Mark, according to Tolbert, only exposes the predisposition of the heart. One is either made of Satan's dirt or of God's good earth. And in the end God is going to destroy the dirt, while the kingdom grows to its fullness in the good ground. Regardless of how the inconsistency would be resolved, neither alternative could be considered to offer much cheer to faith. Who, upon examining their own heart—with its vacillation between fear and courage, doubt and confidence—in the face of such a "gospel," could respond in any other way but absolute and utter fear of God, rather like the women at the empty tomb?

It may be a consistent interpretation, but makes of Mark a very dark book.

Suppose, however, that Tolbert is wrong about it. Suppose that for Mark the mystery of faith is not illuminated by encouraging the believer to indulge in endless self-examination—What kind of soil am I? Suppose that Mark locates the problem and the promise of faith outside itself. What if for Mark the problem of faith, as well as the promise of

faith, is Jesus himself? To make such a supposition is to put the entire interpretation of Mark on altogether different footing.

Briefly, the problem and promise of the Markan narrative unfolds something like this: The problem is that Jesus did not resemble at all the traditional expectation regarding the Messiah. His activities seemed to have little, or nothing at all, to do with the coming kingdom of God. For example, according to 2 Samuel 7 the traditional belief was that the Messiah would never die. The fact that Jesus not only died, but died the death of an accursed person would seem to rule out rather categorically the possibility of his being the Messiah. With his death on the cross the verdict of the opposition would seem to stand (see Mark 14:61b-64). The behavior of the disciples was understandable in the light of events that befell Jesus at Jerusalem. In the light of the historical evidence, the mystery is why anyone should persist in believing that Jesus is the Messiah.

How then is faith able to give an account of itself? If Jesus is the Messiah, why doesn't he look like the Messiah? If the kingdom has come in the ministry of Jesus, why doesn't the world appear to be saved? Why does evil continue to have sway? Under the weight of such questions Mark's narrative would be understood in dramatically different terms than those advanced by Tolbert.

Consider for example the parable of the sower in this light. From this perspective the parable answers faith's fear and doubt by illuminating the problem of Jesus. By examining the relationship between the time of sowing and the time of harvesting, the parable illuminates the relationship between Jesus' earthly career and the kingdom. In the course of his earthly ministry nothing much seems to come of Jesus' preaching. But just as one would be wise not to draw any conclusions about the effectiveness of the sowing until the harvest time, so the parable cautions against draw-

ing premature conclusions with respect to Jesus.

Faith, as the story is told by Mark, has reason to believe that the time of sowing does not tell the entire story. It is just the beginning of the good news. The narrative itself directs faith to expect that the kingdom will yet come of Jesus' career. Doesn't the fact that God raised Jesus from the dead vindicate him against the verdict of the opposition? And isn't this good news precisely for faith which seems always to trip itself up by fear and doubt, by denial and cowardice? Isn't it precisely for such fearful faith that Jesus is raised up and vindicated? Why else would the angel at the empty tomb tell the women: "Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you"?

Of course the women respond with fear and trembling, telling nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. And yet the good news is told. What else can it mean, but that the good news of Jesus is stronger than the fear and doubt of his followers? What else can it mean but that Jesus as Messiah brings in the kingdom precisely for his fearful and doubting followers? What else can it mean, but, as Luther would have put it, that God works to accomplish his purpose through the sign of its opposite?

What it does all mean is that according to the way Mark tells the story of it, the problem which Jesus poses for faith is overcome only by the promise of Jesus. That is the good news according to St. Mark. At least it is an interpretation of Mark which begs to challenge that



offered by Tolbert.

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**WHY NARRATIVE? READINGS IN NARRATIVE THEOLOGY**, ed. by Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989. Pp. 367. \$29.95/19.95 (paper).

The editors say in their preface that this book began in a class and they hope that it will be useful for classes. I would certainly use it as required reading in a class on story theology or a course on contemporary trends. In the past fifteen years narrative has become a hot topic of conversation among biblical scholars, homileticians, and practitioners of Christian counseling. Historians are beginning to recognize that historiography is not a science but the art of story-telling, and systematicians have been woefully frightened by the threat that story theology will bring collapse to their house of cards. This book brings together a remarkable collection of essays that deal with both the form and the substance of narrative, with both narrative hermeneutics and narrative ontology. This book brings clarity and challenge to all theological disciplines, but its particular intent is to wrestle with the question of how story relates to reality. Unfortunately the essays which deal most directly with this question are cloudy and cutesy and they fail to consider adequately the ontological reality of story.

The book has three sections: (1) narrative rediscovered; (2) narrative as a critical tool; and (3) narrative's theological significance.

The first section has essays by H. Richard Niebuhr, Hans Frei, Stephen Crites, and Alasdair MacIntyre. Niebuhr's "The Story of Our Life," from *The Meaning of Revelation* is well worth re-reading. It reminded me the debt I owe him in the development of my own story theology, and it caused me to wonder why more story theologians have not followed his direction in proclaiming the story of the biblical God as Lord of all history as well as Lord of our personal destiny. Hans Frei's essay rightly laments the loss of narrative hermeneutics in the last century, but his writing style is so cumbersome and convoluted that one wonders why he never learned from the beauty of story-telling. In sharp contrast the following essay by Stephen Crites is not only fresh and lucid in style but convincing in demonstrating the "narrative quality of experience." More than any other author in this book, Crites shows how the search for meaning in the story of one's life can help to solve the false dilemma between those who want to extend "control of abstract, technological reason to the whole life of society," and those who "hope for a society

perpetually turned on and flowing with animal juices."

The second section has two essays that stand out. David F. Ford's "System, Story, Performance: A Proposal about the Role of Narrative in Christian Systematic Theology," sees theology as doxological, with story as the worshipful way of praising God. Martha Nussbaum's essay on Samuel Beckett argues for the social development of emotion. If emotions are not natural stirrings but constructs shaped by society then they can be modified by "modification of

belief.” If stories are primary means of emotion teaching, then it is critical to examine the emotional life of an individual or group. Two things struck me while reading this section. Why should bad writing characterize so many of these essays, inasmuch as they are dealing with an art form? And why did the authors not include an essay by Paul Ricoeur on narrative hermeneutics?

The third section on narrative’s theological significance contains a running debate between Julian Hartt, the teacher, and his former students Stephen Crites and Stanley Hauerwas. The debate is interesting, and the question of truth versus truthfulness, fiction versus fact, is rightly put, but Hartt, as usual, is all but opaque and his students are too gentle. It seems that Hartt wants some metaphysical ground for truth because he fears that narrative slips into fiction. Crites and Hauerwas want to limit reality to narrative because they think any external criterion beyond the story of our lives will destroy our personal identity. Hartt fails to see that objectivity and authenticity cannot be found in human metaphysical systems and speculation but only in divine revelation and faith. Hauerwas fails to develop a narrative ontology which alone can satisfy what metaphysics tries to do but cannot.

By far the best essay in the book is by Ronald Thiemann. It is a commentary on Matthew’s Gospel as the development of the character of God in the person of Jesus as the Son of God and in the Father who raised Jesus from the dead, the promising God who is necessarily prevenient. Thiemann alone in this book deals with the content of the story. The final essay by Michael Goldberg is a critique of Thiemann. He objects that Thiemann tells the story of Jesus as the fulfillment of two covenants, one with Abraham and the other with David, whereas Goldberg claims the central covenant was with Moses on Sinai. Matthew and Thiemann tell a story of God’s unilateral grace, but the story of Judaism is one of cooperation between God, the giver of the law, and Israel as the covenant people who are shaped by the law to be a model for the nations. Goldberg’s story is about the formation of a people through adversity and obedience, and it is not difficult to see how one might want that story to be played out in the modern politics of Zionism. Israel’s religion is a religion of the family, a religion of blood and soil. The story of Jesus, however, is precisely that the law is not the way of salvation, that the story of the Exodus and the promised land has been replaced by a new story which developed out of the old one but which promises a fulfillment which both transforms and transcends the old one. This is the way Paul tells the story in the fourth chapter of Galatians, and this is the story that distinguishes Christian and Jew.

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**PAUL AND THE POPULAR PHILOSOPHERS**, by Abraham J. Malherbe. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989. Pp. vxi and 192. \$24.95.

Abraham Malherbe, Buckingham Professor of New Testament at Yale Divinity School, has spent a scholarly life seeking to locate New Testament, especially Pauline, texts and ideas in their precise historical context. He has edited and translated significant but little known texts which then entered the general world of New Testament scholarship: the Cynic Epistles, the ancient theorists on letter writing, and a sourcebook on moral exhortation.

Malherbe is preparing the *Anchor Bible* commentary on the Thessalonian Letters (three

studying 1 Thessalonians Malherbe was struck by the similarities between the language and attitudes of Paul and the popular philosophers of the early Roman empire. It led to his book *Paul and the Thessalonians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), the most creative contribution to the study of 1 Thessalonians in recent years.

*Paul and the Popular Philosophers* gathers eleven articles that are byproducts of his on-going study of the New Testament in the light of the Greco-Roman world, especially popular moral philosophy. All were published earlier in theological journals or essay volumes. These articles, with slight commentary, are as follows: 1. "Self-Definition among the Cynics" concludes that Cynicism is a "way of life," not a philosophic sect. Malherbe bases his description on the Cynic Epistles (their unknown Cynic author ascribes them to Socrates and early Cynics). 2. "*Me Genoito* in the Diatribe and Paul." The phrase, found only in Epictetus and Paul, rejects an objection or a false inference as a transition to a new stage of the argument.

The next three interpret 1 Thessalonians (*parerga* to his commentary research): 3. "Gentle as a Nurse": The Cynic Background to 1 Thessalonians 2." Dio Chrysostom's description of the true philosopher in his speech to the Alexandrians (Oration 32; cf. 12 [Olympic Discourse] and 32 [Discourse to Celaenae]) is similar to Paul's self-description in 1 Thess 2:1-8. The parallels suggest that Paul is not writing an apology for himself, but describing himself as concerned for his hearers, like the professional wet-nurse with her own children. 4. "Exhortation in 1 Thessalonians" examines 1 Thessalonians 4-5 as an example of hortatory speech. Malherbe stresses the philophroneic elements shared with moral philosophers, but also underscores the specifically Pauline edge, e.g., not "friendship" (*philia*), but "brotherly love" (*eis to agapan allelous*) in 1 Thess 4:9. 5. "Paul: Hellenistic Philosopher or Christian Pastor?" calls attention to Paul's continuing concern to nurture his churches when separated from them. All three articles, as Malherbe says (76), show that "when he [Paul] and others discuss his ministry, it is extraordinary to what degree the categories and language are derived from the Greeks."

The two essays on aspects of Paul and the Ephesians suggest aspects of Paul's self-understanding. 6. "The Beasts at Ephesus," on the basis of parallels in philosophic diatribe style, argues against a literal reading of 1 Cor 15:32 in favor of understanding them as Christians who deny the resurrection. 7. "Antisthenes and Odysseus, and Paul at War" cites parallels to the unique military language of 2 Cor 10:3-6 from Cynic philosophy (Antisthenes) to maintain that Paul describes himself as a warrior for God who is consistent in his relations to the Corinthians.

The last four essays discuss followers and interpreters of Paul. Two deal with the Pastoral Epistles: 8. "Medical Imagery in the Pastoral Epistles." The Pastorals use medical imagery as the Greco-Roman moral philosophers do to describe anti-social or heretical teachers as diseased in mind and morals. 9. "In Season and Out of Season": 2 Timothy 2:4" contrasts the advice to Timothy to the standard moralist's advice to adapt exhortation to the *kairos* when given. Both essays stress that the Pastorals use the philosophic tradition in a way that differs from Paul. 10. "Not in a Corner": Early Christian Apologetic in Acts 26:26" uses philosophic language to argue that Christianity's public character is a resource for the apologetic defense of the church. 11. "A Physical Description of Paul." *Acts of Paul and Thecla* 3 describes Paul's physical appearance: "a man of small stature, with a bald head and crooked legs, in a good state of body, with

eyebrows meeting and a nose somewhat hooked, full of friendliness; for now he appeared like a man, and now he had the face of an angel.” Ancient physiognomical writers held that physical appearance revealed character. Malherbe uses this literature to argue that the *APT* present Paul as the heroic Christian Heracles.

Biblical interpreters since the renaissance have sought the literal or historical sense (*sensus literalis sive historicus*) of the biblical texts. The father of Lutheran hermeneutical theory, M. Flacius Illyricus, already said that the interpreter must look for the sense in which the original readers

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(auditors) would have understood the biblical texts, the principle that underlies all lexicography. Malherbe fits well into this classical hermeneutical stance. The readers of Paul were Greek-speaking citizens of the Eastern Mediterranean world in the Early Roman Empire. Malherbe shows how the careful reading of texts clarifies what Paul meant.

Malherbe restricts himself to the moral philosophers, in large degree. Some might regard that as a drawback, especially in discussions of moral attitudes. Virgil, Horace, Ovid, the historians, and the satirical poets certainly contribute much to our evaluation of the morality of the early Roman Empire. Nonetheless, readers will be impressed by the extensive documentation from ancient philosophical and rhetorical texts (one hopes that seminary libraries contain the standard critical editions of these writers) and the broad acquaintance with the modern literature on the ancient sources. (It is probably a hopeless protest from one trained in classics that writings of ancient authors are cited by English translation of their titles. The variety of such translations confuses one accustomed to the conventional Latin titles used in all lexica, grammars, histories of ancient literature, and classical studies. I am sorry that the Society of Biblical Literature’s editorial guidelines contributes to this confusion, but am probably tilting at windmills with this complaint.) The complete interpreter of the New Testa-

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ment must be at home in both early Judaism and the Greco-Roman world. Malherbe shows how specific texts are illuminated by such careful textual interpretation. He deserves many readers and followers. This is a book to read and reread for method and insight.

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**REALITY AND THE VISION: 18 CONTEMPORARY WRITERS TELL WHO THEY READ AND WHY**, by Philip Yancey. Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990. Pp. 186. \$10.99.

The subtitle may not entirely explain this book’s format: fifteen of the seventeen chapters are each devoted to only one well-known writer; the subjects extend chronologically from Shakespeare to Ray Bradbury; most subjects are writers of fiction, drama, or poetry (though Søren Kierkegaard, Paul Tournier, and George MacDonald are also subjects of chapters). Two

remaining essays focus on poetry and on devotional writings. The contemporary writers who contribute to the collection are poets, novelists, biographers, and devotional writers; Walter Wangerin and Madeleine L'Engle are two contributors whose names many readers may recognize. Each chapter concludes with a brief paragraph on how to get started reading the writer under discussion. (By the way, in case anyone is counting, Larry and Carol Woiwode collaborated on the Tolstoy chapter, thus eighteen writers and seventeen essays.)

This collection aims, in part, at a simple encouragement to the reading of great literature. Beyond this fundamental and clearly desirable goal, *Reality and the Vision* raises, sometimes incidentally, a cluster of questions about definitions of great literature, methods of critical inquiry, and relations between theology and literature (or, perhaps better said given the material in this book, relations between one's faith and what one reads or writes). In the preface, Philip Yancey denies any intention of establishing a canon of approved writers, yet, inevitably, the reader begins to get a sense of canon. The essayists were asked one question: "Who has helped form you as a writer of faith?" (x). Most of them settle on one major influence, and they proceed, largely by autobiographical reference, to demonstrate the importance of their figure. One cumulative effect is that of a reading list of significant literary artists or theologians, the study of whose works will yield benefits to the reader of this volume similar to benefits gained by the essayists. The project is not unlike Matthew Arnold's 1880 appeal in "The Study of Poetry" for an attempt to discover "what poetry belongs to the class of the truly excellent" and can serve as a "touchstone to other poetry." Each contemporary writer expresses enthusiasm for the subject of his or her essay; together they build a case and a bibliography for "good literature."

Just what comprises "good literature," of course, remains very much at issue. Through these essays, the reader will begin to uncover the criteria by which judgments are made. Yancey notes that all the writers under discussion share "a certain perspective on this planet and the people who populate it," and offer "at least a glimpse of vision that inspires hope" (x). One essayist argues that art is to "search for, capture, and offer up to view the three verities: Goodness, Beauty, and Truth" (32). Even the question asked of the contributors, "Who has helped you as a writer of faith?" loads the answer in one direction: presumably, "a writer of faith" is shaped by other writers of faith or by works which express some dimension of faith. What is sought, then, is positive and uplifting philosophy. The "reality" of the title acknowledges another edge, but the tone of the essays leaves "the vision" dominant and so provokes reservation from other critical perspectives. Theologically, a person of faith profits from constructive expressions of the vision; critically, however, a reader may acknowledge more ambiguity and tension in definitions of "good literature."

Though Yancey boasts of diversity among both the essayists and the subjects of their essays, the diversity is not so apparent among the subjects. For one thing, as we have noted, they share a common

worldview, if not a common faith; for another, they are far and away European and North American males from earlier times. Twentieth-century writers are dismissed by one contributor for the "smallness" of their view of both God and humanity (109). Flannery O'Connor is the only woman among the celebrated authors (Juliana of Norwich gets brief attention in the chapter on devotional writers). Not one of the writers really stands outside Western perceptions of reality;

no minority voices are heard. Thus, a certain uniformity characterizes this set of “classics.”

This too must be said: these are not *critical* essays about great writers. The chapters here have more the character of autobiographical musings or of testimonials. The contemporary writers, in many instances, give as much space to their own story as to the story of their subjects. At points the essays become more personal and anecdotal than might be useful to a reader who would value thorough analysis of the works under consideration. With a few exceptions, the reader will get neither substantive critique of the writer’s work nor clues to the central issues in the considerable body of criticism that exists for each of these writers.

Having taken issue with the collection at these several points, I want now to acknowledge what I judge to be the advantage of these essays. For one thing, taken all together, the essays may remind us of works we have long wanted to read or of old friends we might wish to revisit. More important, we gain most, in these essays, from what we learn about the contemporary writers themselves. Inevitably they do testify to their own experiences as readers, and they invite us into their own pilgrimages; we listen to their struggles and successes on matters of vocation and commitment. These writers give us intimate access to the benefits they have derived from the famous authors, leading us then to deeper reflections on our own reading habits and to renewed attention to those who write with boldness and clarity.

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**POLITICS AND POLICY: THE GENESIS AND THEOLOGY OF SOCIAL STATEMENTS IN THE LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA**, by Christa R. Klein with Christian D. von Dehsen. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989. Pp. 290. \$19.95 (paper).

What is particularly impressive about this book is its scope. Christa Klein is an historian and that fact is apparent in her treatment of the Lutheran Church in America’s deliberations on social issues resulting in nineteen social statements that were produced and adopted over a quarter century prior to the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (1962-87). The author is hopeful that this book might uncover a “usable past,” contributing to greater understanding of the relation between church and society in American culture.

With her eyes on the larger picture, Klein begins this account with a chapter on nineteenth-century developments in the General Synod and General Council. The temperance movement dwarfed all other concerns much of the time, providing the first major impetus for efforts at public advocacy on the part of the General Synod. The Inner Mission was the primary vehicle for Lutherans in making a humanitarian impact on society, but its focus was the individual rather than any attempt to change society through political action. With the forming of the United Lutheran Church in America in 1918, a standing committee on temperance was inaugurated, soon to be replaced by a Committee on Moral and Social Welfare whose purpose was to study “moral, social, and industrial problems.” This kind of organizational response to societal issues would not occur in the rest of American Lutheranism until the late 1930s.

Klein regards the twenty-five years prior to the founding of the LCA as “the most fertile period in Lutheran social thought thus far in this century” (28). In support of this judgment she notes the contributions of A. D. Mattson, Edgar Carlson, and E. E. Ryden in the Augustana

Letts, Rufus Cornelsen, George Forell, and William Lazareth, the last four reflecting the influence of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich at Union Seminary. The three-volume collection of essays that appeared in the 1950s, *Christian Social Responsibility*, was a landmark in forging a contemporary Lutheran response to economic, political, familial, and ecclesial issues.

With the thoroughness appropriate to an historian's work, Klein provides the reader with numerous citations from documents of the church, books, articles, doctoral dissertations, and also, for the more recent history, information and perspectives gained from many telephone calls to persons who were involved in producing social policy statements. This results in some interesting accounts of personal differences between major players, differences that are not that surprising considering the stature and seriousness of people like Sittler, Lazareth, and Forell. Some of the more engaging accounts relate to the struggles of the Board of Social Ministry in the early sixties in producing a statement on race relations (43ff.), the Commission on Marriage in producing its 1970 statement, "Sex, Marriage and Family" (105ff.), and the controversy surrounding the last social statement adopted by the LCA (1984), "Peace and Politics," which addressed issues of nuclear warfare.

Klein's book (Christian von Dehsen contributed substantially to the last two and one-half chapters, covering the last fifteen years) makes an important contribution for this time of new beginnings in American Lutheranism. The controversial nature of the church's involvement in the social arena makes it particularly important to reflect on the record of the ELCA predecessor bodies in this area of the church's life. Their social statements alone are instructive, and not the least of this book's contributions is its 110-page appendix which includes all the social statements adopted by the LCA. What many readers may miss in this volume is the attempt to reflect at more length on the theological, ethical, and ecclesial dimensions of the church's efforts to address contemporary issues. A brief epilogue hints at some of the problems we face, but no attempt is made that might exemplify how this particular "past" might indeed be "usable."

As one who has been both an observer of and participant in the processes by which the Lutheran church has addressed social issues, a number of developments noted by Klein are particularly interesting to me. One of Joseph Sittler's disagreements with the evolving process in producing social statements related to the appointment of different commissions and drafting groups for each new statement (165f.). He favored the creation of a "Commission of Theology and Ethics" that would be responsible for producing statements and capable of sustained theological and ethical reflection on the variety of issues that arose. If other mechanisms are in place to insure a hearing from all segments of the church, there is much to be said for this viewpoint. The current atmosphere is dominated by the importance of group representation on every committee, a goal that properly concerns the church. However, we have not always balanced that concern with sufficient interest in persons who can bring extensive background in theology and ethics to those committees whose responsibility is to address contemporary issues.

In one of her closing paragraphs, Klein observes that principles of representation "can come to mean that individuals are trusted to understand only the alleged interests of their own sociologically and biologically defined groups" (177). This is the particularly bothersome

problem we are struggling with today—the intense, ideological coloring of every issue we address. A Commission of Theology and Ethics would not be able to completely transcend the ideological interests of its members (who should, of course, besides their academic and experiential qualifications, also reflect the plurality of the church), but one would expect from them an honest attempt to do precisely that as they seek to discern the essential theological and moral issues that demand the church’s attention.

We are currently hearing some discontented voices in the church, including those who are calling for the abolishing of the ELCA’s Commission for Church and Society. Given human nature, one suspects

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that a good bit of this discontent is itself ideologically inspired. What must be paramount in the minds of all of us is an earnest desire to listen to every competing viewpoint, to be as fair as possible in reaching a considered judgment, and to assume the good faith of those with whom we disagree. Not surprisingly, these elements of moral character are essential not only to human community, but to the work of the church as well. My own belief is that we have the resources and sufficient good will to make it happen in the ELCA.

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