

# Reviews



**READING ISAIAH: POETRY AND VISION**, by Peter D. Quinn-Miscall. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001. Pp. 224. \$20.95 (paper).

*Reading Isaiah*, according to the back cover of this book, is “a practical, non-technical how-to literary introduction to the book of Isaiah as a poem.” It does that important job well. In my own Isaiah course, I tell students that it is probably impossible to overestimate the significance of the fact that the vast majority of the prophetic material is poetry. Thus, by definition, poetic prophecy defies a simplistic literalist interpretation. “For the whole book [of Isaiah],” says Quinn-Miscall, “the demands of rhetoric and poetry are stronger than the demands for succinctness and clarity” (119). Thus, since Isaiah *is* poetry, we will be helped by this “how-to” manual on reading it *as* poetry.

Quinn-Miscall begins with a quick introduction to his literary “way of reading” and to several of the elements that constitute Hebrew poetry—a useful introduction or review for the non-specialist. Chapter 1 (“What Is the Book of Isaiah?”) includes a brief summary of the periods of Israelite history that are encompassed by the sixty-six chapters of Isaiah and a serviceable outline to the book as a whole. The next three chapters develop the author’s literary methodology, discussing the themes of the book (“What Does Isaiah Think?”), its images (“What Does Isaiah Imagine?”), and its characters (“Who Speaks and Who Acts in Isaiah?”). The chapter on characters provides a very helpful model of this aspect of

literary method: What does it mean to view the major speakers and actors as “characters” in a literary work? In his final chapter (“The Lord’s Holy Mountain”), Quinn-Miscall applies his method to a more extensive treatment of the book’s “messianic passages” (in a very broad use of that term). Particularly helpful here is his presentation of the material on the servant. Viewing the so-called servant songs, for example, in the context not only of Second Isaiah (a term Quinn-Miscall does not use) but of the whole book provides insights not available to isolated readings of these texts. Particularly striking, in this regard, is his reading of “the great Servant Song” (52:13–53:12) in relation to the “Song of the Woman” (54:1–17).

True to his methodology and intention, Quinn-Miscall provides not a commentary on the text of Isaiah, but rather a way of thinking *about* Isaiah and, perhaps, *with* Isaiah about the book’s sweeping “vision of God and humanity, of Israel’s special place within the world, and of how Israel and all humans are to live in that world and respond to God’s words and teachings” (119). This is, at once, the volume’s value and its limitation. The preacher looking for insight into a specific text may or may not find help here (though she might well find a literary world in which to interpret her particular text). Similarly, the Bible study class looking for guidance in a continual reading of the book will have to turn elsewhere. The author of this book, quite deliberately, leaves much yet for the reader to do: “My goal is to lead my readers into the vision and world of Isaiah, to give them initial direc-

tions on what to look for and how to treat it, and then leave them to explore this world and to turn it into their own" (107). It is not clear, though, whether the naive reader, knowing little or nothing about Isaiah, could pick up this book and understand its "initial directions." The process would have to be cyclical, involving enough reading of Isaiah to become familiar with its basic content, then a use of this book as an introduction to a particular way of seeing that biblical content, and then a rereading of Isaiah, employing Quinn-Miscall's vision of Isaiah's vision—a useful, if lengthy, exercise.

By offering a literary reading—thus, an aesthetic or "cool" reading (my terms)—Quinn-Miscall will frustrate the reader seeking to understand the book in theological—and thus, less dispassionate—perspective. The book's themes and images are, for Quinn-Miscall, universal, and its message, in a certain sense, timeless. By seeing the book as a later poetic "retrospective" on a broad sweep of Israel's history (3) and its individual texts *not* "addressing different periods in Israel's history" (2–3), Quinn-Miscall finds its time to be "whenever" (17), its view of the relation between God and people "not unique" (44), and its intent to provide "a vision of the variety of ways in which the relations of God's ways and human ways can display themselves across time and across cultures" (71). This is precisely the value of reading Isaiah (or anything) as a human literary product (and, of course, from one perspective the Bible is just that).

But other perspectives are thereby excluded. Missing here, among the portrayal of recurrent themes and images from various parts of the book, is the rich particularity discovered through the close reading of larger texts in their immediate literary (and at least implied) historical context. Missing, too, is any overall theological telos. Quinn-Miscall rightly refuses to "resolve all the tensions and problems of humans and of God" addressed by the book of Isaiah (210)—key among them the tension between God's justice and God's mercy

(56–67)—but he finally finds the book's "thematic diversity" an end in itself, "an essential part of Isaiah's all-inclusiveness" (66), and he refuses to give primary weight to one aspect or another. For example, Quinn-Miscall can, at one point, describe the book's "multisided" view of God by listing, first, God as "creator, supporter, parent, and savior" and, second, God as "judge, punisher and destroyer" (65) and then, at another point, turn the order around, describing, first, the God who "threatens, disciplines, punishes, and even destroys" and then the One who "promises, supports, leads, and restores" (139). But does the order not matter? Does God just sometimes show up as savior and sometimes as judge, or does God judge in order to save? Are the several images of God in the book simply random, even contradictory (5)? God is both warrior and shepherd, but once warrior and shepherd are as intimately wed as in 40:10–11 (with its resolution toward shepherd), can God the warrior ever be understood again in the same way? Is the move from warlike Cyrus to gentle servant (at 48:16; cf. 49:1) simply a literary division (37), or is there something afoot here even for God (in which case, God becomes more than just a literary character)?

To be fair, Quinn-Miscall does not mean to be doing theology here (4–5)—and he might well do it elsewhere—but the question remains: If *Isaiah* means to be doing theology, can a literary reading that brackets theology do complete justice to the book?

Such discussions of the possibilities and limitations of different methodologies will continue. In the meantime, Quinn-Miscall provides significant help for the reader who is willing to do the work the book asks of her: to use his impetus to continue "to explore this world" of Isaiah at greater literary (and, I might add, theological and historical) depth.

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**THE PSALMS: AN INTRODUCTION**, by James L. Crenshaw. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001. Pp. 197. \$15.00 (paper).

This book consists of a preface, introduction, three sections, ten chapters, conclusion, select bibliography, glossary, and four indexes. It is compact, containing considerable information.

Crenshaw's perspective on Psalms interpretation is stimulating reading, displaying his expertise with wisdom literature and theology. The enclosed publisher's flyer indicates that the book is "designed for a wide range of educational settings" and "will help students read the psalms with understanding and appreciation." Clearly the book is marketed for classroom use. But the book also has valuable potential for educational use for the parish pastor as renewal of seminary studies and in congregational adult study.

The "Preface" suggests a reason for the book. "In the Psalms I have heard the voices of individuals...and...found kindred minds" (ix). Crenshaw returns to this purpose in the "Conclusion" when he finishes: "if my small effort encourages readers to study the book of Psalms themselves with fresh eyes" (169). Indeed, studying this volume can encourage examining the Psalms anew. Crenshaw then remarks that keeping footnotes to a minimum is following the editor's advice, "although that decision obscures my constant dialogue with the authors" (ix). The best annotated chapter, seven (109–127), has been previously published. The excursus (87–95) in chapter five is well noted. Additional notes would have made this volume more useful for graduate students and pastors and a reference for undergraduates.

The "Introduction" concisely summarizes a number of issues in Psalms study, including liturgical use, numbering differences between the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint, superscriptions, headings, and general approaches.

Part I, "Origins," contains two chapters: "The Individual Collections" and "Related Psalms." Chapter one briefly discusses Egyptian and Mesopotamian Hymns, and moves to the book of Psalms in general, be-

fore examining collections based around similar characters and themes, such as those psalms attributed to David, Asaph, and Korahites. The chapter ends with a summary on psalm composition. Chapter two looks at psalms found in biblical and related literature—other books in the Masoretic Text, Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Qumran, and the New Testament.

Part II, "Approaches to Psalms," contains four chapters. Chapter three, "The Psalms as Prayers," illustrates Crenshaw's expertise with the wisdom traditions. The chapter begins with short summaries of "Jewish Interpretation" and "Christian Penitential Psalms." He then lays out a thought-provoking section on torah psalms as examples of instruction in the wisdom tradition. A short section on "Psalm 23" is followed by "Reflection on Human Nature," "The Cursing of Enemies," and "Metaphors for Yahweh." He concludes the chapter with a brief section, "A Handbook for Religious Life."

The next chapter, "Psalms as a Source of Historical Data," has some very interesting and provocative paragraphs. The paragraphs on economics (73) and music (74) are examples of places where Crenshaw presents ideas that attract the reader's thoughts and makes a compelling case for continued exploration. The section on iconography (75–79), for example, brings to mind the many images that Keel displays in *Symbolism of the Biblical World*. Especially enticing is the mention of the ancient Near Eastern shepherd imagery, shepherds of a flock of sheep and flock of people (i.e., the royal shepherd). Such royal images mentioned in the Psalms help in understanding the cultic setting for this literary corpus mentioned by Crenshaw (1).

Chapter five, "Classification by Types," is a valuable summary of insights gained from the studies of Hermann Gunkel and Sigmund Mowinckel. Other scholars are mentioned in the survey, but the summary of the views of these two major figures of the twentieth century is quite helpful as a refresher for pastors. The excursus, "Wisdom Psalms," is a well-documented analysis by

Crenshaw of scholarly presentations of wisdom psalms. The section ends with a reflection by Crenshaw—“their authorship and provenience matter less than the accuracy and profundity of what they say” (94)—raising the question that his evaluation of wisdom psalms might be better articulated when the message of the various psalms becomes clear.

Chapter six, “Artistic and Theological Design,” looks at recent literary and theological approaches to the Psalms, such as canonical criticism and rhetorical criticism. At the end of the chapter Crenshaw reviews the work of R. N. Whybray on wisdom psalms.

In Part III, “Some Readings,” Crenshaw takes a journey through four psalms illustrating his interpretive methodology. The previously published chapter seven looks at Psalm 73 and sets the stage for Crenshaw’s analytical style and emphasis on the instructional value of the psalmists. Crenshaw continues his methodological presentation in chapter eight (Psalm 115), chapter nine (Psalm 71), and chapter ten (Psalm 24).

The short “Conclusion” recapitulates the book. Each of the three sections is summarized so that the reader can reflect anew or return to a particular section to see what was missed. A brief glossary appears before four indexes. Crenshaw expresses his hope that this volume has encouraged a look at Psalms with fresh eyes. In the reviewer’s perspective, this hope has been accomplished.

Crenshaw notes that the setting of the Psalms arose in the experience of worship (1) and that from these majestic psalms one learns how to pray (9). The journey that Crenshaw follows throughout reflects his passion for the literary poetic style and theological sensitivity that one can discern from the Psalms. Parish pastors can use this material and approach to help in their own faith journey and in studying with their congregation this most varied and thought-provoking collection in the Scriptures.

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**LAMENTATIONS**, by F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp.  
Louisville: John Knox, 2002. Pp. 159.  
\$21.95.

Readers of *Word & World* may have only passing familiarity with the book of Lamentations and most likely have no acquaintance with the scholarship of F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp. Dobbs-Allsopp’s elegant commentary on Lamentations in the Interpretation Biblical Commentary series provides the ideal medicine to cure both of these ills. Dobbs-Allsopp has written one other book and many articles on or related to Lamentations, but for most readers this commentary is the best way into his thinking and also the best way to get to know the book of Lamentations. As the author notes, Lamentations is a biblical book that is well-suited to the theological and political currents of our postmodern and post-9/11 world. Lamentations suits the postmodern context because the five poems collected in this book stubbornly resist attempts to define human experience in any reductionist way. Lamentations suits the post-9/11 context because it is a book written out of the experience of suffocating suffering, yet it is a book that “holds onto life and manifests a will to live that comes from knowledge of (or the belief in) tomorrow” (3).

According to Dobbs-Allsopp, the poems of Lamentations were most likely written during the late sixth century B.C.E. in Palestine. The poems are reactions to the destruction of Jerusalem, its temple, and to the great suffering experienced by its people. The poems in Lamentations bear the “strong imprint” of the Mesopotamian city-lament genre, a type of poem performed by Israel’s neighbors in which a city’s goddess weeps over the destruction of her city. Because the city-laments were performed as part of a foundation-razing ceremony prior to the rebuilding of a temple, some scholars hypothesize a similar setting for Lamentations, namely, that it was written to be performed as part of the rebuilding of the Second Temple. For a variety of reasons, Dobbs-Allsopp finds this conclusion unlikely. Instead he concludes that “one should

think more in terms of the kinds of public mourning ceremonies that presumably took place at the site of the destroyed city” (12). That is, these poems are poems of mourning for the darkest of part of night, before any hint of morning light can be detected.

The strongest part of Dobbs-Allsopp’s commentary is the extended attention that is paid to the lyrical nature of Lamentations’ poetry. For Dobbs-Allsopp, the poetic nature of Lamentations isn’t simply the vehicle whereby the book’s theological ideas are delivered. Rather, Lamentations’ poetry is as much a part of its “theology” as is its intellectual content:

...if we want to get at what lyric poems mean, what they say (to put it crudely), we will need to pay equally careful attention to formal properties and aspects, which are usually glossed over as mere decoration or atmosphere (e.g., sonic elements, meter and rhythm, key words, repetitions, etc.), as we do semantic content....It is never a matter of boiling the lyric poem down to its essentials, but rather experiencing it for what it does as it does it. (13)

The good news is that in the meat of his commentary, Dobbs-Allsopp successfully pulls off the agenda he sets for himself. He pays careful attention to the ways in which the poet of Lamentations uses poetic tools such as metaphor, word order, word play, personification, and so on, to temper the semantic content of the chosen words. Dobbs-Allsopp’s readings of these poems are artful, sensitive, and often painful. For example, Dobbs-Allsopp writes that the poet of Lamentations embraces life by *resisting* the suffering that the poet sees as coming from God. Writing about Lamentations 3, Dobbs-Allsopp states that the poet

insists that the affirmation of God’s ultimate goodness and compassion toward humanity must be interpreted in light of the basic historical reality of the pain and suffering brought on by Jerusalem’s destruction. The gap between the two realities is too great to be ignored....But neither will he surrender the conviction

that God’s innermost will for humanity is not suffering but love and well-being. If the reality of pain and suffering must be squarely faced, it need not be accepted as final and absolute. To the contrary, it is to be resisted actively. The words of this poem constitute the stuff of that resistance, both in their protests and in their calls for God’s attention. (124–125)

As an interpreter, Dobbs-Allsopp has more than one string on his fiddle. He has informed his interpretation by attending to the work of linguistic and poetic theorists, the work of psychologists, and the scholarship of Jewish interpreters. Thus, Dobbs-Allsopp has built his theological house at the intersection of linguistics, technical biblical interpretation, and psychology (for example, he sees the poetry functioning “in a therapeutic vein” and focuses on “grief at the center of its discourse”). If there is one thing that this reviewer finds missing in Dobbs-Allsopp’s commentary it is attention to traditional Christian ways of knowing and understanding God. The most likely reason for this is because Christian theology has so often become mired down in attempts to protect God’s reputation by engaging in questionable theodicies. And, as Dobbs-Allsopp views Lamentations, the book is an “antitheodicy.” Thus, because many traditional Christian ways of knowing God are found wanting, they are essentially ignored.

Anyone who has struggled to find theological material appropriate for the post-Holocaust or post-9/11 context will profit from Dobbs-Allsopp’s slender commentary. In addition, anyone interested in the lament material of the Old Testament, the book of Lamentations, or the poetic corpus of the Old Testament will also find a rich trove here. Dobbs-Allsopp’s book opens up new avenues for conversation with and about the biblical witness. What more can one ask from a commentary?

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**THE WORLD THAT SHAPED THE NEW TESTAMENT**, revised edition, by Calvin J. Roetzel. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002. Pp. xxiv + 168. \$19.95 (paper).

Apart from fragmentary anecdotes gleaned from occasional sermons, television documentaries, or a long-forgotten undergraduate course in the classics, most members of Christian congregations and entering seminarians possess scant knowledge of the ancient world and its relevance for understanding the Bible. Many pastors find it difficult to incorporate data regarding the Bible's historical backgrounds into their exegesis for preaching and teaching, often because the accumulated scholarship appears too massive and inaccessible. Yet the unbounded proliferation of study Bibles on bookstore shelves attests to the fact that the typical reader experiences the biblical texts as alien documents, difficult to get inside and comprehend without a basic grasp of their original contexts or assistance in illuminating their language and sociocultural assumptions.

Calvin Roetzel, who is Macalester College's Arnold H. Lowe Professor of Religious Studies, and Westminster John Knox Press have given a valuable gift to teachers and pastors looking for resources that introduce students and congregants to the political, religious, and social milieux from which the New Testament arose and to which it spoke. This volume offers a revised and modestly expanded version of Roetzel's original edition of 1985. Like the first release, the book divides into five chapters that address the political setting of first-century Palestine; the manifold religious options available to Jews and Gentiles; such socioreligious institutions as the temple, synagogues, and Greek cities; methods of scriptural interpretation practiced within intertestamental Judaism; and ancient perceptions of demonic powers, exorcists, and healers.

In several places, Roetzel has fattened up content that he treated cursorily in the first edition. For example, his presentation of the Palestinian political context between Alexander the Great and the Jewish revolt of

66–70 C.E. now includes extended accounts of the rise and political shrewdness of both Octavian and Herod the Great. In other places, the author has added material that reflects scholars' accomplishments from the past decade or two. For example, a new section in the chapter on social institutions explores the nature and cultural significance of household and familial structures in the ancient world. As Roetzel notes, the Apostle Paul's use of familial terms and images sharply reshapes their symbolic potential and thus represents Christianity's subversion of the social status quo. Readers of the revised edition benefit also from added material about the Pharisees and from new but brief probes into the rise of ruler worship in Roman imperial religion, Hellenistic "mystery religions," and the widely popular healing cult of Asclepius. In addition, Roetzel and his publisher have improved the aesthetics and navigability of this work, replacing endnotes with footnotes and dividing the text with several new subheadings.

This edition introduces very few alterations to the chapter on the interpretation of Scripture and the chapter on the overlap between the created world and demonic forces. This absence of new material results in a modicum of disappointment, for these chapters might have included a sustained discussion of first-century Judaism's diverse expectations about messianic deliverers and more exploration of the apocalyptic currents that promoted a dualistic view of the cosmos's natural and supernatural realms. A final complaint concerns the lack of even a brief bibliography to refer readers to additional resources for deeper study. Those whose find their interests amplified by Roetzel's introduction will need to consult a recent Bible dictionary for direction on where they can delve more deeply.

In obvious tension with my criticism calling for the inclusion of more material, I consider the volume's compact size an asset. This is not an intimidating text, but one that nurtures the interests of thoughtful Bible readers who seek an introduction to the intricate cultural forces that influenced the earliest believers, their theological and con-

ceptual vocabulary, and the texts they produced. One must not equate the book's slender spine with absence of depth, however, for Roetzel's prose is meaty, bearing the imprint of a lifetime of research and classroom instruction. The author displays a talent for rendering complex material in interesting and digestible ways. Frequently he refers to New Testament passages, demonstrating why knowledge of first-century contexts is so important for those of us who profess a particular investment in the message of the Bible. I know of no book that offers a better starting point for exploring the world of Jesus and the earliest Christian communities.

In the book lists for my introductory New Testament courses I specify Roetzel's text as highly recommended. Students usually express interest in learning this kind of material, not because of the general attraction to arcane knowledge that imbues members of seminary communities, but because it empowers them to become more sophisticated and creative readers of Scripture. One hopes that most people who are willing to take up and read the Bible aspire to do so in fresh and informed ways, and so Roetzel's accessible and focused book makes an excellent resource for pastors and laypeople, as well.

To consider the nature of the societies in which the gospel was first proclaimed and interpreted is to read the Bible with new eyes and ears made sensitive to the concrete hopes, conflicts, structures, and histories that the gospel addressed. To understand how the first-century world shaped the New Testament is to peer into the nascent churches' understanding of the promises that the gospel made to them. Familiarity with the cultural codes, symbols, and concepts of the ancient world should not be pursued as an attempt totally to eliminate the distance between our present-day reading experiences and those of the earliest believers, as if such an endeavor were even possible or desirable. Nor should one read Roetzel in an effort to identify and strip away cultural influences to uncover a gospel message that is free from them, as if such a

thing existed. Rather, this book is valuable because greater sensitivity to how the New Testament authors experienced and enacted the gospel within the particularities of their own social worlds may give our churches greater creativity in doing the same within our contemporary contexts.

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**PAUL AND JESUS: THE TRUE STORY**, by David Wenham. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002. Pp. 195. \$20.00 (paper).

David Wenham, an Anglican priest and teacher at Wycliffe Hall in Oxford, who also wrote *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* answers those critics of St. Paul who maintain that the Apostle distorted or ignored the original teachings of Jesus in favor of a "different Jesus of his own theological imagination" (ix).

Written for the general reader (there are no footnotes and only a few explanatory *excursi*), the book is readily accessible to those who have had little or no introduction to St. Paul and his writings. A large portion of the book is comprised of theological summaries of the Pauline letters that Wenham studies. These summaries are quite helpful for those who have not waded through Paul's epistles, and will provide the novice with a good starting point. Wenham's style is also clear and conversational.

The volume is divided into three parts. The first part deals with "what we know of his [Paul's] origins and conversion" (x). The second part focuses on "Paul's so-called missionary journeys and on four of his letters (Galatians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians)" (x). The third part contains Wenham's conclusions. The volume also has a biblical reference index and a subject index.

There is no bibliography, except on pages x-xi, which contain a short annotated bibliography of about a dozen books, mostly commentaries.

Much of the book has to do with the har-

mony that Wenham finds between the author of Luke/Acts and St. Paul concerning Paul's movements, his meetings in Jerusalem, and his missionary journeys. Wenham believes that Luke followed Paul's career closely and that he himself was a companion of Paul on his travels. Wenham, not incidentally, accepts the south Galatian hypothesis and maintains that Galatians was Paul's earliest letter. In terms of Paul's itinerary, the Acts of the Apostles and Paul's letters are, according to Wenham, "strikingly complementary" (180). Wenham does not discuss all the problems of Luke's chronologies, geographies, and characters (e.g., the census under Quirinius, the early appearance of the Italian cohort in Caesarea, the difficulty of the dual priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas) nor does he discuss all the arguments for the south Galatian hypothesis. This is a book for the general reader, after all. One could wish, however, that Wenham would have addressed more fully the seemingly contrasting styles and theologies of Paul's speeches in Acts with the letters of the Apostle himself. For example, though Wenham deals with the Apostle's Aeropagus speech in Acts 17 and Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, insisting that the two messages are the same, he ignores some of the important differences. If Luke had actually been a companion of Paul, one could expect a much greater degree of similarity and emphasis.

The heart of the book, however, deals with Paul's knowledge of the earthly Jesus, his preaching and his life, and the Apostle's use of the Jesus tradition. In this respect Wenham's observations are often quite sound and convincing. Paul must have heard stories of the earthly Jesus from the lips of those who knew him personally, and Wenham identifies instances in which Paul's vocabulary, message, and emphasis seem to reflect Jesus' own words and sayings. Indeed, as we all know, Paul quotes the earthly Jesus in 1 Corinthians 11. As overwhelming an argument as Wenham makes, there are numerous places in which "parallelomania" can be detected (a scourge of which Wenham is all too aware). Can one

always assume that the use of a particular term or short phrase is evidence of direct linkage? Wenham himself seems apologetic at times when pointing out possible echoes and allusions in Paul's letters to parables or stories of Jesus in the Gospels. Sometimes the connections seem rather strained. For example, while it is definitely plausible that Paul's use of the term "Abba" could certainly have come directly from the Lord, it is less likely that Jesus' saying about being a "ransom for many" provides the background of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 9:19 in which he talks about having made himself a slave to all "so that I might win more of them." The term "win" was a common Jewish missionary term and it is not necessary to see Jesus' use of the word "ransom" as the background in this case. Other claims of direct influence also seem strained, as Wenham himself admits. For example, Paul's identification of Jesus as the new "Adam" may or may not be an echo of Jesus' self-designation: "Son of Man."

While it is very easy to criticize Wenham for a number of the connections he attempts to make and for his reliance upon the accuracy of Acts, his main thesis that Paul was cognizant of and true to the Jesus tradition is convincing. If one needed evidence that the Apostle to the Gentiles, who was so passionate about his Lord Jesus, knew and used the very message of that Lord, the case is amply made in this book.

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**MATTHIAS FLACIUS AND THE SURVIVAL OF LUTHER'S REFORM**, by Oliver K. Olson. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag in Kommission, 2002. Pp 428. \$99.00 (cloth).

Most people in North America know something about George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson as founding figures of the United States. It is a safe bet, though, that very few know anything about Pelatiah Webster (1726–1796). Since he was an early headmaster of a cer-



tain Germantown Academy in Philadelphia (a position I held two centuries later), I am able to spread the news that Webster was a prominent advocate for the writing of a new Constitution for the fledgling United States. He was also an important leader in the matter of currency reform, and his writings influenced James Madison in directing public opinion to the necessity of a better form of government.

In like fashion, most thinking Christians doubtless know something about Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Wesley, some of the founding figures in various Protestant movements. It is an equally safe bet, though, to say that very few have heard of or know much about Matthias Illyricus Flacius (1520–1575). To remedy this deficiency in the corporate Reformation memory, Oliver K. Olson has written an extended essay on Flacius, whom Olson claims to be the second most important theologian after Luther and the man who saved the Reformation.

The book bears the lineaments of biography, but it breaks off abruptly in 1557, leaving the reader to wonder what happened to Flacius during the last 19 years of his life. In a brief paragraph, however, Olson promises a second volume to conclude the story, so one can live in hope and expectation (15).

The story that Olson tells details the pivotal role Flacius played in the doctrinal disputes between the time of Luther and the developing Lutheran consensus prior to the Formula of Concord. It is not a pretty story, and it is one that requires some concentration and dedication on the part of the reader. Olson's narrative is dense, and the accompanying footnote apparatus is less than user-friendly for those who do not read German. Moreover, the book has a character index but no subject index, so it is difficult to find or keep track of the topics as they pass. An eighty-page bibliography, however, provides a detailed investigative map for those who may wish to tour the territory further.

Flacius, as Olson tells the story, was a person of wide and varied accomplishment. The author credits Flacius with being the fa-

ther of church history and hermeneutics (15, 55). It appears that he made a significant impact on the history of music, "equal in significance to the discovery of *Carmina Burana* in the nineteenth century" (60). Olson also points out that Flacius influenced English politics and letters (167, 252–255). Among many other things, Flacius mastered the arts of pamphleteering and propaganda (140, 178); liturgical matters (75–83); and even the brewing of beer, although it was *anise* beer, since he substituted anise for hops (207).

In spite of the fact that Flacius also considered himself a healer of Christian hearts (218), he, according to Olson, was not easy-going (41). Indeed, the narrative consistently reveals Flacius to be a quarrelsome and contentious person. Although he claimed to contend against false opinions and doctrines and not against individuals, Flacius aroused the wrath of many people along the way, especially Phillip Melanchthon.

Even though Flacius and Melanchthon were close friends and colleagues in Wittenberg, the two lay scholars often expressed vehement disagreement with each other, especially in the matter of adiaphora. "[B]y his letters he (D. Phillip) strengthens the godless and discourages the faithful," Flacius hotly contended (92). Not to be outdone, Melanchthon returned the barb, punningly pronouncing Matthias Flacius Illyricus an *echidna illyrica* (Illyrian viper) and a runaway slave, a Latin play on words and a racial slur on Flacius's Slavic background (129). Theological language and doctrinal disagreement pulled few punches in the sixteenth century.

This extended essay, however, does not focus on character development, for (apart from his traits of contentiousness and defensiveness) the reader does not get a full picture of Flacius as a personality. What one *does* get is a carefully crafted image of a strong-willed resistance fighter and a stubborn defender of pure doctrine. The heart of Olson's book is a vigorous and detailed account of the resistance to the Augsburg Interim and the Siege of Magdeburg (by a spiteful Charles V, from September 22, 1550,

until November 7, 1551). This crucial episode in the life of the Lutheran Reformation—and the life of Matthias Flacius—occupies almost half the book (69–219). The story does have its fascination, coming to a thundering conclusion as Olson observes: “The scholar turned agitator and had frustrated the cherished plan of the Emperor himself....And he had saved the Reformation” (218).

Spotted throughout the book are a number of helpful illustrations. Some are of great interest, such as Cranach’s *The Last Supper*, with Flacius depicted as Judas (180). The book may have been made visually stronger if there had been more illustrations like the creepy *Surplice Dragon* (136–137) instead of many reproductions of pages from old books (there are nearly thirty of these). It isn’t until page 176 that the striking but enigmatic cover picture begins to make sense. Looking like something from *Lord of the Rings*, the colorful, clawed, and three-headed monster depicts *The Interim Dragon*, the logo for the Magdeburg resistance.

The author also pays significant attention to two other major written projects of Flacius, his *Catalogue of Witnesses* (233–255) and the *Historia Ecclesiastica* (256–279). The latter is regarded as the first comprehensive history of the church since Eusebius of Caesarea more than a millennium before. In the course of recounting these projects, Olson describes meticulously how Flacius used sources and how he continually engaged in polemics—especially with Melancthon, whom he considered to be the great compromiser.

Pressing through the thicket of material in this essay, one becomes aware that certain old issues seem to abide. The matters Flacius dealt with are mirrored in contemporary discussions, at least as Olson tells the story. For instance, the nettlesome matter of the Eucharistic Prayer (121–123) bothered Flacius as much as it does some contemporary scholars. The role of bishops in ordination (123) and in other matters (called “episcopal monkey-play,” 142) echoes current concerns. Recent demurs about epiclesis of the baptismal water (140) and

reservations about “spirituality” (302) apparently find their roots in the writings of Flacius; and Olson, doubtlessly sensitive to these and similar issues, takes note of them in the unfolding narrative.

This book is not an easy one to read, and it is not for the fainthearted. It is a densely packed essay that often gives readers more (and less) than they might like to know about a difficult historical person who played a critical, albeit little known, role in Reformation history. That is, we learn a great deal about the critical opinions and fights Flacius had with such antagonists as Melancthon, Osiander, Schwenkfeld, and Menius; but we learn relatively little about his personal life and character. But after taking a deep and costly dive into the text (it is an expensive book, though you can get a copy for \$49.00+ at <http://www.flacius.com>), one might emerge realizing that it could just be that Luther’s reform did survive thanks to the feisty Matthias Flacius Illyricus. This book tells how he did it. What happened next may be told in the promised second volume: *Matthias Flacius and the Struggle for the Freedom of the Church*. Like Pelatiah Webster, Matthias Flacius has a distinctive place in history, and his story is worth knowing.

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**CONSEQUENCES: MORALITY, ETHICS, AND THE FUTURE**, by James H. Burtmess. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999. Pp. 173. \$17.00 (paper).

Today, perennial moral issues are reasserting themselves in ways that threaten to divide us and our churches. At the same time, due if nothing else to the continual explosion of new technology, we are confronted constantly with a bewildering and unremitting array of novel moral dilemmas. Faced with these challenges, we can be particularly grateful for this insightful volume by James H. Burtmess. As a book principally about ethics (rather than morality),

it contains no moral advice or admonitions. Rather, it seeks to show us how to think and talk about moral dilemmas clearly and productively. Those of us fortunate enough to have studied under Burtneß will recognize that much of the content of his introductory ethics course at Luther Seminary has flowed into this book. Indeed, in many ways it represents a capstone summary of his thinking on ethical methodology.

The book begins and ends with a “Foreword” and “Afterword” that discuss, respectively, the disjunctions and the connections between believing and behaving, between faith and life. Burtneß is clear that there is no “single straight line from Christian faith to moral behavior” (148). Those who assume that there is such a direct relationship may tend to deny that “genuine” disagreement among Christians can occur, and presume rather that any contrary opinion must be due to a failure to avoid prejudice, listen to the Spirit clearly, pray diligently, read the Bible correctly, etc. Burtneß, to the contrary, insists that legitimate disagreement about behavior can occur among believing Christians, and claims, almost counterintuitively, that one of the primary tasks of ethics is to “help conversation partners in moral disputes to come to serious disagreement” (41). Only then will Christians be enabled “to enter into constructive conversation about serious moral matters” (46).

Yet Burtneß maintains there cannot be a strict separation between believing and behaving either. Burtneß detects a pattern in the Bible between God’s initiative and our response, and hence a connection between believing and behaving. This connection, however, often takes the form of general moral directions rather than specific action directives. Differing Christians can often find agreement at the level of these general moral directions, and Burtneß urges them to discover and acknowledge such agreement as a unifying and governing prelude to a discussion about specific action directives, where genuine and substantial disagreement is more likely to develop.

The middle portions of the book deal specifically with methodology. Burtneß in-

sists that we must be clear about our own as well as our conversation partner’s methodological approach before constructive conversation can take place. Burtneß posits that there are basically four major methodological groupings or options that provide structure and procedure in undertaking moral deliberation. These are deontology, teleology, situationism, and character ethics, which emphasize, respectively, rules, the future, the context, and personal virtue. Some have argued that this fourfold typology is too limited and excludes alternative possibilities such as feminist or liberation ethics. Burtneß rightly asks, however, whether these and other possibilities are not in the end permutations of one or more of these four “classic” options or groupings. Burtneß’s own methodological commitment, which he develops and defends extensively, is a type of teleology he calls “consequentialism” (hence, the title of the book: *Consequences*).

Although the book addresses the fundamentals of ethics, it does so in ways that are often fresh and innovative. An example is Burtneß’s development of the idea of “moral density.” Burtneß’s foil here is those ethicists who make a strict separation between moral and nonmoral judgments, the latter purportedly having to do purely with considerations of, for example, prudence or taste. Burtneß denies such a sharp distinction, arguing that it overlooks the complexity of the world in which we live. In truth, he argues, morality so interpenetrates prudence, taste, and all of the other values and institutions of life that few, if any, judgments of a normative nature lack a moral component. Some, however, have a greater moral component, and therefore higher level of moral density, than others. This idea has practical significance in that it allows us, again, to see how in some cases “genuine” disagreement occurs. Christians legitimately may weigh differently the relative moral importance of an issue under discussion and the often conflicting claims, values, obligations, and duties bearing upon it.

Burtneß has produced both a learned and, though relatively brief, comprehensive

book. The book contains a rich and impressive discussion of the views of moral philosophers as well as moral theologians. Further, Burtness has many insightful things to say about, among other things, problems in speaking of a specifically “Christian” ethic, the nature of morality as a social institution, the relationship of law and gospel, and how to go about holding a civil conversation in the context of profound disagreement.

It is, finally, an accessible and versatile book. It has found use at both the college and seminary level as a basic text. It has also been successfully used as a discussion text in congregations. For anyone preparing to guide themselves and lead others in moral deliberation, this book is a must.

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**THE GOOD LIFE, TRUTHS THAT LAST IN TIMES OF NEED**, by Peter J. Gomes. New York: HarperCollins, 2002. Pp. 373. \$24.95 (cloth).

As was the case with his previous work, *The Good Book*, Peter Gomes has written a book valuable for the wealth of information it contains, for his insights into contemporary culture, and for his engaging style.

Writing out of his experience as a chaplain at Harvard University, Gomes explains that he sees in today’s students a hunger for what a good life might be and an ignorance of the moral orientation that might be provided by Christianity. Drawing on the resources of the Christian tradition, particularly the tradition of Roman Catholic moral philosophy, this book is his answer to that question of how to live.

Gomes sketches an anthropology by inviting us into the human experience of failure and success, the difficulty of discipline, and the ambiguities of freedom (chapters 4–7). He tells us that success is illusive, but failure is all too clear. It is only when we will admit our failures that any success is possible. Gomes advances an implicit ontology

by suggesting that our existence is characterized by chaos, both in the world and in ourselves (141). Any attempt at goodness will have to fight against that chaos and will require discipline, a term that Gomes attempts to rescue from its current negative connotations. Goodness requires work to build good habits. Freedom, a highly celebrated virtue since the Enlightenment and the revolutions of the eighteenth century, is seen by Gomes as a distracting obsession. Quoting Augustine, Gomes sees contemporary understandings of freedom as freedom from responsibility and accountability (189), and understands such freedom as opposed to the habit-creation necessary for the Good Life.

The remainder of the book is devoted to describing the ethical content of the Good Life, first from the point of view of virtues of St. Thomas Aquinas (prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude) and then from the point of view of St. Paul (faith, hope, and love). Gomes’s discussion makes these often abstract, often misunderstood virtues understandable in our culture. Gomes summarizes his argument by explaining that the objective of the Good Life is goodness, its result is happiness, its means is the virtues of Aquinas, and its manifestation is faith, hope, and love (210). Gomes does not attempt to describe the variety of Christian ethics that exists today or to explain the difference between his Christian ethics and any other ethics, Christian or non-Christian. Neither does Gomes discuss the specifics of today’s ethical issues: inequality in the world, the fragile state of the earth’s ecology, liberation of the oppressed, or rights of minorities including homosexual minorities.

Gomes addresses himself to what he sees as the question on the minds of Harvard students, “how to live.” This may not be the question generally on people’s minds. There is considerable interest in our culture in spirituality, but I believe that this interest includes not only questions of ethics, but also invokes a broad array of questions about the meaning of life. I believe that, for our culture, the hunger of which Gomes

speaks includes not just the question of how to live but also why to live. We need not only ethics but also theology. In fact, we need theology before we can have ethics. There is no explicit theology, no answer to the question of why to live, in this book. There is, of course, an implicit theology, which appears to invoke philosophic realism to portray a God consistent with the broad sweep of the Christian tradition.

But as compared to the realism of Medieval philosophy, we live in a nominalistic age. Few intellectuals now believe in some kind of trans-empirical reality. Certainly postmodernists reject any possibility of such universal knowledge and guides to behavior. But even thinkers who see themselves as heirs to the Enlightenment modernist tradition understand the world and the human as emancipated from the social, cultural, and political authoritarianism of some kind of natural law.

To do ethics in the twenty-first century, we need a Christian theology of the twenty-first century. What is that theology? What do we mean when we use the word God? We can no longer assume that people believe there is a referent for the word God outside of some linguistic community. Does Gomes have a metaphysics that allows us to reject the critiques of Kant and Hume and so believe that there is a reality behind our God-talk? If so, what is the nature of this God? Does this God embrace the ever expanding understanding of science? Does this God embrace the political freedoms arising from the revolutions of the eighteenth century? Does this God embrace the human rights of all peoples? Does this God love the earth? Perhaps most important, is there any reason to believe that this God is in a loving relationship with each person? In short, is there a Christian theology of the twenty-first century?

And how might such a theology be experienced as an answer to the question of why to live? Is there a community of faith that invokes such a God and in which the nature of God is incarnate? If the answer is yes, we have a reason to live and a reason to do ethics.

I believe that Lutherans will have some

ambivalence about Gomes's approach. While honoring Gomes's presentation of the wisdom of the Christian tradition, Lutherans are likely to distrust Gomes's approach as leaning too heavily on "law" as opposed to "gospel." Lutherans are likely to see, with Augustine, that the central problem of the human is a distorted will rather than a lack of wisdom. What is needed is not primarily knowledge of right but willingness to do right. Gomes appears to do ethics from the tradition of natural law; in contrast, Lutherans are likely to espouse some kind of situation ethics in which laws are only rough guides to ethical action.

We certainly need help on how to live and this book provides such help. While the 1990s have been an era in which it was possible to orient one's life to increasing prosperity, that is no longer the case. Now we live after terrorists have shaken our assumptions about security. The dramatic fall of the equities markets since 2000 has wiped out significant wealth and threatened our assumptions about economic security. After these events it is no surprise that questions about how to live are on the minds of students if not on the minds of most people.

Gomes's book is to be welcomed as an insightful, erudite, and engaging discussion of what is good. Particularly impressive to this reviewer are the first two parts of the book, which serve as the invitation for questioning cultural assumptions and for taking up the Good Life.

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