Book Reviews

Is God a Vindictive Bully? Reconciling Portrayals of God in the Old and New Testaments. By Paul Copan. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022, 320 pp., $27.99 paper.

Paul Copan currently serves as a professor at Palm Beach Atlantic University, holding the endowed Pledger Family Chair of Philosophy and Ethics. He is a Christian theologian, analytic philosopher, apologist, and author. *Is God a Vindictive Bully?* serves as a follow-up and companion volume to Copan's *Is God a Moral Monster?* (Baker, 2011) and shares a strong connection to *Did God Really Command Genocide?* (Baker, 2014), written with coauthor Matthew Flannagan. This third book focuses on filling in gaps present in the two previous works. All three share the aim of presenting "a unified portrayal of the kind and severe God of both testaments" (xiv). The depth of this aim is broad enough that Copan can modify and expand on the material in the previous books without much overlap. Several new questions are also raised and answered.

The thesis of the book is based on Romans 11:22 where Paul writes, "Note then the kindness and the severity of God" (ESV). Copan's focus is to explore "the dual biblical affirmation of God's kindness and severity" (6), which he believes is consistently portrayed in the OT and the NT without discrepancy. Criticism of this thesis comes from outside and inside the Christian faith community. For those criticizing from outside, particularly the New Atheists, Copan emphasizes, "*God is far more loving, kind, patient, tender, and merciful* than we could ever know" (6). For those criticizing from within, Copan stresses, "*God is more severe and harsh and unsafe* than they suggest" (7). The book is divided into seven parts, each addressing a unique category of criticism targeting perceived inconsistencies in the portrayal of God between the OT and the NT. Part one spans the first four chapters, connecting the current attacks from within back to the early church and the heresy of Marcion, the original advocate for pitting the God of Moses and the God of Jesus against one another. Copan focuses much of his attention in this section on the difficult passages addressed by two

critics from within, Andy Stanley and Greg Boyd, who, he concludes, read Scripture selectively.

Part two, chapters 5–9, answers the question: "What makes the law of Moses so special?" The OT law is compared with the law codes of adjacent cultures at the time, revealing both the similarities and uniqueness of the OT law. Copan believes the similarities build Scripture's credibility. The differences reveal a uniqueness in the law of Moses that is internally consistent with the rest of the OT and the NT. Copan believes viewing "the final form of the Pentateuch as a literary and theological unity" (41) clears up questions regarding the dating of Pentateuch material, thereby confirming internal consistency and early dating.

Capital punishment is the focus of Part three, chapters 10–12. The author cites several NT passages affirming that "the death penalty was divinely and justly permitted" (71), then he proceeds to make a case that in most instances "these severe punishments were not to be literally carried out" (72). Multiple accounts within the Mosaic Law reveal that capital crimes were settled through monetary punishments. The only exception is murder. Copan argues that the Israelites understood that the exaggerated language of the Mosaic Law was used to show its seriousness, ethically, morally, and relationally, rather than to be acted upon literally.

Part four, chapters 13–19, shifts the focus to moral questions in which God seems harsh, vindictive, or hateful. The author navigates accounts in the Bible that bring up questions of fairness for many, carefully explaining the historical and literary nuances that provide clarity in each case. The kindness and severity of God cut through the instances of hardening Pharaoh's and other's hearts, divine smitings, and the brutal language of the imprecatory Psalms. God is shown to patiently withhold judgment and provide a multitude of warnings before responding to evil practices committed against other humans, particularly God's people, with similar severity.

Chapters 20– 25 make up part five which wrestles with the treatment of women and slaves in the OT. Copan acknowledges that the cultural conditions of Bible times were "less-than-ideal" (149) while rejecting recent accusations of misogyny, commodification, and enslavement of women. Instead, he posits *heterarchy* to describe the complex web of relational mutual dependence in Israelite communal life. The author shows that

dehumanizing chattel slavery is forbidden by the Mosaic law which seeks to elevate the dignity of all human beings, promoting humanizing conditions for all slaves — indigenous and foreign — and for women.

The topic of warfare in the OT prompts some modern theologians like Roger Olson to "create two radical portrayals of God in Scripture" (189). Part six, chapters 26–31, attends to the difficulties of warfare and violence. Copan emphasizes the consistency between the two biblical concepts of love and vengeance. He asserts that misinterpreting exaggerated language and mistranslating the Hebrew word *herem* explain much of the confusion. The author presents divine counterviolence as the biblical picture "of God's reluctant, grieved counter violent response to oppression, dehumanization, and other wickedness in the world" (232).

Part seven, chapters 32–34, summarizes the overall message of the book for the critics within and without. For those within, Copan provides a multitude of Scripture texts showing the "textual" and the "actual" God are truly one God of kindness and severity. Copan's interaction with critics from without centers around two questions and five steps, all of which present the distinction between starting points or worldviews. He reckons, "When people abandon belief in the God of Scripture … the alternatives look far more problematic" (260).

The book provides an extensive depth of research into complex content that is distilled into accessible material. Copan attends to many difficult and timely questions about God's character that vex Christians today. His responses are riddled with relevant Scripture passages that are clearly and thoughtfully explained. His conclusions are consistently supported by other noted biblical, historical, and theological scholars. His interactions with critics are charitable, avoiding ad hominem attacks as he draws out flaws in their arguments and expounds his alternative position.

Unfortunately, the small group questions provided at the conclusion of the book are a bit of a letdown. They add little to the book's value. The depth and brevity of each chapter provide all the material needed to foster discussion among groups wishing to dig deeper into the content. Group reading with follow-up discussions of each chapter is likely one of the most beneficial approaches to processing the book's content. This can prove especially helpful for those wishing to dialogue with friends, family members, or coworkers wrestling to find answers to these questions. The book can

also serve as a helpful apologetic resource for church leaders and laypeople looking for thoughtful responses to the questions covered.

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American Crusade: Christianity, Warfare, and National Identity, 1860–1920. By Benjamin J. Wetzel. Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022, xi + 215 pp., $50.95.

Debates around the extent of Christian nationalism in present-day political discourse often ignore or downplay the historical context, leaving readers with a false impression of the background of Christian nationalism in American public life. Benjamin Wetzel, associate professor of history at Taylor University in Upland, Indiana, provides some needed context in American Crusade: Christianity, Warfare, and National Identity, 1860–1920. Wetzel examines Christian commentary on three major conflicts to demonstrate how ideology and social location led white mainline Protestants to imbue religious or even messianic understandings of the nation during war; meanwhile, "counterpoint" groups in outlying religious communities often relied on a more conservative theology to offer more circumspect interpretations of the conflicts.

Wetzel mines books, sermons, and religious periodicals of the most popular and widely read pastors within mainstream Protestantism as well as those of less renown from "counterpoint" groups to capture "debates about the righteousness of American wars" (3). In each conflict, prominent Protestant clergy relied on American Providentialism, a belief in the United States' elevated role in God's purposes (13), and democratic Christian republicanism, the blending of Enlightenment ideals of liberty with Christianity (25), in order to promote the American side of the conflict as God's side. "Counterpoint" groups deployed these tools, but with more restraint due to differences in ideology as well as social location.

The opening section compares how Northern white Protestants and African American Methodists interpreted the Civil War. The stakes of the war led both groups to promote righteous religious interpretations of the Union cause, but in ways shaped by ideological commitments and

social location. Prominent white clergy freely blended sacred and secular to elevate the Civil War into a holy conflict against the Confederates. The use of liberal theology to justify confident nationalism emerges as a motif here. Horace Bushnell's rejection of Christ's penal substitutionary atonement allowed him to compare the sacrifices of American soldiers with Christ's death on the cross, the fallen soldiers atoning for the sins of the nation (24).

African American Methodists used the pages of the *Christian Recorder*, the official newspaper of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, to offer support for the Union. However, voices in the *Recorder* also criticized those whose "wartime zeal" led them to "allow their civic duties to trump their spiritual ones" (46). A more supernaturalist theology coupled with "the experience of severe racial oppression" (54) prompted other voices in the *Recorder* to critique "the baleful ways that American society had failed to uphold its professed values" (56). By virtue of differing social locations, Northern white Protestants saw only promise in the conflict, while the *Christian Recorder* provided space to debate the promise as well as the accompanying crucible the war presented to African American Methodists.

The connection between ideology and social location played defining roles for how Christians debated the Spanish American War of 1898. Mainline Protestant clergy added the social gospel to earlier notions of American providentialism and Christian republicanism to justify war with Spain as a religious crusade. They declared God chose the United States to serve the benighted Cuban people by rescuing them from Spanish tyranny. Protestant social location played a key role in their condemnation of Catholic Spain as backward and despotic.

American Catholics largely supported the United States against Spain, often using similar rhetoric of American Providentialism used by mainline Protestants, yet "a significant minority" opposed the war because they identified as "Catholics first and Americans second" (82). A more critical distance led them to see the unrighteousness of a nation that marginalized Catholics, African Americans, and Native Americans. Antiwar American Catholics, by virtue of an ideology tied to their social location, advocated a restrained patriotism that advised against the prevailing theological interpretation of the war.

Mainline Protestants extended the scope of the mission during World War I, declaring the United States God's chosen instrument to slay evil in

the form of Germany and redeem the world. Abbott went so far as to argue that all Allied soldiers who died in the conflict would inherit eternal life by virtue of their cause. This "salvation by khaki" came as a result of Abbott's "theological liberalism, with its penchant for overturning historical understandings of Christian doctrines" (107). While more conservative Christians such as Billy Sunday joined in promoting the American war effort against "demonic" Germany, mainline Protestants often collapsed distinctions between religious and patriotic devotion and saw in the war a Christian imperative to remake the world in the image of social and political righteousness.

Missouri Synod Lutherans, many of whom were of German descent, serve as Wetzel's final "counterpoint" group to the mainline Protestants to show how ideology and social location shaped the range of Christian responses to war. Writers in the synod's newspapers remained committed to Lutheran "two-kingdoms" theology, drawing sharp lines between sacred and secular, and thus avoided crusading rhetoric in wartime (128–34). Persecution of German Americans encouraged a more assimilationist posture, but as the war continued, Missouri Synod Lutherans expressed patriotism "without a great deal of compromise in their position regarding two kingdoms and the separation of church and state" (144). Wetzel concludes by tracing the chastened perspective after the carnage of World War I that produced "a more nuanced view of the church's role in American warfare" (150) and generated "mainline Protestantism's increasing distrust of celebratory Christian nationalism" (152).

American Crusade stands out for the way it handles the subtleties of theology, sorting through the nuances of different theological traditions spanning decades. Wetzel makes great use of recent studies of Christianity during these conflicts to define "American providentialism," "Christian republicanism," and the "social gospel." Unfortunately, "Christian Nationalism," which first appears on page 33, lacks this level of clarity. Wetzel uses the term as a shorthand for the blending of religious and nationalist ideas. However, considering the thermonuclear nature of the term in popular discourse over the last decade and his clarity in his use of other terms, a more explicit and contextualized definition may have helped readers less familiar with the field of religious nationalism make sense of his usage.

In detailing the development of religiopolitical thought among mainline Protestants and various "counterpoint" groups, *American Crusade* offers a compelling sketch of the history of religious and nationalist thought during American wartime. Though commonly associated with conservative and right-wing Christians today, Christian Nationalism's greatest champions came from the theological left during the years in question. A willingness to collapse distinctions between sacred and secular and an emphasis on the immanence over the transcendence of God contributed to an ideology that elevated country to or above God.

"Counterpoint" groups, one of the great strengths of Wetzel's book, critiqued this blending. These groups often joined with the mainstream in supporting the various conflicts but avoided bestowing a divine imprimatur on the United States: they saw the nation's flaws in such a way as to question its character as a Christian nation (138). For the counterpoint groups, patriotism did not require conflating the City of God with the City of Man. This historical context with the voices of these "counterpoint" groups can help Christians wrestling with their relationship to the nation-state understand how Christians of the past navigated questions of national identity in theological terms.

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Social Conservatism for the Common Good: A Protestant Engagement with Robert P. George. Edited by Andrew T. Walker. Wheaton: Crossway, 2023, 334 pp., $24.99 paper.

Over the past few years, it seems that increasing moral confusion and political combativeness have marked the American public square. Often evangelicals take the brunt of the rhetorical combat. It is hard to find the sweet spot between being (to use a colloquialism) a squish and a provocateur. However, in *Social Conservativism for the Common Good,* Andrew T. Walker would like to hold up an example for emulation. Some may experience mild cognitive dissonance as Walker, associate dean in the School of Theology and associate professor of Christian ethics and public theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, points fellow evangelicals to Robert

George. George is a Roman Catholic, an American legal scholar, and a political philosopher at Princeton University (the intellectual home of Peter Singer). Walker is one of a growing chorus of evangelicals seeking to revive the natural law tradition among Protestants, a project that entails significant engagement with George's work and thought.

The thesis of *Social Conservativism for the Common Good* is that in the present cultural moment Protestantism in general, and evangelicalism in particular, needs to know Robert George, that is to know (if I may be so bold) his "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope" (1 Thess 1:3). In particular, Walker commends George for a coherent moral theory premised on natural law which frees Christian ethics to be a "public matter with public implications for public policy and public morality" (6). To that end Walker enlists a host of scholars to present George's life and work to his Protestant audience. This includes John Wilsey who presents George as a modern-day Socrates courageously pointing the modern Western man to truth, Micah Watson who presents George as the defender of reason in the face of emotivism, and Matthew Lee Anderson who, true to type, places George in conversation with Oliver O'Donovan on the theology of the body. Additionally, evangelicals familiar with the current political landscape will be attracted to David Dockery's chapter on cobelligerency in the public square, Scott Klusendorf on George's influence in the pro-life movement, Jennifer Marshall Patterson's exposition of George's arguments in defense of traditional marriage, and J. Daryl Charles's discussion of George's arguments for religious freedom. For the intellectual seeking an introduction to George, Walker's outline of the New Natural Law movement is an immensely helpful summary.

Due to the nature of this work, it is difficult to give it a thorough overview, but two chapters I personally find make a fascinating and needed pair are that of Carl Trueman, "Son of Thomas, Heir of Theoden," on faith and reason and Paul Miller, "Partners in Truth Seeking," on George's friendship with Cornel West. Trueman draws out George's courage and intellect as a "careful, nuanced, and gracious" (68) thinker who, like Tolkien's king Theoden, refuses to surrender the field of battle without a fight. Trueman writes that George's example shows Evangelicals that "regardless of outcome, Christians must meet the enemy on the field of battle — graciously, yes, but in a manner that cedes no ground without a fight ... [M]any of us owe him

a debt of real gratitude" (70). And there are few intellectual battlefields that George has not spilt ink on. George has been a champion, as noted above, for the pro-life cause, traditional marriage, and freedom of speech and religion. Yet George, as Miller explains, is no caustic keyboard warrior. Throughout his intellectual career and political activism, he has built more than alliances; he has built friendships. George befriended West, an intellectual and activist whom George met at Princeton, because he "would hear Cornel asking what I thought were exactly the right questions and then giving exactly the wrong answers" (263). Today, it seems more common that such an observation would lead not to friendship marked by occasional sparring but a pitched Twitter battle of takedowns and gotchas, or for the higher-minded public sniper fire of rival op-ed pages. George refuses such a path and together these chapters provide the reader with the tandem that makes George such a unique figure.

The most important critique of *Social Conservativism for the Common Good* is published in its own pages. In the afterword, in an interview between Walker and George, George states, "I've grown used to some of my ideas being misunderstood or being misrepresented. That doesn't happen in this volume ... I'm grateful to every single one of the authors for the work they put into getting it right" (286). As such it must be said that *Social Conservativism for the Common Good* accomplishes its task of introducing the reader to Robert George. The picture it paints captures the brilliance and kindness of the West Virginian banjo-playing happy warrior. However, there remains a lingering question of who the intended reader is for this work. In many evangelical churches there is a substantial gap between the theological knowledge in the pulpit and in the pews, as there is likewise a substantial gap between many pulpits and the academy lectern. As such Walker, who has taken up the project of "Evangelical-izing" George, has his work cut out for him. As a PhD student of Walker, I have come to read, appreciate, and (dare I say) enjoy George, along with Matthew Levering, John Finnis, and Germaine Grisez. However, they were entirely absent from my previous seminary training, and I fear the pragmatism and anti-intellectualism that—while far from universal—can be present in evangelical churches limits the reach of *Social Conservativism for the Common Good* and interest in Robert George, one of the most interesting men of our times, to a select few.

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Making Christian History: Eusebius of Caesarea and His Readers. Christianity in Late Antiquity, 11. By Hollerich, Michael J. Oakland: University of California Press, 2021, pp. xi + 316. $95.00.

Making Christian History is a dazzlingly comprehensive study on the reception of Eusebius's *Historia Ecclesiastica* (*HE*). Michael J. Hollerich, professor emeritus of theology at the University of St. Thomas, provides copious amount of research about a myriad of times and places while maintaining masterful concision. After a chapter on Eusebius's life and works, Hollerich surveys the reception of the *HE* in the Christian empire, the non-Greek East, the Latin West, Byzantium, early modernity, and lastly, modernity and postmodernity.

Summary

Hollerich's first chapter explains the importance of the *HE* in Eusebius's own time. Certainly, the *HE* is the most popular of Eusebius's works. It is also the most important source for recovering the first three centuries of the church (1). More than popularity and preeminence, however, the *HE* is the seminal work that launched a new genre, church history (32). Following Arnaldo Momigliano, a pioneer in the study of how previous ages wrote about history, Hollerich posits that this new genre was befitting the new "nation" that is Christianity, being a kind of "national" history.

In the next two chapters, Hollerich recounts that work was well received from its inception, and that popularity continued to soar in the non-Greek East. The number of imitators that shortly followed speaks volumes: Rufinus, Gelasius, Philostorgius, Socrates, Sozomen, and Theordorat, to name a few (53). Although each historian may have added his own slant or style, all of them remained in the genre that Eusebius defined. Interestingly, while the *HE*'s popularity spread even to the non-Greek East, Eusebius's Rome-centric perspective was irrelevant to Christians in Arab, Persian, and Turkish lands (107). Nevertheless, his genre was utilized as a springboard for more universal histories (111). For example, a translation of the *HE* is one of the earliest Christian works produced in Armenian, leaving an indelible mark on this nation's historiography (116, 120).

The following two chapters turn to the *HE*'s reception in the medieval West and Byzantium. In the West, Rufinus's translation became the normative version that Latin speakers interacted with until the Renaissance (141). Unlike the Easterners who, not having a Christendom under which to write, opted for universal historiography, the West took to writing histories of particular peoples. One only has to call to mind Jordanes and the Goths, Gregory of Tours and the Franks, the Venerable Bede and the English, or Paul the Deacon and the Lombards (144). The histories of the West varied in their reception of Eusebius's genre, preferring instead the history produced by Orosius (143). But while Eusebius waned in the medieval West, his popularity waxed in the Byzantine East. Nicephorus Kallistou Xanthopoulos exemplifies the best, following Eusebius so closely that "he sometimes seems more Eusebian than Eusebius himself" (188).

Hollerich's last two chapters examine the reception of the *HE* in the Renaissance and today. At the dawn of the Reformation, Eusebius's popularity returned in the West. However, instead of standing as a model for imitation (the humanists preferred to follow classical historians, and the Protestants removed the partition between "sacred" and "secular" histories), he became a tool for competing interpretations on the relationship between Scripture and tradition (192). In the modern and postmodern periods, Eusebius's role has been completely inverted from what it was in the Renaissance: he was, and is, the victim of relentless criticism in a "postcolonial, postmodern, post-Constantinian, post-Christian" world (239). However, the minority who continued to read Eusebius from a theological perspective found him to be a rich source for ecumenical engagement (258). Such is the current legacy of Eusebius's history of the church.

Evaluation

Hollerich's monograph covers a broad chronology and interacts with some of the best research in each respective field. To grapple simultaneously with scholarship on late antiquity, Byzantium, and postmodern historiography is no small task. His even-handed approach acknowledges all the major figures and works one would wish to encounter, a comprehensive overview indeed. Each epoch covered is well researched, informs the reader seeking a broader

familiarity with a range of disciplines, and meaningfully shows how the *HE* has been used for the past 2,000 years.

Despite the overwhelming breadth the work covers, Hollerich balances being a useful reference work to each discrete period while also tracing a narrative thread from beginning to end. I was as delighted to learn about the nationalizing tendencies in the medieval West as I was to see an opposite, universalizing movement in the Muslim-ruled East. However, for the reader who does not appreciate the eclecticism inherent in such a work, learning about peculiar topics such as the Armenian historiography of Movsēs Xorenac'i might feel tedious. This should not be counted a flaw since the very purpose of the book is a reception history. Throughout the sundry times and places, Hollerich consistently points back to the theme of how Christians in each milieu conceived of church history and their role in it, thus unifying what seems to be impossibly disparate.

Although not everyone may appreciate diving into the weeds of various, sometimes obscure, places and times, Hollerich's opening and concluding chapters provide a wealth of information about both Eusebius (his life, work, thought) and the contemporary discussions around the *HE* and historiography that anyone interested in church history will benefit from. Hollerich has done far more than merely traced Eusebius's reception in the modern period; he has provided a window into the people, ideas, and methods of how history is currently done. In sum, Hollerich has created a touchstone that will undoubtedly guide readers of Eusebius for generations to come.

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A Concise Guide to Islam: Defining Key Concepts and Terms. By Ayman S. Ibrahim. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023, xxix + 177 pp., $16.79 paper.

For anyone interested in studying the history, beliefs, and practices of Islam, the question of where to begin can be daunting. For Ayman Ibrahim, professor of Islamic studies at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, a proper understanding of Islam begins with understanding key Islamic terms. To this end, Ibrahim has written *A Concise Guide to Islam: Defining*

Key Concepts and Terms, which is the third of a trio of books in Ibrahim's Understanding Islam series (published by Baker) which are devoted to introducing Islam to students unfamiliar with the religion. The previous two texts were *A Concise Guide to the Life of Muhammad* (2022) and *A Concise Guide to the Quran* (2020). *A Concise Guide to Islam* is divided into six sections covering more than one hundred terms and concepts that define Islam: (1) Islamic Texts, (2) Islamic History, (3) Islamic Faith and Belief, (4) Islamic Practices and Religious Duties, (5) Islamic Jurisprudence, and (6) Islamic Movements. Some of the terms that readers may recognize include Quran, *hadith*, Allah, *Shahada*, *Hajj*, *imam*, *hijab*, *fatwa*, *jihad*, Sunnism, and Shiism. Other terms which will be new for many readers, include *tafsir* (Quran commentary), *tawhid* (the oneness of Allah), *fiqh* (understanding Islamic law), and Salafism (a revivalist trend in Sunnism). Taken together, these terms will provide readers with an introduction into some of the most important issues for Muslims.

Three features of Ibrahim's book make it a unique contribution to the field of Islamic studies. First, Ibrahim covers a wide array of terms and topics related to Islam and presents them in a concise, approachable format. Interested readers could fill an entire library with books that cover each of the topics addressed, and yet, in *A Concise Guide* Ibrahim has produced a single volume that could be read in a few hours. Despite its brevity, the book can serve as an excellent introduction to these vast topics. Secondly, Ibrahim acknowledges the diversity of thought within Islam, which is not a monolith (xxviii). When he describes the practical applications of each concept, he also explains the diversity of opinions that Muslims have on that concept, particularly with regard to those of the Sunnis and Shiites, the two largest sects in Islam. This acknowledgement of diversity in Islam will help readers understand that not all Muslims agree on matters of belief and practice. Thirdly, Ibrahim approaches the study of Islam from a critical perspective, meaning that he questions and critiques traditional Muslims views based on scholarly research. For example, whereas Muslims may claim that the word *qur'an* is a purely Arabic term, Ibrahim informs his readers of the modern scholarly conclusion that *qur'an* has its root in Syriac, arguing from this that the Quran may have been influenced by the religious community living around Muhammad (4). By providing this additional commentary, Ibrahim teaches his readers that many traditional Muslim claims should

be challenged not because of animosity toward Muslims but because of objective research.

Much more than a mere dictionary of terms, *A Concise Guide* is a collection of entries that each synthesize a wealth of scholarly information and present it in a form that lay readers will find accessible. Each section of the book begins with a brief introduction to the broader topic. Each entry begins with a brief definition of the term and then includes a more detailed explanation. Ibrahim chooses to avoid footnotes and quotations for the sake of readers unfamiliar with academic writing, but his writing relies heavily on the most trusted Islamic primary sources — the Quran and Muhammad's traditions — and academic secondary sources. The result is a well-researched introduction to Islam aimed at "nonspecialist interested readers" (xxix).

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The Justice & Goodness of God: A Biblical Case for the Final Judgment. By Thomas R. Schreiner. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2024, 145 pp., $17.99 paper.

Thomas R. Schreiner's *The Justice & Goodness of God: A Biblical Case for the Final Judgment* offers a compelling and timely consideration of an often-neglected topic. Schreiner brings his exegetical expertise to bear on biblical texts concerning divine judgment, crafting a pastorally sensitive introduction to an otherwise thorny biblical subject. Schreiner situates and challenges the modern tendency of Bible readers to downplay final judgment, offering a robust biblical case across the canon for its importance.

The book's central thesis is that God's judgment is an essential aspect of his justice *and* goodness which is traced through careful analysis of final judgment in relation to God's holiness, justice, and righteousness (18–19), the varied terms the Scriptures use for sin (21–34), and relevant passages primarily drawn from the NT (35–102). Schreiner argues persuasively and concisely that without final judgment God's showcasing of his mercy and beauty would not shine as brightly across the biblical witness (124–25).

The first strength of the book is its exegetical depth. Schreiner's commentaries and theological works tend to have a characteristically thorough treatment of biblical texts. This work is no different. Schreiner is

characteristically thorough and nuanced in his treatment of relevant passages on the subject of divine judgment. Readers will appreciate Schreiner's charitable but critical engagement with previous commentators. Sometimes when specialists engage exegetical detail of prior scholarship, the writing can become dense and cumbersome, especially for new readers, perhaps unfamiliar with niche debates filling the Second Temple period and NT lacuna. However, this is not the case with Schreiner's new work. He appropriates accessible quotes from prior NT scholars of a bygone era, such as Leon Morris (e.g., 1, 39, 44n5, 67, 83–84, 94) to move along his writing and offer a fresh account of final judgment. He engages with the original languages and provides helpful glosses on key passages. For example, Schreiner provides brief and cogent descriptions of the biblical differences between sin, transgression, iniquity, and related terms (22–33). By so nuancing, Schreiner can succinctly illustrate how depravity indeed deserves judgment which otherwise would be comprising divine goodness (34). Schreiner rather organically moves from clear definition or exegetical work to NT theology.

The second strength of Schreiner's book is his theological integration. Schreiner seamlessly navigates between tracing a biblical-theological theme into the broader contours of theological readings of the text. He does so with the final judgment as well. There have been increasing contributions to robustly theological readings of Scripture, and while still grounded in tight exegesis and conversation with commentators, Schreiner demonstrates the theological significance of the subject and its relevance for the Christian life today (103–25).

The final strength of the book is pastoral sensitivity. While addressing a weighty topic, Schreiner maintains a tone of pastoral concern, emphasizing the ultimate purpose of final judgment is truly to highlight God's goodness. Clearly of concern throughout, Schreiner conceives that the reason why the gospel seems foreign to some today is the ignoring or outright rejecting of final judgment (x). Some will surely appreciate how Schreiner aptly handles detailed and often difficult passages from Hebrews and Revelation, for he expresses concern for readers not to miss the referent for the symbols and images of a given passage (102). In an era where divine judgment is often dismissed or misunderstood, Schreiner offers a much-needed corrective,

reminding readers from a Calvinistic perspective the ultimate significance of human choices and the justice of God (44–45, 74–79, 106–09).

While the brevity of the book is refreshing, readers may come away wanting a more comprehensive treatment of OT judgment passages. *The Justice & Goodness of God* centrally focuses on NT passages, with the broad grouping of the Synoptics, John, and Acts (35–57), the Pauline and General Epistles (59–79), and the Book of Revelation (81–102). While understandable given constraints due to space, it does leave readers wanting further, more comprehensive treatment of prevalent OT judgment themes. To Schreiner's credit though, even a cursory glance at the index indicates ample citation of the Psalms, Isaiah, and Ezekiel are found throughout his treatment of judgment.

Final judgment as it fits within a broader system of eschatology is eclipsed in the work, largely due to its brevity. While making brief, passing reference in footnotes to Schreiner's position on eschatology over his years of publication (e.g., 9n7, 77n20, 118n1, 121n2), the way in which final judgment fits within his broader scheme of eschatology does not appear to be a pressing concern. While he does trace the function of judgment through the Book of Revelation and a few topics such as the Day of Lord, punishment, and destruction (70–79), there remains eschatological lacuna left to be filled. Readers would surely have benefited if the author put final judgment in further conversation with broader eschatological topics, especially as Schreiner has indicated elsewhere renewed interests to articulate so-called New Creation eschatology (a *via media* between amillennialism and premillennialism like that of contemporary NT scholar Eckhard J. Schnabel and the eighteenth-century Baptist John Gill).

The Justice and Goodness of God is a valuable contribution. Schreiner effectively challenges the modern tendency to downplay divine judgment, offering a robust biblical case for its importance instead. This book will prove particularly useful for seminarians, pastors, and laypeople seeking a greater handle on this crucial biblical topic. Schreiner's succinct and clear writing as well as his logical argumentation make this book accessible to a wide audience, whether seminarians, pastors, or laypeople, while still providing substantial engagement with more advanced NT scholarship especially as he ably refutes contemporary accounts of annihilationism (44–49, 63–65, 98–99, 100n15). It serves as a welcomed and solid

introduction to an oft overlooked topic in biblical studies. Schreiner's charitable engagement in *The Justice & Goodness of God*, even with the pricklier aspects of the biblical topic, ought to assist Christian readers as they think through its NT nuances and seek to live faithfully in view of coming judgment.

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Redeeming Our Thinking about History: A God-Centered Approach. By Vern S. Poythress. Wheaton: Crossway, 2022, 256 pp., $24.99 paper.

Vern S. Poythress is distinguished professor of NT, biblical interpretation, and systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He holds six academic degrees and has written extensively on biblical interpretation, language, and science. *Redeeming Our Thinking about History* is part of a larger series written by Poythress that looks through the lens of Scripture to present a God-centered approach to a variety of disciplines like science, logic, mathematics, and philosophy.

Much of modern Western culture wants to either forget or ignore history today as a result of arrogance and immaturity. Against this backdrop Poythress stresses the importance of history because "God says that history is important" (12). He believes, "History is indispensable in the Bible and in the Christian faith" (16). The book's thesis stands on this foundation, insisting, "[W]e must pay attention to God's deeds in history ... We see that record of God's works is good for our souls" (17). Poythress develops this thesis in five parts. Chapter one serves as an introduction highlighting the importance and challenges of studying and writing history. Each part that follows proceeds to answer questions raised in the opening chapter. The questions addressed include "What is a Christian view of history? And how should Christians study and write about history? How should we read about it and experience it?" (11).

Part one includes chapters 2–8 detailing the essential resources God supplies for analyzing history. Poythress maintains a providentialist approach to history, which he makes clear early on stating, "God rules history" (23). God's plan and outline for all of history is found in

the Bible. God understands history completely, but human understanding of history is limited, coming through three interdependent aspects: events, people, and meaning. God is the source of all three. Analysis of these three aspects is best understood through three interlocking perspectives that Poythress borrows from John Frame and the field of ethics. They are situational, existential, and normative perspectives. Utilizing these perspectives helps historians overcome sin and acknowledge human limitations in understanding history.

Part two covers chapters 9 – 11. This section specifically addresses the ways in which the Bible handles history. The Bible has a clear overarching plan that encompasses the whole and its parts. Poythress presents that pattern of history in four phases: creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. Woven through all the complexity and diversity of the Bible is the "central mystery of redemption" (87). Considering prevailing worldviews today, the author emphasizes the uniquely divine authority of the Bible, forming the foundation for a God-centered approach to history.

Chapters 12 – 18 comprise part three of the book. This section shows how the Bible "as a preinterpretive word ... enables us to understand God's purposes in the events in history" (117). The author recognizes necessary cautions when looking for God in history outside the Bible but also acknowledges that there is value in the pursuit. He then presents six principles stemming from a biblical worldview that are essential for proceeding in understanding God's purposes in history. In addition, Poythress directly addresses the expectation within the academy of remaining religiously neutral in studying and writing history, offering a way forward to Christians. This section concludes by exploring the application of historical analysis in the academy and in understanding biblical prophecy against current events.

Part four consists of three chapters, each providing an example of how to write history. The author reminds the reader that history is complicated (169), requiring historians to grow in awareness of their partisan perspective and propensity for embellishing the presentation of heroes. Poythress uses the writing of the history of the Roman Empire as the context for these observations. The Reformation further reinforces the fact that neutrality is next to impossible, showing how religious understanding affects evaluation. Exploring the history of other civilizations serves as an

example that reminds the reader that knowledge is limited and requires humility when studying and writing about it.

The final chapters 22–26 make up part five, which opens with a summary of five approaches to studying history as laid out in Jay D. Green's book, *Christian Historiography: Five Rival Versions* (Baylor, 2015). Poythress summarizes these and two other approaches and then proceeds to show how providentialism transcends them in its biblical consistency and historiographical practice. He further turns to "Christology: A Key to Understanding History," the fifth chapter of Mark Noll's *Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind* (Eerdmans, 2013), to support his points regarding the value of providentialism. In the author's final analysis, he acknowledges that many historians today reject providentialism, but in his opinion its presence in history is "unavoidable" (222) and therefore must be reckoned with. His final conclusion is that providentialism provides the historian with the framework to study and write with "vigor and with a whole heart ... In humility" (222–23).

A strength of this work is the development of the prevailing approaches to studying and writing history in Western culture today. Poythress reveals deficiencies without demonizing those historians who advocate for the approach. He cautions against erring on the side of arrogantly believing that one can read God's mind historically. The conscientious historian acknowledges and embraces these limitations. A second strength is the clear and simple providentialist groundwork for understanding of history presented in part two. Poythress crafts a substantive explanation of how the Bible is the model and foundation for historical analysis.

One critique of the book is what appears to be confusion over its intended audience. The book appeals to historians and history students with a biblical worldview. The author presents helpful ways for those holding a biblical worldview to approach the general study of history in a way that unashamedly keeps God at the center of the analysis, controlling and orchestrating. At the same time, there are moments in the book when the author appears to lose sight of this audience and entreats the secular historian to come over to his side. Many will surely disagree with the author's points, so it is helpful to remember, though Poythress seems to have forgotten, that the purpose of the work is not apologetic.

This book will be helpful for any history student or historian looking for a biblical alternative to the approaches that remove God entirely from the discipline. Poythress thoughtfully reintroduces God's place in the study, analysis, and writing of history. Despite a slow start to the book, it progressively builds to a strong and cohesive conclusion that is well presented and thoughtfully analyzed.

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