

# Book Reviews

---

*The Wisdom of Sirach*. Eerdmans Critical Commentary. By Walter T. Wilson. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023, xvi + 620 pp., \$85.99.

Walter T. Wilson is a professor of New Testament (NT) at Candler School of Theology, Emory University. As an accomplished scholar, he has published critical editions of the *Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides* (University of Michigan, 2005) and the *Sentences of Sextus* (SBL, 2012), as well as a commentary on Philo's *On Virtues* (Brill, 2010) and the Eerdmans Critical Commentary (ECC) volume on the Gospel of Matthew (2022). The current volume is Wilson's commentary for Eerdmans on the Deuterocanonical book Sirach. The series is geared toward an academic and serious general readership and offers their readers critical notes and commentary on the text's literary, historical, cultural, and theological aspects. Wilson's *The Wisdom of Sirach* accomplishes these goals by offering insightful commentary on the text and guidance on how the book's sapiential thought relates to biblical and nonbiblical wisdom literature. The commentary examines Sirach from four interpretive contexts: the book's historical and social context, the biblical (Old Testament [OT] and OT Apocrypha) scope of the text, the world of Second Temple Judaism, and the development of ancient wisdom literature (1).

Wilson begins by introducing the reader to critical issues of authorship, original text, and provenance (1–10). He affirms that the text's author is a scribe and sage named Ben Sira (2). However, he is open to the possibility of pseudonymity and/or portions of the book being created or compiled by a sage other than Ben Sira (2–3). Appealing to internal evidence, Wilson argues that the original audience is likely comprised of young men training to become scribes themselves (6). Wilson briefly comments on the Hebrew and Greek versions of the text and how these versions diverge from each other (4–5). The introduction also includes an overview of the book's major themes, including the fear of the Lord, the relationship between wisdom and Torah, theodicy, and a substantial survey of the content of Sirach's practical wisdom (10–19). The introduction includes a measured discussion on how to understand Sirach's dependence (or

lack thereof) on biblical and nonbiblical wisdom traditions (20–22). Related to Wilson's expertise, the commentary has a valuable discussion on various forms of expressions used to communicate the book's content (23–28). He closes the introduction with an outline of the entire book of Sirach (28–35).

The rest of the commentary is organized around Wilson's proposed structure. Consequently, following his commentary on the "Prologue" of Sirach, *The Wisdom of Sirach* is divided into nine sections, each subdivided into numbered parts. Generally, the commentary on each passage begins by situating the text in its literary context. Wilson effectively assists readers in finding the coherence between the material that precedes and follows. He demonstrates how Sirach utilizes known forms in wisdom literature when structural features are present in the passage.

In general, *The Wisdom of Sirach* provides readers with three to five pages of commentary on each pericope. The author analyzes phrases and themes that emerge from the text in question. Wilson often relates these themes to other passages within Sirach, giving readers a greater sense of how Sirach develops ideas throughout the work. Additional comments typically involve connecting the ideas or sapiential themes of the text with biblical literature and/or other ancient texts within the ancient wisdom genre. The commentary concludes with a highly useful bibliography of primary and secondary sources, along with an author index, subject index, and Scripture index.

One of the strengths of Wilson's commentary is his mastery of ancient wisdom traditions, both biblical and non-biblical. The reader is presented with a continuous flow of intertextual connections between Sirach and the OT, particularly in the books of Proverbs and Psalms. Additionally, Wilson provides extensive comparisons between Sirach and the OT Apocrypha, as well as comparisons with writings from the Jewish Pseudepigrapha. Readers who are less familiar with the gnomic literature of the ancient Near East or of the Greco-Roman world will be exposed to a significant portion of these texts through the commentary. The section on Sirach 24:1–22 is especially strong in this regard. The author assembles an impressive array of biblical and extrabiblical allusions when commenting on Sirach's poem on Woman Wisdom (282–87).

The comparison of Ben Sira's teachings with other examples of wisdom literature can pose challenges. As Wilson explains, "It is often difficult to determine when Ben Sira is dependent on a specific literary source (i.e., citing something), as opposed to drawing more loosely on scriptural traditions as a general fund of themes and motifs" (20). The commentary strikes a healthy balance by acknowledging Ben Sira's dependence on earlier biblical traditions while also illustrating that he sometimes reworks traditional material to create new combinations of content (22). Despite the significant record of intertextual connections, Wilson allows the book of Sirach to maintain a distinctive voice.

Overall, the commentary differentiates between Sirach's reliance on biblical traditions, such as the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, and sapiential texts beyond the biblical canon, including those from Egyptian and Greco-Roman contexts. Regarding the former, Wilson employs terms like "influence" and "inspiration" (169, 179, 281) along with "based on" (287). For non-Jewish sources, he references "cross-cultural pollination" to draw parallels (23). For instance, while recognizing conceptual similarities between Sirach and a Greco-Roman text (the myth of Pandora), he is reluctant to ascribe direct influence (301). Nevertheless, the author does mention that a "possible source" for Ben Sira's advice on moderation and banqueting (31:20) is Papyrus Insinger (352), and he cites the Elegies of Theognis as a potential source for 31:26 (353). Although his statements here are cautious, the author's abrupt shift regarding Sirach's dependence on extrabiblical traditions prompts questions that the commentary does not address.

For students studying Sirach to grasp the Jewish background and context of the NT, Wilson occasionally compares content from Sirach with passages from the NT. Sirach's teachings on dining etiquette and the potential embarrassment that the wealthy can cause to those who are economically disadvantaged (13:7, 8–13) provide valuable insights into the apostle Paul's confrontation with the Corinthian church in 1 Cor 11:22 (164). However, the commentary primarily assists NT students through Wilson's careful historical and social analysis of the text of Sirach (128, 143, 159, 336).

*The Wisdom of Sirach* diverges from the ECC's stated goal of providing an original translation. Instead, the commentary relies on the New Revised Standard Version. The author occasionally highlights semantic features of

the original text that inform interpretation. However, the commentary offers limited guidance on the grammatical and syntactical aspects of either the extant original Hebrew text or Greek versions.

Wilson has provided students and scholars of Sirach with an insightful and valuable resource. The author's expertise in ancient gnomic literature and his dedicated interest in interpreting the text of Sirach on its own terms establishes *The Wisdom of Sirach* as an essential resource to consult.

Garrett S. Craig, PhD Candidate  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

---

*The Appearing of God Our Savior: A Theology of 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus.* By Claire S. Smith. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2025, xxi + 168 pp., \$21.99 paper.

Claire Smith, author of *Pauline Communities as "Scholastic Communities": A Study of the Vocabulary of "Teaching" in 1 Corinthians, 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus* (Mohr Siebeck, 2012), brings her Pauline expertise to Crossway's NT Theology series. *The Appearing of God Our Savior* provides pastors, students, and interested laypersons with her distinctive teaching on the theology of the letters to Timothy and Titus (xiii). As Smith explains, "Despite the intensely practical nature of the letters, they say more about *God and his project to save a people for himself than they do about us*" (xv, emphasis original).

The introduction addresses questions of authorship, recipients, and the letters' designation as "Pastoral Epistles." Smith aligns with most evangelicals in affirming Pauline authorship of the three letters (3). She appropriately emphasizes the significance of authorship and dating in the interpreter's hermeneutical approach and conclusions regarding the letters (4). As she states, "Authorship has become the lens through which every aspect of the letters is viewed, including their theology" (2). Another important factor in interpreting the letters is the label "Pastoral Epistles." Smith notes that harmonizing the message and theology of the three letters, rather than examining them individually, can obscure the distinctive features of each letter and so organizes the book into three parts, with each part corresponding to each letter (6).

The book consists of twelve digestible chapters. Chapter 1 demonstrates that "1 Timothy is primarily about God" (9). The chapter adopts a

trinitarian structure, addressing the titles ascribed to God (10–16), then examining Christology in the letters (16–21), and concluding by briefly addressing the letter’s teaching on the Holy Spirit (21–22). Chapter 2 shifts to soteriological themes in 1 Timothy, describing how Paul addresses questions of who needs salvation (25–27, 33–35), what people are saved from (28), and how people are saved (29–33). In chapter 3 “The Word of God,” Smith explores the teaching of the apostolic message in 1 Timothy by describing key terminology, such as “faith,” “truth,” “teaching,” and “gospel” (37–42). She contends that God’s written word is featured in the letter “against the backdrop of the false teachers’ misuse of the Old Testament” (42). Chapter 4 “The Household of God” focuses on the church. Smith argues that “God’s household is formed by, ordered for, and primarily directed toward the gospel” (57). Smith pushes back against the notion that the household metaphor should be understood as Paul’s capitulation to first-century cultural norms. Chapter 5 “The Promise of Godliness” closes the section on 1 Timothy by examining its teaching on ethics and eschatology (59). Smith shows that, while 1 Timothy focuses on the Christian existence in the present age, it does so in the context of Christ’s return (66).

Smith shifts to Paul’s second letter to Timothy in part 2. Chapter 6 “The God of Power” is structured around Paul’s understanding of God (72–75), Christ (75–78), and the Spirit (78–79). Smith frames the letter’s theology in the context of Paul’s final words to encourage Timothy to endure while he awaits his death. Chapter 7 “The Promise of Life” follows the theme of God’s salvation in 2 Timothy. According to Smith, with the threat of persecution looming over Timothy, and Paul’s death on the near horizon, the emphasis is on the surety of God’s salvation. In Chapter 8 “The Living Word,” the apostolic word and Scripture come into view. Smith provides a fresh look at 2 Timothy 3:14–17 (93–95), along with a short survey of Paul’s use of the OT in 2 Timothy (95–97). Chapter 9 “Suffering and the Gospel” looks closely at the theme of hardship and suffering as Paul comes to the close of his ministry. Smith shows how Paul wants Timothy to join in his suffering for the sake of the gospel while recognizing the future horizon of Christ’s return (99).

Part 3 focuses on Paul’s letter to Titus. In chapter 10 “The God of Grace,” Smith once again uses a trinitarian structure to follow the themes of God (111–14), Christ (114–15), and the Holy Spirit (116). Chapter 11 “He

Saved Us” focuses on the soteriology of the letter to Titus. In reference to Titus 3:4–7, Smith states, “The word ‘Gospel’ does not appear in Titus ... Yet Titus contains at least one of the pithiest, clearest statements about salvation, and about the involvement of the Trinity in salvation, in the entire New Testament” (119). Chapter 12 “Our People, God’s Elect” surveys the identity and transformed lives that are present in the people of God in Titus.

Smith has provided evangelicals with a concise overview of the theology of the letters to Timothy and Titus. In addition to covering key theological themes, such as God, salvation, the church, and ethics, Smith connects the motif of mission to areas of Paul’s teaching. For instance, she highlights how Paul’s instruction to slaves contributes to the missional motif (52), along with the household metaphor (56–57), ethics (61, 64, 66–67), the ministry of Timothy and Titus (92), and Paul’s own ministry (97, 132). The missional motif is such a prominent aspect of Smith’s understanding of the letters that one wonders if the idea could have been treated as a theme on its own.

A notable strength is Smith’s decision to accent the theological texture of each letter. For instance, when comparing the theological emphasis of each letter, Smith says, “Whereas 1 Timothy focuses on God’s *desire* to save all people, and 2 Timothy on God’s *power* to save, in Titus the focus is on God’s *character*, which guarantees his salvation: he is the God who never lies” (111, emphasis original). The method of treating each epistle separately enhances the portrayal of the theological nuance of the corpus.

Another strength of the book is Smith’s interpretation of the letter corpus against the backdrop of the OT. While she often acknowledges the Greco-Roman cultural frame for understanding aspects of the letters, she nevertheless gives pride of place to the OT. As she notes on the description of God in Titus, the attributes of God’s grace, mercy, and goodness “were commonly attributed to Greco-Roman gods and rulers, and Paul may be co-opting that cultural frame to portray God as the ideal benevolent ruler. But the OT is the richer and more immediate background” (122).

*The Appearing of God Our Savior* is academically informed, exegetically careful, and theologically attuned. Smith recognizes that the letters to Timothy and Titus have been characterized for their teaching on gender relations and ministerial guidance but rarely appreciated for their theology (xv). Smith helps to fill this gap for pastors, students, and

laypersons looking for a trusted resource that explores the theology of some of the most neglected letters in the Pauline corpus.

Garrett S. Craig, PhD Candidate  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

---

*Aquinas on Scripture: A Primer.* By John F. Boyle. Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2023, 138 pp., \$26.95.

John F. Boyle is professor of Catholic studies at the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota and an alumnus of both the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies and the University of Toronto. Having studied Thomas Aquinas for over thirty years, Boyle has delivered the Aquinas Lecture at the National University of Ireland and has been awarded with the Aquinas Medal from the University of Dallas. He is the author of *The Order and Division of Divine Truth: St. Thomas Aquinas as Scholastic Master of the Sacred Page* (Emmaus, 2021). *Aquinas on Scripture: A Primer* provides a more condensed, accessible introduction to the way Aquinas approached Scripture.

A given verse of the Scripture may be interpreted differently by the Church Fathers and medieval theologians, but they shared the same interpretive principles (2). For Boyle, Aquinas is distinct, not because he deviates from the tradition of the Church, but because of his clarity and precision in articulating this tradition (2). The author argues that understanding these hermeneutical principles will enable one to profit from both Aquinas and other ancient commentators, in addition to one's own reading of Scripture (2–3). Boyle dedicates the first chapter exclusively to what Aquinas presumed of his reader, detailing his understanding of words, grammatical units, the literal and “mystical” senses of Scripture, and so forth.

Chapter 2 introduces the principles at the heart of Aquinas's thinking: the “causes.” These “causes” are questions one asks to illuminate the truths of Scripture, which are each addressed in subsequent chapters (40). Chapter 3 asks “why,” for what purpose or end, Scripture was written (45). For Aquinas, salvation is the end of Scripture, governing his understanding of and commentary on it (47). While each book of Scripture has a particular focus, its purpose is salvific (49). Chapter 4 asks “who” the author of Scripture is. For Aquinas, Scripture was authored by God who

used humans as instruments (65). Chapter 5 deals with “what,” seeking to understand the material, or subject matter of Scripture (83). The aim of this question is not at the content of a book but the way the parts of Scripture relate to the whole (84). Accordingly, Boyle articulates the way Aquinas understands the division and structure of certain books of Scripture. The final chapter, chapter six, addresses the question of “how,” as in how to understand the form, style, or genre of Scripture (112). Boyle, in all these chapters, draws from Aquinas’s corpus to show how he understood and applied these “causes” to Scripture.

It is apparent that Boyle’s mind is saturated with the works of Thomas Aquinas. In *Aquinas on Scripture*, the author synthesizes Aquinas’s hermeneutics from a corpus containing little systematic attention devoted to the subject (3). Boyle accomplishes this task in a structured and clear manner in less than 150 pages. His work equips one to catch a glimpse of Scripture through the eyes of the foremost scholastic theologian. This is an invaluable exercise.

It should be noted that *Aquinas on Scripture* assumes a Catholic audience with some degree of comprehension concerning history and saints. The book’s text is littered with Latin words and phrases throughout that make no substantial contribution to one’s comprehension. Additionally, in chapter 1, Boyle describes the two senses in which Scripture is understood: the “literal” and the “mystical,” or “spiritual,” sense (24). The “literal” sense of Scripture is what the words themselves signify while the “mystical” sense is a thing signifying another thing (25). Endorsing this type of hermeneutic can “seem to give license” to erroneous readings and cause modern readers to bar these readings (30, emphasis mine). Boyle seems to attribute reservations like this to cultural differences: “our own intellectual and religious culture, which is particularly fixed on getting at what an ancient author meant to say in his particular intellectual and religious culture” (30). He considers that his book “will have succeeded” if afterward the reader is “able to read Scripture itself with greater faithfulness and joy” (3). However, implementing this hermeneutic largely does the opposite: it leads to reading obscure meanings into the text. These interpretations may sound convincing, but in one’s own devotional time, one only needs to convince himself. Scripture has layers of meaning, indeed, but biblical fidelity is best preserved when Christians

leave these interpretations to the inspired writers of the Bible. When one busies oneself with these interpretations, one detracts from the plain truth.

The other weaknesses are relatively minor, such as the author's claim on Aquinas's articulation. Boyle states that Aquinas exemplified "the tradition of the Church" and interpreted Scripture much like Augustine, Chrysostom, and Bernard (1–2). The significance of Aquinas, according to Boyle, is his unmatched articulation of this tradition (2). But unless one is versed in Aquinas and every other theologian of the Middle Ages, this claim is not entirely verifiable. One cannot know the degree to which Aquinas conforms to tradition, nor his unparalleled ability to articulate it, without having read broadly the medieval theologians. Apart from this weakness, it is striking that the author writes 150 pages on Aquinas, the longest chapter dealing with Aquinas's presumptions, only to mention Aristotle once. This is especially noticeable because the book is about the tradition of applying the "causes" to Scripture, that is, the four causes articulated by Aristotle. The one instance where Boyle does mention Aristotle is when he writes that "it is perhaps no surprise that St. Thomas, explicitly following Aristotle, describes wisdom as understanding things in their causes" (43). The issue is worth noting because Aristotle's influence on Aquinas is great.

Weaknesses aside, Boyle has done valuable work here. Through the corpus of Aquinas, he outlines the prominent interpretive principles of the medieval Church. Regardless of one's church affiliation, Boyle's book offers keen insight into the theological traditions of the Middle Ages.

Elijah S. McClanahan, PhD Student  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

---

*Biblical Counseling and the Psychologies.* By Ernie Baker. Critical issues in Biblical Counseling. Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2023, 100 pp., \$17.99 paper.

The series *Critical Issues in Biblical Counseling* derives from some influential biblical counselors' concern that trends in "the broader biblical counseling world" ultimately will diminish confidence in Scripture's sufficiency as the source of "answers for the deepest human struggles" (24). Ernie Baker's role as the series consulting editor coalesces with his authorship of this volume,

written to demonstrate for pastors and lay counselors the construction of counseling theory as well as a “historic biblical counseling approach” (25). Drawing from decades of experience teaching, counseling, and pastoring, Baker seeks to cultivate the reader’s discernment, enabling pastors and other counselors to dissect counseling models, identify them as belief systems, and conclude that Scripture’s belief system is complete for counseling, without any “need to incorporate the beliefs of other systems” claiming to be biblical counseling (48).

Baker advances his aims in four movements. First, he presents a case study organized in a memorable flow of thought, summarizing a specific person’s situation, thinking, interaction with others, responses, emotions, and expectations, using the acronym “storee” (29–32). Second, he outlines a historic position of biblical counseling, defined as a way of seeing the world through the lenses of biblical presuppositions applied to evaluate counseling models in seven areas: source of authority, source of the problem, solution, methodology to reach the solution, support system, counselor’s role, and apologetics (47–48). Third, Baker summarizes the interpretation and intervention of two prominent counseling models, applying his sevenfold framework to critically evaluate cognitive behavioral therapy and trauma-informed care as they may relate to the case study. Fourth, Baker presents a traditional biblical counseling approach, demonstrating the interpretive and transformative power of Scripture at work in counseling.

Baker specifies presuppositions of biblical counseling as the foundation of his work in this volume. His critical engagement rests on viewing psychologies as belief systems (32). Scripture constitutes a belief system superior to that of secular psychologies, able to explain and rectify human struggles (28, 38–39). Specifically, the presuppositional theology of God as Creator, man as his image, sin and the fall, and Scripture’s epistemological authority drive a biblical worldview as the “eyeglasses” through which counselors see (44–45). Counseling systems must be constructed from these presuppositions, from theoretical foundation to methodological application.

Baker’s apologetic concern lies with the core identity of biblical counseling: a “radically biblical” system of care for troubled people (27). Biblical counseling aims to help people “live a God-glorifying life” in the midst of their circumstances. The “bottom-line question” is whether counselors

*need* to know information from secular therapies to help people reach that aim (71). Baker's answer is clear: no, the psychologies do not provide information necessary to a counseling system (79–80).

Baker cites Jay Adams to argue for the distinction between research psychology and counseling psychology, suggesting that “we can learn much from their research” (36–37). His concern lies with counseling psychology, which proposes explanatory theories and redemptive interventions. Furthermore, in his discussion of trauma-informed care, Baker raises significant points of critique against purportedly scientific brain research underlying trauma theory (69–70). He identifies the psychology he critiques as counseling psychology or questionable research psychology.

This book's greatest strength is its reproducible methods for organizing personal information in counseling and evaluating counseling systems. First, Baker's “storee” mnemonic provides relevant categories to guide the questions a counselor may ask and shape her interpretation of a person's life story. Second, the seven tenets of a counseling system constitute a framework for thorough evaluation. The “key questions” Baker provides in the conclusion further detail a replicable method for analysis (99–100). Counselors will benefit from considering these methods.

This work could be strengthened by including more primary research and citation of contrasting positions. Though a key aim is drawing clear distinctions between “historical” biblical counseling and current aberrations that concern him within biblical counseling, Baker only specifically cites two examples: Eliza Huie and Nate Brooks commending integration (though Baker does not define the term as they use it) and Esther Smith inaccurately referencing neuroscience related to trauma (37, 69).

This book mentions disagreement over trends and methodology within the modern biblical counseling movement (29, 71). More specific examples would clarify Baker's concerns. He critiques the use of “secular trauma-informed techniques” (73), but the only specific technique he mentions is that of “retraining the amygdala” (71). Baker clearly identifies tenets of trauma theory that reflect a godless worldview, most notably reducing human troubles to biological factors, apart from any relationship to God or identity as his image bearer. Biblical counselors should reject the assumption that trauma is “the central, unifying theme” of a person's story, instead seeking to orient people upward to God rather than inward to self

(76–77). Counselors may agree with these critiques and yet wonder if accepting Baker’s position overall entails a categorical dismissal of any information related to the brain or body. In light of his earlier distinction between research and counseling psychology, the reader should assume not. However, the position would be stronger if this point were clarified.

In the source Baker cites, Huie and Brooks affirm most of the presuppositions Baker presents. The point of disagreement seems to lie in the understanding of what biblical counseling *is*, and from there, what kind of knowledge from which kind of psychology is relevant, whether such knowledge is merely relevant or ultimately necessary, and how such relevant or necessary knowledge might be used or not. These questions are central to the current conversations on sufficiency and common grace, and many thoughtful biblical counselors are eager for guidance. A work about biblical counseling and psychology that aims to clarify distinctions would be strengthened by specifically and thoroughly addressing these points, with citations from differing positions.

Baker’s urge to evaluate all systems for epistemological authority reminds biblical counselors that our theoretical discussion and practical methodologies should be derived from and saturated with Scripture (58). In a moment marked by discussion over views of common grace from Herman Bavinck and John Calvin, neuroscience and its critiques, and the significance of embodiment, Baker reminds us all that as Christian theologians and counselors, we are people of the Book. The content of Scripture itself should dominate and direct our reflection, discussion, interpretation, and intervention, as we depend on our Father for wisdom and personal transformation.

Laura-Lee Alford, PhD Student  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

---

*Text and Paratext: Book Order, Title, and Division as Keys to Biblical Interpretation.* By Gregory Goswell. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2023, xv + 252 pp., \$26.99 paper.

Gregory Goswell is a lecturer in Hebrew and OT and academic dean at Christ College in Sydney, Australia. Goswell has published over thirty

scholarly articles on paratextual issues, and *Text and Paratext* is a synthesis of these articles into an introductory book. His stated purpose is to “introduce readers to the biblical paratext and give training in detecting and evaluating the paratextual features” (173). For Goswell, paratext comprises “those elements that are adjoined to the text but are not part of the text itself” that shape how a reader approaches the Bible (1). Readers can often overlook paratext, yet it “has an influence on reading and may assist (or sometimes hinder) the interpretation of the text of Scripture” (1). Since paratext is a later addition to inspired Scripture intended to help facilitate reading, Goswell holds that it should be scrutinized for its usefulness (2). His analysis of book order, titles, and textual divisions is not exhaustive but instead aims to provide a reader with hermeneutical tools “to understand and apply the text of Scripture” (178).

Goswell divides his book into three parts. In part 1, he discusses the influence that book order can have on interpretation by surveying the orders of the Hebrew and Greek canons of the OT and the NT canon. He bases his analysis on the axiom that “the placement of books in close physical proximity implies that they are related in some way” (51). Then, in part 2, Goswell analyzes how the various titles used throughout church history for the biblical books impact interpretation. Goswell’s analysis follows Gérard Genette’s fourfold framework, where a title can identify a book, describe a book’s content, recommend a book, and/or indicate a book’s form or genre (80). In part 3, Goswell shifts to surveying how textual divisions can influence interpretation. For this analysis, he identifies four ways that a division could be functioning: to separate, to join, to highlight, or to downplay (126–27). He then concludes the book by distilling the key insights from each section and discussing how readers can apply these insights.

Goswell does a commendable job of showing the important yet often unnoticed impact that paratextual features can have on interpretation. His discussion of paratextual issues involves significant analysis of how early Hebrew, Greek, and Latin texts of the Bible were formatted that would normally be inaccessible to the average Christian. And while discussion of ancient versions in foreign languages can run the risk of alienating some readers, Goswell helpfully keeps his discussion focused and relevant with clear explanations of potentially foreign ideas. Goswell takes

a balanced approach in that he does not claim too much importance for paratextual features, but he takes them seriously, demonstrating that they have an impact on interpretation. His construal of paratext as an addition that can either help or hinder interpretation enables him to avoid the pitfalls of either dogmatism or irrelevance. The book is filled with numerous examples of how varying book orders, titles, and textual divisions will affect a reader's understanding of a text. For example, Ruth could reasonably be placed near Judges because of the setting (Ruth 1:1), before Psalms because of its Davidic connections (Ruth 4:18–22), or even after Proverbs because Ruth was viewed as the “worthy woman” of Proverbs 31 (46–47). It would be difficult for Ruth's position in any canon to make all these connections, and so interpreters must choose an ordering that emphasizes one of them.

While Goswell's book successfully accomplishes its purpose, I see two ways that his argument could be improved. First, while Goswell helpfully interacts with three key areas of paratextual decisions, his book largely overlooks the important influence that modern punctuation can have. For example, in 1 Corinthians 6:13 English translations differ on how much or whether any of the verse is a quote of Paul's opponents. How modern translations punctuate this passage reveals an interpretive difference over whether Paul is expounding his own view or correcting a false view. While book order or titles operate above the text, punctuation decisions, which can often go unnoticed by readers, directly impact how a text is read.

A second issue with Goswell's book is that he assumes the paratextual issues he discusses are later additions to the text of Scripture and overlooks the possibility that they might be original. For the most part, he is correct that much of the order, titles, and divisions are later phenomena. However, he largely discounts the possibility that any paratextual features are original except for the titles of the Psalms (140). The possibility that other elements could be original is at least worthy of more discussion, since authorially intended paratext should be treated differently than later additions. For example, Goswell too quickly rejects Martin Hengel's claim that the Gospel titles were original, and more discussion of why would be helpful (105). Similarly, Goswell too quickly assumes the Hebrew titles of the Pentateuch are a later addition. Goswell notes that it was typical for ancient Near-Eastern documents to take their title from the first couple words of the writing (82). This leaves open the possibility that Moses could

have intended the titles of his books. I was left wondering if other paratextual features could reflect authorial intent (e.g., the ordering of the Pentateuch and the Former Prophets), but these examples show that Goswell's assumptions could be better justified. Perhaps it is not possible to determine whether most paratextual features are original or not, but it at least merits more discussion.

Although the book could be strengthened in these areas, I heartily commend *Text and Paratext* as a helpful introductory discussion on the role of paratextual features for biblical interpretation. Goswell rightly argues that every Bible is a study Bible due to paratextual additions, and I would add that every Bible reader is an interpreter (4). Therefore, every Christian should at least be aware of the different ways that Christians have ordered, titled, and divided the books of the Bible throughout church history. This awareness will prevent readers from being blindly locked into viewing Scripture according to how their preferred modern Bible translation formats the biblical books. Any Christian would benefit from reading *Text and Paratext*, and as an introductory work it is written for a broad audience. Despite the book's introductory nature, Goswell has filled it with insightful nuggets that will enrich anyone's reading of the Bible, as it did for me. The book could prove particularly useful for someone who typically reads the Bible a chapter at a time, since it can help this type of reader see how chapters and books connect to each other.

Matthew J. Bekken, PhD Student  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

---

*Creation and Christian Ethics: Understanding God's Designs for Humanity and the World.* By Dennis P. Hollinger. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023, 304 pp., \$29.99 paper.

Dennis P. Hollinger is Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary's president emeritus and senior distinguished professor of Christian ethics. Among his notable publications are *Choosing the Good: Christian Ethics in a Complex World* (2002) and *The Meaning of Sex: Christian Ethics and the Moral Life* (2009), both for Baker. In *Creation and Christian Ethics: Understanding God's Designs for Humanity and the World*, Hollinger examines the role the creation

account found in Genesis 1–2 plays in the development of ethics, arguing for creation being the foundational pillar upon which the rest of the biblical storyline falls. Without creation, the Christian “theological metanarrative” is lost (5), a problem Hollinger believes is plaguing contemporary discussion and scholarship in ethics. He places strong emphasis on God’s revealed Word and the “theological precept” embedded in the Genesis account (2), setting his approach apart from natural law theorists who place more emphasis on the law of nature implanted in mankind’s conscience.

In the introduction, chapters 1 and 2, Hollinger sets up the book’s context for his readers: God has created out of love, and everything he has made is good. The main error of modern philosophy and ethics is disregarding Genesis creation for the new creation, and Christians must understand that the new creation is, in fact, a continuity of the old creation. Creation reflects who God is and reveals the patterns according to which believers are obliged to live, and at the final consummation, creation is not destroyed but restored to its original purposes. Before this consummation takes place, however, the good things that God has created are being misused and abused in this fallen world.

Chapter 3 examines the doctrine of *imago Dei* and the “moral obligations” entrusted to humanity (74). Here, Hollinger addresses the issue of human dignity in relation to moral issues such as racism and medical ethics like abortion and euthanasia. “Abortion,” he writes, “is perhaps the most vivid example of the self-deception that accompanies the fall,” and this can be seen in societies’ attempt to euphemize the language surrounding the deadly act (92). Chapter 4 develops mankind’s creation-ordained and ontological roles as stewards of God’s creation, addressing common accusations and critiques levered against Christianity blaming it for the abuse of nature. Hollinger corrects popular misunderstandings and points out that the main culprit that has caused the mindless exploitation of natural resources is materialism (98). Christians living according to Christian ethics would understand that it is the believer’s duty to exercise stewardship for God’s glory and not for personal selfish gain.

Chapters 5 and 6 examine relationships and social institutions. As creatures created by the triune God, human beings are made to fellowship with one another and, most importantly, to have a relationship with God. Hollinger begins this exploration with the fundamental unit of society:

marriage and the family. His arguments defy the modern emphasis on the “expressive individual” and “self-actualization” (121–22). Among the institutions he lists is the church—a family of believers. Other institutions included are education, the media, entertainment and recreation, economics, and government. He considers each of these and acknowledges that while God has given us these institutions for the “common good of the social order” (170), this is an anti-Christian age, and much discernment is required to navigate them.

Chapters 7, 8, and 9 explore work, rest, and human limitations. God, in the first seven days in Genesis, “builds a rhythm of life that will combine worship, work, and leisure” (178). The fall, however, has caused work to become painful and futile, and humanity’s attitude towards work is distorted (185–87). Hollinger does not spiritualize the rest day but believes that this rhythm of work and rest is the ideal for all. At the heart of Sabbath is “a rhythm of life that incorporates worship, self-care, and care for others” (208). These concepts tie into the finitude of man, which Hollinger argues is good, since it is God who has created man “limited, dependent, temporal, and bounded” (223), distinguishing the creature from the Creator. Attempts to rebel against this distinction and limitation can be seen in humanity’s attempts at creating communistic utopias, eugenics, transhumanism, and nonacceptance of mortality.

Chapter 10 answers the question of what constitutes a human being. For Hollinger, it is “very difficult to divide up the human self into tidy, separate compartments.” Instead, he believes that the interchangeability between terms like “body, soul, spirit, and mind” in the Scripture “points to a unified self ... that we are best to speak of embodied souls and ensouled bodies” (253). This reality is to drive the believer’s evangelism and social concern. The book concludes by reiterating why creation is important for Christian ethics in a pluralistic fallen world that hates God (275).

Overall, Hollinger presents a convincing argument for creation as the foundational pillar of Christian ethics. His introduction accomplishes this excellently by pointing readers to the Prophets in the Old Testament and guiding them to see how these prophets appeal to creation as they call people to repent and to return to God and his ways (12–13). Jesus himself, in the NT, also refers to creation when answering questions concerning

moral issues (13–15). This proves that if the Scripture is sufficient for Jesus’s moral arguments, it is sufficient for the controversies of today.

There are, however, two noticeable instances where Hollinger’s argument falls short and contradicts the principles he is establishing. The first is in his allowance for abortion in cases for rape in the name of “just war” (92). Having just finished condemning the euphemizing of the language abortion uses, his “just war” analogy immediately weakens his argument on the inherent dignity and value of human life. The second is found in his view on the procreation mandate where he explains that this mandate “does not mean we should have as many children as possible” (111). This statement is puzzling as it implies that human beings are the ones who determine whether or not the earth is filled, not God. Hollinger believes that ethically using contraceptives is an act to “steward and control” nature and earth’s resources (137–38). His case here is unconvincing because he also believes the procreation mandate allows for the ethical use of reproductive technology to assist couples faced with infertility, including in vitro fertilization. Thus, on one hand, Christians are encouraged to contracept or risk impacting the environment, while on the other hand, technology is allowed to aid in procreation as long as it is “ethically” practiced.

Nevertheless, despite the book’s weaknesses in certain areas of practical application, *Creation and Christian Ethics* is a valuable resource for Christian ethicists who might pitch the new creation against Genesis instead of understanding them in continuity. As Hollinger has intended, this book will be a helpful resource for professors and students of the subject and for pastors and church leaders to use in personal and small group studies.

Sze Ying Lim, PhD student  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary