

Liturgy and Lent

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TOLL-FREE (U.S.)

(800) 229-2990 ext. 297

WEBSITE

www.interpretation.org

E-MAIL

sub.manager@union-psce.edu

ADVERTISING

Address advertising correspondence to:
Charles A. Roth, Jr
CA Roth, Jr., Inc.
86 Underwood Rd.
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mobile: 516-729-3509 fax: 914-470-0483
carothjrinc@maine.rr.com

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Editorial

This issue on the Lenten season is the second in our series exploring the rich resources available for preaching and teaching important themes connected to the Christian calendar. *Interpretation* published an issue devoted to Advent in October 2008 (Vol. 62, No. 4); an issue on the Easter season is scheduled for January 2011. We are grateful for the positive feedback we have received thus far and welcome your comments as we plan future issues in this series.

Marianne Meye Thompson's survey of the lectionary texts moves beyond the conventional focus on introspection in order to hear the biblical summons to return to God with a deepened trust and a renewed commitment to charity and service. Drawing upon the words of the prophet Joel (2:13) assigned for Ash Wednesday, Thompson discerns a clear message: "Tearing one's garments as a sign of repentance does not atone for failing to provide clothing for those who need it."

As the "art of sound," Frank Burch Brown says, music has the capacity to "infuse faith with heart and passion." With one movement it can inspire "true reverence and mystery," with the next, it may "motivate one for justice." Such is the case with both secular music, like Dave Brubeck's "Forty Days," and sacred music, like Handel's *Messiah*. "The church in Lent . . . lends us ears that can potentially hear a special resonance in music . . ." and thus, Brown concludes, invites us "to respond by making new music, or by making old music anew, in a Lenten spirit of humility, penitence, and hope."

Is visual art something we should go without during Lent? Robin Jensen shows how simple forms and colors, like the subdued tones in Georgia O'Keeffe's *Black Cross, New Mexico* (1929), and the contemporary images of the Stations of the Cross by sculptor Virginia Maksymowicz can deepen and expand the way we "visualize Lent." "We need to practice thinking in images as well as in words," Jensen observes, because "external signs also point to invisible truths."

Drawing on a variety of poets, including R. S. Thomas, David Gascoyne, and Edith Sitwell, Richard Griffiths discusses specific ways poetry can be a resource for personal devotion and liturgical worship during Lent. Whether meditating on the meaning of suffering, or creating a Lenten devotional on faith and doubt, "the use of words, in new and un-prosed combination, enables us to relate the finite to the infinite, our earthly experience to a perception of what lies behind it."

Paul Simpson Duke returns readers to the biblical texts that chart the Lenten journey, now with focused attention on the preacher's task. The "lengthening light" of this forty-day period is often strange and unwanted; it exposes "what is killing us and what can save us." The preacher's job is to face what this strange light makes visible, "to see and to say what it shows." As Duke makes powerfully clear, "the further we travel open-eyed through the lit invitations and terrors of the season, the more light we are likely to find and to impart."



Crown of Thorns, Kathrin Burleson, contemporary artist (<http://www.KathrinBurleson.com>). Watercolor on paper. Part of the complete series “The Way of the Cross.”

CONTRIBUTORS

MARIANNE MEYE THOMPSON (*Ph.D., Duke University*) is Professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary. She writes and teaches primarily in the areas of Jesus and the Gospels, most notably the Gospel of John. Thompson’s books include *Colossians and Philemon* (Eerdmans, 2005), and *The God of the Gospel of John* (Eerdmans, 2001). She is currently working on a commentary on the Gospel of John for the New Testament Library (Westminster John Knox). She is an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

FRANK BURCH BROWN is the F. D. Kershner Professor of Religion and the Arts at Christian Theological Seminary as well as the Alexander Campbell Visiting Professor of Religion and the Arts at the University of Chicago Divinity School (spring terms). Brown is author of five books; the most recent is *Inclusive Yet Discerning: Navigating Worship Artfully* (Eerdmans, 2009). He is currently editing the Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts. Brown is also a composer of over twenty commissioned works.

ROBIN M. JENSEN is Professor of the History of Christian Art and Worship at Vanderbilt University. Her research and writing focuses on the interpretation of early Christian art and architecture in its theological content and liturgical and social context. Jensen is the current President of the Society for the Arts in Religious and Theological Studies. She is the author of *Understanding Early Christian Art* (Routledge, 2000); *The Substance of Things Seen* (Eerdmans, 2004); *Face to Face: Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity* (Fortress, 2005); and *Living Water: Images, Symbols and Settings of Early Christian Baptism* (forthcoming, Brill, 2009).

RICHARD GRIFFITHS is Emeritus Professor of French Literature, King’s College London, and is a priest in the church in Wales, currently serving as non-stipendiary curate of St Augustine’s Church, Penarth. His publications on religious subjects include *Poetry and Prayer* (the Mowbray Lent Book, Continuum, 2005), *The Bible in the Renaissance* (Ashgate, 2001), and numerous articles on religious poets, novelists, and dramatists. He is currently preparing a book on Roman Catholic literature in Britain, 1880–1980, for Continuum.

PAUL SIMPSON DUKE is Co-Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Ann Arbor, Michigan (American Baptist Churches, USA). He has served as a pastor also in Louisville and St. Louis. Duke received his Ph.D. in New Testament Literature at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary with special interest in literary criticism and the Gospel of John, and has taught New Testament and homiletics at the James and Carolyn McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University and at Ecumenical Theological Seminary in Detroit. His most recent book is *The Parables: A Preaching Commentary* (Abingdon, 2005).

Turning and Returning to God: Reflections on the Lectionary Texts for Lent

MARIANNE MEYE THOMPSON

Professor of New Testament

Fuller Theological Seminary

While the season of Lent often prompts introspection, the various biblical texts set for Lent call not for a turning inward, but a turning again to God with renewed trust and gratitude for the steadfast love and faithfulness of God. Jesus' death is the supreme example of the love of the God who has a steadfast commitment to deliver his people from captivity, whether captivity in Egypt, or captivity to sin and death.

The season of Lent is historically marked especially by the practice of fasting and other forms of self-denial, colloquially referred to as “giving up” something for Lent. These various practices are intended to lead one to contrition and repentance, and to renewing practices such as prayer, meditation, charity, and service. Although often thought of as a season of introspection, the various lectionary texts do not so much call one to look within in self-examination, but to look to God with deepened trust. Read in the context of the forty days of Lent, these biblical texts call for a renewal of trust in the God who redeemed Israel, who rescues the righteous, whose love and faithfulness are manifest in the coming of Jesus of Nazareth, who, in turn, put his life in God's hand, lived a life of perfect obedience, suffered the death of a slave, and was raised to life by God.

ASH WEDNESDAY

The traditional rite that marks the beginning of Lent—the imposition of ashes—leaves an obvious sign on the foreheads of the worshiper. But the texts from Joel, Isaiah, and Matthew serve as timely reminders that neither deprivation, most notably in the form of fasting, nor visible “signs,” such as smearing oneself with ashes, wearing sackcloth, or tearing one's garments, are ends in themselves or the signs of penitence that God seeks. As the prophet Joel puts it, “rend your hearts and not your clothing” (2:13). God desires genuine repentance and turning towards him, not visible signs in lieu of that repentance. Jesus warns against practicing acts of piety “in order to be seen” by others (Matt 6:1), because these are to be done as an offering of oneself to the “God who sees in secret” (Matt 6:4), and who alone can judge

the heart. Furthermore, those who “trumpet” their acts of mercy draw attention to themselves—thus blurring the focus on God and on those whom acts of charity are designed to help. The public display of acts of piety can also create a “hierarchy of service” as an act of giving, or the extent of one’s deprivation, serves all too easily as a credential of worth and piety.

Jesus, like the prophets before him, expected that God’s people would hear and obey the commands of God in Scripture to care for the needs of others. It is not ceasing from certain activities—such as consuming food, or wearing fine clothing—that constitutes the kind of obedience God desires. Rather, God desires that his people cease their unjust practices, and their neglect of the poor and hungry. Depriving oneself of food is not necessarily laudable in God’s eyes, but depriving others of food is indeed culpable. Tearing one’s garments as a sign of repentance does not atone for failing to provide clothing to those who need it.

Although these prophetic critiques are sometimes taken as an assault on the cult, that is, on “organized” religion or ritual practices, the prophets do not condemn worship or cult; they excoriate those who think they can somehow hide behind these practices. The call of the prophets and of Jesus after them is not merely to “do” certain things, but to seek to be the kind of whole persons that God desires—persons who integrate love of God and neighbor, and who integrate hearts and hands. In the penitential prayer of Ps 51, the psalmist prays for a clean heart, a new and right spirit within. This is not merely a focus on the interior aspect of the human being, but a call for contrition and repentance from wrongdoing so that one may live and teach the ways of God (51:13).

In his reference to his suffering and hardship in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul seems to violate Jesus’ own teaching not to “trumpet” his piety before others (2 Cor 6:10). And, to be sure, Paul does at times seem to call attention to himself and the suffering he endures for the sake of the gospel. The point, however, is to instruct the power-bedazzled Corinthians with the truth that God’s salvation was accomplished through something that the world—and the Corinthians themselves—deemed foolish and weak, the death of Jesus on the cross. Paul wants to say something about the character of the gospel and the life to which it called him for the sake of others, including the Corinthians. And yet, Paul writes, suffering, dishonor, sorrow, and hardship are not the last words: they are what God’s apostle experiences in the present, and does so with the assurance that his own life and experiences reflect the life of Jesus himself, who came to serve, and was obedient even unto death. Paul lives out the Lenten to call to “give something up”—but only because he follows the model of Jesus, who gave himself up to death that others might live through him.

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT: GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

The passage from Deut 26 briefly recounts God's deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt and from the oppression that they had experienced there. Deuteronomy 26:9 remembers not only God's deliverance of his people from Egypt, but also God's leading them to "this place," to the promised land. In that "place," both the Levites, who are overseers of Israel's worship, and the aliens, are to gather to worship the Lord.

If in Deuteronomy the faithfulness of God is celebrated in his leading the people from one place to another, so Ps 91 likens God to a refuge and a fortress, a "place" where one finds security and protection from enemies of all kinds. God is further compared to one who saves a trapped bird from death; protects from a deadly plague; and shields the helpless under protecting wings. The psalmist expresses a strong, seemingly unrealistic, faith in God's goodness and salvation. But those who penned the Psalms were not naïve: they knew of troubles, disaster, and God's apparent silence in the face of them. They do not write in ignorance, but in full awareness of the troubles that surround them. Precisely in desperate circumstances, the hope of the righteous is always hope in God. In Romans, Paul echoes the implicit sentiments of the psalmist that those who trust in God will not be put to shame (10:13), and that God is generous to all who call on him (10:11). Paul's assurance rests on his convictions 1) that God has raised Jesus from the dead (10:9); 2) that this God is the Lord of all (10:12); and 3) that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (10:13).

In the temptation accounts in the gospels, Satan, the adversary, quotes a portion of Ps 91 to Jesus, urging him to test God by jumping from the parapet of the temple to see if indeed God will be faithful to his promises to rescue those who call upon him. But Jesus refuses. Even as the psalm calls its readers to trust in God, so Jesus himself exemplifies that trust, that strong conviction of God's faithfulness. In resisting the temptations of the adversary, Jesus demonstrates that the Son of God, full of the Holy Spirit, carries out his mission in faithfulness to, and not independence from, God. In the NT, Satan seeks primarily to lead the righteous astray from the paths of faithful obedience to God (Mark 8:31–33; Luke 22:31; 1 Cor 7:5; 1 Pet 5:8). Luke depicts Jesus as resisting the temptations to self-sufficiency, power, and glory, instead giving himself in obedience to God and living in trust in the one who does indeed protect them.

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT: FEAR AND CONFIDENCE

The lectionary texts for the second Sunday in Lent highlight the ways in which Abraham,

Paul, and Jesus himself, respond to God's call with trust, determination, and hope. In Gen 15—well-known from the NT citation of 15:6, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (Rom 4:3)—God addresses Abraham with an exhortation, "Do not be afraid," that depends upon God's character, "I am your shield." Using another image, the psalmist affirms that he need have no fear, since God is his "light" and "salvation," the one who hides and shelters him in the day of trouble (Ps 27:1, 5). And yet the psalmist points also to something he has perhaps not yet seen, or anticipates seeing in the future: "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living" (v. 13). The psalmist expects a concrete manifestation of God's goodness, salvation, and protection: he shall "see" these things.

Even so, God promised Abraham a great reward (v. 1), descendants as numerous as the stars (vv. 4–5), and possession of the land to which God had led him (v. 18). And while Abraham raised questions about the ways in which God's promises would be carried out, he nevertheless had faith that God would be faithful to his promises (15:6). This is what marks Abraham as a "righteous" person, as one who stands in a right relationship to God. Abraham heard the call of God—not just once, or initially—but as a continuing invitation and exhortation to follow and trust the one who had promised to be Abraham's "shield." To live in faith is to trust that God will be faithful to his promises.

The Apostle Paul similarly hears and responds to the "heavenly call of God" as it comes to him through and in Christ Jesus (Phil 3:14). In the passage set for today, Paul urges the Philippians to imitate his single-minded devotion to the call of Christ, but acknowledges sadly that there are some who live differently, who live as "enemies of the cross of Christ." Who these people are—whether Christians who try to downplay or ignore the centrality of the cross for Christian living, "Judaizing" Christians, or those who simply do not believe in Christ at all—is not entirely clear. But it is clear that, for Paul, they are "enemies of the cross." They neither follow the example given to the church by the humble self-giving of Christ (Phil 2:5–11) nor set their hope on the coming of "the Lord Jesus Christ" (3:20).

Paul's own life was tethered between these two poles of Christ's crucifixion and expected return. On the one hand, Christian life is determined and shaped by the death of Christ on the cross, which calls Christians to the same kind of faithfulness and self-giving love; and, on the other hand, Christ's followers await his coming, and hope for the transformation of "the body of our humiliation," in order to be conformed to "the body of his glory." Those who live in light of the cross also live in light of the coming of Christ. They live with hope: hope in their Savior, and in the transformation he will effect by his power, a power that is not gained through military

triumph but through and by means of the cross. Even as Abraham trusted the God who called him, so Paul trusted God's call to him through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Luke similarly presents Jesus between glory (the so-called "transfiguration," 9:28–36) and death (13:31–35). The brief account in Luke 13:31–35 begins with the notice that some Pharisees warned Jesus that Herod wished to have Jesus killed. Jesus, however, brushes aside the well-intended warnings, for two reasons: First, he has a vocation to carry out, a calling, prior to his death; and, second, he will die, as the prophets before him, in Jerusalem, the holy city. He laments that he had often wished to gather Jerusalem's children together, to protect them, to be a shield for them even as God promised to be to Abraham, but Jerusalem did not listen. He would not ultimately find a welcome in Jerusalem, but a cross. Jesus' path has led to his death, since he "set his face to go to Jerusalem" (9:51).

Yet the reader of Luke's Gospel already knows that the cross is not the end or the whole story of Jesus' life. This has been hinted at in Jesus' own predictions of his resurrection "on the third day" (e.g., 9:22). But it is also foreshadowed by the transfiguration, the scene in which Jesus appears in his glory, in dazzling garments, as do the angels at the empty tomb (24:4). Peter has no idea what to make of what he has seen, but proposes it might be appropriate to try to memorialize the experience and the moment. But for the Gospel of Luke, the point lies elsewhere, as the heavenly voice makes clear: first, in the identification of Jesus as God's Son, the chosen one and, second, in the call to listen to him. Jesus' lament for Jerusalem (13:34–35) indicates all too poignantly the fact that Jesus' call was not heard; people did not listen. The lectionary texts for this Sunday recall the faithful hearing and obedience of Abraham, of Paul, and of Jesus, and celebrate the faithful protection and goodness of the God who called—even when the road leads to death on a cross.

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT: FOOD FOR THE HUNGRY, DRINK FOR THE THIRSTY

The texts from Isaiah, the Psalms, and 1 Corinthians are connected by the common themes of thirst and hunger, with particular emphasis on what the OT texts especially speak of as a hunger or thirst for God. Psalm 63 was at some point described as a psalm uttered by David "when he was in the wilderness of Judea," where he was no doubt hungry and thirsty while fleeing from his enemies, especially Saul (see 1 Sam 22:5; 23:13–15). But the psalm speaks not of these needs, but of the desire for God that can be compared to the need to drink, eat, and sleep. Such desire for God is manifested in praise (vv. 3, 5), meditation (v. 6), and rejoicing (v. 11).

It recalls times of worship in the sanctuary of God (vv. 2–3), but also those times when, in the night, the weary think and meditate on God. Finally, recalling the steadfast love (v. 3) and protection of God (vv. 7–8) gives birth to new hope for God’s deliverance (vv. 9–11).

The psalmist paints a picture of the weary, thirsty, and beleaguered person clinging to God in a time of trouble (v. 8). And, the psalmist reports, God satisfies. God helps, feeds, supports, and upholds, “so that the mouths of liars will be stopped” (63:11). These are the words of one who has known the rich feast of the blessing of the Lord, and earnestly desires to taste of it again. As the Psalms put it elsewhere, “O taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps 34:8). Such language by no means plays down the need for food and drink that nurtures the physical body, but uses the language of appetite and satisfaction to picture the very concrete experience of God’s good provision for human need.

Thus, in Isaiah God invites the hungry and thirsty to wine, milk, and bread at no cost (vv. 1–2). Such good food consists of listening to God (v. 3) and of seeking the Lord and his righteous ways (vv. 6–7), and finding the steadfast love, mercy, and pardon of God (vv. 3, 7). The invitation to eat, drink, and be filled with the goodness of God should lead the wicked to “forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts,” because God’s thoughts are higher and God’s ways different than those of human beings. In other words, to seek the Lord is not to find what one is looking for, but to discover a God whom one was not looking for—whose mercy and pardon, on the one hand, and whose righteousness, on the other, far surpass those of human beings. God does not so much satisfy as reorient human need and longing. What human beings do not know that they need is a God who will abundantly pardon (v. 7). The prophet invites his readers to seek, turn to, hunger, and thirst for the Lord—for this God can indeed be found.

In 1 Cor 10, Paul describes the wilderness generation as eating spiritual food and drinking spiritual drink. In fact, Paul boldly declares, they actually partook of Christ himself, for Christ is God’s food and drink for the hungry and thirsty. Still, in spite of the fact that they were sustained and nourished by God, they desired evil, became idolators, and indulged in sexual immorality. They had not sought the righteous ways of the Lord. God had called them to be faithful, but they had been struck down for idolatry. Apparently, the same kinds of temptations were facing the young Corinthian Christians within their pluralistic context. Perhaps they were overconfident, believing that their baptism and participation in the Lord’s Supper served as an amulet to protect them from idolatry, temptation, or sin. Thinking they were strong, they were in danger of falling (v. 12). Paul’s exhortation to endure is therefore not an appeal to their

strength or inner resources, but rather to trust in the God who is faithful (v. 13), and provides a way out of the testing.

Of the texts for this Sunday, the Gospel text alone does not speak of thirst or hunger. The passage opens with two brief references to those who had experienced an untimely death—Galileans whom Pilate had killed, and some Jerusalemites who had been crushed when the tower of Siloam fell on them. In light of these incidents, Jesus calls people to repent. Galileans and Jerusalemites who perished at the hand of Pilate and at the fall of the tower of Siloam were not “worse sinners” than any of the other inhabitants of Galilee or Judea; indeed, the passages seem to assume that they were no better and no worse as sinners than those whom Jesus is currently addressing. If the two stories speak of sin and its consequences, then they do so with a twist. Tragedy cannot be taken as evidence of sinfulness, and the absence of tragedy cannot be understood to imply righteousness.

Indeed, the parable of the fig tree is evidence that God’s mercy stays the hand of God’s judgment. In other words, if Jesus’ hearers think that because they have not been judged, it is evidence of their righteousness, the parable of the fig tree suggests that it is because of the mercy of God that they have been spared.

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT: THE GOD WHO RECONCILES

Three passages in the lectionary for the fourth Sunday in Lent deal with the themes of sin, forgiveness, and reconciliation, albeit in different ways. In Ps 32, the psalmist offers praise and thanksgiving for God’s steadfast love towards sinners. The sinners are those who know and acknowledge their transgression, sin, and iniquity (vv. 1–2), and who know themselves to be righteous, insofar as they have confessed their sin and been forgiven (v. 5), and are therefore counted as righteous (v. 2) before the Lord.

Similarly, in his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes of the “great exchange” that takes place in Christ. As Paul cryptically puts it, righteousness became sin, so that sin might become righteousness before God, thus reconciling sinners to himself. The familiar metaphor may well come from the sphere of political negotiation. So, for example, in narrating the wars between Antony and Caesar, and between Herod and the Arabians, the first-century Jewish historian Josephus speaks of the work of the ambassadors as “making peace” (Josephus, *Ant.* 15.136), so as to reconcile enemies to each other. In Paul’s view, God has taken the initiative and sent ambassadors to make peace, “reconciling to world to himself.” The subject of

the sentence is God, and the verbs are active: God reconciles his enemies to himself; they do not need to reconcile God to themselves. Those reconciled to God have come under a new lordship and engage in a new way of living: they are part of God's new creation. Now Paul is called to become an ambassador of God's peace and reconciliation, but the task of representing Christ in the world, and of embodying God's reconciliation, is not limited to the apostles. It is to be the lifestyle of all those who are in Christ, for whom the old way of living and the old allegiances have passed away, giving way to the new.

This theme of embodying God's reconciling love is sounded loud and clear in one of Jesus' best known parables, the parable of the so-called "prodigal son." Shifting the focus from the spendthrift son to his patient father, some commentators have renamed this "The Waiting Father." I suggest that the parable might aptly be named "The Reconciling Father." The father not only welcomes his younger son with enthusiasm and delight, but also he seeks to reconcile his two sons to each other, to get his older son to come in, sit down at table, and enjoy the celebration of welcoming the sinner home. But the older son, rightfully miffed with his younger brother's behavior, is also angry with his father, who seems all too gullible and far too forgiving in welcoming his son home.

According to Luke, Jesus told this parable because the Pharisees grumbled that Jesus ate with toll collectors and sinners. Why should Jesus, a prophet and teacher who claimed to speak for God, welcome such riffraff to eat, and why should the Pharisees risk defilement by joining the party? Did Jesus really mean to imply that God had no concern for righteousness, for faithfulness to the covenant? Could someone dare to flout the ways of the father and not be taken to task in some way or another? But Jesus, set on seeking the lost, wants these two brothers, Pharisees and sinners, to sit down and feast together. He wants to call the people of Israel together, to join in a foretaste of the messianic banquet, and to celebrate the coming kingdom of God. The love of the father for both sons, and the animosity of the older to the younger, are palpable in the father's persistent reference to his younger son as "your brother" and the older son's persistent description of him as "your son." Indeed, they are brothers; and the father wants them to feast joyously together.

Quite a different feast was provided by God for the children of Israel in their journey from Egypt to the promised land. The text from Joshua reminds us that as the Israelites wandered in the wilderness, God provided them with manna, right up until the eve of their entry into the promised land. And when the manna ceased, on the eve of Passover, "they ate the crops of the land of Canaan" (5:12). The story of the Israelites' trek through the wilderness begins and ends

with Passover, and is characterized all the way through by God's provision for them. God may not have spread a literal feast in the desert, but he did not abandon his people, leading them safely to the promised land. Even as the prodigal returned to his homeland to feast at the table of his father, so the Israelites entered the promised land to eat its fruits as the fulfillment of God's promises.

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT: GOD MAKES A WAY IN THE WILDERNESS

The occasion for the OT texts for this fifth and final Sunday in Lent is the return to Zion from the exile in Babylon. Isaiah celebrates this great return as the act of the Lord, the Holy One, Creator, and King of Israel (43:15). Even as God brought the Israelites out of Egypt by making a path through the sea (v. 16), so now God purposes to "make a way in the wilderness" (v. 19). If once God led his people through deep waters on dry ground, now he leads them through the wilderness regions where he promises to make rivers and provide for his thirsty people (vv. 19–20). These are God's "chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise."

And this is precisely what they did, as Ps 126 attests, when the Lord "restored the fortunes of Zion." Although the psalm does not explicitly say so, God's "restoration" of Zion's fortunes may well refer to Israel's return from exile in Babylon, which was an occasion for rejoicing, laughter, and praise. Even the nations marveled, "The Lord has done great things for them!" But the return of the people to Zion did not mean that "they all lived happily ever after." Psalm 126 is apparently a corporate prayer for God to act once again to restore the fortunes of his people. The psalm does not spell out exactly what the problem is; perhaps there has been a threat to the people's livelihood on account of crop failure or some other natural disaster or menace. In the face of this unknown threat, the community brings its petition before God, calling to mind God's deliverance in the past. That deliverance, and the people's joy and laughter in response to it, are remembered in the first part of the psalm (vv. 1–3) and are anticipated in the second part of the psalm (vv. 4–6). At present there is weeping; but remembrance of God's deliverance in the past brings hope for the future; weeping and tears will turn to joy. Hence, as the people look back with thanksgiving and joy, they also look forward with hope that God will do what he had done before, and "restore the fortunes of Zion." As God had made a way in the wilderness, so the people hope that God will do so again.

The Apostle Paul's brief autobiographical account in his letter to the Philippians (3:4–14) likewise looks two ways, to the past and the future—to the past with a somewhat matter-of-fact

recounting of his heritage in Judaism and his zeal for God and the law, and to the future with a passionate hope and longing for “the upward call of the prize in Christ Jesus.” In looking to the past, Paul recounts those aspects of his identity that allow him to have confidence before God: he belongs to the elect people of Israel, has been circumcised according to the commandment of God as a sign of his membership in the elect people, and has faithfully devoted himself to keeping the law that God had given to Israel. It is precisely in light of Paul’s affirmation of his past that his claims about the surpassing value of knowing Christ gain their potency. For in and through Christ, Paul looks to his past, and even to the precious gifts of God, with new eyes. Now those things that he rightfully valued as of great worth pale in comparison to the “surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”

But the path to knowing Christ and his resurrection lies through death, namely, the death of Jesus on the cross and Paul’s own “sharing” in the sufferings of Christ. He can speak of sharing in the suffering of Christ because of his belief that 1) the church is the body of Christ; thus, 2) when Christ suffers, the members of his body suffer; and, conversely, 3) when the members of his body suffer, Christ suffers. Even as Paul is joined with Christ in his suffering, so he will also be joined with Christ in his resurrection. The God who made a way for Israel through the wilderness, and has made a way through the wilderness of death and raised Jesus to life, will also make a way through the wilderness for those who belong to Christ, who are members of his body.

The Gospel lesson for this Sunday in Lent recounts the “anointing” of Jesus’ feet in the Gospel of John. The scene belongs together with Jesus’ washing of the feet of his disciples, an act that symbolizes their need for cleansing. But Mary does not wash Jesus’ feet. He has no need of “cleansing” (13:10; 17:19). Here, rather, she expresses her supreme devotion to Jesus by pouring out a large quantity of costly perfume. Mary anticipates the sacrifice Jesus is willing to make by preparing his body for the death he was about to face, expressing her love for the one who gives his life in love for the world. This is the one whose suffering Paul shares as he anticipates the resurrection he will also share.

THE SIXTH SUNDAY IN LENT: LITURGY OF THE PALMS, LITURGY OF THE PASSION

Psalm 118, the psalm appointed for Palm or Passion Sunday, is the first of six psalms called the “Hallel” Psalms (Pss 114–18), which are particularly connected with Passover, both in terms of their content and the occasion of their use. Psalm 118 is the last of this cycle of psalms, and calls on Israel to give thanks and praise to the God “whose steadfast love endures forever,” a

refrain repeated throughout this psalm, and in others as well (106:1; 107:1). The psalm recalls the words of Moses' song of praise and thanksgiving after their deliverance from the Egyptians in the crossing of the Red Sea (compare Exod 15:2 with Pss 118:14, 21). The experience of Israel becomes paradigmatic for the righteous, and thus in the second part of the psalm, the subject is the plural "we." Now the congregation together rejoices at God's marvelous deliverance, and prays for a similar blessing from the Lord.

This psalm has been taken in the NT as referring to God's raising Jesus up from the dead (Acts 4:11; 1 Pet 2:7). Jesus is "the stone that the builders rejected" who nevertheless "has become the chief cornerstone" (v. 22). On Palm Sunday, Christ entered into Jerusalem in triumph, in festive procession with branches, as the one who "comes in the name of the Lord" and who is blessed from the house of the Lord" (vv. 26–27). But the one who was celebrated with palm branches on Sunday was nailed to the cross on Friday—the stone that the builders rejected.

Jesus' entry to Jerusalem, and the allusion to Ps 118:26 ("Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord") are recounted in Luke 19. In Luke's account, the pilgrims to Jerusalem on Passover are conducting themselves essentially in line with Ps 118, praising "God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power they had seen" (Luke 19:38). Their words echo the angelic announcement at Jesus' birth, speaking of peace and glory in heaven (2:14). But not everyone shares the disciples' elation, and the Pharisees ask Jesus to silence his disciples. Jesus, however, asserts that even if all his followers were silent, the very stones—perhaps of the temple or the buildings in Jerusalem—would "shout out" (19:40). There is a witness to Jesus, even to the rejected Jesus, that cannot be silenced. The rejected stone becomes the head of the corner; the silenced people would lead the stones to cry out in praise.

In Isa 50, the experiences of God's servant trace a pattern that recurs in throughout the lectionary texts: although the servant (or, righteous one) has been beaten and insulted (vv. 6–7), he has not been disgraced or put to shame, because God will vindicate him (vv. 7–9). Whoever this servant might be—Israel (Isa 49:3) or a prophet with a mission to Israel (49:5)—he teaches with the goal of providing a word to "the weary," presumably the Israelites who have been in exile and anticipate a return to Zion (40:1). Although the servant faithfully and obediently speaks what God has taught him, the people do not respond appropriately. Instead, the servant finds himself insulted and abused, so much so that he adamantly asserts his calling and his trust in God, that he will be vindicated by the Lord.

The servant could have prayed Ps 31. In both Isa 50 and Ps 31, the speaker acknowledges the scorn or mocking of adversaries and yet reasserts his steadfast trust in God. One can well

imagine why these OT passages were thought to foreshadow the destiny of God's greatest servant, Jesus himself. In fact, in Luke Jesus prays the words of this psalm, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Ps 31:5). The quotation of this psalm occurs towards the very end of Luke's narration of Jesus' crucifixion, as he dies on the cross (Luke 23:46). In the midst of distress, sorrow, and misery (Ps 31:9), and in the face of those who persecute and plot against him (Ps 31:13, 15), Jesus, like the psalmist before him, gives voice to his trust in God (vv. 14–15), confident of God's deliverance (v. 15).

This is the obedient servant whose life, death, and resurrection are thematic to the hymn of Phil 2:5–11. God's servant in Isaiah sought to preach the word of God to the weary, was abused and rejected, but trusted in God's vindication; the psalmist experienced the scorn of his "enemies and persecutors" (v. 15), who plotted to take his life (v. 13), but trusted in God's vindication and protection. So, too, Jesus, who was in "the form (*morphē*) of God," emptied himself, and took "the form (*morphē*) of a slave" (*doulos*). Jesus took on the humiliation and misery of the slave, and even died a slave's death, a death by crucifixion.

There have been a great many exegetical and theological discussions about such items in this passage as the meaning of "the form of God," the Greek word translated here "something to be exploited," and how and when Christ "emptied himself." Perhaps, however, the point is rather that the God whose form—that is, whose glory and majesty—is seen in Christ, is a God who gives himself in love and compassion for his people. God does not remain isolated or aloof from his people, but in Christ comes to them, takes on the fate of the lowliest among them, and suffers a humiliating death. Christ has thus manifested the divine glory in human form and human weakness, and precisely as a result of the manifestation of the divine in and as the human, the human and divine Jesus, now exalted, will be acknowledged as Lord.

SUMMARY REFLECTIONS

The season of Lent is often thought of as a time of introspective self-examination in preparation for remembering again the saving death and resurrection of Jesus. And the various biblical texts set for Lent in the lectionary readings do call for a kind of conversion, if understood as a renewal, a turning again to God with confidence and trust, praise and thanksgiving, acknowledging the steadfast love and faithfulness of God that endure forever. These are quintessentially manifested in the death of Jesus on the cross, the supreme example of God's love, as well as of God's steadfast commitment to deliver his people from captivity, whether that be captivity in Egypt, or captivity to sin and death. In these Lenten texts, there is a call

to look back and to look forward—back with thanksgiving to what God has done, and forward in hope to what God will do. None of these texts underestimate the challenges of life lived between these poles, for there continues to be trouble and suffering and distress. But the one who trusts in God has great hope: and this hope rests on the secure foundation of the love of God in Christ Jesus, through whom God has reconciled the world to himself. This is what we celebrate at Easter. The season of Lent prepares one to receive that gift with ever more deepening gratitude and praise.

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Lenten Practice in a Musical Mode

FRANK BURCH BROWN

Professor of Religion and the Arts

Christian Theological Seminary

The music most pertinent to Lent often engages and stretches us in ways that, while intimately connected with faith, can nonetheless be difficult to put into words or to accommodate within Sunday worship. Yet faith shaped by worship and Scripture informs the very capacity to hear—and be changed by—vital resonances in such music.

For centuries in the West, the traditional forty days of Lent excluded Sundays. And though liturgical reform has restored Sundays to Lent in Western Christianity—as had generally been true in Eastern Christianity all along—a tension remains between Sunday and the tenor of the other days of Lent.

On the one hand, every Sunday being a “little Easter,” the tone of Lent rightly and inevitably lightens on Sundays, even when Lenten observance deprives Sunday worship of “Alleluias” and “Glorias.”¹ It is not, after all, as though Easter faith is forgotten during the forty days of Lent. Traditionally, Lent is associated with preparation for Easter baptism. Without Easter, there is no Lent in Christian terms.² On the other hand, the emphasis of Lent overall is on repentance, forgiveness, conversion, humility, service, fasting, and confrontation with our mortality—accompanied by a strong anticipation of, and indirect participation in, the events of the passion leading ultimately to Easter resurrection. Lent is appropriately observed in a state of keen awareness that, even for an Easter faith, the reign of God has not yet come on earth as in heaven. One could say with some justification that, inasmuch as Sunday provides a foretaste of heaven—above all in the Eastern Orthodox tradition—Lent tends to mute the Sunday spirit and delay the Easter effect, making the arrival of Easter all the more transformative and joyful.

APPROACHING LENT MUSICALLY

Given the contrast between Lent and the usual spirit of Sunday (as a mini-Easter), it should come as no surprise that the examples I offer of music for Lent are not specific to the Sunday service, although they could be used in that context. John Calvin had imagined centuries ago that Christians should enjoy religious music not only at church, in the context of preaching

*This essay is dedicated to the memory of my wife, Mary Harter Mitchell (1953–2009).

¹ For an informative, balanced, and practical discussion of the liturgical seasons of Lent and Easter/Pentecost, see Don Saliers, “From Ashes to Fire: Lent and Easter/Pentecost,” in Hoyt L. Hickman et al., *The New Handbook of the Christian Year: Based on the Revised Common Lectionary* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 105–235. Saliers acknowledges the tension between the main emphases of Lent and Sunday worship. He nonetheless stresses the importance of Sundays during Lent as well, including the crucial remembrance of “the mystery of our redemption in Christ,” made explicit in the Sunday liturgy; see 106–7.

² For Western Christians, Lent itself ends at sunset on Holy Thursday. For most, this is the start of the period known as the Easter Triduum (three days), which concludes at sunset of Easter Day itself. See *The New Handbook of the Christian Year*, 107.

and communion, but also in homes and in the fields. Unlike church music as such, which he insisted be sung in unison and unaccompanied, religious music in the outer world was expected by Calvin and others in the Reformed tradition, to develop its own qualities while still glorifying God—possibly adapted to instruments and arranged in multiple parts, for instance.³

In extending Lenten practice to draw on musical resources outside the church, we should also take into account that the artistic freedom found in the secular sphere has sometimes made for both an aesthetic and religious gain. Many of the songs Bono has written for the popular Irish rock group U2 have religious overtones and implications, such that their work has now been used as a basis for certain Eucharist services (U2 Eucharist). Whatever one may make of that, their music might have been blander and had a lesser impact even in a liturgical setting without the dynamism first unleashed at rock venues. Again, the music of the Pentecostal movement early in the twentieth century gave birth to modern African American gospel genres by tapping into existing styles, such as the blues, that had worldly and even “devilish” associations for many Christians at the time. That made such gospel music unwelcome in many churches before its wider acceptance in the 1930s. Gospel styles also made free use of instruments such as tambourines and the Hammond B-2 organ, which were likewise regarded at first as too secular to be allowed in most churches, including many African American congregations.⁴ To ignore in Lenten practice all music that originated in close conjunction with secular styles and venues would be to deprive the Christian life of some of its most gifted and transformative expressions.

In what follows, I offer examples for reflection rather than attempting any sort of survey of music relevant to Lent.⁵ The observations and claims I offer here are exploratory. They are intended to build—although implicitly and in a relatively non-technical way—on recent work in the theological and religious aesthetics of music.⁶

The present approach assumes a high regard for the powers of music, which I consider—in the good company of Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Karl Barth, and a host of others in our own time—as a potentially wondrous spiritual gift, and at times a unique mode of theological expression and interpretation. In this view, music does not merely illustrate or underscore religious stories and teachings so they can be remembered better, although it can do that. Music also infuses faith with heart and passion, and sometimes with true reverence and mystery. As the art of sound, music has the capacity to embody inner meaning, to motivate one for justice, to concentrate and intensify prayer, to

³ John Calvin, “Foreword [or Preface] to the Psalter,” translated by Charles Garside, in *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety* (ed. Elsie Anne McKee; Classics of Western Spirituality; New York: Paulist, 2001), 91–97. For a discussion of Calvin’s practical theology of music, see Frank Burch Brown, *Inclusive Yet Discerning: Navigating Worship Artfully* (The Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 99–113.

⁴ See Melva Wilson Costen, *In Spirit and In Truth: The Music of African American Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004); and Jon Michael Spencer, *Protest and Praise: Sacred Music of Black Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

⁵ For a listing of music that might be part such a survey, I recommend the *New Handbook of the Christian Year*, cited above.

⁶ See, for example, Jeremy S. Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007) and Albert Blackwell, *The Sacred in Music* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999).

augment preaching, and to convey a shared sense of sacramental presence in relation to time and, it may be, eternity. Much music delights us and glorifies God through its beauty. But music also attunes our “felt” world to emotion and meaning simultaneously, thereby shaping the spiritual life of music-maker and listener alike—whether in solitude or in community, and in ways that go beyond words alone.⁷

MUSIC OF THE WILDERNESS TIME

In a recent book of reflections on music and spiritual practice that Don Saliers co-authored with his daughter Emily Saliers (a member of the Grammy-Award winning duo the Indigo Girls), the father—who is a musician as well as liturgist—makes special mention of the sacred music of the jazz pianist Dave Brubeck (born in 1920).⁸ Brubeck’s pursuit of jazz as a medium of sacred expression had precedent, of course—most conspicuously, the sacred concerts of the great Duke Ellington. But Brubeck, who is a devout Catholic, always had his own unique style and continues his sacred composition in new performances today. Although Brubeck was trained in classical music as well as jazz, he always excelled at improvisation, which is far more prevalent in jazz than in classical music. For most of his career, Brubeck played with a particular group, which in the years of his greatest fame was a quartet in which he was joined by the celebrated alto sax player Paul Desmond, bassist Eugene Wright, and Joe Morello on the drums. This is the group that recorded Brubeck’s “Forty Days,” which was also incorporated into his first oratorio *Light in the Wilderness* (1968, with Eric Kunzel and the Cincinnati Symphony), and is something that the quartet recorded separately and took on tour with its own personnel.

The Gospel reading for the first Sunday in Lent, from Luke 4, recounts the story of the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness while being tempted by the Devil. At once we are made aware of the arduous nature even of a Spirit-led journey, which can take one into inhospitable territory—although Jesus was as faithful in those forty days of testing as Israel was unfaithful in its forty years in the wilderness. “Forty Days” offers a musical meditation (lasting roughly six and a half minutes) on this time of testing. Opening with a short, slow exposition of a modal-sounding melody harmonized almost in a chorale fashion, but with a slightly Middle Eastern flavor, the music then moves on at a faster pace. The best-known audio recording of “Forty Days” is on the Columbia/Legacy recording *Time In* (1966). That recording includes improvised solos by Desmond on sax, Wright on bass, and then Brubeck himself.⁹

The modal-sounding cast of the music, using a scale that one could simply describe as sounding more minor than major, creates a haunting quality that can pervade one’s mind

⁷ See Frank Burch Brown, “Music,” in the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Emotion* (ed. John Corrigan; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 200–222.

⁸ Don Saliers and Emily Saliers, *A Song to Sing, A Life to Live: Reflections on Music as Spiritual Practice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 156–57.

⁹ Dave Brubeck, *Time In*, Columbia/Legacy B0002VYSSC, 1966; remastered 2004.

and memory long after the music is done. The faster section, however, is propelled by something else—namely, what is evidently a 5/4 meter. The bass player underlines the beats, which the drummer also punctuates, adding syncopated splashes of sonic color on the cymbals. Unlike more familiar time signatures such as 3/4 and 4/4, the unusual 5/4 division of beats has an inherently restless quality since it naturally subdivides repeatedly into a unit of three followed by a unit of two, in a continuous, rapidly alternating pattern. This metrical asymmetry is something Brubeck is well known for having pioneered in jazz in albums of the 1960s such as *Time Out* and *Time Further Out*.¹⁰ Here the 5/4 meter creates something like an undercurrent of questing and questioning.

On *Time In*, Desmond's sax solo, while characteristically fluid, builds considerable intensity through cascades of runs and several high wails. After the inevitably quieter acoustic bass solo, Brubeck's piano playing likewise reaches a high level of intensity with rippling arpeggios and percussive stacks of chords before it subsides back into a recap of the unadorned theme. With the title in mind and the biblical story in the background, one feels some justification in hearing Brubeck's main tune and its harmonization—which the improvisations all use as their point of departure—as a kind of “Jesus in the Wilderness” motif. Whether the improvisations are ever meant to allude specifically to the tempter as well as to the tempted or to specific temptations cannot be decided definitively on the basis of what one hears in the music. But as interpreters, we are likely to hear the improvised changes in the theme as suggesting, at the least, different aspects of the experience of Jesus during the forty days of temptation.

The contrast is fascinating between this rendition and a performance videoed live in Berlin in 1966, now available on YouTube.¹¹ While the tempo as a whole in the Berlin performance is faster, the overall timing is basically the same. The improvised material is very different, however, and the effect is of a lengthier excursion. Desmond's Berlin solo is more laid back, cooler, more suave, though highly imaginative in its figurations, which circle about (or up and down) rapidly. Instead of Wright taking a solo on the bass, Brubeck gives a more extended solo at the piano. At the four minute mark, the piano solo becomes radically more adventurous in harmony and texture. Slowly and quietly, Brubeck introduces highly dissonant sounds as he ventures into polytonality (playing in more than one musical key at once), using widely spaced chords, both high and low, which he strikes in a manner that seems to open up voids and to evoke something like a desert night under stars. Then Brubeck suddenly crashes down with savage, off-beat tone clusters played fortissimo, possibly connoting bouts with an aggressive tempter. Subsequently, Brubeck hammers out a series of chords based on the theme, but accompanied by a steady stream of eighth notes in the left hand. The closing recap of what

¹⁰ Saliers emphasizes the influence here of Brubeck's classical composition teacher Darius Milhaud, whose style at times incorporated jazz influences. See Saliers, *A Song to Sing, A Life to Live*, 156.

¹¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-8PQBYEKHHg>, courtesy of Astrotype, posted May 24, 2007.

I am calling the “Jesus in the Wilderness” tune in its more or less original guise is nevertheless more forcefully set forth than at the beginning, although with soft passages. It all ends with an emphatic octave in the left hand, a decisive and resolute denouement.

I have given a relatively detailed description of the music, not because one cannot listen for oneself (using downloads of both performances, if nothing else), but because it is not always easy to notice what is transpiring, musically. By design, I am asking us to ponder an instance where instrumental music with spiritual depth and intensity engages us without a text, so that, as interpreters of Bible, theology, and liturgy, we cannot follow a natural predilection to focus and even fixate on words and thereby neglect the music—which would miss a major element in why one is listening to music to begin with.

As “Forty Days” reminds us, music without words typically occurs in a context that orients our attention and causes us to hear certain things “in” the music as we listen to the sounds themselves. Indeed, for human beings, what we hear “in” the sounds is part of how the music actually sounds to us, though some other kind of creature—or a person entirely new to jazz—might hear very different things in the music. In this case, for instance, the wide spacing of the dissonant chords struck softly on the piano, in the latter portion of the Berlin performance, seems to convey a sense of a solitary venture beyond what is familiar and protected, and of radical exposure in an alien environment. Later the chords sound to us agitated and violent (though they are literally just loud and accented). No matter that the same dissonant patterns might sound relatively mild in the midst of a Stravinsky ballet such as *The Rite of Spring* or a modern horror movie. There are thus feelings or “meanings” that the music itself conveys or expresses to an attentive listener, without words. Yet what comes across musically are not merely the literal sounds, since a dog might hear all the same sounds and not take in the music of “Forty Days,” at least in the way humans do.¹²

Not all of what we are invited to hear in “Forty Days” is communicated by the music alone, however. Some of that is shaped by the words of the title and the biblical story behind them. In that sense, words do come into play, just as in a liturgy the spoken words give added meaning to actions and gestures done silently, or to music played in response. In “Forty Days,” it takes only a little imagination to hear hints of the Middle East and the openness of arid wilderness. Desmond’s devilishly difficult sax solo, so suave and cool and unflappable in the Berlin version, might conceivably suggest a wily foe (the devil as sophisticate), whereas the sax in the strictly audio recording sounds more overtly aggressive. Brubeck’s Berlin solo is more experimental, projecting a sense of uncertain wandering and feeling one’s way into the unknown—something entirely appropriate

¹² I once had a hound that loved to lie under the grand piano when the music was played loudly from the depths, because he wanted to howl with the roaring music—clearly for reasons obscure to us humans.

to Lent with its emphasis on humility. The eventual percussive blows delivered on the piano sound wickedly assaulting, as I have already noted. When the theme returns in a form similar to the beginning—again someone familiar with the biblical story could hear it as a “Jesus” motif—it comes back with a more definite character, more resolved. The Tempter has been vanquished, one feels.

In either performance, the listener experiences the music as something that is undergone, not merely “listened to.” Just as Luke in his Gospel condenses the entire forty-day wilderness experience into a mere thirteen verses, Brubeck and his quartet condenses Jesus’ time in the wilderness into six and a half memorable minutes.

None of the interpretation I have offered should be imposed literally or rigidly. The associations I have suggested are not strictly verifiable and they are not necessary to musical enjoyment. But, in a Lenten mode, they do lead one to explore and share more fully in the sense of Jesus’ spirit-led venture into a time of trial as we follow the strange, haunting beauty of the theme of the one being “tested”—a theme that, through its various trials persists and finally emerges in a new light. While “Forty Days” is not church music, it is music with which we of the church might well commence Lent.

MESSIAH IN LENTEN CONTEXT¹³

In our ongoing encounters with today’s church music, many of us have reached the point where virtually nothing can surprise us. Some of us can recall when we first heard in church the daringly avant-garde classical music of French composer Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992), perhaps in the form of deep dissonances rumbling from an organ loft or else the same organ twittering a transcribed exotic bird-song. (Messiaen, in addition to being a composer and Catholic visionary, was an ornithologist.) Some may remember being startled and awakened by jazzy elements in Leonard Bernstein’s *Chichester Psalms* (1965), which in its second number interrupts its tranquil setting of Ps 23, for soprano solo, with a rhythmically animated and melodically jagged setting of Ps 2, for men’s voices: “Why do the nations rage, and the people imagine a vain thing?”—disturbing echoes of which persist even upon the return of the more tranquil music. Or, more recently, one could have been almost equally startled by the more classical-sounding elements in Dave Brubeck’s own new mass: *To Hope!—A Celebration* (1996). In addition, many people of various classes and cultures have probably felt challenged, both positively and negatively, by Christian rap and Christian heavy metal, or have been struck by the moves the latest praise bands make not just with voices but also with hands and bodies.

¹³ An earlier version of portions of this discussion of *Messiah* was part of a plenary address I gave in January 2003 to the annual meeting of the North American Academy of Liturgy, which I want both to acknowledge and thank.

We begin to expect the unexpected. And we may increasingly wonder what criteria remain—however flexible those may be—for discerning which music to affirm as most fitting for church or indeed for Christian enjoyment and spiritual practice outside the church (as Calvin had hoped in a far different time and with nothing like the present situation in mind). In this regard, it seems appropriate during Lent to exercise two disciplines that, while frequently in tension, might best characterize Christian responsiveness and responsibility in relation to the endless possibilities of music today. The first is to search for greater inclusiveness and diversity, not only for the sake of greater outreach but also for the sake of a richer and more wide-ranging expression and interpretation of faith itself. The second is to cultivate, in all humility, greater discernment and more finely tuned discrimination (in a positive sense).¹⁴ This is by no means to advocate a reactionary re-entrenchment but rather to develop the sort of discipline and charitable discernment that Lent, of all seasons, seems to call for in a special way.

The question of what Christians are to do in Lent and in general with increasingly abundant and varied musical resources, often secular in origin, is certainly nothing new. Nor is it trivial. It is intrinsic to the whole complex, vital question of the relation of Christianity to the cultures of the wider world. I want now to examine a particularly notable historical example by reflecting on how in England religious oratorio arose and flourished—often during Lent—but, for interesting reasons, did not in that period come to flower as church music. I will discuss two brief numbers from Handel's *Messiah*. That is largely because of the work's virtually world-wide familiarity and its influence. I would also emphasize, however, that there are numerous other excellent and moving Handel oratorios, almost all based on stories from the OT. Handel's last oratorio, *Jephtha* (1752), is particularly searching in relation to matters of mercy and forgiveness. It relates the tale of Jephtha's oath and the resultant but unforeseen impending sacrifice of Jephtha's daughter (whose death the librettist changes to consignment to a life of virginity). While the music moves on to a happy ending, it has us confront questions we must wrestle with—and in some sense live faithfully with—regarding not only human responsibility but also divine love and justice.¹⁵

English oratorios in Handel's era were not church music. Even Handel's *Messiah*, which premiered in a theater in Dublin, was rarely performed in church during Handel's lifetime. Oratorios did not fit the scope of a normal worship service. Moreover, they were essentially musical dramas shorn of staging, or in effect sacred operas without the acting, costumes, or scenery. Furthermore, in eighteenth-century England, much influenced by the spirit of Calvinism and specifically by Puritanism, the theatrical character of oratorios made them seem ill suited to the church. Even when removed to the safe distance of the theater or concert hall, they remained controversial

¹⁴ See Frank Burch Brown, *Inclusive Yet Discerning and Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religious Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁵ For a study of Handel's oratorios in their religious and cultural context, see Ruth Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth Century Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

among some church people because of the blend between sacred story and worldly setting. And in the theaters or other secular venues for concerts, operas were banished during Lent. Oratorios being exempt from this ban, they accordingly became immensely popular as, among other things, a form of Lenten religious entertainment in the fullest sense—genuinely religious and genuinely entertaining.¹⁶

George Friedrich Handel (1685–1759) intended his sacred oratorio *Messiah* to be performed in Lent—in Holy Week, to be precise—even though he quickly approved it for other times of year, and though later performances in England and America have occurred more often in and around the Christmas season. Given the sacred and originally Lenten context of the work, it could seem especially audacious that, for this purpose, Handel drew in part on the music of secular love duets he had written only a couple of months before. But he did just that when he set about composing *Messiah* in a mere twenty-four days in August and September of the year 1741. One number from Handel’s chamber duet cantata “No, di voi non vo’ fidarmi” (HWV 189) reappears, with modifications, in *Messiah* as the chorus “For Unto Us a Child Is Born” (Isa 9:6). Another part of the same secular cantata supplies musical material for the more specifically Lenten chorus “All We Like Sheep Have Gone Astray,” a setting of Isa 53:6.

The Italian text of the duet Handel raided for these two choruses had in the first part addressed the pagan deities love and beauty: “No, di voi non vo’ fidarmi”: “No, I do not trust you two, blind Love, cruel beauty! Too often have you deities lied and flattered.”¹⁷ The music of that duet and the music of “For Unto Us a Child Is Born” are scarcely distinguishable in some ways.

The more one listens, however, the more different the two versions of the music sound. The biggest difference, apart from the rearrangement of the duet for an entire chorus, is that “For Unto Us” twice includes a passage nowhere to be found in the love duet, and it comes at a moment that is religiously climactic. It is the four-part, homophonic passage where the choir all sings, “Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.” Here is where the music reveals and hails the identity of the Messiah (from a traditional Christian perspective, to be sure) and veritably ascribes lordship and divinity to him. That part of the text did not suit the music Handel had drawn from the secular cantata and yet it was certainly not optional among the Scriptures collected and organized by Handel’s demanding librettist William Jennens. Handel, always one to make a virtue of necessity, treats this as an opportunity. The new music he provides for the words beginning with “Wonderful Counselor” serves as a moment of transformative recognition, thereby fulfilling a distinctly religious purpose.

¹⁶ Whether performed in Lent or at some other season, however, Handel’s *Messiah* was found objectionable by many members of the clergy and some of their flock, because of the perceived sacrilege in the choice of venue. While deeming it unsuitable to church settings, they criticized its performance in playhouses. That is because *Messiah* ventured to focus on the most sacred subject of the Christian faith, in contrast to keeping at a safer distance with themes from the OT. For years, in order to dampen such objections, Handel felt it prudent generally to advertise performances of the work under the generic title *A Sacred Oratorio* instead of using the title *Messiah*. See Robert Manson Myers, *Handel’s Messiah: A Touchstone of Taste* (New York: Octagon, 1971), 113–24.

¹⁷ Text trans. Avril Bardoni, *Handel: Arcadian Duets*, Le Concert d’Astrée, cond. Emmanuelle Haïm, Virgin Veritas CD 7243 5 45524 2 7, 2002.

Messiah has been called, somewhat too enthusiastically, “the first instance in the history of music of an attempt to view the mighty drama of human redemption from an artistic standpoint.”¹⁸ (One has to bear in mind that the author of that statement thought of Bach’s *Saint Matthew Passion* not as art but as a “church service” and of Bach as an artist secondarily, or only “accidentally.”¹⁹) The point is worth pondering, however, because Lent is a season for reflecting on the saving work of Christ, and *Messiah* in its entirety is relevant to that activity. Unusual for an oratorio, it really tells no story even while moving from prophecy to fulfillment using Scriptures regarding the birth of Jesus, the passion and resurrection, and eschatological hope and expectation. It does not end with the “Hallelujah” chorus, as popularly assumed, but with a sublime pair of choruses: “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain” coupled with a long, transporting “Amen.” As indicated, all this is relevant to Lenten practice. It vivifies faith and conveys the meaning of Christ’s saving work in new ways.

Our second and final example from *Messiah* is more expressly relevant to Lent than the first. It comes directly from the Pascal section of *Messiah* concerning the suffering Lamb who redeems. In the chorus “All We Like Sheep Have Gone Astray,” Handel reverts to his previously composed music for that same secular duet cantata that addresses the deceitfulness of love and beauty. In the cantata, the singers declared to love and beauty: “I know your tricks from experience; you are persistent tyrants.” Much of that duet music is redeployed in “All We Like Sheep Have Gone Astray.” But Handel does not stop at that, as one hears in comparing the concluding sections of each. His duet had drawn to a close with its accusation of love’s tyranny. In a dramatic manner, the similar music of “All We Like Sheep” sounds momentarily as though it might end at the same point. But the pivotal chord poises instead of concluding and then we are taken into a new key and tempo. From that moment the composer ushers in an extended coda that undergoes a complete transformation in tone.

How so? Earlier, the twists and turns of the rapid runs that the chorus sings all make it sound as though we sheep-like humans, while we may be going astray, are having a very good time of it. We are all heedless in our straying from the path. But towards the conclusion of “All We Like Sheep,” right where the duet’s music had stopped altogether, the chorus now goes on to sing entirely new music as a setting of the words: “But the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” The tempo now slows dramatically, the key shifts to minor, the music is pitched lower and grows increasingly hushed in concluding, whereupon the immense gravity of the situation sinks in. We suddenly must contemplate the consequences of our sin and the weight of our iniquity, which is borne by the one proclaimed the Lamb of God. Here, again, is plain evidence that Handel, even when—precisely when—reworking his own secular musical sources, took care to

¹⁸ R. A. Streatfeild, 1909, quoted in Jens Peter Larsen, *Handel’s Messiah* (2d ed.; New York: W.W. Norton, 1979), 96.

¹⁹ Peter Jacobi, *The Messiah Book: The Life and Times of G. F. Handel’s Greatest Hit* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1982), 9–10.

push them into what T. S. Eliot in his *Four Quartets* would later call “another dimension.”

One could argue, I suppose, that all Handel has done is to recognize, as a good Baroque composer, that the Scripture at certain points calls for a different *affekt*, a different emotional gesture, than the one supplied by the secular music up to that point. In expressive form it just changes from being generically happy or joyful to being generically pensive or sorrowful. Therefore, someone might conclude, the entire religious significance of this and any other music comes from giving the music religious words and ideas. That would help explain how Handel can get away with using the same music for secular and religious purposes. Turning anything musical into religious music would then be just a matter of changing the words. But there are some important things this thinking does not adequately explain or even address.

We do not need to dig very deeply into baroque music theory to explore these points in terms that come from Handel’s own time and that are worth contemplating briefly in their own right. One of the more prominent Baroque theorists and a composer himself, Johann Mattheson, was known to Handel in person. Mattheson and many others argued that music employs a kind of rhetoric so as to express and arouse human affections or feelings. An affection, Mattheson said, “is not simply this or that specific word, but the entire sense and context of an oration.”²⁰ Thus music was judged to have persuasive and emotive power. And that power itself was deemed the same whether exercised in opera or in church cantatas or oratorios. Mattheson asserted,

In church . . . I have precisely the same idea about music as in the opera, that is to say: I want to stir the listener’s mind and get it moving in a certain way, whether toward a feeling of love, compassion, joy or sadness, etc. . . . Especially here, during worship, intense, serious, long-lasting, and extremely profound emotions are needed.²¹

Whereas some scholars have taken that passage to mean that music has the same aims whether in church or in the theater, Mattheson seems in fact to be saying something quite different. While the powers and means of music are the same wherever it is practiced, it is commonly the aim of church music, and presumably of religious music in general, to express emotions that are “intense, serious, long-lasting, and extremely profound.” And that, we can say, distinguishes much religious music from secular, although Mattheson leaves it up to us to add that some of the feelings expressed in religious music are less often found in other music—feelings such as reverence, a love of God and neighbor, a sense of the holy.

Words and music, in the right combination, function inseparably, the way smell and taste combine to create for us the flavor of food. For this reason, in the experience of many, the meaning of a great many of the paschal Scriptures set in Handel’s *Messiah* comes through most

²⁰ Johann Mattheson, quoted in Ulrich Leisinger, “Affections, Rhetoric, and Musical Expression,” in Christoph Wolff, ed., *The World of the Bach Cantatas: Johann Sebastian Bach’s Early Sacred Cantatas* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 186.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 186.

vividly and indelibly when wed to this very music. John Wesley, who was ordinarily no fan of Handel's kind of music, recorded in his journal: "I went to the cathedral to hear Mr. Handel's *Messiah*. I doubt if that congregation was ever so serious at a sermon as they were during this performance."²² Wesley's comment, albeit possibly tinged with envy, acknowledges how Handel's musical setting of Scripture commands attention of the kind that would be appropriate for a sermon—if only, we might add, the sermon were as artful as Handel's music.

Some few modern Handel scholars have downplayed Handel's religiosity and made much of the fact that, undeniably, he thought of his oratorios as entertainment of a sort. There is no way to prove the veracity of the report that, in the process of composing *Messiah*, Handel at one point exclaimed: "I did think I did see all Heaven before me and the great God Himself." Nor can we know how reliable the story is that Handel, on being complimented by Lord Kinoull on the "noble entertainment," replied, "My Lord I should be sorry if I only entertained them, I wish to make them better."²³ We do know, however, that Handel, although perhaps merely following the convention in which J. S. Bach had also participated, inscribed the end of *Messiah* with the letters SDG, for *Soli Deo Gloria*, "To God alone the glory."²⁴ There is an early and quite plausible anecdote according to which Handel claimed that he knew his Bible at least as well as any bishop.²⁵ And there is apparently no doubt that, upon nearing death, Handel expressed the wish "to die on Good Friday in the hope of rejoining the good God, my sweet Lord and Saviour, on the day of his Resurrection." The day he actually died was Holy Saturday, April 14, 1759.²⁶

CODA

We have, in the case of *Messiah*, a wonderful and instructive irony. *Messiah* was presented in a style and manner that the churches of Handel's time would rarely accommodate, whether in Lent or some other time. Yet, despite lingering suspicions of performing sacred texts in a theater, *Messiah* was attended by the church as well as the unchurched. And on both sides, people testified to having been transported to visionary regions previously unimagined, and shaken by religious convictions rarely felt in church itself.

We should not, however, derive from this a simplistic conclusion as to the self-sufficiency of music beyond the church and other communities of faith. Handel's audience during Lent would not have heard his music the same way if they had not been shaped at least indirectly by the traditions and Lenten practices of the church itself and by a prior sense of Scripture. Certainly that can be said, as well, of encounters with Brubeck's "Forty Days." And the same must be the case today when it comes to discerning the nuances and deeper dimensions of

²² John Wesley, quoted in Richard Lockett, *Handel's Messiah* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1992), 183.

²³ Quoted in Lockett, *Handel's Messiah*, 175.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁶ Jacobi, *The Messiah Book*, 63.

works by Irishman James MacMillan, a composer of much music deeply informed both by social conscience and Catholic faith. It applies to encounters with the Eastern Orthodox expressions of spirituality in the music of Arvo Pärt, or indeed to attuning oneself to the “spiritual vibes” of U2, or the core message of change from religious rappers. Accordingly, we should acknowledge that the church in Lent, in its worship and daily life, lends us ears that can potentially hear a special resonance in music in ways that are unavailable to purely secular listening and music-making. During Lent, it would be desirable to cultivate the capacity to discern which music has a potential religious calling, and to recognize that—perhaps also to respond by making new music, or by making old music anew, in a Lenten spirit of humility, penitence, and hope.

Ashes, Shadows, and Crosses: Visualizing Lent

ROBIN M. JENSEN

*Professor of the History of Christian Art and Worship
Vanderbilt Divinity School*

Lent is not normally thought of as a time for adding to or enriching the church's liturgy with visual art. This essay explores possibilities for using visual art that corresponds to the purpose of the season of Lent as a time for somber reflection and reconciliation.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the Lenten season is not one that is rich in visual art. In fact, prior to the revision of the liturgy mandated by Vatican II, Roman Catholic churches typically veiled their crosses and statuary for the last two weeks, only uncovering them during the singing of the Gloria in the Easter Vigil. Other practices in the more liturgical churches, such as “bidding farewell to the Alleluia,” banning floral arrangements, avoiding instrumental music, and limiting festivity at weddings expressed the penitential nature of the season in many Christian traditions. Similarly motivated by a sense of Lenten propriety, Christians from the reformed traditions were more reluctant than usual to augment their services of word and table with pictorial images or other displays of artwork, especially in the worship space. Lent and decoration were—and still are—antithetical to many minds. Although churches, both Protestant and Catholic, have loosened up some in the recent decades, most churchgoers instinctively sense that lavish displays or added ornamentation to the worship environment is inappropriate in this solemn season.

Outside of worship, Lent's austerities may motivate individuals to pass up movies, parties, concerts, or various kinds of entertainments, especially if they seem to be of a frivolous rather than serious nature. Likewise, they may choose to restrict pleasures that are less-than-wholesome for the body, mind, or soul, instead seeking forms of spiritual or bodily discipline, from giving up trivial pleasures to engaging in Bible study, joining faith-sharing groups, and undertaking works of charity. Lent is a time for both stripping down to the basics and examining values.

Arguably, such sensibilities are part of life's natural rhythms, necessary for maintaining some psychic, if not religious, balance. For northern hemisphere Christians, this liturgical season com-

mences in the time in between winter and spring, when the daylight hours are at a nadir and only gradually lengthening. Those in the upper states begin the Lenten journey in a barren landscape, lacking the bright colors that characterize the other seasons—spring’s pink and yellow, summer’s primary colors, or autumn’s warm gold and orange. The late winter world is more like a black and white photograph that has been tinged with sepia or plum. Its hues are the icy white and deep gray of bare branches, stacked firewood, muddy banks, and purple shadows on snow.

This restrained color palate has a subtle and soothing beauty in the way a mysterious fog-blanketed morning offers a new look at the world. And we may welcome the visual rest following a surfeit of jangling and vibrant Mardi Gras colors. Like the restrained and unaccompanied music of Lent, the simplifying of our visual environment helps us to settle into a contemplative mood and encourages us to focus. Our thoughts turn inward; our actions are measured, our diet spare. We conserve our energy, aware that we will need it soon, for the burst of labor and new life that lies ahead. For the present we are like those daffodil or tulip bulbs, planted in the fall, and now gathering strength in the cold darkness so that they might bloom all the more fulsomely when the sun and the warmth return. This is the season of introspection and reflection; quiet and silent growth.

Thus, the restriction of figurative art, fresh flowers, brightly colored banners, or other church adornments has an important and timely visual purpose. It is also an aesthetic statement unto itself, one that is particularly conducive to focused self-scrutiny and an earnest attempt at living a simpler, less indulgent life if not engaging in repentance of sin, rigorous fasting, self-denial, and personal sacrifice. The contrast of Lenten plainness with the lavishness of Christmas decorations, gift-giving, and holiday partying could be just what we need to treat ailing bank accounts or clogged arteries. Yet, Lenten spiritual disciplines should be more than prescribed medicine for intemperate and frenzied lives. They are the gift of concentration and challenge; abstinence in action.

So what are we “giving up” for Lent? Is art something that we should go without? The answer is not entirely yes or no. Rather, I want to suggest that Lent requires us to be more than usually mindful about the kind of art we put in our worship space, and especially conscious of how we use that art. Our sensibilities need to be accounted for and respected by taking care that what we see during worship and prayer augments and deepens rather than distracts.

This is why statues and even crucifixes were veiled in earlier times. Doing so was not a move against art but an attempt to simplify the visual environment, to help worshippers concen-

trate and focus on the essence of the liturgy. Nevertheless, the results must have made quite a dramatic statement. It was as if the church building had been prepared for mourning (something like turning family photographs to the wall after the death of a relative). The veiled objects were no less present for their coverings. Arguably, the congregation would have been more aware of them than ever. It's hard not to notice something that is draped, and its mystery is enticing. Furthermore, the actual act of veiling would have had a performative dimension, not unlike the stripping of the altar at the end of the Holy Thursday service—a ceremony undertaken in silence and half darkness. This ritual action likewise embodies profound loss and grief, and prepares the congregation for the shock of an open, empty tabernacle on Good Friday.

The lesson in this is not so much what we do not do, but about what we do. Not only does the Lenten liturgical environment need to be in stark contrast with what has gone before, it also needs to point to and prepare congregants for what will follow. It should be more than recovery from one party and regrouping for the next. Lent follows the journey of Jesus from the wilderness to the cross and asks us to be mindful of that journey, which was neither smooth nor unambiguously triumphant. Like Jesus, we should set our eyes on Jerusalem, knowing that victory does not come without sacrifice.

For now the journey, and not its culmination, is the focus. The pilgrimage begins with Ash Wednesday, when we acknowledge our mortality and the constitutive elements of our fragile existence—from dust to dust. Then we hear the stories of Jesus being tempted by Satan and are reminded that no one escapes trial and travail along life's path. Then, just at the point where we may wonder if we have the strength to continue, we have a glimpse of our goal. The cross awaits (as well as the resurrection). For the time being, however, we must pay close attention to the road.

For this, I propose that visual art or iconography for the season of Lent should incorporate the following aspects. First, it needs to be restrained and minimal in order to reinforce the penitential nature of the season. Second, it should be coordinated with the liturgical progression through the forty days, perhaps reflecting on the texts proclaimed in the assembly. Third, it should allow for personal as well as congregational interaction since Lent is a time for individual devotional practices as well as corporate worship. And fourth, it needs to draw our attention to the vulnerability of creation, the consequences of human sin, the glaring injustices of our society and, finally, our own mortality.

In this season of sparseness, visual images are central and powerful vehicles of meaning. They cannot be extraneous or simply decorative. Thoughtfully chosen partners and not com-

petitors with the preaching of the Word, they will support much weight. All that we do in worship is symbolic, but the visual elements may be remembered far longer than verbal discourse. So, much is at stake in how we imagine, introduce, and integrate them.

SIMPLE FORMS

The most obvious visual symbol of Lent is its lack of obvious visual symbols. From some point toward the end of Advent, most worship spaces become almost gaudy with greenery, candelabras, poinsettias, and life-sized nativity scenes. When the garlands, chrismons, and crèche are finally put away many worshipers will breathe a sigh of relief. Here is the church, basic, real, and ready to roll up its sleeves and get down to more serious business.

But Lent's arrival does not mean that the liturgical environment should not include meaningful visual art. The general removal of extraneous decoration is an opportunity to create a purposeful contrast with Christmas tinsel or the rich and royal ornaments of the kings' procession on Epiphany. One of the most dramatic ways to effect this contrast is by keeping the works simple and limiting their number.

Purple is the season's traditional liturgical color. It is supposed to connote penitence, but since it can also indicate royalty (pomp and circumstance), it may be worthwhile to seek out hues other than the vivid violet typically used for commercially manufactured banners and paraments. A broader palette might incorporate grayed down, quieter tones and subtler shades. Tints also could be varied week by week, making a symbolic statement about the progression through the forty days. Other colors might be added in limited doses to offer depth or even subtle contrast.

A design that is graphically simple is most effective, and even more appropriate in Lent. A minimalist approach to iconography is most suitable to the season. The basic rule, that "less is more" is apt. A single, central image is probably better than two or three different ones, and will be more conducive to focused prayer or meditation. Additionally, in keeping with the purpose of the season, its design should be artfully austere. Another consideration is scale. The work also needs to be large enough to be seen from the rear of the worship area. Art might be changed from week to week, either by replacing one work with another, or by gradually adding to (or removing something from) an original image.

Georgia O'Keeffe's *Black Cross, New Mexico* (1929), now in the Art Institute of Chicago, has many of these qualities. O'Keeffe's dramatically simple composition presents a dominating

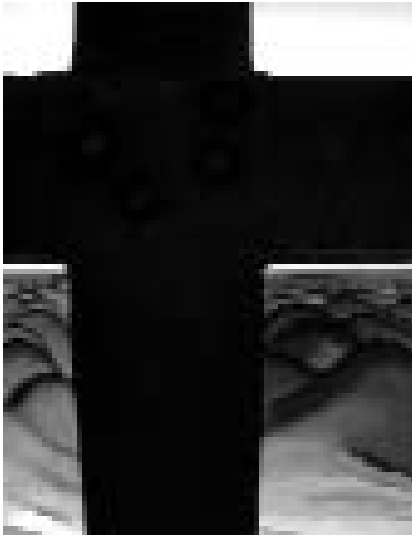


Fig. 1. Georgia O'Keeffe, American, 1887–1986, “Black Cross, New Mexico,” 1929, oil on canvas, 99.1 x 76.2 cm., Art Institute Purchase Fund, 1943.95, The Art Institute of Chicago.

black cross against a background of soft lavender, grey, brown, and rose toned hills (Fig. 1). A thin strip of glowing gold and red horizon edges the cross's horizontal bar and a lightening sky rises above it. These elements suggest sunrise and make a moving counterpoint with the deep black of the cross. The landscape's emptiness also alludes to the desert of O'Keeffe's New Mexico, and might remind viewers of the wilderness journey of Lent.

This interplay of darkness and light is another design element that should be considered in a Lenten environment. Bright lights may be dimmed or directed in order to create both focus and shadows. We might think, for example, of the way that artists like Caravaggio or Rembrandt used light to draw the viewer's eye to certain figures, or shaded other areas of mystery and created dramatic compositions and aided their visual narratives.

Physical material also matters. It might symbolically prick our skin, or at least be a little scratchy or rough, if not to the touch, then at least to the eyes. The penitential season used to be time for hair shirts and sackcloth. Although most of us would not subscribe to such practices, images we see can have a tactility that is expressed through texture.

Such texture is a key element in a work by Nashville artist and songwriter Julie Lee. Lee constructed her *Trash Crucifix* out of found objects, including barbed wire, rusted automobile parts, construction debris, a saw blade, chains, and rotting wood (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Julie Lee, “Trash Crucifix.” Photo credit: Steve Green, Vanderbilt Creative Services.

This sculpture made a large and bold statement about the beauty in ordinary things, even those things that might be overlooked as garbage or deemed ugly or unwanted. The artist, who worked with homeless people, wanted to express the identification of Christ with the “least of these” and to show viewers the potential for beauty in unlikely places. Recognizing that, we may be able even to place our personal misshapeness at the foot of the cross.

Finally, bearing in mind the principle that less is more, it is crucially important to take care with what is added to the liturgical environment. The absence of flowers is a symbol in itself. Feeling some need to fill empty space, so simply finding something to substitute (e.g., dried arrangements or collections of broken pottery) might detract more than add. This is also a good time to remove the general clutter of announcements, leaflets, forgotten umbrellas, or committee sign-up sheets from the narthex (perhaps making room for a special collection basket for donated food and clothing or a place to leave special prayer intentions). By contrast, emptying baptismal and holy water fonts is theologically confusing. Although intended to symbolize our thirst for the God (as the deer in Ps 42), it may suggest that Lent removes our baptism when, in fact, Lent is the time when we should be most attentive to the baptismal rite. If anything, the baptismal font might be placed in the center of the space, brimming with water.

LITURGICAL CONTINUITY

The baptismal significance of the season is one opportunity for integrating the visual setting of liturgy with its lived reality. Ash Wednesday inaugurates the season with a day for fasting as well for imposition of ashes. The words of the Ash Wednesday readings admonish us not to make an outward show of our piety; the visible ashes on our foreheads are not a mark of our righteousness, but a sign of our human sinfulness and transience. Solemnity and simplicity thus should characterize this service in particular, as well as its visual context. We should think of the fast as extending beyond our bellies to our eyes. As the words from Genesis remind us of our mortality (that we are from dust and to dust we will return), we receive the sign of the cross. The bowl of ashes, made from last year’s triumphant palms, and the cross on our foreheads is, arguably, enough iconography for this day.

Yet, the Genesis text reminds us that God is creator. Just as the words remind us that we will be dust, they also remind us that we arose from that dust, specifically in the creation of the human “Adam” from earth, moistened with water, and enlivened by God’s breath. This story may be literally symbolized in the setting out of the ashes near the water and oil of baptism, perhaps in some simple arrangement of those symbolic vessels in the worship space, to remind worshippers that the

season of Lent is the time when we remember our baptismal promises. In many churches, this is also the time when new members make their final preparations for reception into the church through the rituals of baptism or confirmation. In the early Christian centuries, the entire community accompanied these candidates as they undertook a new mode of life as they stepped out of the font and received the white alb of the newly baptized.

A simple handmade pottery bowl or jar could be a central image for this day. This vessel made by Minnesota artist and master potter Richard Bresnahan (Fig. 3), was fired in an enormous wood-burning kiln constructed under Bresnahan's supervision on the campus of St. John's University in Collegeville that is capable of holding up to 8,000 pieces at a time. Bresnahan and his students have sometimes filled and fired the kiln prior to Holy Week, tending it around the clock for more than ten days and opening it on Easter Sunday morning. Symbolically rolling the stone away from the tomb, the beauty inside shines forth.¹ These objects began, like Adam, as dry earth mixed with water to make them malleable. They were centered on a turning wheel, and raised and shaped by the potter's hands. Once formed, fire made them both durable and beautiful. Bresnahan, speaking of the tea bowl illustrated here says of its function: "The host prepares the garden and the tea house as if God were to be a guest. In a simple clay bowl pure water and green valleys refresh the soul of the seeker."²



Fig. 3. Richard Bresnahan, Wood Fired Tea Bowl. Photo credit: Brian Zehowski.

The fourth Sunday of Lent traditionally provides an opportunity for something different. In many Christian churches, this Sunday is called Refreshment Sunday or "*Laetare*" (Latin for "to rejoice"). According to custom, this Sunday grants a brief respite from Lenten austerities. As if a momentary glimpse of spring after a hard winter, vestments and paraments introduce some rose hues with the purple, and flowers might return—temporarily—to the sanctuary. Nevertheless, the day's joyous character should be tinged with a Lenten consciousness, since the journey is drawing nearer to the passion. This bittersweet dimension is expressed in the Gospel texts for the day, which all point to both death and resurrection: Year A's reading tells the story of Jesus raising Lazarus (John 11:1–45), Year B's is Christ's discourse on the grain of wheat (John 12:20–33), and Year C's pericope relates the event of the woman anointing Jesus' feet (John 12:1–8).

¹ On Richard Bresnahan and his work, see Matthew Welch, *Body of Clay, Soul of Fire: Richard Bresnahan and the Saint John's Pottery* (Afton, Minn.: Afton Historical Press, 2001) and Don Saliers, "Artist, Clay, Fire, Ritual: A Potter's Aesthetic," in *Visual Theology* (ed. Robin M. Jensen and Kimberly Vrudny; Collegeville: Liturgical, 2009), 95–108.

² From my email correspondence with Bresnahan, dated August 16, 2006.

Laetare might be an appropriate time to reintroduce pictorial art, perhaps art that illuminates the readings or offers non-verbal presentations of Scripture for meditation. In general, the readings assigned for Lent in the *Revised Common Lectionary* are frequent subjects for Christian art. Their vivid metaphors include the serpent held aloft in the wilderness, the cursed fig tree, the woman at the well asking for the water of eternal life, the Good Shepherd, and the Valley of the Dry Bones—the possibilities for symbolic or visual expression of these themes are virtually unlimited.

So long as they are in the public domain, artworks based on the Lenten readings can be temporarily projected on walls, cloth, or screens. They may be used as bulletin covers or devotional pamphlets. Brief meditations on the artwork might be solicited and shared from and among members of the congregation. For instance, an early Christian representation of the raising of Lazarus appears on a late third-century sarcophagus in the Vatican Museum and has been widely reproduced (Fig. 4). In this image, Mary, Lazarus' sister, kneels at Jesus' feet, her eyes fixed on the open tomb where her brother stands, still wrapped mummy-like in his grave clothes. Martha stands behind Jesus, the



Fig. 4. Jesus raising Lazarus, Third-century Christian Sarcophagus from the Vatican Museum, Rome. Photo credit: Robin Jensen.

expression on her face obscured by the damage to the work over the centuries. Jesus' confident posture, with outstretched right arm, pointing at Lazarus, is the focus of the composition. Two onlookers appear to be puzzled or even slightly repulsed by the scene.

Iconography drawn from the lectionary readings might be part of a congregational or small group Scripture study. Artworks can be used for a visual form of *Lectio Divina*. It is

best, however, if the selected works are not exclusively representational or figurative. Nor do they always need to reference directly the biblical narrative. Unlike so many predictable and often limiting illustrations in Sunday school workbooks, a truly comprehensive employment of visual art

for Scripture study will feature works with a wide range of styles, media, and artistic approaches.³ This is essential for stimulating imaginations and prompting new perspectives. One source for such images is the work, often available on the Internet, of talented photographers and photo-journalists.

For example, this photograph, by Michael Flecky, S.J. (Fig. 5) could be at the center of a far-ranging and engaging conversation as different people respond to the image and describe what they see in it. It might be the focus of prayer, or simply a stimulus to sharing stories of faith and perseverance in life's dark times. The way the photographer has manipulated light and texture, the contrast of the deep blacks with the different tones of gray give color to the image without it being colorful in the usual sense.⁴ These elements make this an ideal image for a Lenten setting, and this image of a young woman meditating through drawing presents a quiet moment that we may enter and share.

Scripture study groups may produce their own art as they read texts together, brainstorming ideas or images (even colors or geometric patterns) that come to mind as they react to the passages. As an example, in Year B, the OT reading is the story of Noah. Breaking from the children's illustrated Bible story figures of boats, doves, and rainbows to something challenging and creatively dynamic is often a by-product of a group's collaboration. The ancient baptismal symbolism of the flood as cleansing and the church as the saving ark might be a starting point, while reinforcing the baptismal aspects of Lent. The group can then go to work on thinking about the space, design, and function of a simple symbol that captures those ideas.



Fig. 5. Michael Flecky, *St. Michael's* 2004. Photo credit: Michael Flecky.

ART FOR PERSONAL DEVOTION

Lent is a time when people are especially introspective, and may choose to engage in

³ See, for example, the excellent three-year lectionary-based series, *Imaging the Word: An Arts and Lectionary Resource* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1994–1996).

⁴ Most recently see Michael Flecky, S.J., *Hopkins in Ireland: Pictures and Words* (Omaha: Creighton University Press, 2008).

special prayer practices or other spiritual disciplines. Labyrinths, installed on floors or mowed into lawns, are enormously popular these days, partly because they encourage structured, individual meditation. Many of these types of private devotions are enhanced by the incorporations of visual art. One of the most traditional is the observance of the Stations of the Cross (sometimes also called the *Via Crucis* or “Way of the Cross”).

The Stations of the Cross may have begun in Jerusalem, as pilgrims followed out a marked route that Jesus followed on his last day of earthly life. We know from the fourth-century pilgrim Egeria that it was traditional to read passages from the story of the passion at various “stations” in the Holy City. Later pilgrims attempted to follow in the very footsteps of Christ on his way to Golgotha. Such uniting of sacred geography with readings encouraged worshipers to be experientially and imaginatively engaged in the biblical narratives.

In the thirteenth century, Franciscan friars developed this imaginative devotional practice after being given administrative control of the holy places, and they then exported the idea to the West where it took root in churches far from the Holy Land. Instead of the actual places in Jerusalem, pictorial images were substituted, allowing worshipers to meditate on an image while hearing or reading passages describing the event depicted and offering a prayer before moving to the next “station.”

In the past few decades many churches, both Catholic and Protestant, have noted a resurgence of interest in the Stations, adapting them as appropriate, sometimes substituting certain biblical events for some of the fourteen traditional stations that depicted non-canonical stories (e.g., Veronica’s veil). Roman Catholics were allowed to move their stations inside the nave, usually to the side aisles of the church in the eighteenth century. More recently, Roman Catholics added a fifteenth station to commemorate Christ’s resurrection and in 1991, Pope John Paul II introduced a new series portraying only biblically based events. Thus the practice has been varied and evolving since its inception. The devotional readings and prayers designed to accompany them are usually printed in pamphlets to allow for individual or group observance.

Although most Roman Catholic churches have permanent stations installed around the time of the building’s construction, many have sought new versions of the stations from contemporary artists. In general, the renewal of interest in the practice has given rise to a wealth of new artistic interpretations, some even abstract expressions of the episodes.

Virginia Maksymowicz, a sculptor living in Philadelphia, produced one of these new sets of stations. In 2004, St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, commissioned them

from Maksymowicz, whose work typically includes parts of bodies cast from life and deals with social and political issues from her feminist perspective.⁵ In an essay in which she discusses this work, Maksymowicz admits that it was not easy to “come out” as a practicing Christian among her secular colleagues, and that this project was thus particularly challenging. Yet, she consciously works to reunite the secular and the sacred in her sculpture, and to produce works that are religiously powerful, while avoiding the merely decorative work that often fills our liturgical spaces. The result was a series of starkly simple images that arrested and focused the viewer’s eye on particular instances of universal human suffering embodied in the events leading up to and through Christ’s crucifixion. Station One simply shows hands bound with rope, an image that has contemporary and global significance (Fig. 6).

Not all churches will have the means to commission artists to produce new Stations of the Cross, however. This was the case with Belmont United Methodist Church in Nashville, Tennessee, when a young ministry staff member wished to introduce the devotion and asked for interested and willing volunteers to work together to produce a series of small installations around the interior walls of



Fig. 6. Virginia Maksymowicz, Station #1. Photo credit: Virginia Maksymowicz.

the main sanctuary. Fourteen teams of two or three individuals each constructed one of the stations, incorporating found objects and visual art. The finished pieces were set up on tables in the narthex and side aisles of the church and opened to the public at set daily hours. Visitors were invited to progress from station to station at their own pace, spending time in prayer and meditation as they interacted with each of the installations.

⁵ Virginia Maksymowicz discusses her work in “Reimagining Religious Art,” in *ARTS: A Journal for the Arts in Religious and Theological Studies* 19.1 (2007), 24–30.

RECONCILIATION

One of the universal Christian themes of Lent is reconciliation. Reconciliation involves self-examination, confessing sin, and seeking forgiveness from God and our neighbors for hurtful or thoughtless behavior and attitudes. Simultaneously we vow to try to live more just, loving, and generous lives. Often this forces us to face things about ourselves that at other times we might avoid. The arts can serve and support this aspect of Lent by raising our awareness of our personal failings, issuing prophetic calls to engagement, and fostering empathy for suffering others.

Another Nashville congregation, The Downtown Presbyterian Church, has had a long-standing program on the arts. An older, urban church located between high-rise condominiums, banks, office buildings, souvenir shops, and honky-tonk bars, the church serves lunch to a growing population of homeless persons along with a mix of Sunday and weekday worship services. The church also provides rent-free studio space to local artists (in exchange for participation in the church's extensive social justice ministries), and annually sponsors a series titled Dialogue: Interaction for Growth (D. I. G.) during Lent, which includes a juried art show and a film series.

In 2006, the D. I. G. exhibition featured the work of artists who were death row inmates, incarcerated in one of Tennessee's state prisons. The decision to solicit art works from the prisoners was made by the members of the Worship and Arts Committee after they decided on the theme "Human Sacrifice" for the art show as well as the film series. The decision was controversial; some congregants were victims of violence themselves and feared that exhibition might glorify the prisoners or appear to make a congregational statement against the death penalty. In the end, most agreed that while the works were not those of professionally trained artists, there were powerful inducements to ponder the possibility of reconciliation in the fact of human sin and failure. Moreover, they confronted the reality that the artists were complex beings, along with being perpetrators of heinous crimes. The work selected for the juried purchase prize was by Henry Hodges and titled *Home Sweet Home*. According to Ken Locke, the church's senior minister, the work, which shows a schematic of Hodges' cell, expresses his struggle to find some reconciliation with and in his situation.

A different artistic experiment took place at Reconciliation United Methodist Church in Durham, North Carolina. The name of this church reflects its self-understanding and mission:

We are a Christian community that seeks intentionally to include all races and cultural backgrounds. Our mission is to embody God's ministry of reconciliation

through our practice of worship, devotion, compassion, and justice. We believe that receiving and sharing God's all encompassing love is our greatest challenge and our only hope. (2 Cor 5:11–12)⁶

In 2008, Reconciliation United Methodist invited New Jersey artist Erling Hope to work with them to produce an artwork that would express their mission and congregational identity. Hope spent the first part of their time together getting to know the congregation and then engaging them in an art-making process themselves. They chose images and worked with paper and scissors to produce cut paper designs. Hope then took these images and arranged them in a radial pattern, using digital technology to redraw segments and repeating patterns in a spiral design. The final result, which is planned for the back wall of the sanctuary (Fig. 7), reflects the community as a group of individuals who, together, comprise the social body of Christ.

Like Reconciliation United Methodist Church, we should welcome the artists as well as the arts to be our guides through Lent. If we do, we may learn to pray and worship with our eyes as well as with our hearts and mouths. We may see things that will change our ways of thinking about our sacred stories, ourselves, and our world. The visual arts can teach us how to attend to the visible, external world of nature and of neighbors. External signs also point to invisible truths, and because they can do this, we need to practice thinking in images as well as in words. If we thoughtfully incorporate them in our Lenten journey, works of visual art can be our guides as well as our companions along the way.

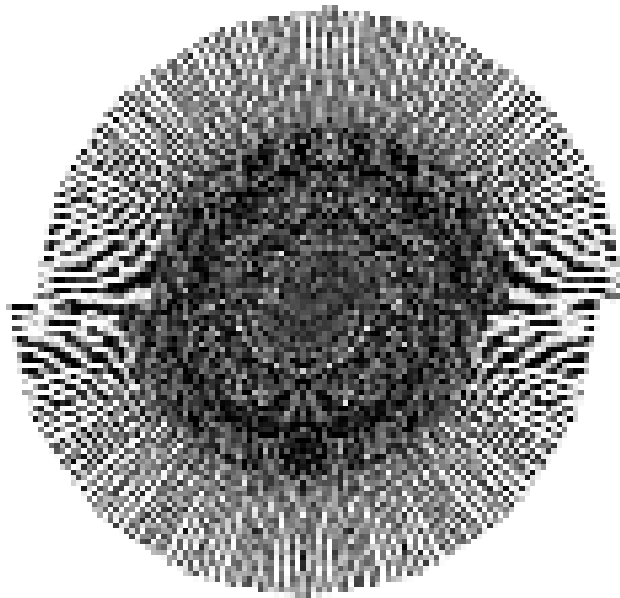


Fig. 7. Erling Hope, Composite Study for Reconciliation United Methodist Church. Photo credit: Erling Hope.

⁶ From the website of Reconciliation United Methodist Church: <http://site.rumcdurham.org/>.

Poetry as a Resource for Worship in the Lenten Season

RICHARD GRIFFITHS

Emeritus Professor of French Literature

King's College, London

This essay examines the suitability of poetry as a vehicle for prayer, worship and meditation. It takes two specific examples of Lenten courses based on poetry: one based on depictions of the events of Holy Week and one based on a discussion of the problem of suffering in a world created by a loving God. It also looks at the liturgical use of the arts in Holy Week services.

Poetry provides, in my experience, some of the most potent material for use in Christian devotions, whether in private meditation, or in the liturgical context, or in Lenten discussion groups. It will be worth asking ourselves two questions before we look at it more closely. Why does poetry have a more powerful effect, in this context, than ordinary prose? And what kind of poetry should one choose for this purpose? When we have answered these two questions, we can then look at the ways in which such poetry can be most effectively used.

POETRY AS A VEHICLE

“How shall we attempt to describe or express ultimate reality except through metaphor and symbol?”¹ In this statement, poet R. S. Thomas pinpoints the essential difference between poetry and prose. Prose is useful in relation to the things of this world. It can describe the material objects that surround us, and the concepts created by logical discourse. Poetry, on the other hand (and this includes “poetic prose”), takes us into another world of aesthetic experience, in which, mysteriously, we get some insight into what lies behind and beyond external reality.

Philosophers, over the years, have tried to explain the effect of the arts upon us, whether music, the visual arts, or poetry. What causes the “shiver down the spine” that these arts can create? The Christian would answer that it is the glimpse that we perceive, however dimly, of “ultimate reality.” The arts can help us to experience the “reflections in a mirror” that are

¹ R. S. Thomas, “A Frame for Poetry,” *Times Literary Supplement*, March 3, 1966, reprinted in Sandra Anstey, ed., *R. S. Thomas: Selected Prose* (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1983), 88–94.

the only glimpses we will get in this life of what we will eventually “know as we ourselves are known.”²

While it is easy to understand why music and the visual arts achieve this effect, using as they do components unrelated to discourse, poetry is a rather different matter. After all, it uses words, the same basic materials that prose does. Words, as used normally, are material tools to deal with the material world. Yet the same words that prose uses so pointlessly, can be transformed when they are used in poetry, where they are neither obscured nor constrained by the norms of logical discourse. In poetry, these same words can suggest, hint, give half-perceptions, draw unexpected parallels or double meanings, and create ambiguity, from which far more profound insights can be drawn. R. S. Thomas, in one of his poems, draws a contrast between the “aggression of fact” created by the words of prose, and the way in which poetry “fights language with its own tools.”³

It could thus be said that good poetry, whether religious or not, can be the basis for religious meditation (in that through the poet’s art we gain a glimpse into the ineffable). But in the religious context, there is of course far greater scope for meditation, worship or discussion if one chooses poetry with a Christian content. In this there is one potential drawback, however. If all great art, including poetry, can be seen as implicitly Christian, not all Christian poetry can be seen as “great,” or even good. There are three great dangers that such poetry finds difficult to avoid: sentimentality, piety, and banality. The Christian poet Norman Nicholson, in the introduction to his 1942 *Anthology of Religious Verse Designed for the Times*, describes the kind of Christian poetry that is only too common:

Many people think of “Religious Poetry” as moral uplift in rhyme or pious verse about the Good Shepherd—the literary equivalent of the pictures distributed by Sunday Schools at Christmas and Easter. There is no need to despise such verse or to doubt the sincerity of those who write it or enjoy it, but, to the more critical reader, the use of conventional images and worn-out phrases seems to imply that Christianity itself is no longer a living thing.⁴

For his anthology, however, Nicholson used poetry that was the antithesis of this, because alongside such literature there has always existed a robust tradition of Christian poetry that can vie with the best in the secular tradition. Every century has produced poets who have the capacity to move us religiously, and to give us profound new insights into our faith. They come from a variety of Christian traditions: Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and a whole range of nonconformists. They have in common the capacity to transcend the purely material things they describe, and to give us new insights into the true realities that lie behind them.

² An adaptation of 1 Cor 13:12.

³ R. S. Thomas, “After Jericho,” from *Frequencies*, in *Collected Poems 1945–1990* (London: Phoenix, 1995), 356.

⁴ Norman Nicholson, introduction to *An Anthology of Religious Verse Designed for the Times* (London: Pelican, 1942), ix.

It sometimes seems, in this modern age, that we have lost the capacity for what used to be called “close reading.” Time is too precious; we feel the need to master the overriding concerns of what we read, to “get the gist of it,” and then relax, satisfied. And in the process, we miss so much of what makes up the complicated, uncertain Truth that lies behind our handy generalizations. Nowhere is this more true than in the reading of poetry. Christian poetry, when read properly, can form an ideal subject for individual meditation, or for Lent study groups; but one can only too easily overfill one’s mind by moving rapidly from poem to poem, from example to example, for fear of lacking enough material to satisfy our butterfly minds. One poem, if it is a good poem, is enough for one session. And we must bear in mind that there is never one sole interpretation of the kind that our logical minds require. Logic remains unsatisfied, but imagination and perception are enhanced, as we experience emotional states produced by the poet’s art, or as we explore multiple alternative meanings and overtones.

When trying to give a picture of the method by which individuals, or groups, should proceed, there is always the danger of imposing one’s own interpretation of the moment, to the exclusion of others. There is a need, therefore, for each person to do his or her own exploration, and to find his or her own details of importance. No matter how careful the examination of a poem may have been, every interpreter will have missed as much as, or more than, he or she has perceived—and on the next reading, may well find completely different things to highlight. With this proviso, I venture to give detailed examples of approaches to Christian poetry that may be found useful.

DEPICTIONS OF HOLY WEEK

Let us start with a series of depictions of the events of Holy Week, which can conveniently form a “course” of weekly or daily examinations of individual poems. The first example, which will be offered in some detail here, is deceptively simple and well known to most readers: the famous hymn “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” by the Independent minister Isaac Watts (1674–1748). From the start, the hymn takes us vividly into the scene of the crucifixion. But it is not just a depiction of a scene; it is also an exploration of the mystery of Christ’s suffering and of our response to it. As readers, we are drawn into it by the poet’s presence there, as our representative, looking at the cross. This is impressed upon us by the immediacy of the word “I.” The first two stanzas depict the effect upon the observer, as he muses upon the vanity of the “gains” and the pride of this world:

When I survey the wondrous Cross
On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast
Save in the death of Christ, my God;
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his blood.

Christ's blood is from this point the most insistent image of the poem, and central to its deeper meaning. The poet draws us in more closely to observe the scene, with the word "See":

See, from his head, his hands, his feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down;
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet?
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

We *see* the blood flowing down. The scene is an immediate one. But note that from this point, the blood is not mentioned by name; each time it recurs, the words point us to the meaning of Christ's sacrifice. Watts calls us not just to see it physically, but to meditate on what lies behind that physical presence. In this stanza, in place of the word "blood," we have the words "sorrow and love," repeated twice. They evoke Christ's sorrow at the world, and his love for suffering humanity, which has brought him to share the human condition and to suffer alongside us. Meanwhile, the contrast between glory and ignominy, and their coexistence in Christ, are once more illustrated by a physical object, the crown of thorns. The mockery intended by it has rebounded on the mockers, for Christ *is* King, and those thorns are a "rich" crown. We are thus brought back to the paradox of the first stanza: it is a "Prince of glory" who is suffering on the cross, and that cross, far from being ignominious, is "wondrous."

As we come to Christ's death, this message of his Kingship is once more stressed by the return of the image of his blood. Yet again, it is not referred to directly, but has taken on a new role. It is now his "dying crimson," which spreads over his body like "a robe," the crimson robe of kingship.

His dying crimson like a robe
Spreads o'er his body on the Tree;
Then am I dead to all the globe,
And all the globe is dead to me.

Christ is the King. His death cannot destroy that fact. But this is not earthly kingship; and the effect on the onlooker is to detach him from all earthly hopes, desires, and ambitions.

The final stanza sums up why this is so, and points us to the future. We cannot offer anything matching Christ's sacrifice, but we as Christians share in that sacrifice, and must make an offering of some kind. All we have is ourselves. And God's amazing love, as seen in Christ's sacrifice, "demands my soul, my life, my all":

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.⁵

What Watts has shown us in this poem is that we, unlike those who merely stood by at the scene, are inevitably led to ask ourselves: "Should this affect the way I live? And what form should my offering take?"

This can lead to fruitful discussion. And there are a number of similarly rich texts upon the events of Holy Week that could be used in this way. In Anglican priest George Herbert's (1593–1633) remarkable poem "The Agony," for example, the image of blood is again predominant. The centrality of this theme in poems on the passion is a witness to blood's centrality in our Christian belief: "Neither by the blood of goats and calves but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us."⁶ This poem moves from the vivid depiction of Christ's agony in the garden ("A man so wrung with pains, that all his hair, / His skin, his garments bloody be"), to an evocation of Christ's love for us, epitomized by the blood and water that came from his side, and by the inestimable gift of the Eucharist. Images of tasting ("assaying") and drinking, encapsulated in the "broaching" of this wine by the soldier's spear, lead into the powerful evocation of the Eucharist, where that blood becomes wine:

Who knows not Love, let him assay
And taste that juice, which on the cross a pike
Did set again abroach; then let him say
If ever he did taste the like.
Love is that liquor sweet and most divine,
Which my God feels as blood, but I, as wine.⁷

Other poets vividly evoke specific aspects of the drama. The Welsh Roman Catholic poet Saunders Lewis (1893–1985), for example, powerfully portrays, in his poem "The Good Thief,"

⁵ Isaac Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1707; revised 1709).

⁶ Hebrews 9:12.

⁷ George Herbert, "The Agony," in *George Herbert: The Complete English Poems* (ed. John Tobin; Penguin Classics; London: Penguin, 1991), 34.

the paradox whereby the thief hanging alongside Jesus, is the only one to perceive truly who he is. He has had none of the advantages of the disciples—who saw Christ's acts and heard his teaching. All he has seen is the ignominy of the gibbet. Yet he has taken "Paradise from the nails of a gibbet," and is now "foremost of the nobilitas of heaven." Lewis asks him, as a saint, to pray for us, in words reminiscent of the Angelus: "Before the hour of our death pray that it may be given to us / To perceive Him and to taste Him."⁸

Other suitable poems for meditation or discussion include Alice Meynell's (1847–1922) "Easter Night," which stresses the privacy of the resurrection, after the public events of Good Friday, as in "the shuttered dark, the secrecy," Christ rises "all alone, alone, alone" behind the stone.⁹ Also, Lionel Johnson's (1867–1902) horrifying "A Burden of Easter Vigil," in which he imagines himself into the situation of the disciples in the period between the crucifixion and the resurrection, caught between "Doubt and Faith." They only know one thing for certain: "He loved us all; is dead." Though there is the possibility that he may rise again, it is merely a possibility: "But if he rise not?"¹⁰

Lionel Johnson gave a late nineteenth-century foretaste of things to come. In the modern age, depictions of the crucifixion have tended to raise anguished and fundamental questions not only about the nature of faith, but also about the continuing state of the world that Christ had come to save. The twentieth-century poet David Gascoyne (1916–2001), for example, starts from violent physical descriptions of Christ's suffering, with his "putrid flesh, discoloured, flayed, fed on by flies," which are far from the sanitized versions of the crucifixion by Renaissance artists, and more akin to the realistic and powerful paintings of Mathias Grünewald. Gascoyne horrifies us with such descriptions in order to bring home to us that the world is still full of suffering and of man's inhumanity to man. He imagines Christ looking down eternally at a world where "fear and greed are sovereign lords." Yet, Gascoyne says, a turning point must come. Christ's subversive truth will eventually strike dumb those who consider themselves to be upright, and "the rejected and the condemned" will become "agents of the divine." He ends by begging the "Christ of Revolution and of Poetry" to come to our redemption, through the human pain that he has experienced:

Not from a monst'rance silver-wrought
But from the tree of human pain
Redeem our sterile misery,
Christ of Revolution and of Poetry,
That man's long journey through the night
May not have been in vain.¹¹

⁸ Saunders Lewis, "To the Good Thief" ('I'r Lleidr Da'), translated by Gwyn Thomas in Alun R. Jones and Gwyn Thomas, eds., *Presenting Saunders Lewis* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1973), 184–5.

⁹ Alice Meynell, "Easter Night," *The Poems of Alice Meynell* (London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, 1923), 94.

¹⁰ Lionel Johnson, "A Burden of Easter Vigil," *The Complete Poems* (London: Unicorn, 1953), 13.

¹¹ David Gascoyne, "Ecce Homo," in *Collected Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), reprinted in Helen Gardner, ed., *The Faber Book of Religious Verse* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 333–35. By kind permission of Oxford University Press.

The contrast between the misery of the cross and the inadequacy of our attempts at commemoration of it (“a monstrance silver-wrought”) is underlined even more in Geoffrey Hill’s (b. 1932) often anguished treatment of the crucifixion, particularly his sonnet sequence “Lachrimae,” in which he describes the crucified Lord as “consigned by proxy to the judas-kiss / of our devotion, bowed beneath the gold,” and the traces we detect of his love for us as coming to us “across a wilderness of retrospection.”¹² These poems depict the poet’s perpetual struggle to find the relief promised by the crucified Christ, which, however, too often turn into a new “crucifixion.”

Crucified Lord, however much I burn
to be enamoured of your paradise,
knowing what ceases and what will not cease,
frightened of hell, not knowing where to turn,

I fall between harsh grace and hurtful scorn.
You are the crucified who crucifies,
self-withdrawn even from your own device,
your trim-plugged body, wreath of rakish thorn.

What grips me then, or what does my soul grasp?
If I grasp nothing what is there to break?
You are beyond me, innermost true light,

uttermost exile for no exile’s sake,
king of our earth not caring to unclasp
its void embrace, the semblance of your quiet.¹³

Of the many overtones of this remarkable poem, some are obvious; others are more ambiguous, and though the import of the poem is clear, the detail is capable of a number of interpretations. The more one reads it, and its companion sonnets, the more one finds within them. Geoffrey Hill is often described as a “difficult” poet. That is to say, he is a good poet. These poems are the perfect subject for individual meditation, or for discussion. They, and other modern poems dealing with similar subjects, are also particularly rewarding to modern readers, who, if they are thinking Christians, often find themselves grappling with fundamental problems, such as the relationship between faith and doubt, or the problem of the existence of great suffering within a world created by a loving and omnipotent God.

¹² Geoffrey Hill, “Lachrimae Antiquae Novae,” *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1985), 150. By kind permission of Geoffrey Hill and of Penguin Books.

¹³ Hill, “Lachrimae Coactae,” *Collected Poems*, 148. By kind permission of Geoffrey Hill and of Penguin Books.

A COURSE ON THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING

Within the parishes I have served, one of the overriding concerns of many members of the congregations has been the problem of human suffering, whether caused by man's inhumanity to man or by what are ironically called "acts of God." For this reason, a Lenten course on this topic can be particularly valuable; and for such a course, the most suitable material consists of Christian poetry. Let us sample a course of this kind (while bearing in mind, yet again, that such courses go their own way, according to the insights and discussions of their members, and that this proposed pattern is necessarily artificial and schematic).

Suffering has inspired some of the most powerful poetry in the English language. One might well start with the Gascoyne poem, "Ecce Homo," which we have already seen. Another, equally harrowing, is Edith Sitwell's (1887–1964) "Still falls the Rain," inspired by the bombing raids in London in 1940. Here, the insistent repetition of the phrase "Still falls the Rain" is like a series of piledriving hammer-blows:

Still falls the Rain—
 Dark as the world of man, black as our loss—
 Blind as the nineteen hundred and forty nails
 Upon the Cross

Still falls the Rain
 With a sound like the pulse of the heart that is changed to the hammer-beat
 In the Potter's Field, and the sound of the impious feet
 On the Tomb.

As with Gascoyne, the suffering of the present is linked with the suffering of Christ on the cross:

Still falls the Rain
 At the feet of the Starved Man hung upon the Cross.
 Christ that each day, each night, nails there, have mercy on us—
 On Dives and on Lazarus:
 Under the Rain the sore and the gold are as one.

The insistent catalogue continues, and finally the poem comes to an end with an invocation to Christ's blood of suffering, and his love that has made him share our woes. The message is underlined by a quotation from Marlowe's "Dr Faustus," where Faustus perceives Christ's blood of mercy, which can save him, in the firmament:

Still falls the Rain—
 Then—O Ile leape up to my God: who pulles me doune—

See, see where Christ's blood streames in the firmament:
 It flows from the Brow we nailed upon the tree
 Deep to the dying, to the thirsting heart
 That holds the fires of the world, —dark-smirched with pain
 As Caesar's laurel crown.

Then sounds the voice of One who like the heart of man
 Was once a child who among beasts has lain—
 "Still do I love, still shed my innocent light, my Blood, for thee."¹⁴

As many discussions have shown, such a solution is not convincing for everybody. It does not explain why God created suffering in the first place. And, though Christ's suffering on our behalf is seen here as a consolation, it does not explain why there exists such suffering in the world. R. S. Thomas, in his poem "Watching," evokes the suffering of individuals in this world, and the apparent detachment of God from it all, watching "from behind the cross that is / the astigmatism in his vision." He starts with some examples of human misery:

Are they happy? Stop
 any of them—this one
 has lost his wife, this
 one his belongings.

This walks in the shadow
 of the scalpel, of
 a company's collapse.

He then ponders these people's attempts to appear happy nevertheless, and the responsibility of the Creator of the world. We humans may attempt to smile, but there is no turning God's "wince" into a smile. Christ, from 2,000 years away, still watches—and the cross merely distorts his view:

They appear at a distance
 to smile. What else can they
 do? It was not their fault.
 The world was not
 of their making. What, then,

 of the maker of it?
 How ever far off we
 stand, there is no turning
 his wince into a smile.

¹⁴ Edith Sitwell, "Still falls the Rain (The Raids, 1940. Night and Dawn)," *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1957), reprinted in Gardner, *The Faber Book of Religious Verse*, 310–11. By kind permission of David Higham Associates.

From two thousand years'
distance, he watches us
from behind the cross that is
the astigmatism in his vision.¹⁵

This idea of the absent, or distant, God is trenchantly posed by the Jewish poet Yehuda Amichai, as, looking at the sufferings caused by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he envisages God as an “alibi God,” eternally absent from such scenes, claiming innocence like a little child:

And the God of Jerusalem is the eternal alibi God,
wasn't there didn't see didn't hear
was in some other place. Was some Place, some Other.¹⁶

Many people find an explanation of the place of suffering in the world in the belief that Christ's coming to earth to save humankind, while it did not fundamentally change our world (which remains full of sin and suffering), did provide us with the consolation of our suffering shared, with the hope of the world to come, and with the means in the meantime to try to create God's kingdom on earth. This hope is most clearly expressed in a lengthy poem by Thomas Traherne (1637–1674), which, while describing the state of the world (“Mankind is sick, the World distemper'd lies, / Opprest with Sins and Miseries”), nevertheless shows that God's love for the world is what the coming of Christ most clearly expressed, and that we, by learning that love amidst our suffering, “might pity all the Grievs we see, / Anointing every Malady / With precious Oyl and Balm.” By thus showing to others the love that Christ has shown to us, we can “live in Heaven on Earth below”:

O holy JESUS who didst for us die,
And on the Altar bleeding lie,
Bearing all Torment, pain, reproach and shame,
That we by vertue of the same,
Though enemies to GOD, might be
Redeem'd, and set at libertie.
As thou didst us forgive,
So meekly let us Love to others shew,
And live in Heaven on Earth below!¹⁷

The love that is to be found amidst the calamities of this world can reveal, in fallen human beings, that humanity that is truly godlike. This has been illustrated in a number of writings that, although in prose, possess qualities of poetry. One such passage, by Rabbi Albert Friedlander, is to be found in the Jewish prayerbook, *Forms of Prayer for Jewish Worship*,

¹⁵ R. S. Thomas, “Watching,” from *Residues* (2002) in *Collected Later Poems 1988–2000* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 2004), 299. By kind permission of Gwydion Thomas (c. Kunjana Thomas, 2001).

¹⁶ Yehuda Amichai, “And there are days,” translated from the Hebrew by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, New Series, No. 14 (*Palestinian and Israeli Poets*), Winter 1998–1999, 50. By kind permission of *Modern Poetry in Translation* and of the translators.

¹⁷ Thomas Traherne, Poem VI from *Christian Ethicks* in *Poems, Centuries and Three Thanksgivings* (ed. Anne Ridler; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 142–6.

in which he assesses human reactions to disasters such as the Holocaust:

The death of an infant moves us; the death of six million people simply stuns our senses. [...] The fine edge of our sensibilities has been worn away by the monstrosities of our age. The six o'clock news is the most brutal programme on television—and we do not even turn it off. Each day, murder and destruction flicker across the screen as part of our home life. [...] We can keep a body count of our own, right in the privacy of our living-room.

Yet there are moments in every life when we break out of the structure, when we are no longer controlled but, suddenly, are in control. And then we can be human beings. We can be humane. We can reach out toward our fellowman. And our shared suffering and our shame can be a bridge and can cease to be a barrier.¹⁸

Yet, however much we may rationalize our responses to human suffering by various arguments such as we have seen, it is very difficult, faced by the rawness of grief of a mother who has lost her child, or someone who has lost a partner of many years, to bring the kind of comfort that such rationalizations attempt to give. It verges on the insulting to try to do so. Just being there is often the best consolation.

The poetry of Emily Dickinson powerfully expresses this true voice of anguish. In “I measure every Grief I meet,” she looks at others, and wonders whether their grief can be like hers.

I wonder if They bore it long—
Or did it just begin—
I could not feel the Date of Mine—
It feels so old a pain—

Can their suffering ever end, or will they “go on aching still / Through Centuries of Nerve”? Finally, she looks at Calvary:

And though I may not guess the kind—
Correctly—yet to me
A piercing Comfort it affords
In passing Calvary—

To note the fashions—of the Cross—
And how they're mostly worn—
Still fascinated to presume
That Some—are like My Own—

The approach is hesitant. She is still comparing her own experience to that of others. She

¹⁸ Albert H. Friedlander, “Awareness,” in *Forms of Prayer for Jewish Worship* (ed. the Assembly of Rabbis of the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain; 7th ed., 1977), 391.

is “passing Calvary,” almost as though by chance, and she “notes” what she sees. And that is the “fashions” of the cross, and how they are “worn”; in other words, the appearance of suffering, which she is viewing from outside. And she is “fascinated,” and “presumes” that some of these sufferings may be like her own. What this poem conveys above all is the dull ache of grief, and the self-absorption of the griever, seeing the whole world through her own suffering, and yet unable to get to grips with it on its own terms. Even the attempt to see the cross of Christ as a consolation is tentative and uncertain.¹⁹

In other Dickinson poems, the anguish is even more unremitting, and there is no consolation. In one, she proclaims the absence of God in stark terms. Those who died expected to sit at God’s right hand; but God’s right hand has been amputated:

Those—dying then,
Know where they went—
They went to God’s Right Hand—
That Hand is amputated now
And God cannot be found—²⁰

In such a mood, she can doubt whether God cares. If it had not been for him, she would not be alive. And surely it would have been better for her not to have been born, than to endure this misery:

Of Course—I prayed—
And did God Care?
He cared as much as on the Air
A Bird—had stamped her foot—
And cried “Give Me”—
My Reason—Life—
I had not had—but for Yourself—
‘Twere better Charity
To leave me in the Atom’s Tomb—
Merry, and Nought, and gay, and numb—
Than this smart Misery.²¹

Emily Dickinson’s misery is like that of so many people that we meet in this world—the bereaved, those with clinical depression, and so many others. Conventional words of comfort cannot help. The only pitiful response is to attempt to share.

And perhaps that is one conclusion to which we tentatively can come. Just as we try to share the experience of the grieving and the depressed, so Jesus Christ came to earth to share

¹⁹ Emily Dickinson, “I measure every Grief I meet,” Poem 561, *The Complete Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), 272–73.

²⁰ Dickinson, “Those—dying then,” Poem 1551, *The Complete Poems*, 646.

²¹ Dickinson, “Of Course – I prayed,” Poem 376, *The Complete Poems*, 179–80.

our grief. The desolation of his cry on the cross—"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"—shows that he too could doubt, as part of the human condition. It was not just physical torment that he suffered. And in the Garden, beforehand, he too had shown human weakness and desolation. He is alongside us, and when people doubt, or are unconvinced by, this Christian consolation, it is up to us to try to take his place, not endeavouring to convince people's minds, but remaining alongside them in his stead.

OTHER USES OF POETRY FOR LENT

Thus far, we have looked at two possible areas of poetry for use either in a Lenten course or in individual Lenten meditation: one based on a particular Christian season, Holy Week, and one based on a topic of major interest to Christian groups, the place of suffering in the world and in the Christian vision of life. There are, of course, many other topics available, in both categories.

One could devise a course for Advent based on poetry to do with the incarnation. This could include, for example, Alice Meynell's "Advent Meditation," in which the mystery of the incarnation is evoked by the presence of Christ in his mother's womb, as an ordinary child, and its contrast with his role as Creator of the world. Then one could look at such diverse treatments as Robert Southwell's (1561–1595) "The Nativity of Christ," with its convoluted and brilliant series of paradoxes in the same vein; Bruce Blunt's (1899–1957) beautiful "Bethlehem Down," with its series of forebodings as to what the future holds for the child that has been born; John Betjeman's deceptively simple "Christmas," in which a serious message is hidden beneath an apparently flippant exterior; or Edwin Muir's (1888–1959) "The Incarnate One," in which serious questions are raised about what we have made of the gift we have been given. Similar groups of poems can be found to illustrate and illuminate other events of the Christian story: for example, Edwin Muir's "The Annunciation," which makes use of the image of a painting to depict the timelessness of the meeting of the Virgin and the Angel (and poetry based on religious paintings could form a subject of its own, combining the two art forms); or the poem by Emyr Humphreys (b. 1919) "The Serpent," with its profound examination of Christ's temptation in the wilderness, which it relates, through a series of subtle allusions, to the original temptation in the Garden of Eden.

In the second category, one could well choose a subject like "Faith and Doubt," starting from the terrible poems of doubt written by Gerard Manley Hopkins and David Gascoyne when they were at their lowest ebb, and then make use of the vast range of poems by R. S. Thomas in

which the close relationship of faith and doubt is explored. One could create a sequence upon “Love,” examining the many treatments in poetry of God’s love for the world, and the reciprocal love of God by us, which also involves the concomitant love of our neighbor.

There is one area of Lenten activity that I have not touched upon: the liturgical use of poetry in this season. While poetry lends itself above all to meditation and to discussion, it can also be very effectively used in a liturgical context. In my own parish, each Lent, we have a form of worship called “Lent Devotionals,” in which we deal with one aspect of our faith over five weeks. This has included such subjects as “Music and the Mass” and “Christian poetry.” One of the most successful was a series devoted to “Christian hymns.” Each week focused upon a well-known hymn, with readings and prayers to fit with it, and a short address examining it both textually and musically attempted to draw the congregation’s attention to all its inner meanings and effects, before the hymn was finally sung by all present. The session ended each week with Sung Compline. It was amazing how much there we found in the words and music that, only too often, had been sung week by week almost automatically. Among the hymns treated in this way were “My Song is Love Unknown” (seventeenth-century poem by Samuel Crossman; twentieth-century music by John Ireland); “All my Hope in God Is Founded” (seventeenth-century German poem by Joachim Neander, revised in English in the twentieth century by Robert Bridges; twentieth-century music by Herbert Howells); “O God Our Help in Ages Past” (eighteenth-century poem by Isaac Watts; eighteenth-century music ascribed to William Croft); and “I Danced in the Morning” (twentieth-century poem by Sydney Carter; old Shaker tune).

CONCLUSION

Who said God was without
speech?

This rhetorical question is asked by R. S. Thomas as he marvels at the song of a bird,

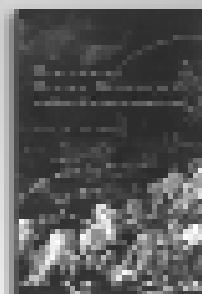
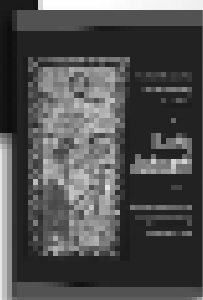
A message from God
delivered by a bird
at my window²²

In many ways, it is through the nonverbal arts, music, painting, and sculpture, that we gain our clearest glimpse of the infinite. Poetry, however, bridges the gap between human comprehension and spiritual experience. The use of words, in new and un-prosed combinations, enables

²² R. S. Thomas, “The Message,” from *Destinations* (1985) in *Collected Poems 1945–1990* (London: Phoenix, 1995), 449. By kind permission of Gwydion Thomas.

us to relate the finite to the infinite, our earthly experience to a perception of what lies behind it. The reading of poetry, which is valuable for its own sake, is at the same time an opportunity to re-evaluate the world we live in, and to come closer to the meaning of that world and of what lies behind it. Lent is the time for just such a re-evaluation.

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Preaching in the Half-Light of Lent

PAUL SIMPSON DUKE
*Co-Pastor, First Baptist Church
Ann Arbor, Michigan*

Lent is a season of difficult and gracious disclosures. To preach in Lent is to give speech to alienation and contradiction, to bear witness to the transforming mysteries of grace, and to recall the church to its memory, fidelity, and hope.

We who preach in Lent might do well to consider the meaning of the season's odd English name. Most Western languages have a more straightforwardly descriptive name for the season, meaning either "the forty days" or "the fast." The designation "Lent," however, has no apparent significance, deriving as it does from the Old English word for spring—but that word is *lengten*, referring to the lengthening of daylight. Lent is decidedly not "spring." In the southern hemisphere it could just as well be called "Autumn," and in the north it is mostly lodged in winter. Even so, there may be value in imagining Lent as the church's forty-day journey through a lengthening light.

It is a strange light, and in some ways unwanted. It shows us our graves. It exposes our diseases, our dread, all our losses. It discloses all the world's unfairness, corruption, and violence, and our complicity in much of it. It illumines the ancient commandments and the difficult path Jesus called us to follow. Such light may also disclose the tremendous kindnesses of God and the unbearable beauty of what we are created to be—and perhaps the stricken face of divine love, bearing all creation's anguish toward redemption.

The task of the preacher in Lent is to point to what this strange light makes visible—to name what is killing us and what can save us, to bear witness to our need of candor and grace, of reconciliation and a new fidelity. Lent is in part a season of darkness, but it is a luminous darkness, with light enough for necessary recognitions and truer acknowledgements. The preacher's job is to face it, to see and to say what it shows. George Herbert wrote that the faithful observance of Lent requires "A face not fearing light."¹ So should our faces be, and the farther we travel open-eyed through the lit invitations and terrors of the season, the more light we are likely to find and to impart.

¹ "Lent," *George Herbert: The Complete English Works* (ed. Ann Pasternak Slater; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 84.

JUXTAPOSITION

As painful as some of its themes may be, Lent is profoundly a season of promise and hope. Contemplating the grimmest realities, the faithful may still proceed with a quiet reserve of confident trust and gratitude. The season may be stark, but its music is by no means all in minor mode. Thomas Merton described Ash Wednesday as “a day of happiness,” and added: “The cross of ashes, traced upon the forehead of each Christian, is not only a reminder of death, but inevitably (though tacitly) a pledge of resurrection. . . . The cross, with which the ashes are traced upon us, is the sign of Christ’s victory over death.”² We do not make the annual Lenten journey pretending not to know that it ends in Easter. We do not wrap ourselves in grimness or indulge in perverse enjoyment of gloom. It is no season for play-acting, but for discipline; and one of the preacher’s most crucial disciplines is to hold steadfastly together the news both of death and life, of alienation and reconciliation, of wretched pain and trusting praise.

The church has attested to these rich juxtapositions by excepting Sundays from the forty days. We observe six Sundays in Lent, not of it (though not all traditions make this distinction). Every Sunday of the year is a feast of the resurrection. It is true that in Lent, rightly, our alleluias are suppressed. We do not leap ahead to Easter tidings, rushing to roll away the stone every week as if we could escape the brutal facts that Lent requires us to face, or as if Easter could make any sense until we have faced them. Even so, Lent is penultimate. It is the first part of the liturgical year’s paschal cycle, which includes the Great Fifty Days of Easter and Pentecost as well.

At the core of the church’s historical practice of Lent is its designation of the forty days as a time of preparation for baptism, emblem of new birth, sacrament of entrance into Christ’s Body and of resurrection itself. That the ancient observance was also for preparing estranged Christians to be restored to the church is further testament to Lent’s brighter themes of renewal, forgiveness, reconciliation, and life in the fellowship of new creation. Penitence, contrition, and fasting, yes—but with resurrection in view, and impending alleluias. The bleakness of the season is not morbid. In Laurance Hall Stookey’s words, “Lent is not six and a half weeks of marching around Mount Calvary.”³

The lectionary knows there is glad news in Lent.⁴ Within the appointed texts in the three-year cycle is the promise of a child whose name will be Laughter, the vision of dry bones putting on new flesh, the raising of Lazarus, the feasting of Jesus with sinners, and words like these: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything

² Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1965), 113–14.

³ Laurence Hall Stookey, *Calendar: Christ Time for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 88.

⁴ The texts for Lent cited in this essay are from the *Revised Common Lectionary*. Many preachers exercise legitimate independence from any lectionary, but the appointed texts are deeply, if not comprehensively, informative of the season’s logic and witness.

has been made new!” (2 Cor 5:17, Lent 4-C); “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!” (Isa 55:1, Lent 3-C); “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long” (Ps 23:6, Lent 4-A).

It has rightly been suggested that the witness of Lent bears the shape of the psalms of lament. Lent invites the full voicing of affliction and forsakenness, of grief and guilt, of rage and terrified questions. We give expressions to these for ourselves and for many others. But as in the psalms of lament, these cries are offered as prayer to One who is trusted to hear and engage with us; and as in the psalms of lament, there is, week by week in Lent, a turning toward new prospects of trust, thanksgiving, and praise. By their insistence on giving expression to both anguish and trust, the psalms of lament are paradigms for Lenten preaching.⁵

To say that the season bridges toward praise is by no means to see Lent as a sort of preamble. Its sharp truths have their own contained and abiding integrity. In fact, as with all juxtapositions, so with the darker news of Lent and the brighter news of Easter: there is no separation, each informs and infuses the other. The promise of newness does come gleaming through Lent. But when the risen Christ finally appears to his friends, he brings his greetings on broken feet with ruined hands. Resurrection does not take scars away; quite the opposite, it unburies them and exposes them to the community. Resurrection does not silence lament; on the contrary, it opens a larger space for lament, and invites the fullest voicing of it. As for our discipleship, the strangely smiling risen one, beckoning us to this newness, is inviting us with a more terrible clarity than ever to come and die. The Lenten journey moves toward a sunrise, the promise of it already beginning to illumine our path. What the eerie light also discloses is that we are walking through a forest of crosses. From such a place, in such a light, our Lenten sermons are preached.

WILDERNESS

This “forest of crosses” is no place of shaded greenness; it is a dry, barren land. This is where the first Sunday in Lent each year sets us down. We see Jesus here, who was forty days in such a place. Recalling our baptism in Lent, we should also recall that immediately after baptism, the Spirit “led” Jesus (Matt and Luke) or “drove him” (Mark) into the desert. That it was the Spirit’s doing suggests that the desert is not optional. Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness reprises Elijah’s forty days in the wilderness (1 Kgs 19:8), Moses’ forty days on Sinai (Exod 24:18), and Israel’s forty years in the wilderness—“forty” meaning in each case a long, long desert time. Why

⁵ See Samuel E. Balentine, “Preaching the Prayers of the Old Testament,” *Journal for Preachers* 17 (Lent 1994), 12–17.

the desert? Because it offers us nothing; it is not exploitable⁶ (though exploitation is precisely what the devil proposes to Jesus there). In such a place we have nothing but our unaugmented selves, our vulnerability and dependency.

The desert is also an emblem of our solitude. The Lenten journey is surely communal, as exemplified in Israel's wilderness journey; but the desert of Jesus (like the desert of Elijah and Moses) is also a place of aloneness. As a symbol, it suggests both the necessary distance required of the church in the world and the inescapable solitude of each individual life, experienced as necessity, as opportunity, yet also as threat. The Lenten texts, in fact, speak often with disarming directness to the individual's needs and responsibilities; surprisingly, even the Ten Commandments (Lent 3-B) are addressed in the intimate singular. Our solitude is part of the season's news, its invitation, and its warning; and we who have learned rightly to say much about community would do well in Lent to speak also to the realities of each one's aloneness. Bonhoeffer was right: "Whoever cannot be alone should beware of community. Whoever cannot stand in community should beware of being alone."⁷

The solitude proposed by Lent is a crucible of testing. In the wilderness Jesus is in the company of the devil. This is not the tempter's only appearance in Lent. The serpent sounds like him (Gen 3:1–5, Lent 1-A), Peter becomes him (Mark 8:33, Lent 2-B), and he is at large in the final betrayals. His chummy suggestions to Jesus, various as their applications may be, come down to one thing: go ahead, adopt the commitments of the powers that be—look first to your own survival; take power for yourself by any means; conscript God for your purpose. Jesus declines, which is to say that his first word in Lent, three times, is "No." His life will constitute a resounding "Yes" to God and humankind, but it begins here with the ringing "No" of his resistance to alternative claims; and in this moment of his adamant inaugural refusal, he begins to bear the cross.⁸

In Lent we preach resistance, personal and communal, to the prevailing powers of aggression, arrogance, greed, and indifference. The Lenten recollection of our baptism includes remembrance of the ancient opening questions to those being baptized: "Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God. . . . the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. . . . all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?" Lenten preaching, especially in its first Sunday, does not neglect the baptismal insistence on renouncing. It calls the church to be a fellowship of resistance in the company of Jesus, who embodied God's repudiation of all enslaving powers. For the church, as for Jesus, this "No" is a wilderness word, rising from a perspective of distance, vulnerability, and empty-handed trust.

⁶ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Cudahy, 1958), 18–21.

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness; ed. George B. Kelly, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 5; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 83.

⁸ On the temptation narratives as accounts of resistance to "the Domination System" and as the beginning of Jesus' bearing of the cross, see Charles L. Campbell, *The Word Before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 45–48.

The Lenten gospel draws a connection between the capacity to resist the powers and a capacity to embrace the emptiness in ourselves. Jesus, like others before and after him, makes his crucial choice while fasting. His resistance is not made on a full belly. So Lent has always been a fast; and though preaching need not press fasting per se, it may wisely note the enlivening possibilities within chosen disciplines of detachment. Lenten preaching invites an intimate re-acquaintance with emptiness, a taking note of what we are consuming “which does not satisfy” (Isa 55:2, Lent 3-C), a coming to terms with our addictions and the anxieties that underlie them. In a sermon on Lenten discipline, Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that the hollowness we fear is not a sign of something wrong, but is in fact the holy of holies within us.⁹ The wilderness to which Lent points us, haunted as it may be by false voices, is that holy place where we learn, together and alone, to say a truer “No,” so as to say a truer “Yes.”

REMEMBRANCE

One of the ongoing tasks of preaching is to restore the church to its memory, a task especially pertinent to the season of Lent. The Lenten sojourn is toward remembrance, and that remembrance is twofold. Donald Saliers has called Lent “a double journey—a journey together (and alone) toward the mystery of God’s redemptive embrace in the death and resurrection of Christ. . . [and] a journey into the depths of our humanity.”¹⁰ This “double journey” leads not to two destinations but one, the “redemptive embrace.” But the first step of the journey concerns “the depths of our humanity.”

1. Mortality. The season’s first day holds out a jarring invitation to remember that we must die. On Ash Wednesday, as the gritty smear is made on our foreheads, we are told: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” These words may have the feel of judgment, since they echo God’s words to the man and the woman being banished from the Garden. Depending on our experience or circumstance, this news of impending death may stir sadness, regret, anxiety, rage, or nothing at all—the season grants room for all responses. But Lent’s counsels concerning death are ultimately a great kindness, pointing to our fixed creaturely limitations and urging the best of choices for living within our boundaried days.

In Lent we preach finitude. The season assaults our dangerous forgetfulness of the limits of our days, our strength, our grasp. Human impermanence frames the season. The first day points to our own death, the last day points to the dead Christ. In between, in text after text, the news of mortality is reasserted. The season informs us with some urgency that it is time to awaken, to be sensible to conditions and to do well in what time remains. In this respect,

⁹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cowley Publications, 1999), 67.

¹⁰ Donald Saliers, “Ash Wednesday through Lent: Practical Considerations,” *Reformed Liturgy and Music* 24:1 (1990), 16.

Lent is both like and unlike Advent. Advent says, “Wake up, it will soon be morning.” Lent says, “Wake up, you will soon be dead.”

But as personal a matter as death may be, and as forcibly as Lent may confront each of us with it, the season’s reminders of mortality are most powerfully communal. On Ash Wednesday, we see the mark of death on everyone’s face, and the “communal poignancy” of the season begins to dawn.¹¹ We think of others not present, and of humankind at large, and of the greater compassion we owe in the shadow of our common dying. We also notice again that the mark of our death is cruciform. This is the first and final witness of the season: human and divine pathos joined, the saving contradiction of ultimate anguish and ultimate hope made one. The preacher herself or himself becomes a sign of that contradiction. It is as if on every Sunday in Lent we were preaching with the cross of ashes still between our eyes.

2. *Narrative.* To speak in the remembrance of dying is to speak toward mindfulness in living. Lent’s purpose, in large measure, is to interrupt our self-absorption, lassitude, acquiescence, numbing entertainments, resigned despair, and all else that reduces our existence to sleepwalking. It wants to sling the cold waters of our baptism across our faces and awaken us to our position.

In part, this would mean recalling where we came from. The whole of “Narrative Time” in the Christian Year (Advent through Pentecost) intends to lead the church through the larger story of its “salvation history,” but the forty days leading up to the cross are an intensified recital of certain crucial or indicative moments in the tradition. In Lent, the lectionary spreads out a generous sampling of the formative old stories. In Year A, the OT lessons are a march from Eden to the blessing of Abraham to the miracle of water in the wilderness to the anointing of David and on to the valley of dry bones. Year B is a sweep through the covenants with Noah, with Abraham and Sarah, with Israel at Sinai—then to a “new covenant” written on the hearts of exiles, and then to a cup of wine, over which someone is saying, “This is my blood of the covenant.”

The Gospels in Lent set before us a great company of our mothers and fathers in faith: that marvelous woman at the well in Samaria, discerning as she is discerned; Martha of Bethany, asserting a grief-stricken faith; Mary of Bethany, anointing Jesus in lavish prophetic comprehension of his death; the newly sighted man-born-blind, feisty with defiance and wit; Peter, stoutly wrong about so much; Nicodemus, “patron saint of all who have tried to make sense of the mystery and failed.”¹² There is Paul on almost every Sunday, ringing out brilliant affirmations for the new community. And there is Jesus—lamenting Jerusalem, turning over temple

¹¹ Wendy M. Wright, *The Rising: Living the Mysteries of Lent, Easter, and Pentecost* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1990), 20.

¹² Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Language of Lent,” *Journal for Preachers* 17 (Lent 1994), 6.

furniture, dining with prostitutes and tax collectors, telling stories of astonishing grace, weeping at a friend's grave, raising him from it, saying his prayers, suffering his friends, feeding them, facing down the empire, screaming his agony, dying at last in strange trust.

Preaching the texts of Lent grants fresh opportunity for recalling the church to powerfully formational texts and reincorporating the church into the ancient communities that trusted, faltered, prayed, learned, failed, and triumphed before us, whose narratives and instruction are now our corrective and enlivening memories. Imparting the witness of such texts is the work of all preaching, but Lent brings a renewed urgency to the task, insisting that we come to fresh terms with who we are, to recall the great generosity of God, to know what has deadened us to them, to remember what we are yet called to be and do in our time, and to reclaim our best resources for the high calling.

This is precisely the course taken by Jesus in the desert. Assaulted by false invitations and assurances, he resorted to his Bible and staked his resistance on the remembered texts. Walter Brueggemann, preaching on this story, said:

But Jesus, child of the Torah, was not resourceless. He has his strategies at hand, almost as if he had rehearsed them and was ready when the voices started. . . . He understands that to hold for our God-given humanity, you cannot make it up on the spot, but you must be ready with a thick, palpable, response that silences the voices and defeats the challenge.¹³

So in the season's logic, there may be even more reason than usual for sermons to be sharply attentive to the texts. As always, but especially in a season devoted to self-scrutiny, church-scrutiny, repentance, and renewed commitment to live as children of light in the world, the texts are to be understood as the listeners' crucial inheritance, their equipment, their compass points of indispensable memory. George Steiner has written: "To quote accurately is to give thanks. . . . To learn by heart is to buttress one's very minor self against barbarism."¹⁴

Lent is a reiterated summons to withstand and oppose the barbarisms around us, among us, within us. Faithful preaching names them, and more, leads the church to "learn by heart" what will buttress our very minor selves together against them.

3. *Transgression.* If Lent speaks to us of death, and sets us down in the desert to make hard choices, and opens the book that tells us our history with God, then it will surely want some words with us about our sins and our turning from them. This, too, is a matter of remembrance. The young man we call "the prodigal," facing starvation, "came to himself"—remembered—

¹³ Anna Carter Florence, ed., *Inscribing the Texts: Sermons and Prayers of Walter Brueggemann* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 37.

¹⁴ Roger Greer Cohn et al., "The Humanities, In Memoriam," *Academic Questions* 8:1 (1994), 62.

and though his subsequent action does not necessarily constitute repentance, the shape of it is to get up and go home (Luke 15:17–18, Lent 4-C). This is precisely what the first text of Lent each year calls us to do. The prophet Joel stands at the door of Ash Wednesday, points to a storm of locusts on the horizon, and cries, “Return . . . with all your hearts. . . . Return to the Lord your God!” (Joel 2:12–13).

The rubric of sin/judgment/confession/repentance appears in almost all the Sundays in the three-year cycle of lectionary texts (fourteen of the eighteen Sundays). This is indeed a penitential season. Some would say Lent is excessively concerned with the subject, but the objection is valid only if the treatment of these themes is morbid and/or individualized and/or insulated from much larger concerns—and none of this, so far as the texts are concerned, is the case.

Lent demands that sin be taken seriously; it aims to renew our capacity to blush. This is not a project merely of the intellect. Lent’s first day strikes the tone: “rend your hearts and not your clothing” (Joel 2:12); “the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit” (Ps 51:17). To contemplate the realities of human transgression and guilt, including our own, is to arrive at a place of horror and deep embarrassment. From such a place, we speak of sin, because sin is desecration—of ourselves, of others, of creation itself; it is terrible cruelty, a defaming of the beautiful and good, a spurning of humanity’s vocation; it is an affront to the One who has created, blessed, entrusted, called, and moved among us with fearsome self-giving love. Six and a half weeks of contemplating our sin, confessing it, and repenting of it is little enough.

The Lenten lectionary texts display an impressive variety of human offenses. The sins they name or depict include greed, self-aggrandizement, sexual immorality, idolatry, racism, sexism, jealousy, bickering, coveting, hatred, slander, lies, cowardice, obtuseness, denial, betrayal, violence, murder—manifest faults and hidden faults, refusals of trust and refusals to act. They are personal, relational, communal, societal, national, institutional, governmental, and ecclesial. In a kind of coup de grâce, many communions see to it that the branches we wave to hail Jesus on Palm Sunday will be burned to ashes and smeared on our heads next year, rubbing our faces in our praise, suggesting that not only the worst in us but also the best in us is the death of us. No wonder the season also gives us Ps 130 (Lent A-5): “If you, Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?”

But it is easy when preaching of sin and repentance to fall into damaging reductionism. What, for example, is the locus of the sins to be addressed? Listeners and preachers have often tilted to one of two extremes: the privatizing of guilt or the wholesale consigning of it to

systemic institutional and social forces. To locate our problem in one of these—in the self or in the system—to the exclusion of the other is dangerously false. In the first instance, the church forsakes its necessary witness against the principalities and powers while keeping individuals in a narcissistic loop of shame and release. In the second instance, the church is relieved of taking full responsibility for its own sins while denying individuals the kindness of having their own guilt addressed. In either instance, the preacher is in too safe a place. Week by week, the texts will guide us as to where the accents belong; but on balance, being honest to the season, to the texts, and to the facts of our existence requires that both intimate personal guilt and massively collective guilt are named and called to repentance.

The other essential balance to be kept when preaching of sin and repentance involves holding together the dual claims that reconciliation is freely given to us and that reconciliation is costly for us. The predisposition to trumpet one of these assertions to a degree that virtually silences the other is as old as the church, and as Brueggemann has noted, “These two reductions of hard judgment and easy grace haunt the church today.”¹⁵ Lent gives preachers an ongoing opportunity to articulate a fuller and saner perspective.

The lectionary texts clearly communicate grace and judgment, costly obedience and extravagant gift. On the side of the more evidently freeing news, we notice, for example, that of the seven so-called “penitential psalms,” only three appear. One of them, Ps 32 (Lent 1-A, 4-C) is purely a celebration of the delights of forgiveness; another, Ps 130 (Lent A-5), adamantly asserts pardon and God’s disinterest in keeping track; and the other, Ps 51 (Ash Wednesday– ABC; Lent 5-B) displays a stunning confidence in the speaker’s imminent gladness and fruitful new purpose, soon to flow from a recreated heart. There is a repeated festal note on God’s intent for sinners, most famously of course in the parable of that party-throwing father. More broadly, since the gospel is always in play, no Sunday in Lent gives difficult news without also imparting hopeful if not thrilling news.

But the season’s call to repentance is at times also issued as threat. Jesus does so in Luke 13:1–9 (Lent 3-C). Having swept aside suspicions that neither those who were murdered by the governor nor those who were crushed by a collapsing tower had died because of their sins, he sharply turns the tables (twice) to say: “but unless you repent you will all perish as they did.” Since abstract repentance is a contradiction in terms, preachers of this and other Lenten texts will go on to specify the particular and necessary work that repentance may entail, as Scripture elsewhere does in plenty: restitution, reconciliation, advocacy, charity, prayer, the amendment of life.

¹⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 15.

The fact that for six and a half weeks the themes of transgression and reconciliation are set before us so repeatedly and so variously suggests that repentance is indeed a long walk home. Jesus' declaration to his would-be followers that to save their lives they must lose them (Mark 8:35; Lent 2-B) is in part a testament to this truth. Hand in hand with the good news of lavish, outrushing mercy, the preacher will articulate the hard necessity of, as D. H. Lawrence expressed it, "a certain long repentance . . . long, difficult repentance . . . and the freeing oneself from the endless repetition of the mistake."¹⁶

PASSION

By no means are all "the wounds to the soul" self-inflicted. Lent requires us to address the hurts we inflict, but it casts its light on wounds of many kinds other than our own guilt. There is no pain outside the embrace of this season. The appointed texts speak less directly than might be expected to the varied forms of human suffering, but some of the narratives do feature characters suffering illness, grief, judgment, exclusion, or terror. There is most of all the passion of Jesus, not narrated until the final week, but anticipated throughout. All suffering gathers to that suffering; all lament is borne up into the lamentation that rises from the cross.

Necessarily in Lent, and not just toward its conclusion, we speak of the passion and allude, at very least, to its significance. Many of the texts (though far from all) require or invite it, which is to say, we have multiple opportunities to draw connections between the cross and the human condition. Too often, the only stated connection has pertained to sin and forgiveness, but locating the significance of the cross so narrowly is false to the variegated NT witness, to the testimony of the saints, and to the many burdens borne by people in the room and in the world at large. The broad Christian claim is that God, in dark mystery, is fully present in the anguish of Christ, embracing and bearing all the world's hurt, disarming its ultimate power, opening the way to a new existence of reconciliation and holy purpose. If such a claim is true, then to speak of the significance of the cross is to declare that the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ address not only guilt but also grief, isolation, alienation, disease, death, fear, anxiety, the evils of poverty, prejudice, abuse, oppression, and violence, and all the suffering of the created world. Preaching in Lent, as in all other seasons, may bring all of this pain to the cross.

Our focus, then, will not be on "theories of atonement." Our task will be to give expression to the realities of creaturely alienation and suffering, and to do this in no coolly clinical sense but with identification, pathos, lament, and love. In it all, we stay clear of that familiar

¹⁶ From D. H. Lawrence, "Healing," *Selected Poems* (ed. Keith Sagar; London: Penguin, 1986), 216–17.

Christian cruelty that presents suffering as somehow intrinsically good, and so calls the faithful to a devout and passive endurance of it.¹⁷ Neither will we reduce the passion to the mere identification of God with those who suffer. The gospel is more than consolation. Offering no facile answers to suffering, it still brings news of transformation.

How do we speak of such things? Inadequately. In John Douglas Hall's words, "The theology of the cross can never be a brilliant statement about the brokenness of life; it has to be a broken statement about life's brokenness, because it participates in what it seeks to describe."¹⁸ When our Lenten preaching speaks to covenants, commandments, repentance, and discipleship, we may employ language that is direct, instructive, and descriptive, all in straight prose. When we draw near to the cross, our language falters. Ordinary speech falls away. If all pain converges here, then every utterance at the cross is made in the shadow of numberless lynching trees,¹⁹ of children's oncology units, of slums, of Auschwitz, and of our own betrayals and bitter doubts. We preach under the terrors of God's absence and of screaming, crucified love, and of mercy beyond us to comprehend or fully name. Our speech at the cross, then, is not explicatory or rounded to a finish or sentimental in the least. It is reticent, confessional, suggestive, broken. As in much lament, our language within these shadows is intensified and stark, but in the end it is spare. We honor the agonies and unutterable mysteries of the cross with fitting silences.

To this end, it may help to stand with Nicodemus, whose encounter with Jesus appears twice among the texts for Lent (2-A and 4-B, though in the second he has shrunk to such insignificance as to be unmentioned). The appointed texts divide the scene but overlap. Nicodemus approaches Jesus in darkness. He opens with appreciation, but his clearest attribute is incomprehension. Jesus speaks of the mystery of the wind, and of mortal ignorance, observing that the man's theological education has failed him. Then, in a sentence that appears in both lections, he likens himself to the snake lifted up by Moses in the wilderness. The story from Num 21:4-9 (also in Lent 4-B) tells of poisonous snakes infesting the camp, striking and killing, and of Moses lifting a bronze image of the snake on a pole, and the bitten who gaze on it surviving. Their cure does not come by word or gesture or any sign of power, but by gazing at the fanged, horrid thing that is killing them. They look upon venomous evil, on their own lethal affliction, and they live. It is to this that the Johannine Jesus compares what will occur when he is "lifted up" on the cross.

It is a peculiarly apt analogy for our preaching of the Passion and all that pertains to it. Like Nicodemus, we make our way through darkness. We had thought to converse here but are met by demands that are beyond us to manage and by mystery beyond our apprehension.

¹⁷ On contemporary proposals for reframing homiletical language about "the saving significance" of the cross, and with good counsel on correcting insidious claims for suffering, see Sally A. Brown, *Cross Talk: Preaching Redemption Here and Now* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008).

¹⁸ John Douglass Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness: Towards an Indigenous Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 117.

¹⁹ James Cone, in a lecture entitled "Strange Fruit: The Cross and the Lynching Tree," has proposed the lynching tree as a crucial metaphor for the cross in North America; see Brown, *Cross Talk: Preaching Redemption Here and Now*, 82-83.

Our language and learning are hopelessly inadequate. No matter. Our business, says Jesus, is gazing, long and hushed gazing, on this monstrous, lonely dying—ours, his, the world's, God's. This is our task: to forfeit what we thought we knew, to look on utter evil and utter grace, to absorb what we see and be silenced by it, then to make what words we can, not to explain or assure, but to show, as we are able, the mystery of all gathered anguish and of unutterably self-giving, transforming love.

Early in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, after coming through the slough of Despond, Christian enters the house of the Interpreter, where he finds a picture of a preacher—"a very grave person. . . . It had eyes lift up to Heaven, the best of books in its hand, the law of truth was written on its lips, the world was behind its back; it stood as if it pleaded. . . ." The Interpreter describes the figure in both masculine and feminine terms: "The man whose picture this is can beget children, travail in birth with children, and nurse them. . . ." He adds: "his work is to know and unfold dark things to sinners."²⁰

"Dark things" may pertain to guilt, to judgment, to all manner of divine and human pain, and to evil itself. It may also refer to deep and abiding mystery. The preacher in Lent is "to know and unfold" all such things, to whatever extent any flawed and straitened mortal may be able. But our knowing is not without a given light, and our unfolding of speech about all "dark things" is toward a greater light. Like the figure in the Interpreter's house, our travail is toward birth and the giving of warm sustenance, as we, too, are given it, for the long journey home.

²⁰ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (ed. Roger Sharrock; London: Penguin, 1987), 71.

Between Text & Sermon

Isaiah 65:17–25

TREMPER LONGMAN III

Westmont College

Santa Barbara

CONFLICT. SADNESS. FRUSTRATION. DEATH. No one escapes the difficulties of life. One does not have to turn on the news to hear stories of tragedy and struggle. Talk to friends, relatives. Reflect on your own life. Life is not easy, and for many it is tragic.

What is true today was true for the time of Isa 65. Many believe that the prophet of this oracle lived during the relatively hopeful postexilic period. Israel had been freed from Babylonian captivity, but nevertheless was still living under the watchful eye of the Persian government. The glory days of an independent kingdom were long since gone. The context of the passage suggests that people of the day thought that God was deliberately absent (64:12). The divine response to this terrifying prospect is that God is not only present but also is prepared to be so in ways heretofore hardly imaginable, the result of which would mean punishment for the wicked (65:6–7).

On the other hand, there were still some “sweet grapes” left in the cluster of Israel (65:8). God gave these faithful people a vision of the future that stimulates the imagination with hope, a picture of the “new heaven” and the “new earth” (65:17–25).

And what a vision it is. In this new creation, there will be no weeping, but only joy. Premature death will be a thing of the past. Babies will not die at birth or children die when they are young. Indeed, those who die “at a hundred years will be considered a youth” (65:20). As a result, people will enjoy the fruit of their labor. They, rather than others, will live in the houses they build and eat the produce of the vineyards that they plant (v. 21). Their labor will be rewarding, not frustrating (v. 23). Rather than worrying about bringing children into a troubled world, they can rest assured that their children will enjoy life as well (v. 23). The world will be free of conflict. Even the extremely vulnerable (sheep) will coexist peacefully with natural predators (wolves; v. 25). Not even the lion will crave blood, but will live happily by eating straw (v. 25). Most fundamentally, in this new creation, relationship with God will be intimate, intense, and immediate (v. 24). The only creature that will experience distress is the serpent, the symbol of opposition to God’s design for the world (Gen 3:13–15), whose food “shall be dust” (65:25).

This “new creation” reminds the reader of the first creation, at least before it was soiled by human rebellion with its resulting alienation. Genesis 1:1–2:4a describes a cosmos and its creatures that were made “good,” even “very good.” Genesis 2:4b–25 narrates the creation of human beings, male and female, and describes perfect harmony between them, as well as with the rest of creation (Eden). Most importantly, it describes the divine-human relationship as one of intimate friendship. Such a wonderful future world is not the result of human effort. It is God’s creation as emphasized by the use of the same word “create” as we see in

Gen 1 (*bārāʾ*), a verb used almost exclusively with God as its subject. God's new creative work, in other words, recreates Eden, or even better.

Is such a vision of the future healthy? After all, there is a danger in presenting a picture of a blissful future to troubled people, especially if the blessings are a divine gift rather than the result of human effort. The result might be human passivity as people wait for God to act, a kind of "pie in the sky by and by" mentality. But such a passive reaction to the vision is not the only, and certainly not the desired, response. The vision is not given to pacify suffering people, but rather to engender hope, a kind of hope that inspires action, not one that suppresses it. In the midst of what seems like a hopeless situation, the promise of a better future can grant to troubled people the energy not just to survive, but to live with joy in the midst of suffering. The amazing visions of the second half of Daniel serve the same purpose. The message throughout the visions of Daniel is that "[i]n spite of present circumstances, God is in control" (T. Longman, *Daniel*, Zondervan, 1999, 19). Accordingly, God's people can thrive even in the midst of their oppression. Paul, too, proclaims a message of hope when he speaks of a world "subjected to futility" but one nonetheless that has hope that it will "be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom 8:18–21).

How, though, will God effect this transition from suffering to joy?

To find an answer to this question, we turn back to an earlier portion of Isaiah. The final verse of our passage (v. 25) presents a remarkable vision of harmony that echoes 11:6–9:

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
 the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
 the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
 and a little child shall lead them.
 The cow and the bear shall graze,
 their young shall lie down together;
 and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
 and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
 They will not hurt or destroy
 on all my holy mountain;
 for the earth will be full of knowledge of the Lord
 as waters cover the sea.

The vision is part of a messianic oracle, anticipating a future leader on whom the spirit of the Lord will rest (11:2). It is this person who will usher in the future glorious age. The NT understands this one to be none other than Jesus Christ, whose work on the cross is the foundation of our hope in the midst of a fallen, sinful world.

The work that will be brought to full fruition in the future has already begun. Paul writes that "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation" (2 Cor 5:17; see also Gal 6:15). The new creation is not just a future event; it is also a present reality.

Luke 24:13–35

E. HAROLD BREITENBERG, JR.

Randolph-Macon College

Ashland, Virginia

THIS WELL-KNOWN STORY ABOUT TWO DISCIPLES on the way to Emmaus, joined in their travels and discussion by the risen Jesus, includes intriguing details and raises many questions. The engaging narrative also provides significant insights. Assigned by the lectionary to Easter evening, the story connects Luke's description of the women, followed by Peter, who visited Jesus' tomb early Easter morning, and Luke's report of Jesus' post-resurrection appearance to the disciples in Jerusalem. All three accounts include sudden appearances, questions put to disciples, descriptions of their disbelief or lack of recognition, exposition of Scripture or a reminder of the same previously done by Jesus, and remembrance or new understandings on the part of Jesus' followers. However, only the Emmaus story addresses the disciples' lack of recognition of the risen Jesus followed by their recognition of him. Why is that? And why does this recognition, explicitly mentioned only in the Emmaus story, occur within the context of Jesus' breaking of the bread? Why not when the remembrance of Jesus' words or the opening of his disciples' minds to Scripture takes place apart from the breaking of bread, as in the stories that frame it? Answers may lie in similarities and differences between the stories.

The first post-resurrection account in Luke (24:1–12) takes place early Easter morning at Jesus' tomb. Upon finding it open, the women go inside and are joined by "two men in dazzling clothes" who suddenly "stood beside them," causing terror in the women. The men ask, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" and proclaim Jesus' resurrection (vv. 4–5; compare the two men in white robes in Acts 1:10–11 who ask "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"). After the men in the tomb remind the women what Jesus taught about the Son of Man, they "remembered his words," return to "the eleven and all the rest," and tell them what has just happened. Peter runs to the tomb but sees only "the linen clothes by themselves," after which he "went home, amazed at what had happened." In the third of Luke's post-resurrection stories, Jesus' appearance to the disciples in Jerusalem (vv. 36–49), Jesus first proclaims peace to them. The disciples are "startled and frightened" at his appearance, thinking they "were seeing a ghost." Jesus then asks why they are frightened and have doubts in their hearts. Their joy, we learn, is coupled with disbelief and wonderment, even after or perhaps because Jesus instructs them to touch and see him and shows them his hands and feet. He asks for something to eat, is given fish and eats it, after which he reminds the disciples of what he said about the fulfillment of Scripture. Jesus then "opened their minds to understand the scriptures" and declares that he will send them what his Father promised (24:45), which we later learn is the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1–4).

The Emmaus road story—Jesus' first post-resurrection appearance in Luke—is thus sandwiched between two other post-resurrection stories, both of which include reports of

terror on the part of Jesus' followers as well as remembrance of Jesus' words or his opening of their minds to comprehension of the Scriptures—but not recognition or knowledge. As we learn only from the Emmaus road story, the disciples' "eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight." In addition, only at the end of the Emmaus road narrative are the disciples in Jerusalem and readers of Luke's Gospel told that Jesus had been made known to the Emmaus disciples "in the breaking of the bread."

Although interpretation of Scripture is essential, in these three stories we find that proper interpretation does not in itself produce recognition of the risen Jesus. At the tomb, the women remembered the words of Jesus after the men who appeared there reminded them of what Jesus taught about the Son of Man. Similarly, in Jesus' post-resurrection appearance to the disciples in Jerusalem, he "opened their minds to understanding the scriptures." In the Emmaus story, the disciples experience recognition, analogous to the women's remembrance, sometime after Jesus "interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures." After Jesus' disappearance, the Emmaus disciples realized their "hearts were burning within . . . while he was opening the scriptures" to them while talking to them on the road, which is similar to the opening of the Jerusalem disciples' minds to understanding Scripture. However, neither the women at the empty tomb nor the disciples in Jerusalem are described as recognizing Jesus.

Readers may find aspects of the Emmaus story rather odd and the story a source of more questions than answers. Who or what "kept" the eyes of the two disciples from recognizing (*epignōnai*) Jesus when he joined them on their journey? Why would they strongly urge someone to stay with them whom they thought to be a stranger, especially when he had only a short time before described them as "foolish" and "slow of heart to believe"? Why is it that they do not seem to be surprised or express astonishment when Jesus vanishes immediately after they recognize him? And why is it that only in the breaking of the bread are "their eyes opened, and they recognized (*epegnōsan*) him"?

Perhaps some clues lie in consideration of the experience of recognition. Although related, recognition and knowledge are not the same. In this context, the English word "recognize" means "to perceive to be something or someone previously known" (*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed., 2004, 1039). To recognize means to see or know again. We can only truly recognize someone or something we previously knew or saw—someone or something we already know but may have forgotten or not perceive clearly. It is different to meet someone for the first time than it is to recognize a person we know, even if we have not seen him or her for a long time. Moreover, in the Bible, knowledge (*epignōsis*) is not portrayed as a purely mental activity—it is a relationship (see "knowledge" in *The Harper-Collins Bible Dictionary*, 1996, 575–576).

While the disciples on the way to Emmaus believe that Jesus is dead and his ministry has ended, they can see and converse with Jesus who joins them on their travels, but they are kept from recognizing him. Their expectations of him had not been met. Curiously, apparently nothing about Jesus, the one whom they followed as disciples, provided them insight about his identity: not his appearance, voice, gait, demeanor, or manner. None of

these telltale attributes of a person, which often trigger recognition in us, are perceived by the disciples as indicative of the Jesus they thought they knew. Yet they allow the stranger to travel with them. When he appears to be going beyond their destination, they note the lateness of the day and offer him hospitality, thereby setting the stage for recognition of the risen Lord. This in turn causes a change in their plans and a new destination: back to Jerusalem and the company of other disciples.

In these three stories, we learn that the experience of the empty tomb does not cause recognition and the reports of the empty tomb do not produce belief. Jesus does not become known to his disciples through his words alone, as important as they may be. Even being in the presence of the risen Lord does not open Jesus' followers then, and perhaps even now, to his true identity. At least, that is not the case in these stories. Instead, Jesus' identity becomes clear to the Emmaus disciples through a particular action, breaking of the bread, following the right interpretation of Scripture. The Emmaus disciples do not even have to have faith to participate in the meal with Jesus. But that event, for these disciples—and only for them in these three post-resurrection narratives—produces recognition.

We may want Scripture to tell us, clearly and explicitly, why only the Emmaus disciples *recognized* Jesus and why he was made known to them “in the breaking of the bread.” The text, however, is silent on those points. But what we do know is that recognition of the risen Lord was preceded by the opening of Scripture to the disciples and occurred in the context of a meal shared within a community of faith, when Jesus was “at the table with them.” In the breaking of bread—an ordinary and mundane act but one that was carried out in a specific context and in which the risen Jesus participated—they knew him again. Then he immediately vanished, only to appear again, unexpectedly, within the context of community. The communal act of *remembrance* that Jesus modeled for his disciples (Lk. 22:19) turns out to be also a means by which his followers *recognize* him—both then and now.


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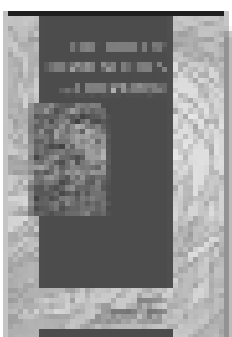
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Philippians 3:17–4:1

TIMOTHY MATTHEW SLEMMONS
University of Dubuque Theological Seminary
Dubuque, Iowa

THE DOGMATIC TASK THAT LIES BETWEEN THIS lectionary text and a timely sermon entails questions relating to 1) imitative discipleship, with ultimate reference not to Paul and other exemplars of the faith (v. 17), but to “the cross of Christ” (v. 18a); 2) the stark distinction between degenerate “enemies of the cross” (vv. 18–19) and citizens of heaven who expect the risen Savior’s return (v. 20); and 3) the second coming itself, with its implications for bodily transformation from humiliation to glory and the subjection of “all things” to the reign of Christ (v. 21).

Where imitation is concerned, the text is framed by its only two imperatives (3:17; 4:1) that bear the light burden of English cognates: observe (*skopeite*) and stand firm (*stēkete*). Assuming a chiasm is not entirely superimposed, these imperatives should hold together and bear upon sermon application with the expectation that discipleship is inseparable from cross-bearing. But what does cruciform discipleship look like? The answer lies in the contrasts Paul posits in light of the cross itself.

Luther alludes to this text in his *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), reminding his readers that heavenly citizenship (*politeuma*) applies to a Christian believer: “to the extent that he does his duty in faith, to that extent he is doing it in heaven.” But this is not a matter of anagogy. Rather, “Paul says . . . a new and heavenly Jerusalem, which is lordly and free, has been established, not in heaven but on earth, to be the mother of us all, of whom we have been born and are being born every day. Therefore, it is necessary that this mother of ours, like the birth she gives, be on earth among (human beings); yet she gives birth in the Spirit, by the ministry of the Word and the Sacraments, not physically” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 26, 439–40). Luther claims the heavenly Jerusalem is the home of the church militant on earth, not the church triumphant. This is not to suggest, with Fred Craddock, that attention to Paul’s eschatology is a “temptation” to be avoided, for eschatology always bears on the present, and more specifically, on present sufferings; and it concerns far more than mere “lifestyle” (*Philippians*, IBC, Westminster John Knox, 1985, 64–69).

In other words, a sermon speculating on the glory of our transformed bodies in the resurrection may momentarily inspire, but would likely circumvent the pressing needs of the church and err into triumphalism, but so, too, would a sermon that reduces the “infinite qualitative difference” (S. Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler*; Princeton University Press, 1998, 181; K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Oxford University Press, 1968, 10), of which Paul speaks here to an invective against immoral behavior.

That the “enemies of the cross” have shamefully divinized the “belly” is not finally a matter of gluttony, lust, or sloth, although such sins certainly indicate deep-seated idolatry.

It is, rather, that their entire orientation, their thinking (*phronountes*) is altogether perverse, i.e., focused on earthly things, rather than the things of God; they have, like Peter when his satanic counsel met with the sternest rebuke, set their minds on human things (Matt 16:23), rather than “the things that are above” (Col 3:1–4).

Thus, the sermon should focus on the cross by way of the contrasts Paul delineates—“even with tears” (v. 18)—between the destiny of the degenerate and that of the persevering, expectant Christian. To shrink from this contrast into one-sided, positivistic pleasantries about the future glory must be avoided every bit as much as the temptation to condemn (Matt 7:1; Luke 6:37; John 2:4a, 12:47; Jas 4:11–12; 5:9). What is needed is “right judgment” (John 7:24b), i.e., discernment (1 Cor 2:14–15; 11:29; 12:10). At the heart of this text is the crucial dialectic of soteriology itself, the watershed event of “the cross of Christ.”

Admittedly, preaching the cross is not easy, and homiletics continues to devise many ways of avoiding it. The esthetic hiatus of the New Homiletic school of preaching that arose in the 1970s and 1980s with, among other things, a tendency to exalt form (especially parabolic form) to the level of content; the inclination of both fundamentalism and liberalism to devolve into their respective brands of moralistic preaching; the unsuccessful efforts of postliberalism to transcend the same where it stakes everything on a cultural-linguistic matrix of ethical formation; the failure of the *Revised Common Lectionary* (outside of Holy Week) to engage in any substantive way the gospel’s Passion Narratives. These are only the most recent detours that have led both preachers and congregations away from the passionate suffering of Jesus, from the Passion Narratives themselves, and from the narrow gate to life and discipleship that the cross represents.

Thankfully, there are indications the cross is again becoming the primary focus of preaching. Sally A. Brown’s recent book, *Cross Talk: Preaching Redemption Here and Now* (Westminster John Knox, 2008) is a welcome, if overdue, contribution in this regard. Brown contends the preacher’s task in relation to the cross is not to offer explanations (of what is finally inexplicable divine grace and love) by means of traditional theories of the atonement; rather, it is to interpret the cross by way of the rich variety of metaphors we find in Scripture. Brown includes a helpful chart that lists references to the death of Jesus in the *Revised Common Lectionary*. Although this chart overlooks the present text, it offers many possibilities for preaching the cross and exposes alarming omissions in the lectionary. Brown’s proposal does not pretend to mine every redemptive metaphor by any stretch; it offers no simplistic formula for application to every text, and no sustained exegesis of the passage under consideration. What it does ask of the preacher is attention to the dynamics of metaphor.

Here perhaps our best metaphor is a counter-metaphor: “the enemies of the cross of Christ.” Who are they? The preliminary question must be posed in the past tense: Who were Paul’s opponents in Philippi? Were the enemies of the cross the same as the aforementioned dogs, the evil workers, those of the mutilation (3:2)? Two centuries of scholarly opinion on these questions have been summarized by John J. Gunther (*St. Paul’s Opponents and Their Background*, Brill Academic, 1973, 2). That they were Judaizers, or at least nominally sympathetic with them, is unanimously held, so clearly Paul intended turning the tables on the

stereotypical formula whereby “Gentile=dog.” Beyond that, the specific heresy in question—whether Gnostic, libertine, apocalyptic, radically pneumatic, or some combination of the above—is not entirely clear. Whatever the case, historical reconstruction leads only so far beyond common anti-Semitic misinterpretations and toward what the Spirit is saying to the church today.

Tellingly, however, the remarkable antithetical dialectics in vv. 19–20 should scuttle any possibility of “pretty,” polite, or impartial preaching about the cross:

Enemies of the cross of Christ

end [*telos*] => destruction

god => belly [*koilia*]

glory => shame

minds [*phronountes*] => set on earthly things

Citizens of heaven, expecting Christ

citizenship => heaven

Savior => Jesus Christ

humiliation => glory akin to Christ’s

expectation => heaven-sent salvation

At a minimum, these distinctions, and the passion with which Paul exposes them, should alert us to the dangers of preaching a crossless Christ or a Christless Christianity. The expectancy of faith, even when it comes to the mutual indwelling of the believer in Christ and Christ in the believer, is undeniably *extra nos*. We are neither born with it, nor do we give birth to it. As Karl Barth wrote,

“the Cross of Christ” is . . . the strongest expression for the radical opposition of Christian truth not so much to moral license and the pursuit of earthly, sensual pleasure, as rather to the religious and ethical presumptuousness that seeks to achieve what (humanity) is utterly incapable of achieving, what can only be given to (humanity) in faith. Those who would seek to get around this barrier, who resist the power of Christ’s resurrection that seeks to drive them into the fellowship of his sufferings . . . these are “enemies of the Cross of Christ.” For whoever seeks a different way, seeks the opposite. Neutrality is here excluded. (*The Epistle to the Philippians*, John Knox, 1962, 113)

Paul’s counterpoints accentuate the awakening prospect of the return of the risen Christ, a doctrine that most lectionary-based congregations do not mention in Lent, despite the fact that Jesus preached his apocalyptic discourse in the days leading to his crucifixion. Preaching the cross eschatologically (see Brown, 77–81) in Lent may provide precisely the lens needed to interpret more faithfully the great divide at work in both culture and church. For, in fact, eschatology is no “temptation,” but avoiding the great eschatological divide and its leading edge in the soteriology of the cross is no longer an option for preaching that would speak to those rendered sleepless by “end time” questions. At the outset of both the Psalter and the *Didache*, we learn that there are two ways through life, two diametrically opposite destinations, two different ways of taking (or mistaking) the gateway to life: narrow or broad (Matt 7:13–14). But the difference is not quantitative, a matter of more or less. The difference is infinite and qualitative by virtue of the destination. Luther, Kierkegaard, Barth, and Bonhoeffer were right on this score, and today’s preacher must stake the claim for heavenly *politeuma* and Christian perseverance on no other ground than the baptized and bloody ground beneath the cross of Jesus Christ, “the enemies” of which court unimaginable regret.

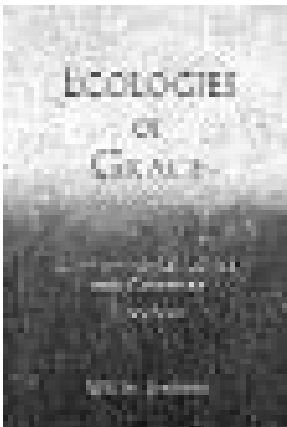
Major Reviews



A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming

by Sallie McFague

Fortress, Minneapolis, 2008. 198 pp. \$20.00. ISBN 978-0-8006-6271-4.



Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology

by Willis Jenkins

Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008. 363 pp. \$35.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-19-532851-6.

SALLIE MCFAGUE PROPHETICALLY addresses the new climate that will engulf global civilization in the next fifty to seventy-five years. As she details in the first part of *A New Climate for Theology*, in just the past ten years, the “most likely” scenarios for global climate change have moved from sobering to terrifying. For instance, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change now projects a possible global temperature rise of up to 6° C by 2100, with a 4.5° rise being most likely (by comparison, the last ice age was 5° cooler than today). Not only is that a geologically split-second, epochal shift with awful implications for flora and fauna, but there is a sociopolitically devastating geophysical twist: because of the physical dynamics of climate change, “for a long time things will be fine, but then, suddenly, perhaps within a decade or two, it will be too late” (p. 14).

Our most likely future reality is almost unimaginable (though we were given a snapshot in the breakdown of civil order in New Orleans in the immediate aftermath of Katrina). The “new climate,” McFague explains, “will be one of violent class wars over resources, the breakdown of civilization at all levels, and the end of . . . the opportunity to have meaningful work, to raise healthy children, to enjoy leisure activities” (p. 168). Climate change, then, is not just one among many challenges that we face, for “[a]ll of the other issues we care about—social justice, peace, prosperity, freedom—cannot occur unless our planet is healthy” (p. 15). There still is time to act and prevent these outcomes. By spending about three percent of global GNP, we could stabilize global temperature with a 2° C rise by 2100. But because of the geophysical twist, we need to act now, while everything still seems to be fine.

The distinct task of the theologian in the face of such a threat—to suggest “different language for talking about God and ourselves” (p. 3)—can seem marginal. However, McFague argues that this is essential, for “in a democracy the basic beliefs of citizens ultimately control the actions of institutions, both business and government” (p. 25). Furthermore, she suggests, the marginalization

of theology in modern Western society has been a major part of the problem: the “privatization of religion is the triumph of public greed” (p. 35). Unfortunately, much modern Western theology has failed to orient us properly as fellow creatures within an earth community that we are called to love.

In the middle two parts of the book, McFague sketches problematic understandings and suggests alternatives. We find familiar critiques of individualism, traditional understandings of God, and neo-classical economics. McFague also makes less familiar but suggestive and important observations about the character and significance of cities, and issues an important critique of the dangerous claim that since everything on earth now bears the mark of human activity, there is no longer any such thing as wilderness or first nature. (The claim is dangerous because it is hard to say why we should work to save wilderness or nature if no such thing exists.) McFague also provides familiar proposals for new models and metaphors that will help to foster an “incarnational” theology (where, speaking roughly, God is incarnate throughout creation, not only in Jesus). At times, McFague caricatures traditional theology and, in my opinion, significantly underestimates its potential, creating a serious and unnecessary obstacle to coordinated response across theological boundaries. But on the whole, she provides good overviews of these familiar critiques and makes promising proposals, many of which could be taken up by those who retain traditional theological commitments.

Very little of the science or theology in the first three parts of the work is groundbreaking, but it is well-written, accessible, incredibly significant, and shows the relationship and vital importance of diverse areas of theological reflection (these would be excellent chapters in a classroom setting). It is the fourth part of the book that makes the whole work special, scary, and classically prophetic. The modern philosophical, theological, economic, and political dynamics that have led us to the edge of geophysical apocalypse have been generations in the making. Such dynamics cannot be turned on a dime and, devastatingly, such is required. McFague, with classic prophetic realism, discerns the reality and the signs of the times and so concludes that the “most likely” apocalyptic scenario almost certainly describes humanity’s near future (the reality of our young children and grandchildren’s late adulthoods). *That* reality, ultimately, is the new climate for theology that McFague has in mind, a theology for humanity’s fast-coming, brutal, and global “exilic” period.

McFague has dedicated her time to reflecting upon possibilities for more faithful economics, political structures, philosophy, and theology—possibilities that cannot be realized in time to avert catastrophe, because she sees catastrophe as inevitable. But she refuses to lose hope. Hope, however, can only be found in God. Explicitly repudiating her previous rejection of the “spirit” metaphor, McFague encourages us to be empowered by hope in the faithfulness of God, hope carried in the “story of Jesus Christ . . . the story of God incarnate, facing the worst that the world (human beings) can offer in terms of oppression and destruction, and rising to new life—the cross and the resurrection” (pp. 171–72). We can live, McFague urges, in the hope and confidence that God will bring us through this geophysical apocalypse; and even now we can work proleptically to ensure that the remnant that remains will be able to formulate different and faithful economics, political structures, philosophy, and theology.

Willis Jenkins’ selfconsciously iconoclastic *Ecologies of Grace* is so erudite and thought-provoking that I recommend it even while strongly disputing its organizing principles and conclu-

sions. Unlike McFague, who is motivated by a practical terror, Jenkins appeals to the practical out of a modern epistemological concern over lack of intelligibility in environmental ethics. Jenkins' concern with theory is so powerful that he dedicates the first part of his book to constructing a metanarrative ("map") that allows him to sketch minimal criteria for "the moral science of environmental ethics" (p. 59), to sort environmental ethics in accord with their practical strategies ("nature's standing," "moral agency," and "ecological subjectivity"), and to illustrate how correlate theological strategies ("ecojustice," "Christian stewardship," and "ecological spirituality") make environmental concerns relevant to Christians by clarifying their soteriological significance.

Jenkins' modern mentality is a practical strength insofar as his environmental appeals work in accord with mainstream cultural assumptions. In particular, Jenkins is explicitly anthropocentric—though his is an exceedingly generous anthropocentrism—and solicitous of science. In contrast to mainstream environmentalist scholarship, Jenkins does not call for a wholesale rethinking of predominant modern Western rationality and human self-understanding.

The appeals to soteriology are likewise a practical strength insofar as they are congruent with popular modern theological understandings. For instance, the Christian strategy of ecojustice "transforms" secular appeals to nature's standing and "makes environmental problems significant for Christian concern by making God's relation to creation part of God's way to friendship to humanity" (p. 61). Similarly, the Christian strategy of ecological spirituality "transforms" secular appeals to ecological subjectivity and "makes environmental issues matter for Christian experience by appealing to the ecological dimensions of fully Christian personhood" (p. 93).

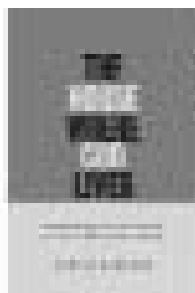
Jenkins' interest in appealing to mainstream theological understanding is perpetuated when he turns to theology proper in the second part of his book. His selection of representative environmental theologians is also iconoclastic. He chooses Aquinas to represent ecojustice theology and Barth to represent a theology of Christian stewardship, and offers stimulating interpretations of each. His selection of Maximus and Bulgakov to represent theologies of ecological spirituality is far less surprising, but may be especially interesting to Western readers unfamiliar with Orthodox theology.

One could argue that Jenkins' theological readings are forced, and that his anthropocentrism and affirmation of mainstream Western modern rationality perpetuate the modern conceptual and spiritual roots of the environmental crisis. Moreover, those who follow Albert Schweitzer and Andrew Linzey, transforming secular animal rights concerns into a theological calling, might object that Jenkins' metanarrative simply writes "animal rights" and its theological analogues out of existence. (Notably, for Jenkins, when prophetic visions of a peaceable kingdom lead to moral ideals at variance with realities revealed by natural science, natural science trumps [pp. 73–75].)

But even critics will find much to commend in Jenkin's insightful and stimulating book. In relation to the multitudes who for the foreseeable future are likely to remain anthropocentric and to think in accord with mainstream modern Western rationality, Jenkins offers a powerful, multivalent, and environmentally friendly metanarrative, and explains its clear congruence with predominant streams of Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Christianity.

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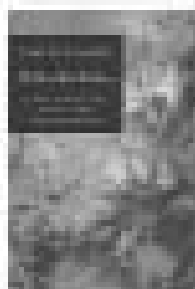
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Jeremiah: A Commentary

by Leslie C. Allen

The Old Testament Library. Westminster John Knox, Louisville, 2008. 546 pp. \$59.95 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-664-22223-9.

THIS VOLUME REPLACES THE COMMENTARY by the late Robert Carroll in the venerable Old Testament Library. It includes a select bibliography focused on works published since the middle of the twentieth century, an introduction to the critical issues in Jeremiah studies and to the approach taken in the commentary, the author's translation of the text of Jeremiah with additions made by the Masoretic textual tradition in italics, text-critical and grammatical notes, and an index of

authors cited. The introduction discusses the complicated problem of the two traditions (MT and LXX) of the text of Jeremiah, the prominent genres in the book, the history of the literary development that produced the canonical text, and the macrostructure evident in the final form of the text.

In many respects, Leslie Allen's approach to Jeremiah can be described as methodologically conservative. This is suggested by the chief dialogue partners he identifies (Rudolph, McKane, and Holladay) and by the six primary assumptions he acknowledges from the outset, namely: 1) that Jeremiah is religious literature; 2) that the interpreter confronts the final, canonical form of the text; 3) that it is nonetheless incumbent upon the interpreter to recognize the complicated condition of the textual witnesses; 4) that the condition of the final form of the text requires attention to redaction and source critical issues; 5) that primary concern with exegesis of the text necessitates leaving aside questions of hermeneutics or theological application; and 6) that the commentary will include observations regarding Jeremiah's context in the canon, both as it develops prior biblical traditions and as it serves as the source for the subsequent growth of tradition.

Allen's focus on the final form of the text does not reflect a commitment to purely synchronic reading. Instead, relying heavily on the work of Emanuel Tov with regard to the history of the text of Jeremiah and of Louis Stulman with regard to the character of the so-called "prose sermons" in Jeremiah, Allen concludes that MT represents the final redaction of Jeremiah over against LXX, which represents an earlier form of the book. This final form is characterized by "a serial structure of closing hope with sporadic anticipation that the MT redaction imposed on the older text, developing intimations it already found there" (p. 14). The MT did so principally through additions in Jer 10:12–16; 30:10–11; and 33:14–26, through rearrange-

ments of material, through “amplifications” in Jer 46–51, and through the prologue (1:1–2:3) and epilogue (52) structure. Significantly, Allen differentiates between the “now” of the prophet Jeremiah, the “now” of the final form of the text (i.e., the context of the original readership), and the “now” of the commentator, a very fruitful hermeneutical distinction. In his view, however, the identification of the audience is not yet sufficient to identify the purpose of the book. Although the prose sermons may seem to address the audience with the options available to them (repentance), the reader must take care to distinguish between the purpose of Jeremiah’s preaching to the pre-crisis Judeans and the purpose of the book. That is, in the context of the book, the prose sermons already presuppose the outcome. Similarly, rather than offering an option to exilic readers, the several “calls to repentance” situated throughout the book “are set firmly in prejudgment contexts and draw implicit attention to the fact that repentance did not take place” (p. 17). In contrast, Allen notes “the purposeful trajectory of overriding grace that stretches over the book like a rainbow” (e.g., Jer 1:10; 3:14–18; 12:14–17; 16:14–15; 24:6; 31:28). This trajectory was “already introduced in the edition represented by LXX and enhanced in MT” (p. 17).

Problematically, however, Allen’s identification of the MT with the final form of the text and his characterization of the book’s “now” as the exilic period and thus, the “now” of the audience, require greater attention to the redaction history of the book than Allen’s assumptions allow. He must account for evidence suggesting that LXX and MT represent regional versions of the text and that both versions, but especially the text witnessed by MT, underwent rather lengthy periods of growth, probably continuing down into the Persian period. He does not, in fact, seem to maintain that the book of Jeremiah, at least not the Babylonian oracles in Jer 50–51, attained essentially its current form before the Persian period. Although Allen attributes much of the poetry in the oracles against the nation to Jeremiah, a judgment that seems uncritically to apply the poetry/prose distinction as a criterion for authenticity, he finds signs in Jer 50–51 that point to a date later than Jeremiah. These signs include, especially, the reuse and reapplication of pre-existent prophetic materials, particularly material from Deutero-Isaiah. If this is correct, the final form of the LXX version of Jeremiah, which includes Jer 50–51, already postdated the exile. Thus, if Allen’s conclusion that the MT edition represents a rearrangement, amplification, and expansion of the prior LXX version is correct, it must have attained its final form well into the Persian period. How would Allen’s reading of Jeremiah be influenced by postulating the later period as the context for the final form of Jeremiah?

Allen’s commentary on the compositional unit often termed the “Temple Sermon” (7:1–8:3) illustrates the mainstream character of his analysis. He describes the unit as “a collection of prose passages with cultic overtones” (p. 93) consisting of five oracles of destruction (7:1–15, 16–20, 21–29, 30–34; 8:1–3) structured into two literary compositions (7:2–20; 7:21–8:3). The oracle reception heading in 7:1 lends the unit a significant macrostructural role mirrored on the microstructural level by the quotation formulas in 7:3 and 21. The initial oracle of destruction moves from a chiasmic exhortation (vv. 3b, 4, 5–7; A, B, A’) to repentance and reform through an enumeration of reasons for the impending disaster (vv. 8–11a) to the ultimate announcement of destruction in vv. 13–15. “Place”—God’s (temple, Shiloh) and

the people's (the land), integrally interrelated—functions thematically in the oracle's juxtaposition of a perversion of Zion theology and the demands of covenant fidelity. The second oracle also focuses on "place," but exchanges the false worship of God with the worship of false gods as the people's offense. The second set of these oracles, which exhibits a number of verbal connections with the first pair of oracles, also moves from a denunciation of faulty Yahwistic worship to a charge of pagan worship. The final oracle of destruction in the overall composition parallels the second in its treatment of astral worship in relation to the coming disaster.

Seen as a whole, Allen notes, the compositional unit notably reflects on and reiterates material from Jer 5–6 and depends heavily on Deuteronomy and Ps 78. It represents an exilic perspective on Jeremianic traditions. Along the way, Allen discusses the prophetic torah form evidenced in 7:5–7, the significance of prophetic intercession, the likely Mesopotamian backgrounds of the Queen of Heaven cult, and other standard historical-critical *topoi*.

Allen adopts similar middle-of-the-road stances regarding virtually every critical crux in Jeremiah studies: the book preserves authentic material, but has undergone a process of collection and redaction; it offers some reliable information concerning the life and career of the prophet, but cannot be pressed to yield a substantial biography; etc. Allen's contribution may be viewed, then, as a summation of mainline historical-critical scholarship on Jeremiah at the end of the twentieth century. In some regards, it is most remarkable for what it eschews: its own solution to critical issues, theological and hermeneutical readings, engagement with literary theory, and so forth. This observation is not meant as a criticism. The contemporary trend in commentary writing leans so far in the direction of literary novelty and theological, even homiletical, pertinence that the kind of historical, textual, linguistic, and form-critical interpretation and analysis Allen has produced has almost disappeared from the marketplace. Without access to a good library, this variety of scholarship—solid historical-critical exegesis—is virtually no longer available. Allen fills that gap admirably.

Mark E. Biddle

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1 & 2 Thessalonians

by Linda McKinnish Bridges

Smyth & Helwys, Macon, Ga., 2008. 293 pp. \$45.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-1-57312-083-8.

BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP OVER the past twenty years has undergone a significant attitude shift with regard to presenting its findings in a more “user-friendly” format. Two decades ago, those few Old and New Testament studies that contained visual images and special-interest boxes (“sidebars”) were not considered scholarly enough to be worthy of serious consideration. Not so any more. In recent years, we have seen a growing wave of published biblical scholarship specifically designed to bridge the gap between the

insights of academicians and the demands of theological students and preachers.

The new commentary on 1 and 2 Thessalonians by Linda McKinnish Bridges illustrates this shift. Her volume is part of an ambitious series, the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary, that covers both Old and New Testaments and whose stated goal is “to make available serious, credible biblical scholarship in an accessible and less intimidating format” (p. xv). A multimedia format is employed under the conviction that “a visual generation of believers deserves a commentary series that contains not only the all-important textual commentary on Scripture, but images, photographs, maps, works of fine art, and drawings that bring the text to light” (p. xv). Like the others in the series, this volume treats each major section of the biblical text in two main sections: Commentary and Connections. The first deals with matters typically found in an exegetical commentary: explanations of the Greek text, historical context and literary forms, as well as theological issues that the text raises. The Connections section deals with the application of the text, providing the pastor, teacher, and lay reader with specific ways in which these two ancient letters remain relevant for the church today.

Sidebars are located liberally throughout both sections. Each of these special-interest boxes has not only a descriptive heading but also an icon intended to provide a visual clue to the type of material found within. These sidebars are classified into four different types. The first, symbolized with an icon of the Greek letters, Alpha and Omega, deals with issues pertaining to the Greek text of 1 and 2 Thessalonians. The second, with an icon of an Ionic capital, covers the cultural context: how geographical, historical, political, or social information from the Greco-Roman world sheds light on Paul’s words to the Thessalonian church. The third, with its icon of an open book, includes quotations from classic or contemporary lit-

erature that illuminate some aspect of the apostle's letter. The fourth, symbolized with a magnifying glass, provides the reader with a list of useful resources for further investigation.

A lot of effort has been put into producing a commentary on 1 and 2 Thessalonians that meets the series goal of making available serious scholarship in an accessible format, and that effort must be judged a success. This resulting volume presents its material in an inviting, visually rich format that will be appreciated not only by pastors, seminary students, and lay readers but also by academicians. In the midst of a plethora of commentary series currently on the market, the user-friendly format of this volume makes it stand out as an attractive option. Nevertheless, the discerning commentary buyer might worry that such a volume is, as the saying goes, "all style and no substance." We move, therefore, beyond the packaging of this volume to consider more carefully its contents.

The brief introduction (thirteen pages) presents four patterns of thought that have guided McKinnish Bridges' reading of 1 Thessalonians. First, she was surprised to discover from Paul's style of leadership that the apostle is not the arrogant, manipulative, and misogynist person she anticipated but "a softer Paul, accessible to all people, both male and female" (p. 6). Second, with regard to identifying the letter's literary genre, McKinnish Bridges chooses "not to confine Paul's words to any single genre or theory, ancient or modern" (p. 8), and refers to the letter more generally as a letter of friendship by which Paul encourages the Thessalonian church. Third, the congregation of Thessalonica is not based in the home of a wealthy patron but is an artisan church—a community shaped by manual laborers who meet in a workshop or tenement house. Fourth, the original members of this artisan community were primarily male and the resulting androcentric perspective encoded in the letter has implications for its interpretation: "If a feminine perspective is absent, either by force or ignorance, then the interpreter is faced with the challenge of creating new worlds of meaning that will be more inclusive and available to all of the readers. That is the purpose of this commentary" (p. 12).

The exegesis is competent and typically follows the positions of mainline Thessalonian scholarship. Objections could be raised about any commentary; space constraints allow me to raise just three. First, McKinnish Bridges follows the majority of contemporary scholars in rejecting the older view that sees an apologetic concern at work in the letter. Yet she misrepresents the older view, claiming that it holds that Paul was seeking "to defend his role as leader, a role that was being challenged by opponents in the congregation in Thessaloniki" (p. 19). This is incorrect, as defenders of the older view claim that Paul's opponents are *outside* the church (2:14, "fellow citizens") and that the attack on the apostle thus naturally concerned not his qualifications as leader (as in Galatians), but his integrity and moral character. Second, on the heavily debated textual question of whether Paul described himself and his coworkers as "gentle" (*ēpioi*) or "infants" (*nēpioi*), McKinnish Bridges chooses what she admits on external evidence is the weaker reading, namely, "gentle." She does so on the grounds that this reading eliminates a mixed metaphor created by the image of a nursing mother mentioned later in the same verse. But the problem of the mixed metaphor is greatly minimized if not removed altogether with proper punctuation of the verse, so that the metaphor of infants *concludes* the point of 2:5–7, while the metaphor of a nursing mother *introduces* the new point of 2:7b–8 (as correctly punctuated in the TNIV). Third, one of McKinnish Bridges'

more novel interpretations is that the word “laborers” in 5:12 (“those who labor among you in the Lord”) refers not to spiritual leaders working in the church but simply to “people who produce goods for society” (p. 150). That Paul has in view, however, not regular laborers but spiritual leaders seems clear from the accompanying prepositional phrase that such folks are “in the Lord” and that the rest of the church should “esteem them most highly because of their work.”

The Connection section for each major unit of the letter runs on average about two-thirds the length of the Commentary section and thus forms a significant part of the overall volume. McKinnish Bridges draws heavily in this section from her own past experiences and often speaks in the first-person voice, giving a very personal and almost autobiographical quality to this material. She grew up in a fundamentalist Baptist mountain church where end-time discussions played a heavy role, and many of her observations in this section involve reflections on how her past understanding of the Bible has been nuanced or changed by her later academic studies, life experiences, and reflection.

There is a separate and lengthier introduction (twenty pages) to 2 Thessalonians. McKinnish Bridges argues that this letter differs from 1 Thessalonians in its emotional tone, vocabulary, and syntactical structure, and thus was not written by Paul. She spends quite a bit of time discussing pseudepigraphical writing, arguing that “to forge a name on a piece of work did not signal dishonesty; rather, to place a name other than your own on the work was a way of honoring the past, of creating additional authority for the name and readers” (p. 200). Second Thessalonians, she argues, was written by a disciple of Paul to a Thessalonian church that is a little older, bolder, and more organized, but that needed doctrinal correction concerning the end times and admonishment concerning work.

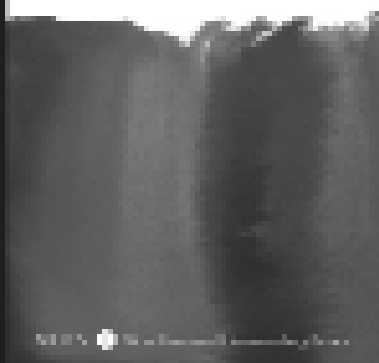
To summarize, McKinnish Bridges has produced a commentary on 1 and 2 Thessalonians that fulfills well the series goal of providing solid scholarship in a nonthreatening, user-friendly format, and therefore will be especially appealing to those engaged in pastoral ministry. But while all will appreciate this volume’s packaging, judgment about its contents will likely be more mixed, depending on whether one shares McKinnish Bridges’ specific patterns of thought on how these two letters ought to be read.

Jeffrey A. D. Weima
CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

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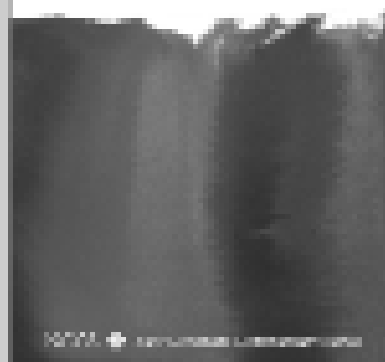
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Shorter Reviews

This Is My Body: The Presence of Christ in Reformation Thought

by *Thomas J. Davis*

Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2008. 224 pp. \$24.99.
ISBN 978-0-8010-3245-5.

IN THIS COLLECTION OF ten essays, largely grouped around eucharistic imagery in Reformation thought, Thomas Davis presents diverse reflections loosely connected to the interpretation of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. The book opens with two essays about the development of eucharistic theology within Martin Luther's work. The next six essays cluster around Calvin's eucharistic theology and draw widely on Calvin's sermons and commentaries in addition to the *Institutes*. The final two essays offer broader thought on the social body of Christ and the role of signification in eucharistic thought in the sixteenth century. Along the way, Davis traces helpful distinctions between Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin. Several themes help to connect the essays: the central role of the Word, the place of proclamation, the role of the body (natural and social) and its relationship to eucharistic presence, and the place of metaphor and sign in Reformation theology.

As with most collections of essays, there is overlap and repetition. In spite of this occasional tendency, Davis is a thoughtful interpreter and critical guide to debates among Calvin scholars. Particularly noteworthy is the essay on Calvin's homiletic legacy, where Davis demonstrates the continued importance of Calvin's approach to making Christ present through preaching. The collection concludes with a thoughtful and creative rendering of the role of art in prefiguring a shift towards the literal signification of reality. While trying to fill in a more sympathetic and human portrait of Calvin, the work remains limited by its emphasis on theological thought (as evidenced by the book's title). In particular, a broader exploration of the significance of theological practice could yield a richer portrait, especially in regards to Calvin's eucharistic practice.

For pastors looking for a carefully nuanced articulation of Calvin's eucharistic theology, this work provides a helpful guide to the literature. Davis addresses specialized themes in ways that remain largely accessible and is able to show their importance to broader debates within theological scholarship of the Reformation.

PAUL GALBREATH
UNION-PSCE
RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

When God Speaks Through Worship: Stories Congregations Live By

by *Craig A. Satterlee*

The Alban Institute, Herndon, Va., 2009. 137 pp. \$17.00.
ISBN 978-1-56699-383-8.

SØREN KIERKEGAARD's famous image of worship as a drama in which the worshippers are the actors and God is the audience, makes it clear that the congregation is to be active and involved. Craig Satterlee, however, realizes the danger of that image: while keeping the congregation from being passive observers, it makes God into one. Worship then becomes fundamentally a human activity, to be shaped and filled with meaning by those who prepare it. Satterlee turns this image on its head with an extended and anecdotal argument that God, not the preacher nor even the congregation, is the fundamental actor in our worship, and invites readers into the delightful discipline of asking one another what God is up to in the worship life of the community.

The stories Satterlee tells are from his own pastoral ministry, and his interpretations of them are reverent best guesses; he never claims to see all that God is doing in worship. But they all come back to "giving God the first word," and believing that God is at work in our worship, often going beyond or even at cross purposes to the planners' intentions. The chapters are organized around simple, common imperatives: "Remember Baptism," "Welcome Kids," "Celebrate Vocation," and so forth.

Surprisingly, Satterlee himself comes through

in this book even more than in his earlier volume, *When God Speaks Through You*, in two particularly valuable ways. First, the fact that he is legally blind is an important part of many of these stories. His blindness may be a gift to his congregations, since he is obviously not self-sufficient, and collegiality is required. Second, Satterlee's doctoral work on the catechetical practice and mystagogical preaching in the early church leads him to urge congregations to institute new practices and then reflect on them, rather than introducing them with lengthy instructions. His examples of weekly Communion and footwashing on Maundy Thursday are apt and moving.

Unfortunately for a book that aims at group reflection, the questions for discussion at the end of each chapter are not terribly inspired. In fact, they often depend on dichotomies that Satterlee has specifically rejected. But no group that reads this book together will need to use those questions. They will be too busy telling their own worship stories, and asking what God is up to.

MARK W. OLDENBURG
LUTHERAN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY AT
GETTYSBURG
GETTYSBURG, PENNSYLVANIA

Inclusive Yet Discerning: Navigating Worship Artfully

by Frank Burch Brown

Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2009. 173 pp. \$20.00. ISBN 978-0-8028-6256-3.

THIS IS THE FINAL BOOK of a trilogy on making theologically-based aesthetic decisions about worship practice. Frank Burch Brown describes it as the most practical of the three, for in it he tries to establish some broadly based guidelines that will enable faith communities to make inclusive yet discerning decisions about the use of art in their worship life. Citing the polarities that have arisen amid worship wars in Protestant denominations, he pushes the reader to be open to frequent and informed reflections on liturgical style and the aesthetic dimensions of "worship and the spiritual life." Primarily concerned with attentiveness to the arts in worship and worship that is artful, he challenges the reader to reflect

upon the connection between theology and worship and the place of the arts and aesthetics in the Christian life as a whole. In Brown's view, even beginning a conversation on aesthetics and worship is difficult, for seminaries have done little to equip those who plan and lead biblically based worship to reflect on aesthetics and to make value judgments about the diverse artistic options now available in an increasingly multicultural North American church.

Missing in Brown's short volume is a discussion of the theology of worship. The community that uses worship as a tool to attract the unbaptized will want to apply very different aesthetic principles than the community that worships primarily as a response of the baptized faithful. Although he invokes the term "biblically based worship," he does not discuss its precise nature. The reader with some knowledge of the arts and aesthetics will find this book useful for reflection on how artful worship can assist and challenge a congregation in its encounter with the divine. Those pastors with little background in the arts or liturgical studies will find the book tough going. Brown's book would have been far more useful to many congregations if he had included some practical tools for discerning marks of excellence in artful worship.

ALAN BARTHEL, *Executive Director*
THE PRESBYTERIAN ASSOCIATION OF MUSICIANS
LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY.

Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible

by Ellen F. Davis

Cambridge University Press, New York, 2009. 234 pp. \$23.99. ISBN 978-0-521-73223-9.

THE ROLE OF THE BIBLE in the modern environmental crisis has been much debated since Lynn White's searing indictment of 1967, in which he laid the ecological catastrophe squarely at the feet of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and specifically, the biblical traditions in Genesis. While many since White have argued that it is not the Bible but misguided interpretations of it that have encouraged ecological exploitation, few have done careful exegetical work showing that the Bible itself offers holistic, coherent, and life-giving perspectives on

the appropriate interrelationships of land and human beings within creation. With her characteristic exegetical grace and sensitivity, Ellen Davis has accomplished precisely this. Nine essays treat a wide cross-section of the canon, from Genesis to the prophets to Wisdom literature, each one illuminating the distinctive ways in which the biblical writers express their concern for the welfare of the arable land. This alone makes the book an important contribution, but Davis also interweaves her rich exegesis with reflections on the present ecological crisis and specifically on the writings of contemporary agrarian writers, including Wendell Berry, who wrote the foreword.

The work is thus a wonderful example of good biblical theology. Unfortunately, I suspect that this volume will be read primarily by those already persuaded by the case Davis sets forth, though they will undoubtedly learn, as I did, much about the particular ways in which the Bible puts forward an ethic of care for the land, and be delighted by the exegetical insights Davis offers and the connections she makes to contemporary concerns. Many people of good conscience in the pew, however, are not yet convinced of the dangers posed to the land, and to all life, by the industrial practices of agribusiness, and it is unlikely that they will take up such a scholarly (albeit exceptionally lucid) book. As one usually thoughtful, well-educated parishioner dissented after hearing a digest of the main ideas of the book: "But the Bible doesn't say anything about organic farming." Such a reaction suggests a larger methodological problem for preachers and teachers: how does good biblical theology make it from scholarly argument to the pew?

JACQUELINE LAPSLEY
PRINCETON THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY

How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now

by James L. Kugel

Free Press, New York, 2007. 819 pp. \$35.00 (cloth).
ISBN 978-0-7432-3586-0.

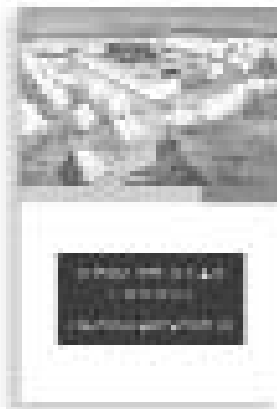
JAMES L. KUGEL DESCRIBES himself as "a [Jewish] believer in the divine inspiration of Scripture."

The Bible is "the Word of God, and . . . a guide to daily life" (p. xiii), following the assumptions of traditional Jewish and Christian interpreters from 300 B.C.E. to 200 C.E., for whom "the Bible contained no contradictions or mistakes" (p. 15). Such interpreters often invented ingenious readings to harmonize any inconsistencies. But Kugel also has spent his career "studying and teaching modern biblical scholarship" (p. 45), for which inconsistencies are indications of historical development, multiple authors and editors, and sometimes contradictory theological positions. His book describes the tensions between these two hermeneutical practices. Although Kugel exhibits profound appreciation for biblical criticism, he concludes that "modern biblical scholarship and traditional Judaism [and presumably Christianity] are and must always remain completely irreconcilable." Critical "speculation" about the development of the Bible cannot "have any part in traditional Jewish study or worship" (p. 681).

Despite this conclusion, Kugel's knowledge of biblical criticism is encyclopedic and erudite, especially if one attends to the numerous footnotes and the bibliography (the latter posted at his website). He presents a sampling of various biblical texts as methodological case studies of how both ancient and critical interpreters have worked, along with various topics (e.g., the documentary hypothesis, etiology, and "canonical criticism"), providing a rich resource for ministers who want to review the latest in HB scholarship. It is also clearly written and accessible to lay people (despite its daunting length), and could make an engaging introduction to biblical study. Kugel has a gift for explaining the intricacies of biblical scholarship without jargon or obfuscation.

Every preacher who struggles with how to "translate" biblical scholarship to the person in the pew (often "pre-critical") will appreciate Kugel's dilemma, yet the two "Bibles" are not as irreconcilable as Kugel finally claims. Criticism can lead the interpreter to read the text with a "second naïveté" (Paul Ricoeur), or in "communion" that transcends a false objectivity (Walter Wink). Moreover, the ecclesial context of interpreting the Bible (church and synagogue) is precisely what makes it "Scripture," thereby distinguishing it from

EXTRABIBLICAL-LEVEL STUDIES FROM REVEREND OLD TESTAMENT SCHOLARS

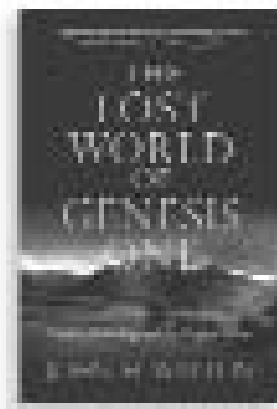


How to Read Exodus

Douglas Conroy, EdD

Conroy's approach to the point-by-point layout in the course of this volume and the author's clear and engaging style can be a real help to a host of Jews.

review@ivp.com, 9/20/16



The Lost World of Genesis One

John H. Walton

John H. Walton explains the Near Eastern cosmology that undergirds the text's conclusions. His implications for our modern culture are mind-bogglingly relevant.

review@ivp.com, 9/20/16

"This *World of Genesis One* explains how our 'lost' original cosmology, and also our long-neglected biblical and cultural descriptions of origins."

—Thomas S. Collins, lead of the Creation Research Project

other ancient Near Eastern literature, similar though it may be. Preaching can be informed by biblical criticism, yet still affirm that the Bible is “the Word of God” and a “guide to daily life,” even if defining those phrases is difficult (and different from a pre-critical understanding).

THOMAS W. MANN
WINSTON-SALEM, NORTH CAROLINA

Daughter Zion, Mother Zion: Gender, Space, and the Sacred in Ancient Israel

by *Christl M. Maier*

Fortress, Minneapolis, 2008. 285 pp. \$21.00. ISBN 978-0-8006-6241-7.

CHRISTL MAIER PRESENTS this work as a tradition-historical study of Jerusalem’s development as a political entity and a religious symbol in the HB. Maier focuses on the Zion language found in the poetic portions of the HB—the prophets, Lamentations, and Pss 46 and 48. Her argument is that as the “Zion tradition” develops from the pre-exilic to the exilic and finally postexilic period, the tradition of Mt. Zion and/or Jerusalem as sacred space comes to acquire the specialized metaphor of Zion as a gendered personification. The endpoint of this development emerges in the postexilic period in the image of Mother Zion, a symbol of peace and salvation (e.g., Isa 60 and Ps 87). As she studies the evolving portrayals of Zion as daughter, whore, queen, and finally, mother, Maier skillfully teases from the biblical texts Zion’s characterization in terms of perceived space (actual space or topography), conceived space (ideological constructions of space), and lived space (experience of a place). She argues that the intertwining of sacred space and gender allowed the writers to respond to historical crises by providing equipment for re-thinking the Israelites’ relationship to the divine, to each other, and to the land.

The distinctive contribution of this volume, which is best suited for advanced graduate students and scholars, lies in the way it brings together historical-critical investigations of Zion, the critical theory of space and metaphor, and feminist biblical theory to talk about specific texts. Maier’s response to the patriarchal lan-

guage of gendered Zion is not simplistic. While taking seriously the feminist critique of these gendered images in the prophets, she also seeks to understand how and why this language worked for biblical writers and their readers. Her insights suggest promising new avenues for assessing the ideological work of these texts. Nevertheless, her tradition-historical program raises questions, especially concerning her understanding of what comprises the “Zion tradition.” Maier subsumes all the differing images, personified or not, of Jerusalem (some of these texts do not even use the language of Zion) with the Zion theology one finds in First Isaiah. She argues that the differing views of Zion’s inviolability are due to the tradition’s evolution. But one wonders if all of these images belong to one line of thinking that is neatly evolving or if, instead, the HB evinces a more fluid conversation involving different, sometimes overlapping, and sometimes oppositional, rivers of thought.

AMY C. MERRILL WILLIS
GONZAGA UNIVERSITY
SPOKANE, WASHINGTON

Memories of Ancient Israel: An Introduction to Biblical History—Ancient and Modern

by *Philip R. Davies*

Westminster John Knox, Louisville, 2008, 182 pp. \$24.95. ISBN 978-0-664-23288-7.

MODERN HISTORIANS of ancient Israel divide themselves into two camps: “minimalists,” who believe that the only biblical narrative that should be judged “historical” is that which can be confirmed through archaeology or epigraphy; and “maximalists,” who argue that archaeological data, by its nature subject to varying interpretations, are essentially unreliable and that biblical narrative can generally be trusted (pp. 148–49). In *Memories of Ancient Israel*, Philip R. Davies, a leading minimalist, discusses many of the issues that historians face in writing about the times and places referenced by the OT texts.

Davies’ assessment of biblical narrative relies on the concept of “cultural memory,” a term that entered the lexicon of biblical studies only within the past ten years. “Cultural memory”

stands precisely between “myth” (in the sense of a narrative that explains the world) and “history” (the simple facts, things that really happened; p. 112). The ancient Israelites aimed to transmit factual history, but facts frequently became confused over time as various myths were repeated and combined. The end result may retain substantial mythic and theological value, but it is of little real historical use.

The book is divided into “Resources” and “Strategies.” In the first, Davies discusses the issues involved in working with the elements used to define biblical history: the Bible, archaeology, and epigraphy. The second part concentrates on methodology: how one uses the data to create biblical history. After a chapter on cultural memory, Part II discusses how the various data might be synthesized. Davies then reviews several recent “minimalist” positions (including his own work), and critiques some recent maximalist works. Each chapter has its own helpful bibliography.

While Davies is generally fair, his own views are evident throughout. Many readers will be surprised to learn that “Biblical Archaeology is now dead among professional archaeologists” (p. 65). Surely ongoing Syro-Palestinian archaeology continues to illumine biblical interpretation (a central purpose of “Biblical Archaeology,” p. 59). In his description of the minimalist options, Davies emphasizes the paucity of overlap between biblical data and data derived from archaeology and epigraphy. Yet, as Davies admits, archaeological and epigraphic data themselves rarely overlap each other, while presenting their own sets of interpretive problems. This is why historians should evaluate and correlate all available data in order to establish biblical history. However, these criticisms are minor in light of this volume’s overall utility.

JOHN W. HERBST
UNION-PSCE
RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

Beginnings: Ancient Christian Readings of the Biblical Creation Narratives

by Peter C. Bouteneff

Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2008. 256 pp. \$22.99.
ISBN 978-0-8010-3233-2.

PETER BOUTENEFF OFFERS a fresh study of early Christian readings of the creation narratives of Gen 1–3. Of overarching interest to him is the question of how literally his chosen authors understood the text. The perhaps surprising answer is of significance not only for historical-critical and fundamentalist readers, but also for readers who fall within the intervening expanse of the spectrum. As he ponders this question, Bouteneff pursues such engaging topics as the nature of the human person; the origin of evil; and sin, death, and their relationship. His attending to the early Christian commentary on the opening narratives of the Bible includes by happy necessity the broader issue of how each commentator understood the Bible in general. Bouteneff thus provides readers a teaser, a mini-survey of the history of early Christian biblical interpretation.

After a careful and enlightening look at the text of the two creation narratives, Bouteneff describes the journey of the text through its pre-Christian use to its place in Christian reflection. He continues with a consideration of its use by Paul and other NT writers. His comments on what we can attribute to Paul’s genius (for example, his conception of Christ as the New Adam), and cannot attribute (for example, that all are born guilty of Adam’s sin), will be eye-opening to some. The book continues with chapters on the second-century apologists Justin, Melito of Sardis, Theophilus of Antioch, and Irenaeus; on Origen, with some attention to Tertullian; and on the three Cappadocians. A valuable contribution of the book is its detailed exposition of the christocentric focus of much early Christian interpretation, an emphasis that offers good balance for our modern tendency to read the two testaments independently. Bouteneff’s command of his sources is impressive, as is his locating of his authors in their political and theological contexts. Also among his strengths are his occasional speculative comments, for example, his suggestion as to why Gregory of Nyssa saw human sex

distinction as both bestial and holy. The book's final chapter offers a good summary of the preceding material.

I found *Beginnings* consistently informative, occasionally provocative, and always good reading. I would be pleased if Bouteneff were to continue his study by charting the development of the widespread belief that humans are born bearing the guilt of Adam's sin, a position Bouteneff does not find unambiguously in the writers he surveys.

MARY CATHERINE BERGLUND
UNION-PSCE
RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

Q, the Earliest Gospel: An Introduction to the Original Stories and Sayings of Jesus

by John S. Kloppenborg

Westminster John Knox, Louisville, 2008. 170 pp. \$19.95. ISBN 978-0-664-2322-1.

THIS COMPACT INTRODUCTION to Q—the sayings source behind Matthew and Luke—provides students and non-specialist readers with a valuable synthesis of the arguments for Q and its implications for how we tell the story of Christian beginnings. The book addresses four questions: “Why should we think there was a Q? What did Q look like? What difference does Q make? And what happened to Q?” (p. ix).

Q changes the way we look at what we already know. In this rural, Galilean, Jewish gospel, miracles and resurrection do not assert Jesus' uniqueness; they mark the transformative power of the kingdom of God in many people's lives. Jesus' announcement that “you will not see me” (Q 13:35) may point to Jesus' postmortem absence as an *assumption* to heaven, like Enoch and Elijah. This view fits with Q's understanding of the death of Jesus within the Jewish tradition of the rejection of the prophets (see *1 En.* 85–90). Primarily, Q is about the kingdom, as can be seen in its vision of community cooperation and reciprocity in the face of poverty, debt, and taxes. Tracing the way that James and other Christian texts adapt Q-like sayings suggests that Q was less a source (*Quelle*) than a “resource for moral exhortation and for the inculcation of an alternative *ethos*, called the ‘kingdom of God’” (p. 120).

This accessible book argues for the Two Source hypothesis as a highly *effective hypothesis* that accounts for most details and tells a plausible story of gospel origins. It fairly explains the contributions and shortcomings of the Griesbach and Goulder (Goodacre) hypotheses while making a convincing case for Q. The discussion of what difference Q makes will likely hold the most interest for readers. Contrary to its subtitle, the book is not overly burdened with finding the “original” or historical Jesus. Thus, its insights are richly productive for theological thinking about how Q's community focus and emphasis on everyday ethics contrast with and echo through other early Christian texts, as well as challenge the way we look at those texts. Working through this book in an adult study group alongside the equally compact *Mary Magdalene Understood*, by Jane Schaberg (who also argues for early assumption traditions about Jesus), and *Reinventing Paul*, by John Gager (who similarly synthesizes the New Perspective on Paul) would provide a powerfully different image of earliest Christianities than is available in many popular, highly Jesus- or Christ-centered resources.

MELANIE JOHNSON-DEBAUFRE
DREW THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL
MADISON, NEW JERSEY

Christ and Caesar: The Gospel and the Roman Empire in the Writings of Paul and Luke

by Seyoon Kim

Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2008. 244 pp. \$24.00. ISBN 978-0-8028-6008-8.

A STEADY STREAM OF publications over recent years has argued that NT texts contain anti-imperial agendas. Seyoon Kim's new volume dares to swim against the popular current. He argues that Paul's letters, the Gospel of Luke, and the Acts of the Apostles do not, in fact, attempt to subvert the Roman imperial order.

In examining Paul's writings, Kim finds fault with both the assumptions and methods of scholars who present anti-Roman interpretations of those texts. He is especially critical of what he calls “parallelomania,” the hasty assumption that the presence of similar terms in both Roman imperial ideology and in the Pauline writings,

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such as *kyrios* and *parousia*, means that Paul consciously fashioned his gospel as an antithesis to the Roman imperial order. Kim examines Luke–Acts and finds that the author presents Jesus as a deliberate contrast to Caesar. However, he maintains that the author demonstrates the compatibility of the Roman Empire and Christianity. Furthermore, the author’s primary concern, evident in the ministry of Jesus and the apostles, is with personal transformation, not institutional change.

Kim’s arguments have considerable merit but are not without flaws. He insistently maintains that “any anti-imperial interpretation” of Paul “is destined to be shipwrecked at Romans 13:1–7” (p. 21), despite the efforts of scholars who have convincingly interpreted it otherwise. He also contradicts himself at times: he acknowledges that Paul summoned the early churches to be alternative societies in the midst of the empire but refrains from calling this an anti-imperial stance. His view of resistance is somewhat narrow, as he does not acknowledge passive forms of resistance.

Despite these shortcomings, this book is highly recommended for all scholars and pastors with special interest in the NT’s relationship to the Roman Empire. It is concise and clear, making it accessible to a wide readership. Though Kim disagrees with much of the current consensus in Pauline and Lukan studies, his contribution is a welcome addition to the conversation, and may serve as a methodological caution to scholars engaged in studying the relationship between the Roman Empire and the NT.

ARTHUR M. WRIGHT
UNION-PSCE
RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

Unlocking Romans: Resurrection and the Justification of God

by J. R. Daniel Kirk

Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2008. 245 pp. \$32.00. ISBN 978-0-8028-6290-7.

IN THIS REVISION OF HIS Duke University doctoral dissertation, J. R. Daniel Kirk puts forward a two-pronged thesis. First, he argues that Jesus’ resurrection functions as the hermeneutical key

“unlocking” Paul’s (re)reading of Israel’s Scriptures in Romans. Paul defines his gospel, in Rom 1:3–4, in terms of God’s resurrection of Jesus according to the Scriptures. Then, in every major section of the letter, the issue of resurrection reappears. In each case, Jesus’ resurrection is the hermeneutical lens through which Paul (re)reads Israel’s stories. These readings form the backbone of Paul’s argument in the letter. For example, in Rom 4, Paul argues that God is the God who raises the dead. Abraham’s children, therefore, are those who trust in this resurrecting God, be they Jew or Gentile. Jesus’ resurrection enables Paul to redefine both God’s identity and the identity of those who belong to that God.

Secondly, in contemporary Jewish literature resurrection was tied up with matters of theodicy. Resurrection would demonstrate God’s justice by vindicating God’s people in the face of suffering. In Romans, Paul uses his hermeneutical lens on Israel’s Scripture to show that Jesus’ resurrection enacted God’s faithfulness toward Israel in spite of the fact that Israel by and large refuses to recognize it.

This book builds upon and advances recent trends in Romans scholarship in several ways. For example, Kirk reads Romans as a highly contextualized writing concerning God’s dealings with Jews and Gentiles. Like his mentor, Richard Hays, Kirk claims that Romans is not about a timeless question of how an individual finds a gracious God. Rather, Paul’s concern lies with whether Jews (and Gentiles) can trust a God who supposedly abandons divine promises to Israel. But unlike Hays, who sees Paul as reading Scripture through an ecclesiological lens, Kirk argues that Paul reads Scripture through the lens of resurrection. Kirk, however, does not neglect matters of ecclesiology. Rather, the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in God’s eschatological people (the “ecclesiological” concern) emerges as a repercussion of God’s mighty act of resurrecting Jesus rather than serving as the focal element of Paul’s hermeneutic in and of itself.

Even if one accepts Kirk’s theses, questions remain. Why write such an extensive letter defending God to followers of Jesus in Rome at this time in Paul’s ministry? Kirk hints that this letter may have been preparation for a defense of his gospel in Jerusalem. That explanation has been

tried and found wanting. But this is an important question if one wants to root the letter in its first-century context. Nevertheless, this is a fresh, lucidly argued examination of a letter that has shaped the church in profound ways. By putting the central claim of the Christian tradition, Jesus' resurrection, front and center for understanding how Paul argues in Romans, Kirk has done the church and the academy a great service.

JAMES C. MILLER
ASBURY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
ORLANDO, FLORIDA

Faithfulness and the Purpose of Hebrews: A Social Identity Approach

by Matthew J. Marohl

Princeton Theological Monograph Series. Pickwick, Eugene, Ore., 2008. 210 pp. \$25.00. ISBN 978-1-55635-512-7.

WHILE SCHOLARS NO LONGER insist that knowing the author's identity is a prerequisite for interpreting Hebrews—"God knows" was Origen's famous answer to the question—the same cannot be said concerning the identity of the original audience. Basic assumptions about the ethnic and religious background of the audience and the situation in which they found themselves play a critical role in determining the author's purposes in writing. Most interpreters, according to Matthew Marohl, approach this task in the wrong way. Employing social identity theory, a branch of social psychology promulgated in the 1970s, Marohl finds that, like other groups in the first-century Mediterranean region, the addressees arranged the world into two groups: "us" and "them." They understood their group to be "the faithful" rather than referring to themselves as "Jews," "Gentiles," "Christians," or by some other anachronistic label. Everyone else was "them," members of a symbolic (not a flesh-and-blood) outgroup. The author of Hebrews describes Jesus' faithfulness as "prototypical" and seeks to integrate the addressees into an "ongoing story of faithfulness" that also includes the "cloud of witnesses" from the Israelite past (p. 148). In this way, Hebrews seeks to prevent defections and to provide a "positive social identity" for the audience.

This is a valiant attempt to break out of a seemingly vicious circle characteristic of much

historical-critical scholarship. Knowing the purpose of a text depends on knowing something about the audience, but how one envisions an audience is a function of what one thinks the author is trying to accomplish. Marohl deserves praise for avoiding excessive jargon in his application of social identity theory to meet this challenge (notwithstanding dozens of references to the "inappropriate conceptual framework" of other scholars).

The yield, however, is sometimes less than satisfying. If the true crisis facing the addressees is that they "likely had (or were at risk of having) a negative social identity" (p. 181), then it is difficult to see precisely how this differs from the standard theories that they are spiritually sluggish or contemplating apostasy. Likewise, given that the *encomium* on faith in Heb 11 is perhaps the most famous passage in the letter, is it surprising to conclude that encouraging faithfulness is among the author's chief aims? To argue that the audience identifies themselves simply as "the faithful" leaves unanswered key questions: faithful to what or to whom? In terms of concrete actions or specific beliefs, what does fidelity look like? As it is conceivable that different individuals or groups could disagree, how might one adjudicate between competing construals of faithfulness? Greater attention to these questions would enrich this book, which offers valuable insights about the process by which the church arrived at a distinctive sense of itself in the first century.

PATRICK GRAY
RHODES COLLEGE
MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

Person, Grace, and God

by Philip A. Rolnick

Sacra Doctrina. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2007. 280 pp. \$28.00. ISBN 978-0-8028-4043-1.

PART OF EERDMAN'S Sacra Doctrina series, which publishes Christian theology for today's church and takes seriously the challenges and responsibilities of contemporary postmodern culture, Philip Rolnick's fine work investigates the possibility and promise of theological anthropology from this perspective.

The work begins with an historical and etymological development of the concept of the

person. Through a close reading of early church councils and the work of Augustine, Boethius, and Richard of St. Victor, Rolnick helpfully traces early conceptual distinctions between person, substance, essence, and nature and argues for the importance of incommunicability. For Rolnick, persons are *incommunicabilis*, that is, something more than substance or nature; they are unique, unrepeatable, non-transferable, and particular. The intuition that persons are marked by being “something more” grounds his responses to the challenge of Darwinian biology, postmodern philosophy, and his constructive theological anthropology.

The result is a three-fold argument against a variety of contemporary reductionisms. Against the reductionist denial of metanarrative, Rolnick argues for the importance of the grand narrative of creation as the irreducible context of human personhood. In addition, as Rolnick develops the idea of personhood by incorporating the insights of great thinkers from Augustine to Jacques Derrida, he implicitly affirms the importance of metanarrative in developing one of his own. This makes the text an especially useful resource for theology students. However, it suffers from a paucity of women and minority voices—a concern made more pressing given that the topic is personhood and what it means to be human.

In conversation with Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, E.O. Wilson, Friedrich Nietzsche, Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and Richard Rorty, Rolnick offers direct responses to biological reductionistic views of altruism and postmodern reductionistic views of the gift and of the self. Thoughtful responses like Rolnick’s are an especially useful corrective to the often one-sided public discourse on these matters. However, Rolnick devotes more attention to postmodern concerns than to biological ones. As a consequence, the challenges from Darwinian biology seem rather monolithic. A more thorough engagement with these challenges—especially with more recent scientific advancements—would have been most welcome.

Rolnick’s constructive proposal is another argument against contemporary reductionist tendencies. Grounded in an analogical, Trinitarian, and incarnational view of persons, Rolnick argues for a view of the human person as animal nature

and spiritual gift joined in a single personality (p. 230). The result is a dynamic view of humanity ever reaching to be “more than” itself, increasingly related to God and others and yet whole and unique in the midst of these changes. Scholars in the field will likely find Rolnick’s constructive proposal of particular interest, even as we are left wanting more, particularly about the more subtle marks of personhood such as incommunicability. Despite these concerns, this book is a welcome invitation to consider more deeply who we are and how we are intimately related to God, each other, and the rest of creation.

LEA F. SCHWEITZ

LUTHERAN SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AT CHICAGO
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism

by Paula Fredriksen

Doubleday, New York, 2008. 457 pp. \$32.50. ISBN 978-0-385-50270-2.

PAULA FREDRIKSEN EXAMINES Augustine’s extant documents in chronological order, tracing the church father’s Christian defense of Judaism from its inception to its maturity. Through this process, she demonstrates how his thought developed during his dispute with Faustus the Manichee, thus making *Against Faustus* a crucial text in any examination of his argument.

Augustine argued that Christians must allow Jewish practices to continue, because these practices originate from the same God as do their own religious practices. Therefore, unlike religious outsiders, such as pagans and heretics, Jews hold special status. Furthermore, Jews share a special relationship with Christians through a shared Scripture, the OT. Because of its antiquity, this sacred text validated Christian teachings that otherwise might have been deemed fraudulent by pagans.

How did Christians and Jewish relations become so fractured? Fredriksen answers the question, first, by explaining the Hellenistic society within which the ethnic base of Christianity shifted from a Jewish to a Gentile one. She then examines how those traditions and ideas shaped the culture in which Augustine found himself as

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he journeyed from heretical Manichaeism to Orthodox Christianity. And in doing so, she reintroduces Augustine's belief that Jews live under the mark of Cain, a concept that, according to Fredriksen, played an important role while his argument was developing. Jews carry the mark of Cain in that although God scatters them outside of Israel, they are not without his subsequent protection in their exile. The physical mark of Cain is their faithful adherence to ancestral practices, while their continued existence is evidence of God's protection. Fredriksen then explains why this one idea, so fundamental in the development of Augustine's argument, was eventually replaced with Ps 59 in *City of God*, which better fits his theme of wandering, even though all the other elements of the original argument developed against Faustus remained.

Augustine's argument, unique and original in his own time, remains provocative today. In resurrecting it for a new century, Fredriksen offers a finely researched and comprehensible explanation of how and why Judaism and Christianity were torn apart. Those Christians hungry to understand, and perhaps even searching for permission to mend, this breach will find *Augustine and the Jews* invaluable.

SANDRA KAY GOEHRING
UNION-PSCE
RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

The Power of Stories: A Guide for Leading Multiracial and Multicultural Congregations

by Jacqueline J. Lewis

Abingdon, Nashville, 2008. 140 pp. \$16.00. ISBN 978-0-687-65069-9.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BE an effective leader of a multiracial or multicultural congregation? What leadership capacities promote the development of inclusive congregations? For ministers who share Jacqueline Lewis' passion for building such churches, *The Power of Stories* is provocative, because it directly engages these questions.

As the title suggests, Lewis uses the idea of "story" to frame her research and discussion. She employs it broadly to describe how individuals interpret their life journeys; how a congregation

perceives and articulates its history, mission, and vision; and how leaders construct meaning in religious organizations. She contends that a minister's ability to tell stories that are authentic, faithful, and meaningful to persons in various social locations can create and sustain congregations as they grow in diversity.

Lewis begins by telling the stories of five leaders who pastor multiracial and multicultural churches. She examines their early childhood experiences and traces the ways in which capacities for multicultural ministry were shaped in their formative years. She observes that all the pastors, in some way, learned as young people to love others across racial and cultural barriers. In addition, they acquired capacities like truth telling, a commitment to justice, the ability to deal with conflict, flexibility, and playfulness. Most importantly, they learned to be multivocal in their ministries.

Multivocality is critical to Lewis' understanding of effective church leadership; she believes this capacity enables ministers to "embrace the complexity of difference in diverse communities and to story a moral imperative to value diversity in their congregations" (pp. 69–70). In the latter portion of the book, she describes multivocal storytelling in more detail, using the example of ministry at Middle Collegiate Church in New York, where she is now the Senior Minister.

Unfortunately, Lewis gives few suggestions about how readers might achieve multivocality in their storytelling and ministries. Her focus primarily on the ministers' early childhoods fails to explore how adult social interactions, education, or work may have shaped them as effective religious leaders. Readers cannot relive their childhoods; they may, however, be able to seek out educational and other experiences that can equip them for the kind of ministry Lewis so passionately supports. Had this book focused more on the learning opportunities that occur later in life, of which pastors could take advantage, it could have been more helpful.

DEBORAH J. KAPP
McCORMICK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

What is Asian America Biblical Hermeneutics? Reading The New Testament

by *Tat-Siong Benny Liew*

University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 2008. 258 pp.
\$37.00. ISBN 978-0-8248-3162-2.

TAT-SIONG BENNY LIEW presents his reading of the NT with a focus on an Asian American experience. While critiquing a colonial reading practice of the NT that aims at a single Christian identity (as in Eurocentrism), Liew suggests that the NT be read carefully to affirm the ongoing struggle of a minority people for their creative, participatory identity in a new social-immigrant world. This book mainly deals with postcolonial/postmodern issues such as subjectivity, identity, power relationships, and human agency.

Bringing together interdisciplinary studies such as Asian American literature, cultural studies including films, and psychoanalytic studies, Liew articulates in the first two chapters the rationale for Asian American biblical interpretation. In the next four chapters, Liew discusses specific postcolonial/postmodern issues in John, Acts, and 1 Corinthians. In each case, Liew warns that the NT should not be used as a weapon for control or upward mobility at the expense of others. In the final two chapters, he points out that the biblical text should be re-read endlessly in new contexts, with a fresh vision (apocalypse) for a new people.

Liew's book is a pioneering work in the area of Asian American biblical interpretation as he attempts to articulate the subject by bringing together sophisticated theories such as postcolonial discourse and cultural studies. It is a good resource for those interested in this topic.

However, I note a few deficiencies. First, Liew points out the oppressive, harmful aspects of human ideology and society in general but does not discuss human transformation. It would have been beneficial if he had discussed the possibility of a positive transformation of Asian American experience. Second, a section on political theology in which God, self, and others play a central role in human transformation could have been included. Third, the book's title does not correlate with its contents. It does not treat the

system/theory of Asian American biblical interpretation, but instead is a postcolonial/postmodern reading of the NT in light of Asian American experience. In actuality, Asian Americans do not have a collective sense of identity other than that of a minority or marginalized people.

YUNG SUK KIM

S. D. PROCTOR SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
VIRGINIA UNION UNIVERSITY
RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

All for God's Glory: Redeeming Church Scutwork

by *Louis B. Weeks*

The Alban Institute, Herndon, Va., 2008. 170 pp. \$18.00.
ISBN 978-1-56699-379-1.

I AM GRATEFUL TO Louis Weeks for this book because it simply rings true in its central argument: leadership and management are in fact means of spiritual care. Of course, the Benedictine community has made this case for a very long time (*orare est laborare*), but many of us in the Protestant world have neglected such wisdom. Given our similar roles as seminary presidents, I am keenly aware that those of us charged with educating effective leaders for church and world cannot continue the often high-handed dismissal of organizational health in either theory or practice.

A few insights about this book: would that the occasional snippets of history, some going back to a pre-Reformation shared Christian heritage, had been teased out more richly; that the theme of basic competence and its development into mastery had been elaborated; that the only hinted-at notion of "comparative administration" (that is, discerning how our respective confessional traditions affect our practices) could have been addressed; that the whole notion of our relative difficulties with diversities of many kinds (not just ethnic) could have been given sustained treatment, for therein lies our future; and that "flow theory" and its impact for leadership could have received more attention. Of critical importance, I have a concern that Weeks' proposal that we cultivate intuition and exercise imagination does not attend to what gets in the way—the wall of denominational histories and prejudices that cause us to lose many of our best leaders. If we take on even this last point more

than cursorily, we see that effective leadership and organizational administration are at the very core of vibrant communities of faith and learning.

I question that we should ever frame organizational leadership and administration as “scutwork,” despite what we may feel about it—in part because it is the condition of the possibility of viable witness, and also because it is a presenting symptom of *all* professions; that the “heart follows treasure,” which in my experience is exactly the reverse of how people deal with their aspirations and money; and in the end, whether the list of “seven of the most important things we can do to ensure that administration serves as pastoral care” (p. 150) actually constitutes a substantial advance in a very important and longstanding struggle.

That said, I do believe that this book is a resource for those who care about the spiritual heart of organizations and their leadership.

DAVID G. TRICKETT
THE ILIFF SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
DENVER, COLORADO

Christian Realism and the New Realities

by Robin W. Lovin

Cambridge University Press, New York, 2008. 231 pp.
\$29.99. ISBN 978-0-521-60300-3.

IN THIS COMPREHENSIVE text, Robin Lovin brings the resources of the rich and diverse Christian realism tradition to bear on current political and social realities. For example, how should Christians think about political structures in a way that accounts for non-state actors like corporations and even terrorists? How should Christians understand the relationship between faith and politics in a context of pluralism, when people disagree about the goods that should be sought, how those goods should be understood, and the potential for religion or politics to secure them? In response to such questions, Lovin develops a “pluralist realism” that embraces the tensions evoked by fragmentation, multiple social contexts, a diversity of actors in political life, and competing understandings of human good. (He contrasts this with three other forms of contemporary realism: witness, anti-utopian, and counterapocalyptic.)

Lovin’s book is timely. If Niebuhrian styles of Christian realism were designed for the great state-state conflicts like World War II and the Cold War, what might realists contribute to our understanding of responsibility in today’s pluralist, multi-situated, and globalized context? Rejecting the historical divide between liberal theory and theology, Lovin raises interesting questions about how faithful Christians might think and act responsibly in a multiplicity of contexts (work, government, family, religion, and culture).

Audiences familiar with the development of Christian realism and liberal theory will appreciate the depth of Lovin’s argument. Some readers, however, may find parts of the argument too complex and expansive to follow easily. For example, Lovin weaves a narrative between Reinhold Niebuhr and John Rawls’ understandings of justice that assumes a good bit of prior knowledge of Rawls. Readers may also find his use of numerous theoretical frames to explore multiple dimensions of pluralism dizzying.

Although Lovin’s recasting of the role of religion in public forums (in light of an “unapologetic principle” in which participants’ claims need not be defined by an instrumental language determined by another context) is helpful, the absence of the voices of scholars on the margins is notable. Toward the end of the book, Lovin comments on the necessity of seeking dignity for all persons in public forums, leaving readers wondering, “How can scholars on the margins contribute to the reshaping of Christian realism for a new global context?” Let that be the next contribution in this important conversation!

JENNIFER R. AYRES
McCORMICK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
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Book Notes

Theological Bible Commentary

edited by Gail R. O'Day and David L. Petersen

Westminster John Knox, Louisville, 2009. 479 pp. \$49.95. ISBN 978-0-664-22711-1.

This superb one-volume Bible commentary meets a need both in biblical studies and in Christian religious communities for a resource that puts the best of scholarship in conversation with the theological claims of the biblical texts. Most commentaries focus on standard scholarly issues, addressing questions of authorship, original audience and structure. This one, by contrast, emphasizes theological questions: What does each biblical book say about God? How does the book describe God and portray God's actions? Who is God in these biblical books? The individual commentaries, authored by scholars distinguished by their interest in theological reflection, together offer a glimpse of the wealth of theological perspectives that the contemporary reader can find in the Bible and model diverse ways of thinking theologically about biblical literature. Sam Balentine, William P. Brown, Ted Hiebert, Luke Timothy Johnson, Carol Newsom, Gail O'Day, Dennis Olson, and David Rensberger are among the contributors.

The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media: Story and Performance

edited by Holly E. Hearon and Philip Ruge-Jones

Biblical Performance Criticism. Cascade, Eugene, Ore., 2009. 176 pp. \$23.00. ISBN 978-1-55635-990-3.

This volume honors Thomas Boomershine on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Society of Biblical Literature's section on "The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media," which he was instrumental in founding. This program unit has provided scholars with opportunities to explore and experience biblical material in media other than silent print, including oral and multimedia performances. These essays, written specifically for the generation of students who will shape thinking about both Bible and media in the years to come, provide an accessible introduction to the complex issues involved in this area of scholarship.

Eleven essays address the media history of the Bible (oral/aural, manuscript, print, and electronic), the ancient media context in which the Bible came to be written, how knowledge of performance in the ancient world might inform scholarship in our own world, and the biblical story in the multimedia world. Contributors include A. K. M. Adam, Dennis Dewey, Robert Fowler, and David Rhoads.

The Social Sciences and Biblical Translation

edited by Dietmar Neufeld

Symposium. Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta, 2008. 188 pp. \$24.95. ISBN 978-1-58983-347-0.

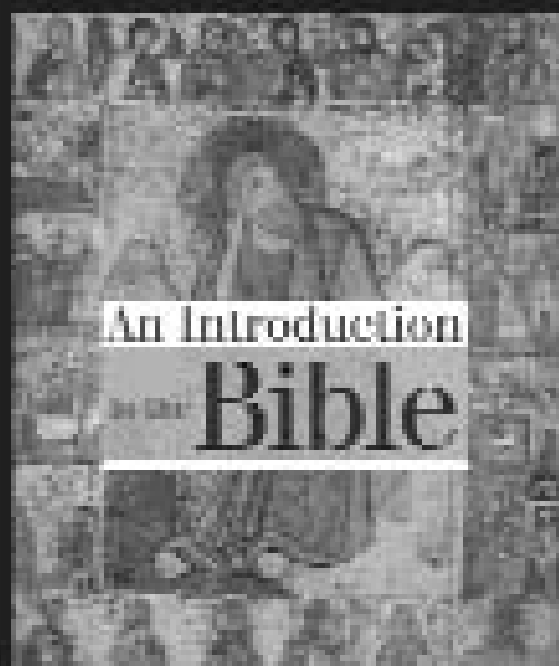
The Bible is an ancient book, written by, for, and about people whose worldview, culture, social values, and aspirations differ radically from those of the modern reader. To help bridge these gaps, this volume examines the translation and interpretation of a set of biblical texts from the perspectives of cultural anthropology and the social sciences. An introduction dealing with methodological issues is followed by essays that address the meanings that selected passages would have had to their original ancient audiences. Ten contributors thereby demonstrate how Bible translations can be culturally sensitive, taking into account the challenge of social distance, and avoiding the dangers of ethnocentric and theological myopia. Passages examined include texts from the OT, NT, and Dead Sea Scrolls. Among the contributors are Richard Rohrbaugh, John Elliott, and John Pilch.

Exploring the Origins of the Bible: Canon Formation in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective

edited by Craig A. Evans and Emanuel Tov

Acadia Studies in Bible and Theology. Baker, Grand Rapids, 2008. 256 pp. \$22.99. ISBN 978-0-8010-3242-4.

This collection of essays by international scholars provides perspectives on various facets of the biblical writings, how those writings became canonical Scripture, and why canon matters. Emanuel Tov assesses the contribution of the Septuagint to the



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literary analysis of Hebrew Scripture; James Charlesworth defines the word “canon” and discusses aspects of the emergence of the canons of Scripture in the various Jewish and Christian communities of faith; Stephen Dempster addresses the much-debated question of the emergence of the tripartite canon (Law, Prophets, and Writings); Glenn Wooden explores the role of the so-called Septuagint in the formation of the biblical canons of Scripture; Craig Evans investigates the usefulness of the extracanonical Gospels for historical Jesus research; Stanley Porter explores the relationship of Paul to the canonization process; Lee McDonald addresses the question of authority; and Jonathan Wilson concludes the volume with a discussion of the theological implications of canon.

The Text of the New Testament: From Manuscript to Modern Edition

by Harold Greenlee

Hendrickson, Peabody, Mass., 2008. 130 pp. \$12.95.
ISBN 978-1-59856-240-8.

This accessible revised and expanded edition of Greenlee’s classic textbook (*Scribes, Scrolls, and Scripture*, Eerdmans, 1985), traces the history of the copying and transmission of the NT text down to the present day and introduces the basic principles of textual criticism. It engages questions of genuine concern to many laypeople: How were the books of the NT originally written? Can we be sure that the true text of the NT has survived in any form after all these centuries? What should we think about the multitude of differences between the ancient manuscripts? Did some ancient scribes intentionally “water down” or corrupt the NT text while copying it? Do modern English translations adequately preserve the message of the ancient writers? Greenlee addresses such matters in non-technical language but with scholarly accuracy, providing a reliable introduction to the origin of the NT.

The Sicarii in Josephus’s *Judean War*. Rhetorical Analysis and Historical Observations

by Mark Andrew Brighton

Early Judaism and Its Literature. Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta, 2009. 184 pp. \$26.95. ISBN 978-1-58983-406-4.

Brighton offers a comprehensive study of the

Sicarii in Josephus’s *Judean War*. Failure to place them firmly in this work has led in part to sharply divided assessments about Masada and the historical identity of the Sicarii. In a departure from the classical proposal that the Sicarii were an armed and fanatical offshoot of the Zealots, Brighton concludes that from a historical perspective, “Sicarii” was a somewhat fluid term used to describe Jews of the Judean revolt who were associated with acts of violence against their own people for religious/political ends.

Judaism of the Second Temple Period, Vol. 2: The Jewish Sages and Their Literature

by David Flusser, translated by Azzan Yadin, foreword by David Bivin

Eerdmans, Grand Rapids; The Hebrew University Magnes Press; and Jerusalem Perspective; 2009. 390 pp. \$42.00.
ISBN 978-0-8-28-2458-5.

This collection of twenty-six essays has hitherto been unavailable in English translation and widely scattered in various publications. The late David Flusser (1917–2000), a leading Jewish authority on the NT and Early Christianity and a prolific scholar of ancient Judaism, was a professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. This second volume of his essays on Judaism of the Second Temple Period is devoted to Jewish sages, their Wisdom literature, and the impact that both have made on contemporary Judaism and early Christianity.

Enigmas and Powers: Engaging the Work of Walter Wink for Classroom, Church, and World

edited by D. Seiple and Frederick W. Weidmann

Princeton Theological Monograph Series. Pickwick, Eugene, Ore., 2008. 139 pp. \$19.00. ISBN 978-1-55635-290-4.

This *Festschrift* celebrates and engages the work of of the noted author, biblical scholar, peace activist, and workshop leader, Walter Wink. Twenty-three contributors, Wink’s colleagues and former students, address the entire range of his work and its impact across disciplines, from biblical studies to peace studies, from theology to psychology, reflecting on the depth and breadth of his output, influence, and potential.