

CANADIAN-AMERICAN THEOLOGICAL REVIEW

A Journal of Theology, Scripture, and Culture

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Foreword

This theme issue of *Canadian-American Theological Review* contains a series of articles originally presented at a panel discussion on *The Heart of Torah* at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Diego, CA, November 2019. The articles represent scholarly responses to the two-volume work, *The Heart of Torah: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion*, by Shai Held, President, Dean, and Chair in Jewish Thought at the Hadar Institute in New York City, an ecumenical, egalitarian center for the renewal of Jewish thought and life. The final article by Held offers his response to the respondents.

*Christopher Zoccali,
Editor-in-Chief*

Between Exegesis and Theology: Jewish and Christian Appraisals of Shai Held, *The Heart of Torah*

J. Richard Middleton
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Abstract

Shai Held's two-volume work, *The Heart of Torah: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion* (2017), is a model of articulate Jewish theologizing grounded in specific biblical texts. This article introduces Shai Held's work and the reflections of Jewish and Christian biblical scholars that were originally presented at a panel discussion on *The Heart of Torah* at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Diego, CA, November 2019.

“O how I love your Torah,” declares the psalmist; “I meditate upon it all day long.”¹ With these words from Psalm 119:97, Shai Held opens his Introduction to *The Heart of Torah*.¹

Shai Held is currently President, Dean, and Chair in Jewish Thought at the Hadar Institute, in New York City, an ecumenical, egalitarian center for the renewal of Jewish thought and life. I first heard of Shai Held when Bill McDonald, a friend of mine who lives in Michigan, sent me an email in 2013 with a quote from Held, in which he articulated his commitment to a Torah centered on *hesed*:

My aspiration for *Yeshivat Hadar*, and for my own teaching, is that we teach a *Torat Hesed*, a Torah of love and kindness, a Torah that reminds us that every step we take towards God is a step towards—not away from—the world. As I often remind students, if being present in the face of others' pain were easy, Torah wouldn't describe it as the culmination of the religious life.

This quote is taken from the Covenant Foundation announcement of the 2011

¹ Shai Held, *The Heart of Torah: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 1:xxi.

Award for Excellence in Jewish Education, which Shai Held received, along with two other Jewish educators.²

My Michigan friend then sent me, the following year, a PDF of one of Held's commentaries on the first Parashah or lectionary reading from the Torah in the annual Jewish cycle, called "What Can Human Beings Do, and What Can't They?"³ Written originally in the Fall of 2013, this commentary became the first essay in the two volumes of *The Heart of Torah*. My friend pointed out that this Jewish scholar had quoted my work on the *imago Dei* in Genesis 1.

I was pleased and honored by that; but I didn't think much more of it, until I received an email from Shai Held in January 2015. He wanted a phone conversation with me on how egalitarian the *imago Dei* text in Genesis 1 really was, stemming from a discussion he had just had with Jon Levenson (who had been Held's dissertation advisor). Held was scheduled to give a public lecture in New York City three days later on police violence against blacks, and he wanted firm exegetical footing for his affirmation of the dignity of all people, including African Americans.

It turns out that Shai Held had previously been arrested during a protest of the police shooting of Eric Garner.⁴ In his CNN article on the event, Held noted that the arresting officer had asked his permission to touch his prayer shawl. Would that the police had treated Eric Garner with the same respect, said Held.⁵

With my interest piqued from the phone call, I looked into the Hadar Institute (then called Mechon Hadar) and began reading two years of Shai Held's commentaries on the weekly Torah portion, which would be published as *The Heart of Torah*. I then attended Hadar's Executive Seminar, held every July for laypeople. I attended the Seminar in 2016 and 2017, and I came to feel a special kinship with this group of egalitarian, ecumenical Jews, who welcomed a Christian of Jewish ancestry into their midst, and took my participation (and my questions) seriously, whether during morning Talmud study, in the lectures given by various Hadar teachers, or in informal discussion at the lunch table.

So when Shai Held asked if I would write an endorsement for *The Heart of Torah*, I immediately agreed; and I solicited endorsements from a number of Christian biblical scholars, three of whom have contributed articles to this thematic journal issue.

2 Shai Held's remarks are quoted in the announcement of the Covenant Foundation 2011 awards, April 7, 2012. Archived at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20120407122625/http://www.covenantfn.org/awards/past-recipients/awards-2011/shai-held>.

3 Held, Bere'shit #1 (Gen 1:1–6:8), "What Can Human Beings Do, and What Can't They?" in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:3–6.

4 Eric Garner was killed in a chokehold by an NYPD police officer on July 17, 2014.

5 Shai Held, "All Are Equal, but Not All Are Treated Equally," July 11, 2016. <http://www.cnn.com/2016/07/11/opinions/equality-racism-opinion-rabbi-shai-held/>

Jewish and Christian Engagement with *The Heart of Torah*

These articles have their origins in a panel discussion on Shai Held's *The Heart of Torah* at a joint session of the Society of Biblical Literature, held on November 24, 2019 in San Diego, CA. Special thanks are due to the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures and the National Association of Professors of Hebrew, the two program units of the Society of Biblical Literature that co-sponsored the event. Thanks are also due to the Jewish and Christian biblical scholars who participated in this event, including Shai Held for his response to the panelists.

The articles in this theme issue of the *Canadian-American Theological Review* are lightly edited versions of the panel presentations. One of the issues raised in just about all the articles is the relationship between exegesis and theology; or, to put it in Jewish terms, the relationship between *peshat* (literary-contextual readings of the Bible) and *midrash* (readings that go beyond the intent of text, in order to explore contemporary significance). While all the articles are agreed that these are both legitimate approaches to the Bible, there is some disagreement about how these should be related, and Held's response addresses this issue head on.

Beyond showcasing a variety of perspectives on *The Heart of Torah*, we have retained the authors' differing ways of referring to the divine name (including the spelling of G_d). However, we have systematized the citations to *The Heart of Torah*, providing as much detail as possible about each Parashah reading.

Perhaps a word of explanation is especially appropriate for Christian readers who might be unfamiliar with the Jewish lectionary cycle and Jewish terminology (especially for those outside the guild of biblical scholars familiar with Hebrew). The lectionary cycle for Jewish synagogue worship consists in reading through the entire Torah or Pentateuch once each year. To that end, the Torah is divided into units, each a few chapters long, each known as a Parashah (plural Parashot; Parashat is the construct form, meaning "Parashah of"). A sermon, reflection, or commentary on a Torah portion is called a D'var Torah (plural Divrei Torah). Shai Held's *The Heart of Torah* consists for the most part in two short reflections (Divrei Torah) on each Torah portion. Volume 1 covers Genesis and Exodus, while volume 2 covers Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Each Parashah or Torah portion has a traditional name, using a Hebrew word or phrase found near the start of the literary unit. Thus the first Parashah (Gen 1:1–6:8) is called Bere'shit (the opening word of Genesis 1) and Held's two reflections on Parashat Bere'shit are labeled Bere'shit #1 and Bere'shit #2.⁶ Held also has his own title for each D'var Torah, which is given when a particular reflection is first cited. Although not listed with the heading of each essay in *The Heart of*

6 Although we have standardized the spelling of transliterated Hebrew words throughout the essays in this journal issue, various alternative phonetic spellings may be found in classical and contemporary Jewish usage.

Torah, we have added, for the benefit of the reader, chapter and verse references for each Torah portion cited.

A Jewish Ethical Analogue to the Christian “Rule of Faith”

Having read and re-read the essays in *The Heart of Torah*, as well as the lucid Introduction, in which Held lays out his approach to the biblical text, I have come to appreciate Held’s hermeneutic of Scripture, which has a certain resonance with my own approach.

I appreciate Held’s willingness to address the dark patches and rough edges of the Bible. His commitment to wrestle with (rather than ignore) difficult texts is an important model for biblical scholars, rabbis, pastors, and laypeople in both Jewish and Christian traditions.

But Held does not simply succumb to these difficult texts, either to read them as justification for unethical action or to jettison such texts from the Torah. Rather, Held cites the phrase “Jewish Humanism” from Moshe Unna, with Unna’s emphasis on the word *humanism*. Unna noted that “from the Torah one can learn many different things. . . . One can even learn from it an obligation to engage in terror. . . . The word ‘humanism’ serves to explain and clarify on the basis of which values, of the many found in our literature, we seek to establish Jewish education.”⁷

As Held puts it, the question is not *whether* the interpreter uses a lens through which to read Scripture, but *which* lens she uses. “My own readings,” he confesses, “reflect my belief in a God who prioritizes the ethical and by Rabbinic tradition’s own claim that love of neighbor and affirmation of every human being as an image of God are the ‘great principles of the Torah.’”⁸ Held, therefore, is willing to wrestle with texts that on first glance might seem to contradict this principle, until he receives from the text—and from the God who is present in the text—*berekah*, a blessing.

I have come to view Shai Held’s articulated hermeneutic (which is exemplified in his commentary) as a Jewish ethical analogue to the Christian *regula fidei* or “rule of faith,” the theological lens through the early church fathers, beginning with Irenaeus, attempted to read Scripture.

As Rob Fennell suggests, in his nuanced account of the *regula fidei*, having a trusting theological perspective in one’s approach to the Bible does not necessarily lead to a monolithic approach to the text, but is compatible with acknowledging the complexity of Scripture, the diversity of interpretative traditions, and the need for reflection on the social and historical location of the interpreter.⁹

7 Held, *The Heart of Torah*, 1:xxxii.

8 Held, *The Heart of Torah*, 1:xxxii.

9 Robert C. Fennell, *The Rule of Faith and Biblical Interpretation: Reform, Resistance, and Renewal*

I myself have stated my own assumptions for reading (and teaching) the Bible in a handout that I regularly give new students. The first assumption is that:

The Bible is a *complex* collection of literature that nevertheless is framed in terms of a *coherent* story of redemption that is meant to guide our lives. The coherence of Scripture holds true despite many differing theological emphases, and even the presence of dissonant voices. We ignore both the *coherence* and the *complexity* of Scripture at our peril.

Whereas the complexity of Scripture is certainly important for me as a biblical scholar, many years ago I took to heart Abraham Joshua Heschel's comment addressed to Christian theologians:

It has seemed puzzling to me how greatly attached to the Bible you seem to be and yet how much like pagans you handle it. The great challenge to those of us who wish to take the Bible seriously is to let it teach us its own essential categories; and then for us to think *with* them, instead of just *about* them.¹⁰

Heschel's concern is echoed by the Christian Old Testament scholar David Jobling, who has been one of the most incisive proponents of an ideological-critical reading of the Bible in Canada. Although Jobling has often read against the grain of the text, articulating a critique of patriarchy or ethnocentricity in Scripture, he was constrained to admit that: "The powerless, and those who write out of experience shared with them, are not prepared to give up the power of the Bible. They need to draw on the Bible's power in empowering ways."¹¹

Jobling notes that it is those "socially invested with power" (he mentions particularly white males like himself)

who are inclined to assert our power *over* the Bible through a very skeptical critique. . . . I continue to think that such critique of the Bible is utterly necessary. But . . . I have begun to worry that, as I help my students to take power *over* a Bible which has disempowered and oppressed them, I am denying them access to power *through* the Bible, of which they are so much in need.¹²

(Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018).

10 Quoted in Albert C. Outler, "Toward a Postliberal Hermeneutics," *Theology Today* 42 (October 1985): 281–91, here 290 (emphasis original).

11 David Jobling, "Experiencing the Many: A Response to Camp, Mack, and Wimbush," in *Power, Powerlessness and the Divine: New Inquiries in Bible and Theology*, ed. Cynthia L. Rigby (Atlanta: Scholars, 1997), 281–89, here 283 (emphasis in original).

12 Jobling, "Experiencing the Many," 283–84.

It is Held's attempt to read *with* the Bible (as Heschel puts it), in such a way as to open up access to the power of the Bible for human life, that I very much appreciate.

The Relationship of Heart and Action

There is one more aspect of Held's approach to the biblical text that resonates with me as one who stands in the Wesleyan theological tradition—that is, Held's emphasis on moving beyond study or reflection to *action*. Whereas there are, of course, differences between Jewish Torah observance and the Wesleyan emphasis on social holiness, it is significant that a few years ago at the Society of Biblical Literature, Jewish biblical scholar Ben Sommer commented to one of my students (herself a Wesleyan) that he felt a particular affinity with Wesleyan Christians.

But Jews and Wesleyans, while united by an emphasis on praxis, need to move in opposite directions, so to speak. Held has to counsel his Jewish readership to move from merely outward observance to cultivate intimacy with God (this is especially the theme of the new book he is working on). I, on the other hand, have students who are often caught in the classic Protestant antithesis of faith and works. So with them I have to stress that motives of the “heart” are not enough; the inner life must be put into observable action.

Shai Held's *The Heart of Torah* is a rich feast of theological engagement with Scripture and it is my great pleasure to introduce this theme issue of the *Canadian-American Theological Review* devoted to Jewish and Christian engagements with Held's approach to the biblical text.

Human Participation with G_d in Perfecting Creation: Shai Held's *The Heart of Torah*

Marvin A. Sweeney
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Abstract

Shai Held's two-volume work, *The Heart of Torah: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion* (2017), is a model of articulate Jewish theologizing grounded in specific biblical texts. This article interacts with Shai Held's work. It was originally presented at a panel discussion on *The Heart of Torah* at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Diego, CA, November 2019.

It is a pleasure for me to review these two volumes of *The Heart of Torah* by Shai Held. I first met Shai in 2004 when we were both fellows at the Inaugural Session of the Summer Institute for Modern Israel Studies sponsored by the American Jewish Committee and Brandeis University. He is the son of Moshe Held, the late and renowned scholar of Hebrew and Semitic Studies at Columbia University, who passed from this life much too early. But Shai need not rely upon his father's laurels; he has emerged as a leading and innovative scholar in his own right in the fields of Rabbinic studies and Jewish thought. His work displays deep understanding of Bible, Rabbinic literature, and Jewish thought in general, and it is innovative in that it deliberately engages non-Jewish as well as Jewish scholarship in an effort to open dialogue between Judaism and the wider realm of public religious, social, and cultural discourse in the United States, Israel, and beyond.

The Heart of Torah focuses on the annual series the Parshat ha-Shavua, the weekly Torah portion read in synagogue for each Shabbat of the year and studied by Jews for each occasion. For each weekly Torah reading, Held presents a D'var Torah that identifies key issues in the text and applies them to concerns apparent in the modern world of both Jewish and non-Jewish life. A few samples should illustrate both the depth and breadth of Held's work.

The Complexity of Being Human

I begin with Held's first D'var Torah on Parshat Bereshit (Gen 1:1–6:8), which recounts the creation of the world and of humanity within it. Held titles his

discourse, “What Can Human Beings Do, and What Can’t They? Or, Does the Torah Believe in Progress?”¹ He begins by summarizing the Torah’s account of human cultural progress, but he reminds his readers that although Genesis takes human initiative seriously, it does not call for simpleminded celebration of human cultural or technological progress. Such a concern is especially evident in the aftermath of the Shoah in which Germany, one of the allegedly most-advanced nations on earth, deliberately engaged in an attempt to murder the world’s Jewish population—as well as others who were deemed undesirable—and received the cooperation of many in Europe who shared the Nazi’s views. Held states that “Genesis pulls the cord at both ends” by also taking the time to examine the human propensity for violence, as illustrated by Cain’s murder of his brother Abel, and Lamech’s murder of a boy who had somehow wounded him.² Here he notes how the Lex Talionis, “an eye for an eye,” was intended to limit violence only to an equitable punishment for a crime rather than to launch an unending blood feud that would spin out of control and consume the parties involved.³

The Torah’s intent is to reject one-dimensional understandings of human potential and instead embrace the complexity of human life in the world. The Torah refuses to assume that people are so irredeemably sinful that we are incapable of accomplishing anything, but it also recognizes that we are not simply good-natured beings who would readily attempt to get along together and sing “kumbaya.”

Human beings must accept moral responsibility in the world and act upon it with our eyes open, recognizing that such responsibility is often hard to recognize and that the progress is elusive. Although we might like to have a Messiah to perfect the world for us, we are in fact responsible for completing and perfecting the world in which we live until such time as the Messiah will come. Such an understanding of human responsibility thus expresses Judaism’s view that human beings exercise free will and thereby must assume responsibility for their actions. It also underlies the rest of Held’s work.

Critique of Conformity

Held’s D’var Torah on Parshat Noah (Gen 6:9–11:32) then takes the focus on human responsibility one step further when he addresses the meaning of the Tower of Babel narrative.⁴ He rejects common suppositions that the narrative is a morality

1 Shai Held, Bere’shit #1 (Gen 1:1–6:8), “What Can Human Beings Do, and What Can’t They? Or, Does the Torah Believe in Progress?” in *The Heart of Torah: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 1:3–6.

2 Held, Bere’shit #1, 1:4.

3 Held, Bere’shit #1, 1:5.

4 Held, Noah #2 (Gen 6:9–11:32), “People Have Names: The Torah’s Takedown of Totalitarianism,” in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:16–20.

tale concerning a human attempt to climb to heaven and displace G-d or a primitive allegory about an insecure and vindictive G-d who is so threatened by human achievement that G-d therefore wreaks havoc on human beings in self-protection. Instead, Held reads this narrative as an account that challenges notions of human conformity and instead lays the foundations for the recognition and validation of human uniqueness.

Such a reading directly challenges those religious traditions, such as Christianity and Islam, that demand and expect that all human beings must accept and adopt their own religious teachings so that the world will be redeemed and world peace will be achieved. Instead, the narrative posits that all human beings were alike in speaking the same language and striving for the same goals, but G-d's action in scattering human beings throughout the world and in giving them different languages gave us the opportunity to learn to understand the world and express ourselves from differing standpoints and worldviews, thereby assuring diversity within the human realm that promoted human uniqueness and thus the basis for learning that not everyone in the world thinks or acts in the same way. Such a perspective then becomes the basis for understanding and accepting the other as a Levinasian Other and not simply as a pale reflection of ourselves. Non-conformity then helps to ensure that there will those who say that the emperor has no clothes, and thereby awaken the recognition that the majority is not always right.

Abraham's Dialogue with God

Held's second treatment of Parshat Va-yera' (Gen 18:1–22:24) focuses on Abraham's encounter with G-d prior to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.⁵ Here, many, including myself, note the role that Abraham plays in giving voice to the ethical imperative by asking if G-d will destroy the righteous with the wicked. When pressed by Abraham as to whether G-d will destroy the cities if there are fifty righteous in the city or even ten, G-d always answers, "No."

Held challenges Brueggemann's view that Abraham instructs G-d in moral perception and action, and argues instead that G-d humbles G-dself to stand before Abraham and patiently waits for Abraham to learn the lesson that such action is not only immoral, but contrary to the character of G-d.⁶

Here I think that both Brueggemann and Held have missed a key point. The point is not that Abraham has to teach G-d morality—G-d already knows, as indicated by the divine responses—nor is it to teach Abraham about G-d's character—Abraham's portrayal throughout the Genesis narrative indicates that Abraham recognizes G-d's character. Rather, the narrative is constructed to teach the reader

5 Held, Va-yera' #2 (Gen 18:1–22:24), "In Praise of Protest, Or: Who's Teaching Whom?" in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:35–39.

6 Held, Va-yera' #2, 1:37.

about both, in that it highlights what has been evident all along, namely, that both Abraham and G-d are ideal characters—although it takes longer to recognize that point in relation to the portrayal of G-d and the divine promise to make a great nation out of Abraham and Sarah despite Sarah’s barrenness—and that the reader must learn to understand this and emulate both. The reader of the narrative is always party to the events and conversations depicted within, and at this point—and of course many others—the didactic character of the Torah narrative becomes evident.

The Wisdom of Gentiles

Held’s first treatment of Parshat Yitro (Exod 18:1–20:26), which recounts Jethro’s instruction to Moses on how to build a system of justice in Israelite society, makes some key points concerning Israel and its relationship with foreigners.⁷ Earlier, in his exposition of Parshat Lekh Lekha (Gen 12:1–17:27), Held made the point that becoming the elect or chosen people of G-d did not entail moral or religious triumphalism. Rather, Israel’s election calls for the recognition that gentiles also require moral treatment by G-d and human beings alike.⁸ Here in Yitro, Held makes the point that Jethro, the priest of Midian, is the one who instructs Moses in the means by which justice and the ethical imperative might be advanced by setting up a court system of judicial authority to decide matters of law within human society. Right before the revelation at Sinai, Israel is taught a lesson by a gentile about the administration of justice, thereby indicating that Torah alone will not ensure justice in the world; there is wisdom among the gentiles as well, and that wisdom should be taken seriously. Indeed, that point was recognized long ago by Ahad Ha’Am, one of the major theoreticians of modern Zionism, who noted that Jews must live in both a Jewish state and in the Diaspora. He argued that while the Jewish state will build Jewish identity, the Jewish Diaspora will help to ensure that the wisdom of the world will also play a role in building both Judaism and the world at large.

Human Partnership in Sanctifying Creation

Held’s combined exposition of Parashat Va-yak’hel (Exod 35:1–38:20) and Parshat Pekudei (Exod 38:21–40:38) addresses texts that recount the building of the wilderness tabernacle and disclose G-d’s choice to establish the ideal holy presence both within the human world and beyond it.⁹ Held agrees with Brueggemann

7 Held, Yitro #1 (Exod 18:1–20:26), “Does Everyone Hate the Jews? And, Is There Wisdom Outside of Torah?” in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:165–68.

8 Held, Lekh Lekha #1 (Gen 12:1–17:27), “Are Jews Always the Victims??” in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:21–25.

9 Held, Va-yak’hel #2 (Exod 35:1–38:20) and Pekudei #1 (Exod 38:21–40:38), “(A) Building with Heart,” in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:217–20.

that G-d does not want a holy habitation forcibly built by human beings. Rather, G-d desires generosity of the heart as the motivation for humans to build the sanctuary; Israelites are to bring their gifts so that Bezalel and Ohaliab could build a sanctuary by means of the heart, thereby ensuring that the holy presence would be established within.

Readers sometime turn away from Leviticus because its focus on ritual is often alien to the way in which some moderns view their lives, but Held takes special pains in his exposition of *Va-yikra*' (Lev 1:1–5:26), which provides instruction on the presentation of offerings at the temple, to draw out the parallels between Leviticus 1, which recounts the presentation of the whole burnt offering, and Genesis 1.¹⁰ Genesis 1 does not teach the principle of *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing), as so many presume. A correct reading of the Hebrew demonstrates that G-d takes pre-existing chaos and makes order out of this chaos.

Leviticus calls for human beings to do much the same, insofar as the rituals of Leviticus call for human beings to make distinctions in the world—especially between the holy and the profane—and thereby bring order into a chaotic world through holy action, such as the daily presentation of the whole burnt offering and the other offerings detailed in the Parashah. Such a proposal gives voice to the teaching that human beings, especially (but not exclusively) Jews, are called upon to act as partners with G-d in completing and sanctifying the creation that G-d has initiated.

Why Are Moses and Aaron Barred from Entering the Land?

In his exposition of *Hukkat* (Num 19:1–22:1), Held misses an opportunity to build upon the importance of sanctification when he discusses Moses's sins in striking the rock that yielded water in the wilderness, thereby prompting G-d to bar him and Aaron from entering the promised land of Israel (Num 20:22–29).¹¹ He rehearses the usual attempts at solution, namely, Moses's improper address of the people as rebels; his impatient question, "shall we get water for you from this rock?" (Num 20:10); and striking the rock instead of speaking to it—none of which has ever succeeded in explaining G-d's decisions.

But the preceding narrative had emphasized that the Levites would serve as priests, that those defiled by the dead must purify themselves, and that Miriam had just died and been buried without Moses and Aaron having purified themselves prior to standing before G-d as priests; that is why they were banned. The

10 Held, *Va-yikra*' #1 (Lev 1:1–5:26), "Order and Chaos: Connecting to Leviticus," in *The Heart of Torah*, 2:3–8.

11 Held, *Hukkat* #1 (Num 19:1–22:1), "When Everything Starts to Look the Same: Moses's Failure," in *The Heart of Torah*, 2:146–51.

narrative teaches that even those of the highest standing—even Aaron and Moses—are obligated to observe G-d’s expectations of holiness.

The Revision of Law in the Torah

Finally, Held’s exposition of Re’eh (Deut 11:26–16:17) examines the differences between Deuteronomic halakhah concerning the treatment of the poor and women with the laws of Exodus 21–23.¹² He notes that Deuteronomy gives greater rights to the poor and to women, in that the poor are given money by their master upon their release from debt slavery and women are allowed to go free on the same basis as men. Although some argue that Exodus and Deuteronomy take up very different legal situations, Held recognizes the dynamic principles in the articulation of biblical law, indicating the willingness to go back, reexamine, and even revise earlier law in an effort to achieve the justice that the original law was intended to achieve. The Torah’s system of laws builds in the potential for progress, and thereby shows itself to be a living system of law that was intended to ensure that both justice and holiness could be achieved in Israelite and Judean society. But it also shows that we human beings have the moral responsibility to ensure that such justice is done.

In sum, Shai Held has presented us with an exposition of the weekly Parshot ha-Shavua that highlights the imperatives for moral and holy action on the part of human beings within the world of creation. Such an exposition emphasizes that study and application of the Torah is just as necessary in the modern world as it was in the ancient world, and it points once again to our own responsibility to serve as partners with G-d in ensuring the completion and sanctification of creation.

12 Held, Re’eh #2 (Deut 11:26–16:17), “Women in Deuteronomy—and Beyond,” in *The Heart of Torah*, 2:235–39.

Moral Theology in an Exegetical Key: Shai Held's *The Heart of Torah*

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Abstract

Shai Held's two-volume work, *The Heart of Torah: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion* (2017), is a model of articulate Jewish theologizing grounded in specific biblical texts. This article interacts with Shai Held's work. It was originally presented at a panel discussion on *The Heart of Torah* at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Diego, CA, November 2019.

It is not often that one gets to read, let alone review, a book in biblical studies or theology that is truly a page-turner. Shai Held's project is unusual, ambitious, and as he himself describes it, "harrowing," and so the reader wants to see how it turns out.¹ Moreover, the ideal reader of this book has a personal stake in Rabbi Held's project, which is to foster "a mature spirituality."² This phrase arrests my attention, since "spirituality" is a word not overused in books reviewed at this Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature.

By his account, a mature spirituality has two elements. It involves taking seriously Torah's witness to God's will and manifest presence, and living "with our eyes and hearts open" to the world in which we find ourselves.³ That would be a fair summary of my own goals as a teacher of Bible to Christian divinity students, most of whom are preparing for pastoral ministry, and so here I hope to show how Shai Held's project can be directly useful and even provide a model for me and my students in our work of biblical interpretation, as well as introducing them to Jewish interpretation and religious thought altogether.

1 Shai Held, Be-har #1 (Lev 25:1–26:2), "Another World to Live in: The Meaning of Shabbat," in *The Heart of Torah: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 2:76–80, here 2:76.

2 Be-har #1, 2:76.

3 Be-har #1, 2:76.

Held's Approach—Both Textual and Theological

Perhaps the most distinctive and compelling aspect of his approach—and ultimately, what makes him in my judgment a reliable interpreter—is that he resolutely holds together the text and God at the center of the conversation, never allowing either exegetical or theological claims to be abstracted one from the other. He has a keen eye for philological and literary detail—not to be taken for granted in someone trained in moral philosophy. At the same time, he pursues a remarkably wide-ranging theological inquiry, drawing upon Jewish liturgy and commentary tradition from ancient times to the present, while also consulting contemporary Christian commentators and theologians across the theological spectrum. (As far as I can see, he does not yet work with the history of Christian interpretation, but that may be only a matter of time.)

As a philosopher, Shai Held has an eye for big questions, and the biggest of them is also the most basic: What is Torah, after all, and what does it mean for the Jewish people? That question comes up first and most directly in an essay that takes as its surprising point of departure the moment when pregnant Rebekah goes “to inquire of the LORD” (*lidrosh et-HaShem*, Gen 25:22). But if she and other characters in Torah inquire of God directly or through a human intermediary, Judaism generally follows the sensibility expressed in a psalm such as 119, which seeks guidance and moreover, delight, through study of God's *written* word. Shai Held speaks of the great “gamble” of text-centeredness. When the gamble pays off, Jews gain access to God “in every conceivable circumstance,” even when God seems entirely absent from our world.⁴ Shai Held, who calls himself “a Jew in search of God,” affirms how precious that access is to him, and yet he names the danger inherent in the gamble: “Whatever mediates God can also come to displace God. We can become so focused on Torah that we lose any sense of the reality of God, let alone of God's commanding presence.”⁵ It is possible to worship Torah and lose God.

A later essay on the law of the runaway slave in Deuteronomy shows appreciation for the moral insight that the text affords, while also illustrating the danger of an exclusive text-centeredness.⁶ Deuteronomy's formulation of the slave freely choosing a place to dwell in the land creates a parallel with God's own freedom to choose a place for the divine name to dwell in the land; thus “the whole land is a sanctuary, and the entire people is summoned to welcome those who arrive in search of freedom.”⁷ However radical that law may have been in its own time, it

4 Held, Toledot #2 (Gen 25:19–28:9), “Between God and Torah: Judaism's Gamble,” in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:54–9, here 1:58.

5 Toledot #2, 1:57.

6 Held, Ki Tetse' #1 (Deut 21:10–25:9), “Let Him Live Wherever He Chooses: Or, Why Runaway Slaves Are Like God,” in *The Heart of Torah*, 2:251–4.

7 Ki Tetse' #1, 2:251.

does not eradicate slavery and thus is insufficient as an ethical guide for us. Shai Held recounts with sorrow his experience of hearing a respected teacher in yeshiva suggest that “perhaps Jews should hope for a restoration of slavery so that we would again be enabled to observe the Torah’s guidance on how to treat slaves humanely.”⁸ That memory substantiates his core conviction that Torah interpretation and observance is not an end in itself but “a bridge connecting us to a compassionate God,” and “we can become so focused on the bridge itself that we simply forget about what (or Who) stands on the other side” (1:58).

The Wager of Transcendence

Here, and in any number of other instances, we see Shai Held going for broke, pinning everything on the reality of God and more, “the wondrous fact of God’s closeness.”⁹ His intellectual project rests on a strong form of what George Steiner calls the “wager on transcendence.”¹⁰ In *Real Presences*, Steiner argues that all genuine art—in contrast to mere academic or journalistic criticism of art—entails a “presumption of [transcendent] presence.”¹¹ If we adopt Steiner’s terms, then, to characterize *The Heart of Torah*, we might say that it is to be distinguished from much of the kind of “secondary literature” that most of us write and review, in that this book is existentially engaged criticism; it is text and not textbook. If Shai Held is practicing a style of commentary that is itself an art form, I might name the genre “moral theology in a homiletical key.” (I intend that as a compliment.) He troubles to write well and often beautifully, because he is not scoring academic points or even merely clarifying an intellectual argument (although he does the latter with some regularity), but rather addressing fundamental ways we think and live. Notably, he is not afraid to conclude his second volume as a preacher might, with an overt exhortation, even a prayer: “let us recall: Torah is about a God of love who calls us to a life of love. May we merit that a Torah of lovingkindness always be upon our lips.”¹²

Theocentric Moral Theology

Shai Held’s style of theocentric moral theology has direct ethical ramifications, because “how we treat others is in some sense how we treat God.”¹³ Therefore he gives persistent attention to current social issues. For example, in connection

8 Ki Tetse’ #1, 2:254.

9 Held, Va-ethannan #2 (Deut 3:23–7:11), “A God So Close, and Laws So Righteous: Moses’s Challenge (and Promise),” in *The Heart of Torah*, 2:215–9, here 217. See also Toledot #2, 1:59.

10 George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 4, 214.

11 Steiner, *Real Presences*, 214.

12 Held, Ve-zot ha-berekah #1 (Deut 33:1–34:12), “The Beginning and End of Torah,” in *The Heart of Torah*, 2:295–8, here 2:298.

13 Held, ‘Aḥorei Mot #1 (Lev 16:1–18:30), “Yom Kippur: Purifying the Tabernacle and Ourselves,” in *The Heart of Torah*, 2:52–56, here 2:56.

with Leviticus's treatment of impurity at childbirth purity, he focuses on maternal mortality rates that are escalating in the United States and inequitably distributed around the world.¹⁴

He does not shy away from vexed political issues: In his treatment of "Jacob's ethical legacy" on killing, he engages in a fairly detailed consideration of theological responses to military violence in modern Israel.¹⁵ Focusing on the mid-rashic tradition that when Jacob returns to Canaan after his long absence in Mesopotamia, he is afraid both of being killed by Esau *and of killing him*, Held then reflects on "the Rabbinic antipathy to weapons," even though Jewish tradition asserts the need to take a preemptive strike against a murderous aggressor. Then, turning to the question of the modern state, he considers and rejects two rabbinic positions: first, the realized messianism of R. Abraham Isaac Kook (d. 1935), who in the early decades of the twentieth century believed that a Jewish army was a contradiction in terms, and second, the sacralization of military force by the younger R. Zvi Yehudah Kook (d. 1982). Against both those views, R. Held affirms, "The full-throated embrace of militarism represents a dramatic departure from normative Jewish ethics as it has been understood for millennia. Having a state means having an army, but that is a tragic necessity rather than a revelation of the holy."¹⁶ Although in this particular discussion he does not name the militaristic position as idolatrous, such a judgment would be consistent with his practice of aligning theology and ethics. It goes without saying that the sacralization of force is a form of idolatry found also within Christian communities.

Attention to Pastoral Issues

I want to conclude by pointing to two emphases of the commentary that may be especially valuable for those studying for pastoral ministry, although they are not common among professional biblical interpreters. These are Shai Held's repeated attention to first, pastoral leadership, and second, the liturgical calendar. In both instances I take my examples from his essays on Leviticus—not a book that my Christian students would normally consult for guidance in these matters.

First, on leadership: In a subtle analysis of Leviticus 10 (Shemini), Shai Held sees the inappropriateness of Moses's pious opining about God's will to his brother immediately following the shocking death of Aaron's two sons. This is not a time for theological platitudes; Moses's words betray his own fear of the chaos that has burst out in the sanctuary. Yet it is intriguing that Held does not condemn Moses for what might seem to be the equally insensitive refusal to allow

14 Held, *Tazria* #1 (Lev 12:1–13:59), "Living on the Boundary: The Complexity and Anxiety of Childbirth," in *The Heart of Torah*, 2:37–41, here 2:41.

15 Held, *Va-yishlah* #1 (Gen 32:4–36:43), "The Fear of Killing: Jacob's Ethical Legacy," in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:69–73.

16 *Va-yishlah* #1, 1:73.

Aaron and his surviving sons to mourn in public. Israel's covenant with God is in jeopardy, and in this moment the priests cannot give free expression to their personal grief; putting the public crisis first is the necessary cost of assuming leadership.¹⁷

Finally, I note Shai Held's attention to the liturgical calendar as a way of highlighting the text's theological import. Of numerous examples, I choose his treatment of Sukkot (Booths), the one festival that Leviticus explicitly commands as an occasion for joy (Lev 23:40). Yet this is "profoundly surprising"—why not Passover or Shavuot, which commemorate the momentous, transformative events of Exodus and Sinai?¹⁸ Held's answer is that Sukkot celebrates a "calmer covenantal joy: . . . the joy of the quotidian and the pedestrian . . . of commitment and responsibility rather than of uplift and exhilaration."¹⁹ As a nearly lifelong admiring outsider to Judaism, I wonder if this celebration and consecration of the quotidian might be its special genius; certainly it is the focus of my own "holy envy"—to cite the phrase coined many years ago by the late Bishop and Professor Krister Stendahl, a pioneer in interreligious theological conversation.

In sum, Shai Held has given us a probing and intimate reflection on Torah as a mode of access to God for Jews, and he has generously done it in a way that is accessible to Christians. I would be happy if my students were to be moved to holy envy by this wise and lovely book, so that they too might seek God through Scripture and their own religious traditions—complex, troubled, yet beautiful as they are.

17 Held, Shemini #2 (Lev 9:1–11:47), "Of Grief Public and Private: Moses and Aaron Face the Unimaginable," in *The Heart of Torah*, 2:31–36

18 Held, 'Emor #1 (Lev 21:1–24:23), "Covenantal Joy: What Sukkot Can Teach Us," in *The Heart of Torah*, 2:66–70, here 2:68.

19 'Emor #1, 2:69.

The Perfect Craft Cocktail on a Sweltering Day: Shai Held's *The Heart of Torah*

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Abstract

Shai Held's two-volume work, *The Heart of Torah: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion* (2017), is a model of articulate Jewish theologizing grounded in specific biblical texts. This article interacts with Shai Held's work. It was originally presented at a panel discussion on *The Heart of Torah* at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Diego, CA, November 2019.

I have a professional frustration, which perhaps some of you share: my professional and devotional study of Scripture leads me to believe that there is enormous wisdom within the diverse texts of the canon, wisdom for people of faith, of course, but also wisdom for people of little faith or even no faith—wisdom about how to understand our place in this world, our responsibilities to one another and to the planet, and to God. And yet it is hard to get that message out. The message that these Scriptures, rightly interpreted, can help us order ourselves in such a way that all people, and all of creation, will flourish. And beyond that, the Scriptures provide us with time-tested resources to make our way through this life, its joys and griefs, and everything along the way. And beyond *that*, Scripture provides glimpses of transcendence—the sublime even—of a God who is both near to us and beyond our capacity to imagine.

On the one side, the Bible has been reduced to a totem for religious intolerance—a justification for exclusionary speech and policies that are often harmful not only to human beings but also to creation as a whole. Curiously many secularists share the view that the Bible offers an exclusionary, harmful message. The main difference between the secularists and the religious intolerants is that the secularists are explicit about the Bible's harmfulness, while the religious intolerants believe it expresses the divine will; in this latter view, it's just too bad for those who don't seem to benefit from the divine will. So broadly speaking, many secularists and religious intolerants agree on the *interpretation* of the Bible, they just disagree on whether the *effects* for our common life are salutary or not.

And what of those of us in the minority? This minority includes many of us at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting who have spent our professional lives dedicated to interpreting and teaching the Bible precisely because we think it offers wisdom for finding our human way on this planet, wisdom that seeks the flourishing of everyone and of the earth itself.

Many of us find our teaching and research to be fulfilling. We cherish it when students respond with deep appreciation of our teaching, and when our books and other writings seem to have an impact in the guild and in faith communities. Yet it is difficult to see that any of this moves the needle very far. Most of us are keenly aware that it is not those with a depth of biblical knowledge who command the microphone on Bible-related matters in the wider culture and in the media. To be sure, some efforts are worthy and have a salutary effect: the Bible Odyssey project of the Society of Biblical Literature, for example, has been a positive initiative to speak into the culture and especially the educational realm, but it is only a start.

So it's hard to get the message out that the Bible is actually life-giving, which is why this two-volume work by Shai Held feels like the perfect craft cocktail on a sweltering day: it combines high quality ingredients with flavor, attention to presentation, and creativity. The result excels in slaking thirst and thus bearing hope to the weary. Held's perceptive eye for the deepest commitments of Scripture, and his winsome way of presenting them—in small sips that anyone can take—result in a much-needed and compelling reflection on what lies at the heart of the Torah. I want to offer appreciation by commenting on Held's approach, note a few examples, and then close with a few questions for further reflection.

Held's Approach to Torah

Right away in the first sentences of the Introduction we see that we are on different interpretive ground from the norm: Held speaks of the “*enchantments* of learning and teaching Torah.”¹ By invoking “enchantment”—a cousin of joy—Held sets himself up as countercultural, not only to the ethos of popular interpretations, but to the scholarly guild as well. Most of us professional biblical academics don't speak of our work as something that “enchants” us, but maybe we should. Rabbi Held seamlessly weaves first-rate biblical scholarship with rabbinic interpretations and other readings and reflections, both ancient and modern. This is a delight. One feels that one is being steeped in deep wisdom of the ages; it is a gift to readers to bring together into one place so many life-giving interpretations of Scripture from across the ages, along with the author's own. And to do it with winsome prose that is easy on the eyes and brain, in the form of Torah portions, which makes for

1 Shai Held, *The Heart of Torah: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 1:xxi (emphasis added).

digestible delicacies hospitably offered to all with a taste for what Scripture has to offer.

Pharaoh's Ingratitude

The first example I want to mention is from Exodus: Held unpacks the ways in which the early chapters of Exodus explore the problem of ingratitude: Pharaoh believes he needs no one, relies on no one, and this is his core problem.²

To be ungrateful is to be unable—or again perhaps just unwilling—to acknowledge other people, past or present, who have made our lives possible. . . . If we are ungrateful, if we don't acknowledge the reality of just how much has been given to us rather than made or achieved by us, we will actually be incapable of worshipping anything but ourselves.³

In Held's reading, Pharaoh's ingratitude is an example of the quintessentially human problem of ingratitude, and the implications such a posture has for us and for the world. The mind lights on many resonances in our current cultural moment, but for the moment I'll name one: This reflection is timely indeed as public debate unfolds around the question of reparations for slavery. Many Americans respond that they themselves have not benefited from the institution of slavery, and African Americans today do not suffer as a result of that past. This response is grounded in a perhaps peculiarly American belief that every individual's success or failure is dependent exclusively on that person's own efforts. Held's reading of Exodus suggests that this kind of thinking is precisely what afflicts Pharaoh. Held points to Ezekiel's portrait of another Pharaoh who postures in a similar way, saying, "The Nile is mine; I made it for myself" (Ezek 29:3). The result of this false self-reliance is arrogance and narcissism, which have catastrophic consequences for those under the heel of such power. In a subsequent section Held unpacks how Pharaoh "is a living embodiment of everything that works to undermine the world" (146), and he is undone by the very forces which he embodies, which tragically takes many innocents with him. We are not as far from Pharaoh as we might wish.

Isaac and Hagar

About Genesis 22, Held asks what interpreters have asked for millennia: what happened to Isaac at the end of the *Akedah*? Though the story carefully tells us that Isaac and Abraham go up to Moriah together (Gen 22:6), it mysteriously makes no mention of Isaac at the end: "Abraham then returned to his servants" (Gen 22:19).

² Held, *Shemot #2* (Exod 1:1–6:1), "Gratitude and Liberation," in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:128–33.

³ Held, *Shemot #2*, 1:129–30.

Taking a page from a midrash, Held suggests that the traumatized Isaac has taken off in order to find Hagar in the wilderness, both to seek solace with another who has suffered, but also to offer his own comfort to her. But even more so, Isaac goes to find a God who does not terrify with inscrutable commands but is the one who meets with compassion the vulnerable and the outcasts. This is the God whom Hagar met at the end of Genesis 21 and is the one whom Isaac seeks.⁴

I have studied the *Akedah* a fair bit—we spend a lot of time thinking with our seminary students about it (and using Ellen Davis’s wonderful reading in *Getting Involved with God*).⁵ As part of that, I’ve thought a lot about the connections between the near-sacrifice of Hagar in Gen. 21 and the near-sacrifice of Isaac in Gen. 22—the evident parallels, linguistic and thematic, between these two stories. But I have never thought about a possible connection between the nearly-sacrificed Isaac and the nearly-sacrificed Hagar in quite this enriching and thought-provoking way.

Siding with Moses?

To be sure, there are some places where I did not find myself in tune with Held’s approach to a story. In Numbers 12, for example, Held’s sympathies lie entirely with Moses, whose authority has been questioned by Aaron and Miriam.⁶ If Held notes the unequal treatment of Miriam in the dispensing of punishment, I missed it. In a world that still routinely punishes and demonizes women for either exercising or deigning to reach for too much power, this singular focus on the beleaguered Moses feels out of tune, and like a lost opportunity.

But these off-key moments are few and far between. Ample interpretive delights await a reader hungry for insight and understanding of the Scriptures. The format of the daily Torah portion is reader-friendly—with a few pages of commentary each, one gets enough substance to be intellectually and spiritually engaged, but the chunks are short enough to pick up and absorb when time is short

Concluding Thoughts

A few minor points: not surprisingly, the emphasis throughout the volumes is on the ethical. This is for the most part to be commended, though I sometimes find myself wanting a bit more of the *magnum mysterium*, the ambiguity, even the terrifyingly sublime of the divine, to find its interpretive place. But it may be

4 Held, Hayyei Sarah #1 (Gen 23:1–25:18), “Isaac’s Search: On the *Akedah* and Its Sftermath,” in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:40–42.

5 Ellen Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cowley, 2001), chap. 6: “‘Take Your Son’: The Binding of Isaac” (50–64).

6 Held, Be-ha’alotekha #2 (Num 8:1–12:18), “After Pain, Prayer: What Moses (and Job) Can Teach Us,” in *The Heart of Torah*, 2:119–23.

enough to lay alongside Held's work some of Ellen Davis's or Dennis Olson's as complementary perspectives.

A second minor point: it seems to me that the book could be cross-marketed to thoughtful Christians. To do this, one would need to include the chapter and verse references for each section of biblical text in the heading for each Torah portion, so that one is not constantly flipping to the Scripture index as I did.⁷ A book like this deserves to have an even wider audience and I could imagine some interfaith good could result from a crossover in audiences. I think of the folks in my own congregation who are hungry for spiritually-rich biblical interpretation and who long to have their theological understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures expanded.

I am grateful to Shai Held for his sensitivity to the melodies and harmonies of Scripture, and am equally thankful that he has harnessed his energies in such a way that his insights into that scriptural music could be shared with a broader public.

⁷ Editor's comment: For the benefit of the reader, chapter and verse references have been added for each Torah portion cited in the essays in this thematic journal issue.

Jewish Theology Rooted in Biblical Texts: Shai Held's *The Heart of Torah*

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Abstract

Shai Held's two-volume work, *The Heart of Torah: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion* (2017), is a model of articulate Jewish theologizing grounded in specific biblical texts. This article interacts with Shai Held's work. It was originally presented at a panel discussion on *The Heart of Torah* at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Diego, CA, November 2019.

It is not often that I read an academic book and find myself not only intellectually stimulated but also spiritually uplifted. As I read Shai Held's essays, this is exactly how I felt. Held has helped me to deepen my love of Jewish texts and I have learned a lot of *torah* (biblical teaching) through his collection of essays.

The range of resources that Held has at his disposal is impressive and I especially appreciate the way he meanders around traditional Jewish sources, alongside contemporary Protestant biblical commentaries. He brings voices into conversation with each other in ways that I have not experienced before. His writing style is casual and accessible, but also profound and persuasive.

The influence of Abraham Joshua Heschel on Held's theology is apparent. The introduction to Held's essays opens with a verse from Ps 119:97: "O how I love Your Torah" and this is shortly followed by a quotation from Heschel: "The way to faith in the 'Torah from Heaven' (*torah min ha-shamayim*) is the preparation of the heart to perceive the heavenly in the Torah (*shamayim min ha-torah*)."¹ Held surely lives into Heschel's call. Held's ability to open his heart to *torah* is indeed contagious, at least for this reader!

In this review, I raise a number of questions that I believe are ultimately about the role of the Torah (that is, the Pentateuch) in contemporary Jewish meaning-making. While this is the meta-question, I will explore this issue by

1 Shai Held, *The Heart of Torah: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 1:xxi.

comparing Held's work to that of Jewish biblical commentators and theologians trained in historical-critical methodologies. The intention of this exploration is not to criticize Held's work, but rather to place it in the context of Jewish biblical scholarship (since the setting for the review panel was the Society for Biblical Literature).

A Work of Jewish Theology

Held's two-volume collection of *Divrei Torah*, that is, teachings on the weekly Torah portions, shines most brightly as a work of theology. For Held, the Bible tells a story about a God who loves and who can never abandon Israel (invoking Hosea), about a God of mercy who spares a family during the flood, about God's commitment to life and God's affirmation of human dignity, especially for the most vulnerable in society. Held consistently affirms that Jewish theology also focuses on human responsibility and accountability.

Herein lies the audacity of Jewish theology: Despite how stubborn we are, God enlists us as God's partners; despite how easily seduced we are by vanity and idolatry, God demands that we cast away our false gods; despite how callous we are to other people's suffering, God beckons us to care for the hurting and the aggrieved.²

Held consistently holds to the view that the Bible embraces the complexity of human nature; we are not irredeemably sinful nor as good-natured as to "kumbaya" together. Human beings have both great power and great responsibility. We are communal beings, but also need to think for ourselves.

Held also places his theology within the context of some contemporary issues like the trope of Jewish victimhood, where he points to the reality that Jews are not always the victims, but victimizers as well. A single quotation from Held's Introduction encapsulates his approach: "I attempt to understand how texts address the complexity and intractability of the human spirit. And I ask, always, what the text intends to say about God—and by extension, about what it means to live life in service of that God."³ In other words, Held makes it clear that his writing is predominantly about theology, and that biblical exegesis is one of several tools that he employs to understand God.

The Difference between Theology and Biblical Commentary

Jewish critical commentators root their work within the framework of modern biblical scholarship, which seeks to understand ancient texts by considering issues like authorship, provenance, and the meaning of the ancient texts in their earliest

² Held, *The Heart of Torah*, 1:xxix.

³ Held, *The Heart of Torah*, 1:xxxiii.

contexts. Such biblicists use philology, archaeology, source criticism, and a slew of other “criticisms” in order to draw evidence-based conclusions (even though many of our conclusions remain tentative and highly subjective), while *Divrei Torah* (expositions of the text for the faithful) weave tapestries by intertwining traditional texts and contemporary Jewish life for religious meaning-making. The academic pursuit is to clarify the “plain” meaning of the text, while the function of *Divrei Torah* is homiletical.

Another way of expressing this distinction is that biblicists place the text (and author and/or ancient contexts) at the center, while theologians like Held place God at the center. When I engage with biblical texts wearing my academic hat, my question is not “what do we learn about God and how ought we to behave?” but rather “what does the text reveal about God-beliefs in antiquity and how have subsequent generations reinterpreted the text?” One approach is religiously motivated, while the other is primarily academic.

An example of Held’s theological approach is his first essay on Parashat Terumah, (the liturgical reading of the Torah portion called Terumah), where he offers two different traditional understandings of the Jewish Kabbalistic view of divine contraction, known in Hebrew as *tzimtzum*.⁴ As one of his signature moves, he argues that both approaches have truth to them and the complexity of *tzimtzum* is best expressed by holding the two views together. However, not many people would read Parashat Terumah and think about *tzimtzum*. Held’s essay is actually based on a midrash (a rabbinic homily) connected to verses from the Torah reading: “Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts” (Exod 25:2) “and let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them” (Exod 25:8).⁵ The essay is a beautiful teaching about God, but it has nothing to do with the biblical text itself. If one is interested in learning something about the Torah portion Terumah, this essay will not be helpful.

Similarly, Held’s first essay on Parashat Be-shallah explores the centrality of human dignity as a step toward true freedom.⁶ After departing from Egypt, at the Sea, when the Israelites panic and claim that they should have stayed in Egypt, Moses tells them to hold still and to observe the might of God. God then speaks up with anger asking Moses why he is crying out to God. (The narrative itself makes no mention of Moses having cried out to God.) Held focuses on the latter part of God’s statement: “Tell the people to go on!” Held argues that God is condemning Moses for telling the people to wait passively and watch, when instead they need to act to regain their sense of dignity.

4 Held, Terumah #1 (Exod 25:1–27:19), “Being Present while Making Space: Or, Two Meanings of *Tzimtzum*,” in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:184–88.

5 NJPS translation.

6 Held, Be-shallah #1 (Exod 13:17–17:16), “Leaving Slavery Behind; On Taking the First Step,” in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:155–58.

Again, the teaching is powerful, but Held ignores the first part of the verse that is actually the more difficult. Why would God tell Moses to stop crying out to him when Moses was not doing so at all? Most biblicists see this disconnect as evidence of sloppy work on the part of the redactor who was intertwining the P and J narratives. Many biblicists are drawn to this verse because it helps to make the case for two intertwined accounts regarding the incident at the Sea. Most biblicists are interested in how the accounts are different, how they imagine God differently. Even biblical scholars who are more interested in literary, synchronic readings acknowledge the textual difficulty. Held weaves together traditional Jewish sources to explore human dignity as a necessary prerequisite to human freedom, but the connection with the plain meaning of the biblical text is tenuous at best. Someone seeking wisdom on Parashat Be-shallah will find relevant material here, but it does not really emerge from the plain meaning of the text. This essay is midrash, creative interpretation.

What Is Jewish Biblical Theology?

As I stated previously, these observations are not critiques of Held's work; rather, the publication of Held's work offers an opportunity for further exploration of an ongoing question among Jewish biblical scholars: What does Jewish biblical theology look like?

There are a plethora of books authored by Protestant biblicists that present a relatively systematic biblical theology.⁷ However, there is no analogous work by a Jewish biblicist. There is no consensus among Jewish biblicists regarding any aspect of Jewish biblical theology—even whether it is a legitimate field of Jewish inquiry! However, one opinion that has emerged is that a Jewish biblical theology should highlight the variety of different theologies in the Bible, rather than seeking one central theology as is typical of most Protestant biblical theologians.⁸

It is widely recognized by biblical scholars that the Priestly source(s) and the Deuteronomistic source are of a very different mind concerning the nature and presence of God, the holiness of the Israelites, how Israel is to stay in relationship with God, and so on. Jewish biblical theology could highlight the internal discussions within the Bible itself. Held uses contemporary biblical scholarship but seems to avoid identifying differing opinions within the Torah itself.

For example, in Parashat Tetsavveh, where Held discusses holy space, he

7 A few of the most influential works include Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols.; trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1962); Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997); Rolf Rendtorff, *The Canonical Hebrew Bible: A Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. David E. Orton; Tools for Biblical Study 7 (Leiden: Deo, 2005).

8 Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament* is the rare work by a Christian biblical theologian that highlights tensions in the Bible.

writes, “Perhaps this is why the tabernacle is called both *mishkan*, literally dwelling place, and *ohel mo’ed*, or tent of meeting.” He then quotes Menachem Haran who describes how the *mishkan* functions and how the *ohel mo’ed* functions. Held concludes: “This is a core tension in biblical theology. . . . God is radically present but also mysterious and transcendent; immanent but not willing to be localized or domesticated.”⁹ Held’s reading implies that there are two different names for the tabernacle because the Torah cannot communicate the complexity of the topic of divine presence with just one idea. But, in fact, Haran and other biblicalists argue that there are two different names for a holy place because they were different structures altogether that represent two different groups of biblical writers who had different understandings of God’s presence.

As a Jewish biblicalist, I am interested in the fact that there were (at least) two different traditions regarding divine presence. The priestly *mishkan* is part of a system that privileges the role of priests, the importance of the elimination of ritual impurity, and the centrality of the sacrificial system; while the *ohel mo’ed* texts privilege prophecy as the medium of communication between God and Israel. In teaching this outside of academia, I present these two systems to encourage Jewish readers to think about what the two models hold as most important, to consider what traces of each tradition has influenced Jewish practice and identity, and to explore how these models might inform our own practices and identities. In discerning different sources (such as the distinctive approaches of J and P), we can more deeply appreciate the voices of our forebears, Or, as Benjamin Sommer has eloquently written: the “commentator revives a lost voice of the Jewish tradition. . . . Peshat readings, including modern critical readings, are significant because they enable us to hear religious teachings that might otherwise have been neglected.”¹⁰

Jewish Theology Rooted in Biblical Texts

Shai Held does consistently lift up different opinions and interpretations of text, but only post-biblical texts. One of the most powerful aspects of his work is that he incorporates different interpretations into a single vision to teach that life is complicated and that God is multifaceted. . Held could have written a very similar work organized around his central areas of interest: God’s love, God’s mercy, human responsibility. By setting the biblical text front and center, that is, by using the ritual liturgical calendar of Torah readings, Held’s work feels more rooted in the biblical text than works by other Jewish theologians. The format of presenting

9 Held, *Tetsavveh* #1 (Exod 27:20–30:10), “God in the *Mishkan*: Present but Not Domesticated,” in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:194–97, here 1:197.

10 Benjamin Sommer, “Two Introductions to Scripture: James Kugel and the Possibility of Biblical Theology,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 100 (2010): 153–82, here 172.

theology via engagement with the text is certainly a dominant Jewish way of “doing theology.” By organizing his work around the weekly Torah portion, he is able to weave the rhythms of Jewish time and liturgy together with Jewish theology

Shai Held’s work in the volumes of *The Heart of Torah* is not Jewish biblical theology, but Jewish theology that uses biblical texts as starting points. Held’s collected essays enlightened me, as a Jewish reader, and deepened my own love of Torah and our rich textual traditions. Held’s work has revived important questions for me, as a biblical scholar, to consider regarding the overlapping but distinctive enterprises of Jewish theology and Jewish biblical theology.

A Critical Review of Shai Held's *The Heart of Torah*

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Abstract

Shai Held's two-volume work, *The Heart of Torah: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion* (2017), is a model of articulate Jewish theologizing grounded in specific biblical texts. This article interacts with Shai Held's work. It was originally presented at a panel discussion on *The Heart of Torah* at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Diego, CA, November 2019.

The appearance of Rabbi Shai Held's two-volume work, *The Heart of Torah*, is cause for celebration. Held brings his formidable skills to bear on the weekly Torah portion and shows, with insight, erudition, and creativity, how it can speak in profound ways to the spiritual needs of the day. The work represents a significant achievement, particularly within the context of traditional Jewish Torah learning. Few works within the genre of weekly Parashah study maintain a careful and serious dialogue not only with the classical Jewish sources but also with Christian scholarship, literary analysis, historical-critical research, and more. The result is a multifaceted work that is literarily insightful, ethically challenging, theologically sophisticated, and, most important, religiously inspiring.

In spite of the work's remarkable qualities, there are certain aspects of it that I find problematic. My reservations do not relate to the insights and reflections that Held presents. I almost always find these sensitive, nuanced and compelling. Rather, they concern the ways in which these ruminations are at times identified, without sufficient qualification, with the biblical text, the theology of the Torah, or Judaism more broadly.

Rabbi Held spells out some of the principles of his approach to biblical interpretation in the introductory essay that appears in both volumes of the work. Here he affirms: "The essence of Torah is a God of love and kindness who calls Israel to love and kindness."¹ The God of Torah is also a God of life, who affirms the dignity of every human being, especially the vulnerable. Held's Torah places

1 Shai Held, *The Heart of Torah: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 1:xxx.

great weight on human agency and responsibility. Thus, God “summons the people to reject passivity and to learn to act on their own behalf.”² Held draws upon midrashic literature in particular for confirmation of his ethics-centered conception of Torah. At the same time, he does not, in most instances, present his readings of the Parashah as exercises in interpretation in the midrashic mode. More often than not, he presents them as straightforward expositions of “the Torah,” or “Tanakh.” Indeed, Held’s entire two-volume work may be seen as an attempt to substantiate the premise on which it is based—that the heart of Torah summons us to ethical sensitivity and personal responsibility.

Anachronistic and Homiletical—yet Valuable

There are obvious difficulties with this approach. As we are all well aware, we generally find what we are looking for. Thus, if we set out to read texts with a strong ethical lens, we inevitably find ethical instruction. The main question is, of course, to what extent the ethical instruction that has been so discerned may legitimately be presented as that of the texts in their original literary contexts. To be sure, hermeneutical questions such as these are extremely knotty, and I do not wish to pretend that I have the proficiency necessary to address them adequately. Nonetheless, my basic sense regarding not a few of the ethically oriented readings that Held suggests or commends is that they must be regarded as anachronistic and homiletical. This does not mean that they are any less valuable. Texts take on new meanings and bear new implications when read in new and different social contexts and intellectual climates. It is important, however, to clearly distinguish between the meanings that were available to the ancient readers and those that emerge only in conjunction with later sensibilities.

One small example of such anachronistic exegesis is Held’s characterization of Judah as a biblical paragon of repentance and personal transformation.³ Held notes that when Joseph seeks to incarcerate Benjamin, Judah steps forward and pleads that he might be imprisoned in place of his brother. Judah assumes his responsibilities as a brother. He also expresses empathy for his father, impressing upon Joseph Jacob’s deep attachment to his youngest son. All of this stands in stark contrast, Held tells us, with Judah’s mode of conduct at the beginning of the Joseph narrative. There, Judah organizes Joseph’s sale into slavery, displaying total indifference to the pain this would engender.

How are we to explain Judah’s change in behaviour? Held suggest that the narrative interlude of Judah and Tamar may provide the key to Judah’s transformation. Here Judah endures the loss of two of his sons. This unbearable tragedy,

2 Held, *The Heart of Torah*, 1:xxvi.

3 Held, Mikketts #1 (Gen 41:1–44:17), “His Brother’s Brother: Judah’s Journey,” in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:88–92.

Held surmises, enables Judah to feel sympathy for Jacob's pain over the loss of his son, Joseph. Then, Tamar confronts Judah with the terrible guilt he bears in holding back from her his youngest son, thereby condemning her to perpetual childlessness. In the words of Held:

Tamar's message must have shaken Judah to the core, because the words she uses—"Recognize, please" (*haker na*)—are the very words Judah and his brother had used in presenting Jacob with his son's bloodied tunic: "Recognize, please (*haker na*), is it your son's tunic, or not?" (Gen 37:32).⁴

In other words, Tamar's carefully formulated speech compels Judah to confront and acknowledge not only his appalling treatment of her, but also of Joseph and Jacob much earlier. Shaken to the core by Tamar's challenge, Judah repents of his various sins and transforms himself into a new person. He is now prepared to act as a responsible brother and intervene on behalf of Benjamin.

Is this reading compelling? Does Judah bemoan his harsh treatment of Joseph and Jacob, and painfully resolve to mend his ways? The fact is that the narrator never tells us so in plainspoken words. Nor does Judah give any verbal expression to such thoughts and feelings. When Tamar confronts Judah with the words "Recognize, please," Judah confesses his trespass toward her but says nothing at all of his treatment of Joseph. Nor does he make reference to his role in Joseph's fate in his appeal for Benjamin, where he conveniently reports that Joseph simply died. Finally, the narrator tells us nothing about how Judah experienced the loss of his sons, let alone how this might have influenced his feelings toward his father.

Held projects inner feelings of empathy, remorse and penitence onto Judah, in spite of the narrator's disinterest in them, because they are central to his own theology. As far as the logic of the narrative is concerned, there is no need to imagine Judah remorsefully reflecting on his treatment of Joseph and undergoing a moral transformation. His initial proposal to sell Joseph into slavery was not an act of unalloyed callousness. It was the only plan that was likely to win the approval of the brothers and save Joseph from certain death. Furthermore, Judah's plea for Benjamin's release was not a radically new exhibition of empathy or brotherly responsibility. It was rooted in the unique commitment Judah made concerning Benjamin, in light of the life-threatening situation of the ongoing famine (see Gen 43:8-10).

Held's reading of Judah in the Joseph story is problematic not only because it projects inner thoughts and feelings on the biblical character that the Torah narrator was not interested in developing; it is problematic also because it is

4 Mikkets #1, 1:91.

anachronistic. Yehezkel Kaufmann points out in his *Toledot HaEmunah HaYisraelit* that the theme of repentance is a theological innovation that is absent in Genesis and other parts of the Bible.⁵ And in his recent book, *How Repentance Became Biblical*, David Lambert shows that “repentance,” as an act of introspection initiated by the individual, focusing on remorse over deeds identified as improper, and ending in a resolution to change one’s character, is essentially a post-biblical, Hellenistic phenomenon.⁶ Our tendency to identify and situate this mental-ethical practice in biblical texts is, to a large extent, testimony to the predominant influence of later Judaism and Christianity on our reading habits. Again, there is nothing wrong with reading Torah anachronistically, in tandem with interpreters of various eras, so long as we acknowledge that this is what we are doing.

Selective and One-Sided

Beyond the problem of anachronistic or insufficiently grounded exegesis is the problem of selectivity and one-sidedness. Held often draws broad conclusions concerning the character of “the Torah” or “Tanakh” on the basis of select passages, without giving due consideration to opposing voices. Of course, Held is well aware of the fact that Torah encompasses at least some measure of diversity, and he at times acknowledges conflicting biblical trends. But the work as a whole, as the title testifies, seeks to uncover “the heart of Torah,” and this involves accentuating theological consistency in the text, especially with regard to issues deemed fundamental. The result is a unified and coherent theological vision resting on an imbalanced portrayal of Torah in its full plurality and heterogeneity.

For example, Held asserts that human agency is central to the message of Scripture.⁷ Yet God never calls upon the Israelites in Egypt to take practical steps to facilitate their liberation. Prophets condemn Israel’s kings for forming political alliances with foreign powers instead of relying exclusively on divine salvation.⁸ And they look forward to the day when God will eradicate human willfulness and implant a heart of impeccable obedience (Deut 30:6; Jer 31:33; Ezek 36:25–27). Further, apocalyptic texts such as Daniel present all of world history as the gradual unfolding of a predetermined drama in which individual effort is largely pointless. Of course, it is perfectly legitimate to shy away from such texts in the context

5 Yehezkel Kaufmann, *Toledot HaEmunah HaYisraelit* [= *History of Israelite Religion*] 8 vols. (Tel-Aviv: Bialik Institute-Duir, 1937–56), 2:285–86. ET: Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, trans. and abridged by Moshe Greenberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

6 See David Frankel, review of David A. Lambert, *How Repentance Became Biblical: Judaism, Christianity and the Interpretation of Scripture*, *Journal of Religion* 97 (2017), 569–71.

7 Held, *The Heart of Torah*, 1:xxvi.

8 On this, see Alexander Rofé, *Introduction to the Literature of the Hebrew Bible*, Jerusalem Biblical Studies 9 (Jerusalem: Simor, 2009), 388.

of a discussion on the importance of initiative and responsible action. But one should not give the impression that they do not exist.

The one-sided nature of Held's work is nowhere more evident than in its uneasy engagement with morally problematic texts. The God of Torah is said to be a God of love. His displays of volatile jealousy and indiscriminate vengeance, of deep insecurity and narcissistic pride, are hardly discussed or given serious attention.⁹ The essential concern of Torah, Held asserts, is to inculcate compassion, especially toward the vulnerable. But what of the passages that summon us to exercise brutality and to renounce compassion (such as Deut 25:12)? Held acknowledges the presence of such passages and admits that the Torah can be used for evil. But he does not allow the reality of these passages to tarnish his glowing depiction of Torah as a blueprint for the embodiment of the good and the holy. Instead, he places the onus for such passages on the interpreter of Torah, whose task it is to read as humanely as possible. In the words of Held, "to worship the God of Israel is to worship a God of love and mercy—and thus . . . to commit to interpreting Torah accordingly."¹⁰

An Alternative Proposal

Allow me to briefly present a different approach to Torah interpretation in general, and to problematic texts more specifically, as a possible alternative. This approach proceeds from the belief that the God of Israel is not only a God of love but also a God of truth. Truth (*'emet*), according to the Rabbis, is God's very seal.¹¹ This implies that we must commit to interpreting Torah not only as humanely as possible, but also as truthfully as possible.

Martin Buber called upon us to engage in a dialogue with the Bible, not unlike the kind of dialogue we ideally engage in with our fellow human beings. We should listen to the text carefully and with ears as open as possible, and respond to what we hear with honesty and integrity.¹² For me, this Buberian model implies that we should openly contest biblical theologies that we find superficial or inadequate. True dialogue involves the ability, nay necessity, to at times openly and respectfully disagree. If we can never disagree with some biblical perspectives, we can never meaningfully agree with any.

We might also set biblical texts in opposition with one another, and explain why we prefer some over others. For example, if we cannot reconcile ourselves to the belief in a God who harbors a special love for one particular people, we can

9 The literature on this theme is extensive. See, e.g., Eric A. Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009).

10 Held, *The Heart of Torah*, 1:xvii.

11 Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 55a.

12 Martin Buber, "The Man of Today and the Jewish Bible" in *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1968), 1–13, here 5.

give theological priority to the Wisdom books, which implicitly deny the belief altogether.¹³ Here I take issue with the thrust of Held's assertion about the primacy of election in his second essay on Parashat Devarim, when he says that "contemporary Jews who wish to have a theology rooted in scripture have no choice but to reckon with chosenness. To jettison the language of chosenness is, I fear, to jettison Tanakh itself."¹⁴ By emphasizing the enormous diversity of thought, however, both in the Bible and in Jewish literature more broadly, we allow the student of Torah to maintain her own authentic dialogue with the multifaceted tradition, and identify those ancient voices that resonate for her.

Finally, truth and honesty demand that we frankly acknowledge that significant portions of Torah not only fail to inculcate love and mercy, but actually inculcate cruelty and inhumanity. The Torah, like everything in the world that is not God, is a flawed amalgamation of good and evil. We should not equivocate on this matter or employ sophisticated interpretive strategies as a means to avoid acknowledgment of the depravity of deplorable texts. This is not only because of our commitment to truth, but also because of the perils of an uncritical orientation toward Scripture. Rabbi Held acknowledges that while Torah can motivate us to love and care for others, it can also "bolster chauvinism and cultivate hate." In fact, the latter is not just a theoretical possibility. It is a not uncommon reality today amongst certain Jewish circles in Israel and the Diaspora.¹⁵

In a telegram sent to President Kennedy on June 16, 1963 regarding what was referred to then as "the Negro problem," Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "The hour calls for moral grandeur and spiritual audacity."¹⁶ One might well contend that the situation today, in which Torah study not infrequently bolsters chauvinism and cultivates hate, again calls for moral grandeur and spiritual audacity. Leviticus 19:17 reads, "Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt" (NIV). In the spirit of Heschel's call for spiritual audacity, I would suggest applying this passage to Torah itself. If our relationship to Torah is to be one of true dialogue, then we must muster the courage to rebuke it when necessary. If we don't speak out openly against deplorable sacred texts, whether they appear in the

13 For the conflict between covenant theology and the theology of biblical Wisdom literature see Walther Zimmerli, "The Place and Limit of the Wisdom in the Framework of the Old Testament Theology," in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, ed. James L. Crenshaw (New York: KTAV 1976), 314–26. See also the recent reevaluation of Zimmerli's essay in Stuart Weeks, "The Place and Limits of Wisdom Revisited," in *Perspectives on Israelite Wisdom: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar*, ed. John Jarick, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 618 (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2016), 3–23.

14 Held, Devarim #2 (Deut 1:1–3:22), "A Bolt from the Blue: Or, When God Falls in Love," in *The Heart of Torah*, 2:204–8, here 2:207.

15 It is sufficient to mention pernicious works such as "Baruch Hegever" and "Torat Hamelech," which have been endorsed by many rabbinic authorities.

16 See Susannah Heschel, ed., *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996), vii.

written Torah, the oral Torah, or contemporary rabbinic teachings, if we ignore such texts in the hope that our students won't notice them, we will share in the guilt for what they may engender.

A Place to Stand: Shai Held's *The Heart of Torah* in Dialogue with Pentateuchal Scholars and Literary Theorists

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Abstract

Shai Held's two-volume work, *The Heart of Torah: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion* (2017), is a model of articulate Jewish theologizing grounded in specific biblical texts. This article interacts with Shai Held's work. It was originally presented at a panel discussion on *The Heart of Torah* at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Diego, CA, November 2019.

When Rabbi Shai Held first published his two volumes of essays entitled *The Heart of Torah*, I offered this endorsement:

Rabbi Shai Held's superbly crafted reflections on Torah texts from Genesis to Deuteronomy dazzle with insight, practical wisdom, and scholarly erudition. These essays are a model for both Jews and Christians on how to read the Bible with intellectual integrity, religious significance, a mind open to a wide array of dialogue partners, and a generous spirit that celebrates the love of God and the repair of human dignity in our world today.

The opportunity to offer a more extensive response to these two volumes has reaffirmed my appreciation for the insights that weave in and out of Held's ninety-one separate essays on the weekly Torah readings from Genesis to Deuteronomy. These essays reflect not only the beating "heart" of Torah but also the beating heart of a passionate and gifted teacher and scholar of the Bible and Jewish tradition.

As a modest contribution, I want to offer two potential critiques of Rabbi Held's model of reading Torah and then offer ways by which Held might respond to them. I imagine these two critical assessments hypothetically arising from two different scholarly approaches to interpreting the Bible. One potential critique

arises from the field of redaction-critical and source-critical studies of the Pentateuch. These scholars are focused on the tracing the history of composition of the books of Genesis-Deuteronomy. The second potential critique arises from scholars with a more literary orientation in interpreting the Bible. These scholars would place the Bible in conversation with recent trends in literary theory more broadly used to analyze all kinds of literature in comparative literature courses and the like. After summarizing these two hypothetical critiques of Held's work, I will then proceed to offer a response to each hypothetical criticism and suggest that Rabbi Held's method of Torah interpretation has a place to stand within these two scholarly approaches.

Critique #1: Pentateuchal Studies

I could imagine that a group of Pentateuchal scholars who wandered into a panel session on Shai Held's *The Heart of Torah* at the annual guild meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature might raise an objection to this collection of essays on Pentateuch texts. They might argue that Rabbi Held reads too much on the surface of the final form of the biblical text of the Torah without sufficient attention to discerning the underlying sources and redactional layers. Held, they might say, does focus on a number of tensions and opposing traditions on the surface of the text, but Held overinterprets those tensions in the text as theologically or ethically meaningful and rich. Many Pentateuchal critics would say they can better explain these tensions, doublets, and contradictory traditions as signs of independent and separate voices that are earlier than the final form of the text and "beneath" the surface of the text.

The so-called neo-documentarians would identify four documentary sources as having been woven together to form the present collection of Genesis-Deuteronomy: a J (Yahwist) source, an E (Elohist) source, a D (Deuteronomic) source, and a P (Priestly) source. Alongside these four documentary sources, they argue that a later Pentateuchal redactor or sequencer whom they call "R." This Pentateuchal redactor or editor ("R") divided up the four sources and then laid out the various sections in an imperfect but sufficiently comprehensible chronological sequence extending from Genesis to Deuteronomy. The Pentateuchal Redactor then added a number of mostly mechanical linking connections among the many J, E, D, and P episodes and units. The editorial rearrangements of material and connective additions, these scholars argue, contributed little in the way of theological or ethical reshaping of the biblical texts in the Torah.

It should be noted that other groups of Pentateuchal scholars do not identify as neo-documentarians. These more redaction-oriented scholars reconstruct the history of the composition of the Pentateuch as more complex than the neo-documentarians. The Pentateuch emerged through a process of multiple stages of

editing and redaction interacting with layers of Priestly and non-Priestly sections and a multi-layered Deuteronomic tradition. For my purposes here, I will focus on the neo-documentarian perspective.

Ben Sommer is an excellent Pentateuchal scholar and a neo-documentarian. Sommer wrote a wide-ranging and thoughtful book entitled *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition*.¹ As a Jewish scholar of the Bible, Sommer sought to understand his work as a Pentateuchal source critic as falling within the bounds of a faithful Jewish mode of interpreting the Bible. Sommer argued that the critically reconstructed documentary sources underlying the present form of the Pentateuch (Yahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomic, and Priestly sources) should be honored as separate authoritative voices included under the broad umbrella of Oral Torah. Although Oral Torah is a category typically reserved for later, post-biblical Jewish legal rabbinic interpretation (Mishnah, Gemara, Talmud and the like), Sommer proposed expanding the category of Oral Torah to include these individual Pentateuchal sources (J, E, D, P as reconstructed by modern biblical scholars) as additional authoritative voices within the Jewish Oral Torah tradition.

If I were to imagine a response from Shai Held (and noting his irenic nature), I think Held might respond that he is grateful and indebted to the careful work of source and redaction critics who do often help to identify real tensions and contradictions in the traditional final form of the Masoretic text of the Bible. Historical-critical and other disciplinary modes of inquiry can all contribute and be helpful toward a richer understanding of these texts of the Pentateuch. In his two volumes *The Heart of Torah*, Held makes numerous allusions to historical-critical scholarship on the Pentateuch. He also incorporates insights that arise from thoughtful comparisons of Torah texts with relevant texts of similar genre, theme or imagery from cultures surrounding ancient Israel.

I imagine, however, that Rabbi Held would challenge the claim made by neo-documentarian Pentateuchal scholars that “R—the Pentateuchal redactor—worked rather mechanically with his source documents. Neo-documentarians assume that R (the Redactor) simply braided together and arranged in sequence the four independent sources (JEDP) into the present form of the rough narrative sequence running from the creation stories of Genesis to the death of Moses. “R” did little editing and left behind a good number of contradictions, doublets, and tensions in the final literary form of the Pentateuch. “R” was a compiler and little else. Thus, for the neo-documentarians, the final or present surface form of the Pentateuch carries in itself little interpretive meaning. It is the four independent

1 Benjamin Sommer, *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

sources that underlie the Pentateuch where the real thickness of meaning lies, not the surface or final form of the text.

Here I might suppose that Rabbi Held would respond that his own dialogical, complex, and theologically and ethically rich interpretations of the *peshat* meaning of the text, in dialogue with the vast array of post-biblical rabbinic commentaries and philosophers and other voices, provide a sufficient and adequate symphony of diverse voices to create compelling readings of Torah portions. Whatever the origin and process of the formation of the final form of the text of the Pentateuch, the plain sense of the present form of the Written Torah of the Pentateuch has stood the test of time and nourished the faith and spirit of multiple generations of Jewish communities, worship, and prayer over thousands of years. In addition to the Written Torah, Rabbi Held might observe that the Jewish tradition of Oral Torah and rabbinic commentary already has an embarrassment of riches. Do we really need to expand the category of Oral Torah to include the documentary sources?

Critique #2: Literary Theory or Literary Studies and the Torah

Returning to our panel session on Held's *The Heart of Torah*, we might imagine that once the Pentateuchal scholars sit down, a scholar from the Bible and literary theory working group wanders in and raises their hand to offer their critique. "Rabbi Held," they might say,

I appreciate your careful, detailed and close reading of the surface form of the texts of the Torah. Many of us, however, are aware of the many ways in which the plain sense of the texts of Scripture have been interpreted and used in deceptive ways to support patriarchy and gender inequality, violence, and oppression against the weak and vulnerable, marginalization of outsiders, ecological devastation, the slavery of Africans, and the maintenance of existing power relationships based on class, race and ethnicity, gender, disabilities, and other differences among various groups, both ancient and modern.

This hypothetical caution is well taken and a genuine contribution of modern literary theory. Strong ideologically-focused readings, influenced in the 1970s and 1980s by Freud's psychoanalysis or Marx's historical materialism (along with the work of many other theorists), encouraged a brand of interpretation that searched for meanings in texts that were hidden, repressed, deeply buried, and in need of detection, excavation, and disclosure by an interpreter. Frederic Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (1981), for example, advocated a strong hermeneutics of suspicion toward surface meanings of texts, urging instead attention to pairs of oppositions—present or absent, transparent or hidden, and surface and

depth.² The surface of a text is often associated with the superficial and deceptive in such readings. Any mere surface reading of a text was often considered false or oppressive when closely scrutinized, supportive only of the status quo. The suspicious literary critic unmasked the text and restored to the surface the “real” underlying history that the text represses, what is really going on under the surface. Such readings sought to activate ethical response and be a spur to activism, change, liberation, and transformation in arenas of difference and power.

How might Rabbi Held respond to this potential disparaging of his surface readings of the final form of the Torah texts he interprets? I think that Held (again in his irenic manner) might well affirm the drive to ethical activism to which such symptomatic readings aspire. He would affirm the need to remain ever vigilant to the potential power of texts to oppress, abuse, deceive, and marginalize. As a Jew, he is deeply aware of how texts, especially biblical and religious texts, can be used to defend and promote hatred and horrific violence. The long history of Christian anti-Semitism, the Crusades, and the Holocaust are ever present as reminders of how surface readings of religious texts may have horrendous results.

Held, however, also sees the positive interpretational possibilities of reading carefully and in detail the surface of biblical or Torah texts. If he were to find a place to stand in the current field of literary studies (I’m not sure he would be concerned to do so, but if he were) Held might point to some more recent options within literary studies that have turned to what is called “surface reading” or New Formalism as offering an alternative literary vision or approach more similar to his own project.³ The so-called New Criticism that began in the 1950s in literary theory came and went, but now an updated version has again emerged among some literary theorists.

This New Formalism or surface reading does not entirely reject or forget what has been learned in more ideological and contextual readings.⁴ However, this New Formalism redirects the reader to attend first of all to the intricate verbal structure of literary language as encountered at the surface of the text. These are close

2 Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982).

3 See, for example, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108 (2009): 1–21.

4 On the capacity of New Formalism and renewed attention to literary aesthetics to generate ideological critique, see Claudi Breger, “The Return to Aesthetics in Literary Studies,” *German Studies Review* 35 (2021): 505–509. Interestingly, Michel Foucault, whose theorizing focused on the interplay of knowledge and power, described his approach to the study of archives of texts and artifacts on a particular topic (sexuality, punishment, madness, and the like) in a way that is relevant to this discussion. He emphasized the surface or literal meaning of texts, taking what texts say on their surface at face value. Rather than dig for “relations that are secret, hidden, more silent or deeper than . . . consciousness,” Foucault described himself as seeking “to define the relations on the very surface of discourse” and “to make visible what is invisible only because it’s too much on the surface of things.” *Foucault Live: Interviews, 1961–84*, ed. Sylvere Lotringer, trans. John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), 57–58.

readings that focus on what is called the “linguistic density” and “verbal complexity” that is woven into the surface of texts.

In this literary reading, the surface of the text is embraced, accepted, treated with respect, and then engaged with in debate, conversation, and dialogue alongside other texts. Texts are not just objects that must be made to fit an imposed theoretical and interpretive framework. Literary texts, presumably including ancient texts like the Bible, are dense and complex, even at their surface. Some blend of a hermeneutics of trust and hermeneutics of suspicion is often quite generative, as the interpreter listens closely and patiently to the often complex dynamics at the surface of carefully-crafted and rich literature. Affirming the contribution of the close reading of texts seems compatible with how Rabbi Held describes a Jewish way of reading:

Many years ago I heard R. Levi Lauer say that one of the greatest contributions the Jewish people have made to civilization is the gift of the close reading. And indeed, Jews have traditionally displayed their love of Torah, and in turn deepened it, by reading texts with exquisite care and attention to detail.⁵

The observation invites us to see that the close reading of texts is not an invention of modern literary theory, but more a recovery of an ancient Jewish practice, a treasure that is found and then lost and then found again and again. In a digital age of Twitter and social media, such patient, close readings of Torah texts may indeed be a precious treasure to be found again and cultivated. Close reading may slow readers down and allow us to seek the “linguistic density” and “verbal complexity” evident even in the surface of the text. Rabbi Held describes his own approach in a similar vein:

In writing these essays, I did not start out with an agenda, deciding what I wanted to say and then searching for a peg on which to hang a predetermined idea. Instead I tried to listen to the text, and to the history of its interpretation, and to see what emerged from the encounter. (Of course, what emerged was no doubt shaped at least in part by my own interests and predilections.)⁶

Held knows that as an interpreter of Torah he is not just a blank slate, a totally objective observer. The intention, however, as far as it is possible, is to listen patiently to the ancient text and its long tradition of interpretations, appreciating the complexities already baked into the surface texts of the Torah as well as the

5 Shai Held, *The Heart of Torah: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 1:xxi.

6 Held, *The Heart of Torah*, 1:xxi–xxii.

further complexities of the vast archive of texts of post-biblical interpretations. Part of this complexity of the surface of the rich and complex literary texts (like Torah) is that they contain their own critical (and self-critical) agency and thus stimulate dialogue.

If critique and self-critique (a hermeneutic of suspicion) is already deeply embedded into the surface texts of the Torah, so too is a hermeneutic of trust and hope. Torah repeatedly affirms the love of God for Israel and the love of God for all creation and the call to the people of God and all humans to participate in God's ongoing work of repairing a fractured and troubled world. I conclude with these wise words from Shai Held:

Judaism's view is that we are called to be world builders; God believes in our ability to renew ourselves, and to make real and deep contributions to realizing a more just, decent, and compassionate world. Participating in those grand visions, in fact, is a large part of what it means to be human. But we are all also asked to live with our eyes open, in full view of just how complicated both we and the world are, and thus of how hard and elusive moral progress really is. We can and must improve ourselves; but we cannot perfect ourselves. We can and must improve the world, but we cannot perfect it. That's part of what it means to wait for the Messiah rather than pretend that we *are* the Messiah. But waiting for the Messiah is not an excuse for fatalism or despair. On the contrary we wait by working, and building, and dedicating our lives to causes and realities greater than ourselves.⁷

To that, I say Amen!

⁷ Held, Bere'shit #1 (Gen 1:1–6:8), "What Can Human Beings Do, and What Can't They? Or, Does the Torah Believe in Progress?" in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:6.

A Response to My Respondents

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Abstract

This article presents Shai Held's extended response to reflections by Jewish and Christian biblical scholars who have interacted with his two-volume work, *The Heart of Torah: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion* (2017), earlier in this theme journal issue. These reflections, along with Held's response, were originally presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Diego, CA, November 2019.

Let me begin with an expression of gratitude. I am profoundly honored that such an illustrious group of scholars has taken the time to read my work with such care and insight. I am indebted to each of them, and to all of them.

How I Came to Write *The Heart of Torah*

At the outset, I want to say a few words about how and why I came to write *The Heart of Torah*. Marvin Sweeney alludes to my father, the late Professor Moshe Held. My father was a renowned Semitic philologist; he loved words. For him there were few greater pleasures in life than discerning the meaning of a previously obscure word. Growing up in my home you could have been forgiven the impression that nothing less than the redemption of the world depended on deciphering the word *heryonim* in 2 Kings 6. From his example I learned what it meant to love a text, to spend hours lingering upon a word as if nothing else really matters.

My father died when I was twelve years old and as father-son dramas go, although I was in love with Jewish studies, there was nothing that interested me less than the Hebrew Bible. That was *his* thing, after all, and I needed my own. From a very young age I was drawn to philosophy and theology and those were the realms in which I lived and found myself at home.

There were glimmers of interest in Tanakh along the way. As a first-year rabbinical student I heard the late Tikva Frymer-Kensky deliver a lecture on intertextuality and the story of Rahab in Joshua and I was mesmerized by a way of reading that was new, unfamiliar, and even startling to me. As a young rabbi I

heard Judith Kates present a class on a text from the early prophets—I no longer remember which one—and again, I remember thinking, the Bible is a closed book to me, and yet there is so much here. At one point, I picked up Jon Levenson’s magisterial *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* and I was captivated—the Bible was just so much richer than the way it had been presented to me as a child in yeshiva; how could a serious student of Jewish theology not immerse himself in Tanakh, I wondered. But as I say, I had other passions and concerns. The focus of my research, and thinking, and writing was theology.

One day around 2010, a couple of years after I had the privilege of co-founding the Hadar Institute in New York, I found myself in a faculty meeting in which the consensus was that we needed to find a Tanakh teacher who could bring together the yeshiva and the academy; we wanted someone who would read midrash and traditional parshanut and/but would also make unapologetic use of academic biblical scholarship, all in the service of Torah. I had seen Bible taught in what amounted to a history-of-religions approach but that wasn’t what we were after. We wanted to use every tool available to us in order to better reflect on the question: “And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you?” (Deut 10:12)

Looking for the right person, we came up empty. After a great deal of back and forth, for reasons I cannot fully explain, I spoke up. “Give me six months,” I said, “and I will try teaching a course on Genesis 1–11. I don’t really know what I’m doing, but I hope I can learn.”

I have never looked back.

The essays that comprise these two volumes began as a weekly email Hadar sent out to some 7,000 readers—Jews from across the denominational spectrum, including close to a thousand rabbis, and over time, growing numbers of Christians as well (I hope Christian readership will continue to grow; for those who are not Jewish, it is perhaps worth explaining that many lay people’s primary engagement with the mitzvah of Talmud Torah, Torah study, takes place through study of the weekly Torah portion and its commentaries). My goal in writing these essays was to bring people into deep exegetical engagement with biblical (and sometimes later Jewish) texts (more on that later) and to draw out some of what I took to be their contemporary implications. I tried to keep Maimonides’ instruction to learn the truth from whoever says it close to heart, and it brought me great pleasure to bring traditional Rabbinic sources into conversation with modern academic scholars.

What I wanted to do in writing these essays was to learn to read and listen more closely; I suppose you could say that my goal was to adopt a prayerful posture, to see whether we could discern the voice of God speaking through the texts and their commentaries. The philosopher Jonathan Lear says that one of the greatest obstacles to learning is knowing—I think I know something so well that I can no

longer hear what it's saying. For me, and I hope for many of my readers, these essays were an exercise in setting aside what I thought I knew about the biblical text and listening anew. As the Jewish tradition puts it, the voice goes forth from Sinai each day.

There is a lot in the responses with which I would like to engage. But because of the critiques they offer of my work, let me focus especial attention on some of what David Frankel and Tamar Kamionkowski have said. My hope is that my own approach will be clarified in the process.

Response to David Frankel

As I understand him, David Frankel objects to my “accentuating theological consistency in the text, especially with regards to issues deemed fundamental.” As a result, he suggests, my approach fails to reckon adequately with what he calls the “full plurality and heterogeneity” of the Torah. (In this David reminds me of a mutual friend, a Bible scholar who regularly tells me that I ought to stop referring to “the God of Tanakh” and ought to speak instead of the “gods of Tanakh.”)

This is nowhere more true, David says, than in my portrayal of the God of Tanakh as a God of love. In David's words, God's “displays of volatile jealousy and indiscriminate vengeance, of deep insecurity and narcissistic pride, are hardly discussed or given serious attention” in *The Heart of Torah*. David's worries extend beyond the character of God to the nature of God's commands. “What of the passages,” he asks, that “summon us to exercise brutality and to renounce compassion?”

As an alternative, David proposes an interpretive model he thinks of as Buberian. By his lights, “we should openly contest biblical theologies that we find superficial or inadequate. True dialogue,” he insists, “involves the ability, nay necessity, to at times openly and respectfully disagree.”

Let me respond as honestly and forthrightly as I can. My response both to David's critique of what he takes as my approach and to his brief characterization of his own is: deep ambivalence.

On the one hand, there is something true and salutary in what David suggests. If source criticism has taught us anything, it is to be mindful of and attentive to the range of voices in the Hebrew Bible. The Bible itself, we might say, is in no small measure an argument over what the Bible should be. And it is indeed important to be candid about when texts strike us as problematic and even offensive. So far, so good.

Where David and I would part ways, I suspect, is in what comes after the process of identifying sources and distinguishing between them. The fact is that the text we have inherited, the text as it has been read by Jews and Christians for thousands of years, the text as it is *still* read by an overwhelming majority of

pious Jews and Christians, is a weave of those earlier sources—woven, I should add, not haphazardly, but with great artistry and sophistication. If I understand David correctly, on his approach we can speak of the theology of J or of P but we can't coherently speak of the theology of the Torah because, after all, for every ethical or theological claim *x* there is also an ethical or theological claim of *y* (or not-*x*). Or, to make a related point, for all the beauty Torah contains, there is also ugliness; for all the emphasis on love and compassion, there is also no shortage of hatred and cruelty. And so we must choose, and that choosing entails rejecting—so David holds—voices that we find problematic or (David's word) "deplorable."

But is it really true that multiplicity, and even cacophony, must be accorded the last word in biblical interpretation? I don't think so, and I don't think the Bible itself thinks so either. Let me explain.

Take God's self-description in Exodus 34:6–7: in the NJPS rendering, "The LORD! The LORD! A God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness (*hesed*) and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet He does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations." The first verse of God's self-description describes God's character, or *who God is*; the second describes God's actions, or *what God does*. Only one word is repeated in both verses, thus underscoring its immense significance *hesed*, steadfast love. Whatever else God may be, these verses teach, God is a God of love. Note well: in Exodus 34:6, which describes *who God is*, no mention whatsoever is made of anger; God's anger is introduced only in verse 7, which portrays *what God does*. The implication of this is crucial for a proper understanding of Jewish theology. Anger is not essential to who God is in the way that love is. God *gets* angry, but God *is* loving.

Some may object that this is, after all, only one characterization among many in the Hebrew Bible. But is it? These verses have an extremely robust afterlife; if I am not mistaken, within the biblical corpus itself no verses are cited more frequently.¹ And as the verses are quoted and reworked, greater and greater emphasis is placed on God's love and mercy.²

1 This is a claim also made, for example, by Richard Elliott Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah: With a New English Translation and the Hebrew Text* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 290. For a careful book-length study of the ways the verse is quoted and reworked in Tanakh, see Nathan C. Lane, *The Compassionate but Punishing God: A Canonical Analysis of Exodus 34:6–7* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010). Thomas Raitt observes that "The formula in Exod 34:6–7 is as important as it is because of repeated enactment and continual expansion or abbreviation, restructuring or reapplication." Thomas Raitt, "Why Does God Forgive?" *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 13 (1991): 38–58, here 53.

2 Thomas Raitt explains that over the course of Tanakh, Exodus 34:6–7 is cited less to emphasize the polarity of divine mercy and divine judgment and more as "an unconditional assurance of God's mercy." Raitt, "Why Does God Forgive?" 46; see also 49–50.

In light of this, I would argue that what I am doing in interpreting the Bible is not simply privileging the texts that I like and dismissing the ones that I don't. On the contrary, I am following the Bible's own lead in placing divine love and mercy at the very center of my interpretive and theological project.

More than that: If one wants to read as a Jew, one cannot but note that these two verses are at the very heart of the Yom Kippur liturgy. As Jews approach God in repentance, the biblical passage that anchors their hope for mercy and forgiveness is this one. These verses are thus crucial not only to the Bible itself but also to the unfolding of Jewish religious life over time. We thus find both inner-textual and extratextual warrant for placing these verses at the core of Jewish biblical interpretation.

Making what I take to be a similar point, Terence Fretheim writes:

I would claim that there is an inner-biblical warrant to enter into evaluative work regarding biblical texts and to make distinctions among them regarding their more specific authority, even regarding God. That is to say, the Bible itself provides an *internal center* in terms of which the interpreter can begin to sort out matters regarding authority. That is to say, certain texts and/or themes constituting a center *within* the biblical material give some texts a higher value than other texts and constitute an inner-biblical warrant for such a task.³

Fretheim also places great emphasis on Exodus 34:6–7, on which he comments:

The God herein confessed is the *kind* of God whom Israel experiences in *every* circumstance. This “core testimony” with respect to God has an authoritative value in helping to sort out the varying theological dimensions of biblical texts yet without shutting down challenges . . . or portrayals that stand in tension with this core (e.g., Ps. 77:4–10).⁴

3 Terence E. Fretheim, “The Authority of the Bible and the Imaging of God,” in *Engaging Biblical Authority: Perspectives on the Bible as Scripture*, ed. William P. Brown (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 45–52, here 48.

4 Fretheim, “The Authority of the Bible and the Imaging of God,” 48. Elsewhere Fretheim writes that the claims made in Exodus 34:6–7 about the kind of God Israel worships provides a “hermeneutical key” to the biblical story as a whole, “delimiting possibilities of meaning”; these verses, he says, serve as “the confessional clue for determining the basic character of the God of the story.” Terence E. Fretheim and Karlfried Froelich, *The Bible as Word of God in a Postmodern Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 120, 122. For a distinctively Jewish approach, rooted in readings of Tanakh as well as Rabbinic literature, with a similar thrust, see Moshe Greenberg, “On the Political Use of the Bible in Modern Israel: An Engaged Critique,” in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom*, ed. David P. Wright, David Noel Freedman, and Avi M. Hurvitz (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 461–71.

This leads to my second point of disagreement with David. As we've heard, David advocates rejecting certain biblical texts in the name of "honesty" and "truth." Here again I have sympathy with the concerns that drive David's approach; after all, we have all seen—and many of us have experienced very directly—biblical texts being wielded as bludgeons. And yet I don't find the idea of rejecting texts either coherent or meaningful.

At the end of the day, I seek to live *within* a religious tradition rather than outside or above it; I seek to stand *under* the text rather than over it.

In an extremely powerful essay on what she calls "critical traditioning," Ellen Davis reports on an exchange with a colleague who wants to know whether there is any text she would flatly reject. Explaining that her impulse, like my own, is to say No, Davis explains that "When we think we have reached the point of zero-edification, then that perception indicates that we are not reading deeply enough; we have not probed the layers of the text with sufficient care."⁵

Another way of making this point is to say that I am interested in the Bible as scripture—or in more Jewish terms, as Torah. And part of what it means to treat a text as scripture—and more broadly, as part of a sacred canon, is to read it generously and charitably, though, I emphasize, not passively or uncritically. (So far from simply submitting to it, to stand under a text sometimes requires us to wrestle with it until both we and it walk away wounded.) Here again Davis captures my own intuition perfectly: "Charitable reading requires considerable effort: it is easier to dispense with the problematic text. Those who regard a text as religiously authoritative are willing to sustain that effort because they perceive that the text comes to them, in some sense, from God."⁶ My hesitation about David's approach here is that when we consider ourselves free—let alone obligated—to reject biblical passages, it seems to me that they cease functioning as Scripture.

In my view, rather than reject disturbing texts, we should go on wrestling with them and, when necessary, reinterpret them. Our sense of who God is, and of who God intends us to be, sometimes bumps up against the plain sense of the text-- and sometimes even against the way the text has been heard for thousands of years. Both the text and our moral and religious intuitions, themselves shaped by the

5 Ellen F. Davis. "Critical Traditioning: Seeking an Inner Biblical Hermeneutic," in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 733–51, here 734.

6 Davis, "Critical Traditioning," 749. Davis cites Moshe Halbertal, who writes that "We apply the principle of charity in our reading of a holy text not only to ensure its meaningfulness, but also to ensure that it corresponds to the highest criteria of perfection. In the case of the Scriptures, there is an a priori interpretive commitment to show the text in the best possible light. Conversely, the loss of this sense of obligation to the text is an undeniable sign that it is no longer perceived as holy. Making use of the principle of charity, the following principle can be stipulated: the degree of canonicity of a text corresponds to the amount of charity it receives in its interpretation. The more canonical a text, the more generous its treatment." Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 29.

biblical tradition, need to be given weight. The text is never abandoned or repudiated in the dialogue, but it is sometimes transformed. (As I've already indicated, the fundamental question is not what to accept and what to reject but, rather, if I may put it somewhat colloquially, what to read in light of what.)⁷

To be clear, I am decidedly not advocating for—or even defending—easy harmonization. Several of the essays in *The Heart of Torah* are devoted to unresolved wrestling. To take just one example, as heirs of the Bible—or, to again invoke more traditional language, as students of Torah—how ought we to hear the mandate to wipe out Amalek? I consider various strains of interpretation, including symbolic and psychological interpretations; my point is not to resolve the problem the text poses—I don't pretend to know how to do that—but to confront the problem forthrightly and to consider some of the ways we might grapple with it.

What all this means is that although I think we *can* talk about a God of the Bible, we have to accept the fact that some passages will leave us disturbed and unsettled. Like Fretheim I “seek a unified portrayal of God, but with the understanding that some biblical texts will just not fit; they provide some ongoing over-againstness to that portrayal... I seek to present a unified portrayal of God to the modern world, but I recognize that that texts cannot so neatly be lined up behind such a portrayal as I might like and that the ongoing struggle with the differences leads one onward in the search for the truth about God.”⁸ Some degree of irresolution, we might say, has its benefits.

Response to Tamar Kamionkowski

Tamar Kamionkowski's fascinating response to my book seeks after its genre. If I understand Tamar correctly, her view of what biblical scholarship does is, at bottom, source critical. Thus, for example, speaking of what she identifies as the P and J strands of a story in Exodus, she avers that “Biblicists are interested in how the accounts are different, how they imagine God differently.” Tellingly, perhaps, when she speaks of Jewish biblical theology, she cites Benjamin Sommer's neo-documentarian insistence that “Modern critical readings are significant because they enable us to hear religious teachings that might otherwise be neglected.”

Tamar is undoubtedly correct in asserting that “modern biblical scholarship . . . seeks to understand who, why, and when the texts were created,” but I wonder whether her formulation makes adequate space for other things that biblical scholars also do, like wrestle with the final canonical text(s) and apply the tools of literary criticism to help understand the artistry of those literary wholes. More critically for my point here, biblical theologians do more than just retrieve voices

7 Whether or not the Bible has a center, a good interpreter necessarily does.

8 Fretheim and Froelich, *The Bible as Word of God in a Postmodern Age*, 125.

that are in danger of being silenced or forgotten. They—or at least some of them—also seek to read texts as wholes, and some go so far as to attempt sweeping interpretations of the canon(s) as a whole. For every Ben Sommer, there is also a Brevard Childs or a Walter Brueggemann.

Tamar writes that when she engages with biblical texts, her question is not “what do we learn about God?” but rather “what do we learn about God-beliefs?” Now, some of what contemporary Bible scholars do depends on this kind of methodological naturalism, which, I readily concede, has often yielded rich and wonderful fruit in helping us to understand the multiplicity and diversity that underlie scriptural texts. But like many readers, I am ultimately interested in the text as Scripture, and not (just) as cultural artifact. If I am reading her right, what Tamar offers is a kind of history of religions approach, which I see as a tool but not an end in itself, or, if you prefer, as a stopping point in our journey with the text but not a final destination. In reading Scripture, I seek to know God, not—or in any event not *only*—“God-beliefs.”

Now again, I am not advocating abandoning source criticism and historical scholarship more generally. What I am suggesting is that responsible biblical scholarship need not limit itself to historical criticism.

It bears noting, especially in this setting, that there is a burgeoning subfield of biblical studies that scholars refer to as “theological interpretation of Scripture.” On Walter Moberly’s definition, “Theological interpretation is reading the Bible with a concern for the enduring truth of its witness to the nature of God and humanity, with a view to enabling the transformation of humanity into the likeness of God.”⁹ What Tamar says of me, that I place “God” rather than “the author or authors” at the center of my work, would presumably apply to Moberly as well. Moberly (and I, though as Tamar rightly notes, to a lesser extent; more on that a bit later) do care about the author or authors but seek ultimately to hear *God speaking through the authors*. Not surprisingly, Moberly embraces Paul Ricoeur’s yearning that “Beyond the desert of criticism, we wish to be called again,”¹⁰ seeing it as the “the keynote for theological interpretation.”¹¹

To this point, most of the voices engaged in theological interpretation of scripture are Christian. But, *mutatis mutandis*, a Jewish version of this project (or series of projects) is also possible. And it seems odd to me to think that it would not qualify as biblical scholarship. (I can’t elaborate upon this here but I will add here that from my perspective not enough biblical scholars are willing to wrestle with

9 R. W. L. Moberly, “What Is Theological Interpretation of Scripture,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 3, no. 2 (2009): 161–78, here 163.

10 Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon, 1969), 349.

11 R. W. L. Moberly, “Theological Interpretation, Second Naiveté, and the Rediscovery of the Old Testament,” *Anglican Theological Review* 99, no.4 (2017): 651–70, here 655.

the historical locatedness of their own thoroughgoing commitment to historicism.)

Tamar points out that in some of the essays in *The Heart of Torah*, I rely on what she calls “a minimal textual hook” to take the conversation elsewhere; witness one of my essays on parashat Terumah, in which I explore two very different understandings of *tzimtzum* in Jewish thought and attempt to discern what we can learn from holding them together in productive and dialectical tension. I want to note that I do this on purpose, and with a goal in mind. For Judaism, commentaries themselves often become primary texts, in turn eliciting supercommentaries. It is extremely significant—I am tempted to say foundational—to Jewish thought that the word “Torah” refers not just to what is divinely revealed (that is, to what we call *the Torah*) but also the range of human commentary on and, if one may say so, human expansion of, that divine revelation. Tamar says, correctly, that my essay on Terumah will not help a reader who is interested in “learning something about the Torah portion Terumah [itself].” I have no argument here, only an observation: in light of what I’ve just said, I think it’s also true that Judaism’s Parashat Terumah consists not only of the biblical text but also of what’s been said about it by sages and scholars through the ages. So the midrash on Parashat Terumah upon which I build my essay is part of what Jews mean when they talk about the Parashah.¹² In any event, I think there’s value in both projects—hearing the original scriptural text anew and listening well to the ways it’s been read through the ages.)

Getting directly to the heart of my work as a theologian and an interpreter of the Jewish tradition, Tamar wonders whether I “could have written a very similar work organized around [my] central areas of interest: God’s love, God’s mercy, human responsibility” and asks “what . . . the presentation of theology via Torah portions offers us”; perhaps, she suggests, it “raise[s] up the core importance of textual engagement in developing theology.”

In fact I am currently engaged in a massive—and, I readily admit, a massively daunting—project: an attempt to reclaim love as a central category, and arguably *the* central category, in Jewish theology, spirituality, and ethics. In the new work, I treat many of the themes that emerge in *The Heart of Torah* more systematically and expansively than I could there. Yet in working on my current project I struggle to find a balance between what we might call a discursive mode and an exegetical one. The point is, as Tamar suggests, that Jews often do theology in the form of textual commentary. A more discursive mode allows you to zoom out, as

12 In a related vein, I’ve argued in the past, that, in this sense, the Jewish tradition is more Catholic than Protestant—more focused, that is, on the reception history of the text and not single-mindedly focused on the text itself. See Shai Held, “The Promise and Peril of Jewish Barthianism,” *Modern Judaism* 25, no. 3 (2005): 316–26, esp. 318–19.

it were, and engage “the big questions” on a broader canvas, yet it also threatens to lose the sheer and irreducible textuality of Jewish religious thinking.

Asking whether my work is “biblical theology or Jewish theology that invokes biblical passages,” Tamar opts for the latter. I am not sure about the answer to this question and in all honesty I don’t have a great deal invested in it. Another option, perhaps, is a term I learned from the opening pages of Ellen Davis: exegetical sermon.¹³ Many of the essays in *The Heart of Torah* could arguably be described as “high-end exegetical sermons,” in which I strive to take both the exegesis and the sermonizing extremely seriously. Or, as Ellen herself describes my work, I “resolutely hold together the text and God at the center of the conversation, never allowing either exegetical or theological claims to be abstracted from one another.” At the end of the day, I am not sure how to categorize what I do, but I know where I do it, at the interface of biblical studies and theological, ethical, and psychological reflection.¹⁴

Reading Emotion in the Hebrew Bible

I would like to respond to one further point, this one about how we read (or don’t) for emotion in the Hebrew Bible. David Frankel rightly observes that I characterize Judah as a paragon of repentance and self-transformation. When Joseph seeks to imprison his brother Benjamin, Judah steps forward and pleads to be incarcerated in his place. In this moment, I suggest, Judah embraces the role of brother and son more fully than he has heretofore. Expressing empathy for Jacob, he is horrified at the grief his father will undoubtedly endure should he lose another son. All this stands in stark contrast to the Judah of old, who leads his brothers in selling Joseph into slavery and betrays gross indifference to the suffering his father will endure. As Matthew Schlimm notes, with his offer of himself in place of Benjamin, “Judah unwittingly reveals to Joseph that he is not the same person he was many years ago.”¹⁵ What begins to change Judah, I suggest, is the death of his own sons, recounted in Genesis 38; perhaps, I speculate, losing his own sons enabled Judah to sympathize with his father in ways he had been unable to beforehand. As if this were not enough, Tamar soon confronts Judah with his own selfishness in withholding his youngest son from her, thus condemning her to a life

13 Ellen F. Davis, *Opening Israel’s Scriptures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 2. Ellen also describes my writing as “existentially engaged criticism” and “moral theology in a homiletical key.” Both are provocative characterizations that shed light on at least some of what I try to do in *The Heart of Torah*.

14 In the opening essay of the first issue of *The Journal of Theological Interpretation*, Joel Green described theological interpreters of Scripture as standing “at the interface of biblical studies and theological reflection.” Joel B. Green. “The (Re-)Turn to Scripture,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 1, no. 1 (2007) 1–3, here 2.

15 Matthew R. Schlimm, *From Fratricide to Forgiveness: The Language and Ethics of Anger in Genesis*, Siphrut 7 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 176.

of solitude and childlessness. I suggest that the words Tamar uses in asking Judah to take responsibility for what he has done, *haker na*, “recognize, please,” must have shaken Judah to his core, since they are the very same words Judah and his brothers had used in presenting Jacob with Joseph’s bloodied tunic. Confronted with his guilt (twice over), something shifts in Judah. The Judah we soon meet evinces a greater capacity for empathy and a more developed sense of interpersonal responsibility.

Labelling all of this “anachronistic,” David asks: “Does Judah bemoan his harsh treatment of Joseph and Jacob, and painfully resolve to mend his ways? The fact is that the narrator never tells us so in plainspoken words. Nor does Judah give any verbal expression to such thoughts and feelings.” David’s complaint is accurate as far as it goes. Neither the narrator nor Judah explicitly tells us about Judah’s inner life—about the guilt he may have felt or about the growth in empathy he may have undergone. But David’s insistence that we cannot say anything about the emotional life of characters in a story unless their emotions are described by the narrator “in plainspoken words” strikes me as an extremely odd way to read the Bible—or any other literature, for that matter. Textual positivism of this sort can blind us to the subtle emotional richness of the text. Genesis 22, for example, tells us nothing explicit about what Abraham feels as he climbs Mount Moriah to sacrifice his son. Is it anachronistic to imagine that Abraham may have been bewildered by God’s command, wondering how God could demand that a father slay his son; confused about how God had finally fulfilled God’s promises to Abraham and now threatened to undo them; terrified that perhaps he would not be able to sacrifice his son, and no less terrified that perhaps he would? Guilt-ridden, about what Sarah would say? And so on. Part of the power of the text lies precisely in the fact that the narrator does not tell us what Abraham is feeling. But the implication of that silence is not that Abraham isn’t feeling anything, or that the reader should remain completely agnostic about the patriarch’s inner life. On the contrary, the narrator’s silence invites us in, opens the door for us to imagine the thoughts and feelings that were undoubtedly swirling inside Abraham on that fateful climb.

Taking inspiration from David Lambert’s argument about repentance being a post-biblical phenomenon,¹⁶ David accuses me of “project[ing] inner thoughts and feelings on the biblical character that the Torah narrator was not interested in developing.” Whether or not we can responsibly speak of repentance in the Hebrew Bible, it seems dubious to me to claim, as David does, that we cannot speak

16 David A. Lambert, *How Repentance Became Biblical: Judaism, Christianity, and the Interpretation of Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). For a provocative critique of Lambert’s equally provocative book, precisely on the grounds that it too readily dismisses conceptions of interiority in the Bible, see Walter Moberly, Review of *How Repentance Became Biblical: Judaism, Christianity, and the Interpretation of Scripture*, *AJS Review* (November 2017) 463–66.

of something so fundamental to the human condition as guilt and regret. (Just why does Tamar use the words *haker na*? How is Judah's encounter with Tamar connected with his earlier treatment of his brother and his father? And why is the story of Judah and Tamar placed where it is?) I agree with David that the narrator was not interested in "developing" a complex language around inner thoughts and feelings, but I don't think that means that inner thoughts and feelings were alien to him—any more than they would be alien to any storyteller worth his salt. When a son who had once been callous to his father's pain now becomes overwhelmed at the mere thought of that pain returning; when a man who had been willing to sell one of his father's favorites into slavery now effectively volunteers to be enslaved in order to save another of his father's favorites, then clearly something has changed. To wonder what precisely has transpired in Judah's inner world is not anachronism; it's just careful reading. Now, I may well be mistaken in my analysis, which is, by necessity, speculative (as David notes, the narrator doesn't *tell* us). But the project of trying to discern what characters think and feel seems to me to be essential to what it means to read a story, whether sacred or not.

Let me conclude where I began, with heartfelt thanks to my respondents for engaging so deeply and substantively with my work, and for forcing me to think deeper and harder about the commitments, both methodological and theological, that animate *The Heart of Torah*.

BOOK REVIEWS

Evangelical, Sacramental, & Pentecostal: Why the Church Should be All Three. Gordon T. Smith. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2017. ISBN: 9780830851607. Pp. 132. Paperback. \$18.00 (USD).

For many adherents of the Christian faith, the very title of Gordon Smith's work may sound like something of an oxymoron. Within Pentecostal circles, sacramentalism is frequently dismissed as a euphemism for empty ritual, the rejection of which was one of the very catalysts that gave rise to the movement in the first place. Conversely, Pentecostalism has been dismissed by some within more liturgical churches as a capitulation to unrestrained emotionalism, negligent of the profound sense of the Spirit experienced through the ordinary means of grace such as baptism and the Supper. Still others, in the evangelical tradition, assert that the primary way in which believers should expect to encounter the living God is neither via one's personal experience nor participation in the sacraments, but through the knowledge of his written Word.

In Smith's view, however, the church need not default to one of these three paths. On the contrary, he asserts that the church must be all three at once, "if we want to appropriate as fully as possible the grace of the ascended Christ" (3). Grounding his case in the triune nature of God himself, in his introduction Smith labels the "Word, sacrament, and immediate presence of the Spirit" as the three prongs of "an ecology of grace" crucial to the church's fullness in Christ (4). This "ecology"—inspired by the likes of Calvin and Wesley, to whom Smith appeals to demonstrate its consistency with an evangelical ethos (50–51)—is the means by which the church ought to understand its union with Christ (7). His first chapter, a discussion of John 15:4, surveys the various ways the church has traditionally understood the call to abide "in Christ", concluding that, "the three—Spirit, along with Word and sacrament—are the means...by which we abide in Christ as Christ abides in us" (21). Each of these means is the focus of a chapter; 4-6 are entitled the Evangelical principle, Sacramental principle, and Pentecostal principle, respectively.

Each tradition would likely find certain points of contention with Smith. While appreciative of his emphasis on the pneumatology of Luke-Acts in chapter 2, and on the Spirit's work in Jesus's earthly life (23), the Pentecostal would like him to explicitly affirm their doctrine of Spirit baptism in calling for the church to be

authentically “Pentecostal.” The evangelical would applaud his assertion that pneumatology must ultimately “be thoroughly Christological,” that the Spirit “glorifies Christ” among God’s people (26). However, low church evangelicals in particular may be skeptical of his position that the Supper should be celebrated weekly, as in liturgical settings (40). Moreover, in Reformed evangelicalism, his statement that “Luther and Calvin could not incorporate into their own teaching a legitimate expression of the inner illuminating grace of God” (104) would like meet with protest—particularly since the latter has frequently been praised as “the Theologian of the Holy Spirit” by devotees. The sacramentalist, certainly, would wholeheartedly concur with Smith’s proposal “that conversion to the Christian faith necessarily includes baptism” (38) and his caution to those evangelicals and Pentecostals who mistakenly believe “that it is possible to have a full-orbed Christian life with minimal exposure to the sacraments” (45). On the other hand, some sacramental communities may balk at his assertion that the Scripture readings for a particular service necessarily ought to have some connection with the sermon preached (90), or find odd his insistence that the Spirit’s work should always to be highlighted when the Lord’s Supper is celebrated (93).

However, all things considered, Smith’s volume is quite generous and refreshing, constructively offering a much-needed corrective to the imbalances that characterize many local congregations. It identifies the greatest strengths of these three ecclesial traditions and consistently highlights how they are, despite their differences, well positioned to complement each other. His analysis of Acts 2, which depicts the preached Word and the Lord’s Supper as the core of Spirit-empowered church’s gathering (32), serves as a powerful reminder that, though intriguing to the contemporary reader, his vision of the local church is hardly a revolutionary concept—it is, rather, an ancient model. Though Smith may appear rather charismatic in his assertion that, “We are only truly the church when we live, together, in the fellowship of the Spirit” (98), this fellowship is firmly grounded in the constant celebration of the sacraments and preaching of the Word. His discussion of Christian initiation (129) is also timely; while Smith notes that the church of Acts viewed reception of the Spirit and water baptism as “the basics of initiation” for new converts (28), this concept is largely lacking in the contemporary Western church—particularly in evangelical circles which so strongly affirm the sole authority of Scripture, ironically. It seems a direct link may be drawn to this phenomena and the question of community he frequently raises; while few orthodox churches would deny the absolute necessity of Scripture for Christian vitality, Smith reminds his readers that “to be truly the church is to be a community immersed in a sacred text”—not simply a weekly gathering of persons who interact with that sacred text privately (37). On these two points, then,

Smith's work seems to push back on the rampant individualism of Western Christianity, for which it ought to be commended.

Moreover, his appeal to Wesley, Calvin, medieval mystics, and the Fathers to bolster his case reinforces the fact that authentic Christian community requires not just appreciating the voices of other believers within the church today, but those from ages past. Perhaps the prime example of this is his sixth chapter, "The Pentecost Principle," in which he draws the bulk of his discussion concerning Christian experience not from the contemporary Pentecostal-Charismatic movement, but figures like Bernard of Clairvaux (101) and Ignatius Loyola (103). Indeed, both the critical Pentecostal and sacramental reader ought to consider the rich spiritual experience of such individuals as evidence their distinct branches of Christendom may hold much more in common than at first glance. One would imagine this is Smith's goal given his assertion that, "The Spirit is an ecumenical spirit; if we are in the Spirit, we are committed to working with and fostering the unity of the church universal" (120). Thus, a deep reverence for tradition and community, coupled with a high premium on personal experience, serve to greatly enrich one another.

Yet, perhaps the greatest strength of this title is its accessibility; Smith's writing is truly within reach of the wider Body of Christ that he wishes to address. Constructed in such a way that the informed layperson may understand the content, yet with enough depth to satisfy the ordained minister or ecclesial focused academic. On the one hand, Smith's work is theologically rich, grounding his case in the core Christian doctrines of the Trinity, union with Christ, and the incarnation, while also highlighting how they are vitally connected with one another (106). Yet, it is intensely practical, drawing on his own experiences in congregational settings, on the mission field, and his career in theological education. In short, this volume reads as one not merely written about the church, but ultimately for the church.

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Wright, N.T., and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2019). ISBN: 0310499305. 987 + xviii pages. Hardcover. \$32.99 (USD).

Hailing from the hallowed halls of St. Andrews to the metropolitan streets of Ridley College, Melbourne, *The New Testament in Its World* (hereafter NTIW)¹ is a truly mammoth achievement. Clocking in at nearly one thousand pages of

¹ For the sake of continuity, I will refer to Bird and Wright, NTIW, and the plural "they" interchangeably to refer to the same authorial entity.

text with over two hundred and thirty colored images², one can scarcely imagine a more comprehensive and extensive summation of the work of N. T. Wright—if anything else the fact that Bird and Wright were able to condense Wright’s thousands and thousands of scholarly materials into a single volume is nothing short of extraordinary. As has been acknowledged in the preface, instead of Bird and Wright authoring distinct elements of the work separate from the ground up, both Bird and Wright chose to collaborate in this “joint effort” (26), working together to integrate Wright’s past work into a coherent and readable volume. However, any reasonable person is forced to wonder—does NTIW a worthy addition to the already saturated “New Testament introduction” market? How does NTIW compare to recent academic works from Donald Hagner (2012), David DeSilva (2018; 2nd ed), M. Eugene Boring (2012), Mark Allan Powell (2018; 2nd ed) Luke Timothy Johnson (2010; 3rd ed), D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo (2005; 2nd ed), as well as the classic work by Raymond E. Brown (1997)? The answer, by and large, is NTIW holds up *quite well* although there are some reservations. For the sake of keeping this review from delving too deeply into the weeds, I will focus my attention on the various parts (there are a total of 9) rather than highlighting the isolated chapters (of which there are 37).

To give the reader a sense of the majesty and enormity of NTIW, the reader must travail over one hundred and sixty pages of background details before she even begins a discussion on the Historical Jesus (171ff.). While this is certainly relevant and vital material the immensity of the material will be difficult for any beginning reader or seminarian. For instance, NTIW purports to be a “robust and user-friendly introduction” (26) and while this is indeed noble, the sheer amount of text and concepts will make for a difficult ascent even for the most theologically proficient undergraduate.

After a rather arduous tedious list of the aforementioned illustrations and a preface (13–36), NTIW commences with an introduction to theological and historical method (38–83). Educated readers will already be aware of Wright’s view of critical realism and such a view—contested or otherwise—remains continuous and consistent at this point. NTIW affirms three specific elementary realities for their understanding of the study of the New Testament: history (“the past”), literature (“the text”), and theology (“understanding God and the world”). While many evangelical theologies originate with assertions and arguments about the existence of God, NTIW eschews that sort of method in favor of a more grounded and less apologetic approach. The definition offered for *critical realism* centers on

2 This does not include tables, chronologies, text grids, emails from the edge, and portals and parallels and other such imagery. If one were to include them, the numerous would likely double.

The process of “knowing” that acknowledges *the reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower* (hence “realism”), which also fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiraling path of *appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known* (hence “critical”). (54; emphasis original)

The remainder of part 1 fleshes out these specific topics with characteristic clarity and passion, and the conclusion drawn is finally centered on a desire to bring one closer to God. It is in this section where NTIW is most explicit about its audience: it is primarily although not exclusively written *for* the church (83).

Part 2 is a wide-ranging exploration of the Jewish and Greco-Roman world of the New Testament (86–171). While some New Testament introductions offer perhaps a single chapter on this comprehensive topic, NTIW delves deeply and exhaustively into critical establishing the bedrock world that birthed the New Testament. Special attention is paid to the Jewish framework of this world (108–141). As already mentioned, this section is feasibly necessary for situating a reader within the world of the text, one is already aware of the mammoth mountain they must climb over—hence this section, while well-written and engaging, is imaginably too sizeable to have the necessary impact. The forest is far too large and far too dense for the average reader to travel without getting lost amidst the historical woodland.

Part 3 (172–215) brings readers up to date on the question of/quest for the Historical Jesus. The customary questions concerning the identity of Jesus (including extended work on his prophetic calling) are all addressed. Of special note is the messianic nature of the Synoptic traditions (Son of Man imagery) as well as the notorious theological question; “did Jesus think he was God?” is at the center of the climactic chapter of part 3 (231–41). Bird and Wright avoid easy categorizations (calling it a “flattened out modern question,” 238), instead opting to incorporate temple imagery and the theological-cultic nature of such imagery as exemplified in Jesus’ passion and trial. As the exalted Son of Man (or Human One per the Common English Bible), NTIW argues that Jesus sees himself not only as having authority over the temple but to *be* the one who replaces the temple and is enthroned alongside God (239). Such argumentation is far more persuasive from a historical perspective than easy insinuation of about various notions of “divinity,” and NTIW is restrained but compelling in its presentation of the evidence. For Wright and Bird, the seeds of this historical reality are the source of the theological bloom we find in the later creeds, where Jesus “would embody in himself the returning and redeeming action of the covenant God” (241).

Beginning with the end of the beginning, part 4 is quick to locate the notion of

resurrection and the afterlife in the ancient world (264–336). Anyone familiar with Wright’s *The Resurrection of the Son of God* will immediately recognize the same style of argumentation and assortment of evidence from that classic work of historio-theology. A brief primer on Paul’s conception of the resurrection and the afterlife form the center of this segment. Specifically, Paul and the earliest followers of Jesus believed that “the Christian life belonged within a historical narrative which began with Jesus’ resurrection and ended with the resurrection of all believers” (315). Paul, as the theological of the first fruits of the resurrection, is then the foundation that NTIW builds upon as the Gospel tradition is established via the writings of the Evangelists (316–33).

Paul and the faithfulness of God is the largest chapter by page count in NTIW, clocking in well over two hundred pages (336–553). While the layout is common enough in New Testament introductions, focusing on an epistle-by-epistle survey of the writings of Paul, NTIW is unique in that the epistle to Philemon is at the front of this exploration; most theologies of Paul focus on other epistles like Romans (ala James D.G. Dunn’s work). This is a fresh and nuanced take on Pauline theology and the starting point of theological construction. Concerning the thorny issue of Pauline chronology, Douglas Campbell’s provocative work *Framing Paul* is not consulted in NTIW’s reconstruction (336–65) of the life and travels of Paul. Additionally, NTIW’s places a high (though critical) view on the authenticity of Acts in describing Paul’s travels (347–49), fitting the resurgence of scholarly opinion that the Book of Acts is far more historically precise than previously affirmed (c.f. Craig S. Keener’s massive four-volume commentary). Moving on from this point, NTIW segues into three select Pauline-centric topics: monotheism, election, and eschatology (370–95) synthesizing and summarizing Wright’s massive section in PFG on this particular triad of topics. Space permits me only to note the various conclusions drawn by Bird and Wright on the contentious issues in the Pauline epistles:

- They prefer the south Galatian hypothesis (399–400) and date Galatians to 48/49.
- 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 and the phrase “caught up in the air” refers to “royal arrival” (424), not the so-called “rapture” motif that some evangelicals have seized for theo-political reasons.
- Concerning the “Lawless One,” NTIW concludes that this figure “is probably built up from various ancient, scriptural, and contemporary figures who set themselves up against God” (428).
- The epistle to the Philippians and perhaps 2 Corinthians are both unified letters, not composites of numerous documents (441, 484–85).
- The Christ-Hymn in Philippians 2:6–11 affirms the preexistence of

- Jesus (v. 6), as well as his incarnation (vv. 7–8) and exaltation (vv. 9–11), avoiding the Adamic arguments of Dunn et al (443).
- Regarding the issue of authorship in the Deutero-Pauline corpus, they affirm the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians (420–21), Colossians & Ephesians (458–59), and perhaps the Pastoral Epistles (530–40).
 - The authors are essentially egalitarian in their view concerning women’s equality within the church concerning women in worship in 1 Corinthians (491–92) as well as the deacons and apostles and co-workers named in the Roman church (525). The more contested passage in the Pastoral Epistles (1 Tim 2:12) is addressed specifically as women being welcomed within the assembly and challenged to learn: “. . . men and women alike can develop whatever gifts of learning, teaching, and leadership God is giving to them” (544).

The remainder of the New Testament is explored in parts 6 and 7, specifically as it relates to Gospel studies (554–701) and the so-called “Catholic” epistles (702–849), with part 8 being concerned with the construction of the New Testament as a whole—including text-critical matters and the canonization process (850–77). Part 8, outside of the conclusion (part 9) is the shortest and least involved part of NTIW, although it certainly is up to date in terms of where textual criticism is going. For example, the inclusion of the *Coherence Based Genealogical Model* (CBGM) is a welcome addition (858).

As previously mentioned, there is a great deal to commend about this stellar work. Without a doubt, the aesthetic nature is appealing, the charts and images and tables engaging, and the prose is naturally captivating and easy to read—as one would expect from Wright and Bird’s other works. The mere fact that Bird and Wright were, as also mentioned, able to summarize and condense and nuance the thousands and thousands of pages of previously written material into a coherent whole is itself a wondrous feat. The consistency across the writing itself is also to be commended, as having two authors writing together on any project—much less a project of this size and scope—likewise deserves a note of high praise. However, there are some lingering issues. I highlight two specifically.

The first issue is that the scope of the work is enormous and thus requires some abridgment at certain junctures and this, unfortunately, results in some odd editorial and explanatory choices. For instance, a survey of the actual contents of 1 Corinthians is less than 10 pages long (not accounting for page space that has been utilized by select images), resulting in a too-brief exploration (985–94). While this condensed reality is perhaps necessary, the specific controversial parts of the epistle that are often the focus of scholarly and ecclesial debates are not explored in any great detail (i.e., the issue of prophecy in 1 Cor 11:2–16). Another

example of this odd abridgment is the particularly truncated explanation of perhaps one of the most difficult passages in all of Paul—Romans 9–11—where all three chapters are summarized in less than a page and a half, whereas Romans 1–4 is given around seven pages of detailed attention. This seems disproportionate considering the importance of Romans 9–11 to the discussion of Israel, election, and the future.³

A second issue, outside of the first one mentioned, is the nature of the assumed reader. There is a lack of clarity concerning precisely *who* NTIW is intended for. Were I privileged to teach a seminary course introducing the New Testament, I would heartily recommend and require the use of NTIW. However, if I were teaching a similar course for undergraduates and beginning readers of the New Testament, I do not believe the size and scope would be conducive to said learning environment. This is not a criticism of the book *per se* although I do note that I do believe certain sections are needlessly long above, but a point for future professors and teachers about some mild misgivings.

All in all, this work holds up quite well against all of its faithful New Testament introduction competitors, and one can scarcely find a more widespread work that seeks to address all of the critical issues in New Testament studies—all while seeking to build up the Christian for a life of knowledge, learning, and faithful service to God-in-Christ. To that end, may this book do just that.

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The Forgotten Trinity: Recovering the Heart of Christian Belief. James R. White. Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2019. ISBN 978-0-764233821. Pp. 231. Softcover. \$16.99 (USD).

Amidst the endless recent theological books on the Trinity, there is an angle for everyone. In the case of James R. White's *The Forgotten Trinity* (revised and expanded), the approach is different than typical university academics or local pastors, since it is the approach of conservative evangelical apologetics.

White summarizes and defends a cogent and scholastic Trinitarian dogma. While the tone seeks to be generous, the overarching, functional framework naturally remains one of entrenched warfare about false teaching and heretics vs. truth and the orthodox, where both the author and implied reader are already familiar with this orientation. White's contention is that "the doctrine . . . is so misunderstood that a majority of Christians, when asked, give *incorrect* and at times downright *heretical* definitions of the Trinity" (13). "*Wrong* information"

³ The debate over the meaning of "all Israel" (Rom 11:26) is summed up in a single unqualified sentence: ". . . all Israel . . . consists of all believers" (522).

(193) and incorrect definitions are no small issue in this doctrinal debate. “We hang a person’s very salvation upon the acceptance of the doctrine,” readers are told on the second page, “yet if we are honest with ourselves, *we really aren’t sure exactly why*. It’s the topic we won’t talk about: no one dares question the Trinity for fear of being branded a ‘heretic,’ yet we have all sorts of questions about it, and we aren’t sure who we can ask” (10).

This perspective is peculiar, indicating much about the author’s own experience and perception (and perhaps the book’s original 1990s date). For this reader, it was all questions: *do Christians really hang anyone’s eternal salvation upon the simple “acceptance of a doctrine”? And if we aren’t sure why, why are “we” doing this?; Given the endless conferences, books and symposia, confessions and liturgies, Bible studies all focused on the Trinity, who is it that “won’t talk about it”? And, how is it (and why are) Christians afraid for asking such theological questions to begin with?*⁴

Questions only multiply as readers encounter one puzzling assertion after another. “The Trinity is the highest revelation God has made of himself to His people” (10), leaving readers to ask, *According to whom?* and, *Isn’t the Christ event the highest revelation of God (assuming there legitimately exists such a superlative)?*⁵ White’s reasoning is “the Incarnation . . . [is] that one act revealed the Trinity to us in a way that no amount of verbal revelation could ever communicate” (10–11). The Christ event is subservient to the more ultimate and grand revelation of God as Trinity. White also laments that the Trinity is “rarely the object of adoration and worship—at least worship in *truth*” (13). In reading the book, it was hard to discern the difference between worshipping God as Trinity and worshipping *the doctrine of the Trinity*.⁶

The perspective is also noticeably modern and rationalist in its anthropology,

4 The answer to this last one is obviously a historical ethos of coercion and threats of violence—whether in the long story of the institutional church burning heretics at the stake specifically for questioning Trinitarian dogma, or the more common threats of eternal hell from the pulpit. *The Forgotten Trinity* implements the standard strategy of various sectarian, religious, and fundamentalist movements by *mixing subtle threats with love*. “I wish to invite you, my fellow believer, to a deeper, higher, more intense love of God’s truth” (14; cf. 9, 18)—but “we must be willing to love God *as He is*” (14). A mental mistake, a faulty “image of God in our mind” (14) on the level of God’s nature, has the worst of consequences. One is here reminded of Marcella Althaus-Reid’s “T-Theology,” as quoted in Linn Marie Tonstad, *Queer Theology: Beyond Apologetics* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), 85–86: “Theology is a grand imperial narrative of power. It seeks to classify all reality systematically . . . T-Theology [teaches people] . . . how to justify . . . acts of brutality as, in a sense, acts of Christian love.”

5 The use of the male pronoun for the Trinity as the whole, is also noticeable for a contemporary work in theology. Even the most conservative and reformed of systematic theologians writing in the most conservative and reformed publishers are at least critically aware of this issue and its importance. E.g. Douglas Kelly, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2008).

6 Cf., “The object of [Jonathan Edwards’] reflection is in changing, for it is nothing other than the eternal truth of God. The world, and his circumstances, cannot take away from him what is most precious: his God” (16).

allergic to anything subjective. “The deepest feelings and emotions evoked by the Spirit are not direct toward unclear nebulous, fuzzy concepts, but toward the clear revealed truths of God concerning His love, the work of Christ, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit” (12); “We do not just sit back and expect God to zap us with some emotional surge” (13); “this work . . . is written from a position of ‘passion.’ Passion not in the sense of unordered, chaotic feelings . . .” (13), etc. In reading the book, it seems unfathomable to the author that a person could worship something genuinely mysterious, or that human feeling and intuition might indicate truth,⁷ or that the clearest theological truths may not have anything to do with the Trinity, or that God might primarily be understood as a person to be experienced and not an object to be systematically comprehended.

Indeed, the perspective is extremely dogmatic. “If one denies any of the preceding truths upon which the Trinity is based, one will end up rejecting the entire doctrine *en toto*” (17). Despite cheap talk of theological thinkers having “clouded minds” (15), there is no middle ground, and the situation is knowably black and white. The thick theologizing of Nicaea to Chalcedon can all be found somewhere, somehow, in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament⁸ while the specific opinions of the author are given the weight of timeless orthodoxy. A paltry few pages are given to “mystery” and the limits of language before brushing all that aside to define the Trinity in contemporary, propositional English language: “Within the one Being that is God, there exists, eternally three coequal and coeternal persons, namely, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (23). The author is so confident of this stated doctrine that “Christians who accept all of the Bible believe this doctrine” (25), and “*Every error and heresy on this doctrine will find its origin in a denial of one or more of these truths*” (25; emphasis mine). Furthermore, “An unwillingness to worship God *as God is and has revealed himself* lives behind every denial of the Trinity that appears down through history” (17). Thus, if readers raise any questions about the proposed definition, one already knows in advance that their eternal salvation may be in question.

7 The author is part of the reformed anti-empathy movement, which prides itself on the coarse preaching of judgment and predestination and discourages any substantive appeals to “emotion” in rational discourse, especially in the face of minorities (e.g., African Americans, non-heterosexual persons, etc.) who are suffering social oppression. The movement finds its most recent contemporary inspiration in the work of psychologists Jordan Peterson, and Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016).

8 Hence “forgotten” Trinity: “Most Christian people, while remembering the term ‘Trinity,’ have forgotten the central place the doctrine is to hold in the Christian life” (12). It escapes White that these unfortunate Christians include those of the first two centuries CE, and that the official acceptance of Trinitarian dogma in Christendom (to whatever extent it was in certain periods) is not proof of its concrete impacts on “the Christian life.” The rise of Nicene orthodoxy over Arianism is also said to be proof that “political power cannot overthrow scriptural truth” and evidence of “the irresistible force of truth” (189). But this (problematically) suggests that the doctrine’s *political success* is an indicator of its *theological truth*, not to mention that orthodoxy is rightfully coercive.

The approach of the book is typical of such cheap apologetics: the orthodox idea is defined, followed by proof-texts and additional evidence showing that it's correct, and refuting dissenters along the way (in this case, primarily Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons). Although readers are reminded to love God, experience proper emotion, and not just obtain "good ammunition to use the next time I debate the Trinity" (15), the book essentially functions in precisely this way.

For an explicitly popular level work (19, 29) of (American) evangelical fundamentalist apologetics, one therefore unfortunately witnesses what one might expect: a near total absence of relevant secondary sources,⁹ prevalent use of outdated biblical studies resources,¹⁰ and an astounding degree of isolation and ignorance on the primary subject matter.¹¹ Without any literature review, bibliography, justification of method, and familiarity with developments or debates on the

- 9 White implements Hodge, Warfield, and Berkof (all from the early 20th century). Remarkably, one of the only contemporary persons cited (and favorably) is Wayne Grudem—whose notorious views on the Trinity have been the object of repeated criticism by fellow conservative evangelicals, reformed theologians, and traditional Trinitarians. See Kevin Giles, *The Rise and Fall of the Complementarian Doctrine of the Trinity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017); *idem.*, *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012); *idem.*, *The Trinity & Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God & the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2002); Millard J. Erickson, *Whose Tampering With the Trinity?* (Louisville: Kregel Academic, 2009); Michael Bird and Scott Harrower, *Trinity Without Hierarchy: Reclaiming Nicene Orthodoxy in Evangelical Theology* (Louisville: Kregel Academic, 2019); D. Glenn Butner, *The Son Who Learned Obedience: A Theological Case Against the Eternal Submission of the Son* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2018). White somehow manages to sidestep this debate of two decades that consumed conservative evangelical discussions on the Trinity—and sidestep the implication: that internal consistency within this "orthodox" group is an illusion.
- 10 E.g., the second edition of Bauer and Danker's *Lexicon* (1979), Kittel's *Theological Dictionary*, Thayer's *Lexicon*, the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, etc.
- 11 The book shows virtually no familiarity with the theology of and debates about the Trinity outside the narrow confines of Old Princeton and post-reformation scholasticism. Barth, Moltmann, Rahner, other giants on the subject of the Trinity are not mentioned. The problem of "Arianism" in scholarship is nowhere referenced (on this, see in particular David Rankin, "Arianism," in *The Early Christian World*, ed. Philp Esler, 2nd ed. [New York: Routledge, 2017]). And note that the last several years saw the release of several evangelical-Protestant books on the Trinity such as Bird and Harrower, *Trinity Without Hierarchy*; Butner, *The Son Who Learned Obedience*; Keith Whitfield, *Trinitarian Theology: Theological Models and Doctrinal Application* (Nashville: B & H, 2019). This isn't to mention significant evangelical-Protestant works on the subject after the initial release of *The Forgotten Trinity*, such as Stephen Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History and Modernity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2012), or significant works prior to its release, such as T. F. Torrance's seminal *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2016, orig., 1996). Other recent works on the Trinity include Paul Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017); Dick Eugenio, *Communion with the Triune God: The Trinitarian Soteriology of T. F. Torrance* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014); Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering, *The Oxford Handbook on the Trinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Lincoln Harvey, *Jesus in the Trinity* (New York: Blackwell, 2020); Harriet Baber, *The Trinity* (New York: Blackwell, 2019). White appears to be in dialog with none of these conversations, much less aware that they exist and/or might be relevant to his studies.

Trinity over at least the last thousand years, it's as far away from academia as one can imagine.

How bizarre, then, that *The Forgotten Trinity* successfully served as (“Dr.”) White’s dissertation for the obscure and unaccredited Columbia Evangelical Seminary.

It is unfortunate that a critical review like this has to be written. But it is more unfortunate (and baffling) why a division of Baker House would publish (and re-publish!¹²) such phony scholarship to begin with (and by a publicly notorious figure no less).¹³ But my bigger concerns are more practical: the book will put Christian readers in an incredibly vulnerable place, leaving them with a superficial account of theological development in church history and misplaced priorities about the nature of worship, theologizing, and biblical study.¹⁴ They are also left without any clear direction for more substantive study of the Trinity.

It should go without saying that there are dozens of Christian doctrines and models of the Trinity,¹⁵ and that they are frequently complementary, not in competition.¹⁶ Furthermore, churches are free to identify themselves with Nicene orthodoxy, implement some other articulation,¹⁷ or do the work of the church without a creedal requirement at all. If discerning what can rightly be called “Christian” on this subject is White’s primary concern, then we will have to do more than close our eyes and ears, circle the wagons around shameless ignorance, and proclaim

12 Other than vague remarks on the back cover, there is no clear indicators as to what was changed or why in the 2019 edition. (It is ironic that something similar happened with Grudem, who changed his views on the Trinity and promised to emend them in a revision of his popular *Systematic Theology*, but never did.)

13 Note observations in Jamin Andreas Hübner, *Deconstructing Evangelicalism* (Rapid City, SD: Hills Publishing Group, 2020), 25–28; 45–47. White serves as a pastor of the infamous Apologia Church in Mesa, AZ.

14 Early Christians frequently (and perhaps most commonly) worshipped and prayed to God through Christ. See Piotr Ashwin-Siekjowski, “Creeds, Councils, and Doctrinal Development,” in *The Early Christian World* in conjunction with Larry Hurtado, *The Lord Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005). For White, this (and the general fact of doctrinal development) is automatically discounted as significant because of some theoretical final revelation of Trinitarian dogma unveiled in the Constantinian and/or post-Constantinian era.

15 These would include all those in the first five-hundred years of the church, to the more recent ones like Sallie McFague, *Models of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1987); Raimon Pannikar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993) and *Trinitarian and Cosmotheandric Vision (Opera Omnia, Vol. VIII)* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2019); Peter C. Hodgson, *Winds of the Spirit: A Constructive Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994); Catherine Mowry LaCugna, “God in Communion With Us: The Trinity,” in *Freeing Theology*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

16 This is true for many concepts, theologies, and doctrines—but all the more true for something as deep, mysterious, and complex as the nature of God’s existence. If there is one area of human knowledge where a person should *not be dogmatic*, wouldn’t it be on the nature of God? (“Trinitarian dogma” is, perhaps indeed, an oxymoron.)

17 The Brief Statement of Faith (1981) comes to mind as a modern-day equivalent to the Nicene Creed.

certain knowledge about perhaps the most notoriously complex topic of Christian theology.

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Amanda W. Benckhuysen. *The Gospel According to Eve: A History of Women's Interpretation*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019. Pp. x + 262. ISBN 978-0-8308-5227-7. Paperback. \$25.00 (USD).

In *The Gospel According to Eve: A History of Women's Interpretation*, Benckhuysen examines what more than sixty forgotten female interpreters from the fourth to the twenty-first century said about what it means to be male and female, based on their interpretations of Genesis 1–3 and Paul's writings. The book is arranged thematically rather than chronologically, each chapter functioning as an independent article with its own thematic concerns. The book's appendix fleshes out the biographies of individual women interpreters.

Chapter 1 introduces the history of the interpretation of Eve by well-known male interpreters and by forgotten or ignored women. As Benckhuysen points out, women writing on Eve usually interacted with the dominant interpretive tradition of their time, providing alternative views from a female perspective. While many early interpreters negatively portrayed Eve as “an inferior and secondary creation who bore primary responsibility for plunging the world into sin and strife” (8), several male interpreters, such as Chrysostom, Gregory the Great, Basil of Caesarea, and Lombard, viewed Eve more positively, suggesting that Eve like Adam was created in the image of God and was equal to Adam in dignity and virtue (18–19). Benckhuysen's brief survey reveals that some of the female interpreters who accepted the traditional representation of Eve in Genesis 1–3, also pushed back in subtle and not-so-subtle ways (22).”

Chapter 2 focuses on the literary defenses of women in the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries, when women began to write and circulate their responses to the resurgence of misogynist texts (24–25). Benckhuysen highlights Christine de Pizan's first published defense of women. In her positive reconstruction of the image of women, Christine portrayed women as human beings beloved by the Creator and found no biblical basis for arguing that women were secondary or inferior to man (28). Following Christine's lead, many other women writing poems, prayers, treatises, dialogues and devotionals to promote “a more godly, redemptive and liberating view of women in home and society” (26). Weighing in on the common mediaeval debate about “who sinned more,” Nogarola reasons that if women are the weaker or less intellectually capable sex, Adam is more culpable for sin (31). On the basis of their close readings of Genesis 1–3, many women

advocated for “a more biblical gender ideology where male and female were partners and companions, lovers and friends” (51).

The primary focus of chapter 3 is the question of women’s education during in the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries. Traditional arguments against women’s education throughout much of Western history were based to prescribed views of women’s nature and women’s roles, which in turn were influenced by the negative perceptions of Eve (53). Based on their more positive views on Eve, women from this period began to use the creation story to support their arguments for women’s moral improvement through education. Bathsua Makin did more than recommend female education, she insisted that it be required (71). Mary Chudleigh went further to suggest that educated women would make better wives as they could become “true partners and friends” (73).

Chapter 4 surveys women’s biblical interpretations from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries related to the theme of marriage and motherhood. While Protestant theologians “encouraged a companionate vision for marriage, the reality played out quite differently” (85). By law and social custom, a wife was expected to surrender her will, desires, and needs to those of her husband to make him happy. Mary Astell, one of many women interpreters to address the issue of female subjugation in marriage, argued that the New Testament exhortations (Eph 5:22; 1 Pet 3:1–2; Col 3:18; 1 Cor 11:1–16; 1 Tim 2:13–14) for wives to submit to their husbands indicate nothing about the inferiority of women, and that Gen 3:16 be understood as a prediction and not a divine prescription (83, 87). So instead of finding biblical warrant for men to rule over women, women interpreters found textual support for more egalitarian marriage that was based on “friendship, founded on mutual esteem, fixed by gratitude, supported by inclination, and animated by the tender solitudes of love” (97). In her related discussion of motherhood, Benckhuysen raises the issue of maternal breastfeeding (101), and though it is in intriguing, it seems to distract from the focus of this chapter.

The book’s last chapters turned to a discussion of women in the public sphere. Chapter 5 focuses specifically on women’s preaching and teaching in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. Benckhuysen’s discussion the hermeneutical approaches women used to justify women’s preaching and teaching is illuminating as women all read the difficult Pauline texts (1 Cor 14:34–35; 1 Tim 2:11–12) in the context of the whole canon (111). Some also drew support for their call to be “the various of the truth of God’s word” from other texts including the creation story where Antionette Bourignon in particular believed that “Eve’s true purpose was to turn Adam toward God” (119, 121). During the period of revival in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, women as well as men were urged “to bear testimony to their faith” (125). The strong support for women’s preaching and teaching was withdrawn in the late nineteenth century, when male church leaders

of an increasingly individualistic and materialist society pushed back against women preacher's frequent emphasis on sin, repentance, submission, and self-sacrifice. Instead they encouraged women encouraging to serve God in other ways (134).

The focus in chapter 6 shifts to a consideration of the new roles women took on as educators in the nineteenth century. Women became both consumers and producers of women authored Children's Bibles, Bible histories, and devotionals (144–45). Women's interpretations of Genesis 1–3 are embedded in this material. This chapter on women educators sets the ground for chapter 7, which focuses on social reform. In their discussions of the question of the equality of the sexes, many women interpreters cited Gen 1:26–27. Some, like essayist Hannah Crocker, “stop[ped] short of promoting full cultural equality, maintaining stereotypical distinctions between men and women that gave rise to and were reinforced by separate sphere ideology” (177). Others began to see themselves not as the property of men but as image bearers of God who had responsibilities for the care of the earth (198).

Chapter 8 brings a long debate about the roles the nature of women into the present in light of current divisions between complementarians and egalitarians in the contemporary evangelical church that center around the interpretation of key biblical texts. Benckhuysen introduces forgotten women interpreters who used their knowledge of the original languages to engage in rigorous textual criticism and come up with fresh readings of the controverted texts (203). Katharine Bushnell (1855–1946) and Lee Anna Starr (1853–1937) who believed in the spiritual and social equality of men and women also regarded the Bible as women's greatest advocate (208). Their published linguistic and structural analysis of Genesis 1–3 demonstrates the lack of good support for Adam's superiority in Genesis 2 and argues that the biblical texts support the full equality and rights of women. Many more women scholars joined this important conversation later in the twentieth century using new scholarly tools and archaeological data (222–24). European and majority world voices have also joined the choir of those who proposed alternate readings of Genesis 1–3 that support the biblical truth that calls for women's full —spiritual, social, and ecclesiastical—equality with men (229).

In her invaluable work that introduces the forgotten voices of women interpreters Benckhuysen unveils the women's forgotten counter readings of biblical texts that as traditionally interpreted had negatively affected women's lives. Benckhuysen concludes her book that recovers these veiled voices throughout history with a call to listen to both men and women's perspectives on the Bible: “If this history of interpretation on Genesis 1–3 has taught us anything, however, it is that we need both men's and women's perspectives to help us gain a deeper understanding of the truth” (232). The study questions at the end of the book are

especially helpful for readers who are interested in pursuing the many questions that the book raises about the roles of women and men in the home and society, about how the Bible has been interpreted historically, and about why women's voices in particular were often silenced. All in all, Benckhuysen's *The Gospel According to Eve* is a compelling read. It is a very informative and educative resource that both women and men will benefit from reading.

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Kevin Hargaden. *Theological Ethics in a Neoliberal Age: Confronting the Christian Problem with Wealth*. Theopolitical Visions. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018. ISBN: 1532655002. Pp. 234. Paperback. \$21.68 (USD).

There is a longstanding practice in the Christian tradition which highlights the problem of poverty, resulting in appeals to care for the poor and the oppressed. Far fewer, however, are writings on the problem of wealth, which is exactly the problem that Kevin Hargaden sets out to wrestle within his book *Theological Ethics in a Neoliberal Age: Confronting the Christian Problem with Wealth*. Hargaden, Social Theologian at the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice in Dublin, Ireland, claims that for Jesus, “wealth is depicted as a master, or a lord, or an idol whose quiet power can surreptitiously claim our allegiance” (xv). There is an “inherent risk in wealth,” and *Theological Ethics in a Neoliberal Age* “intends to be a constructive work of Christian ethics that presents a theological analysis of wealth, and by reference to the parables, charts an alternative approach to being rich and following Jesus” (xii, xvi).

Theological Ethics in a Neoliberal Age is divided into four chapters and proceeds as follows. In chapter 1, drawing predominantly on the work of the twentieth century theorist Karl Polanyi, Hargaden puts forth the argument that today we live in an economic age governed by a nexus of factors that he refers to as “neoliberalism.” In neoliberalism, the market economy is the driving force of society.¹⁸ Those under the rule of neoliberalism find themselves in an enterprise society where the identity of each citizen is as a “man of enterprise and production” (11).

18 Garrett Brown, Iain McLean, Alistair McMillan, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics and International Relations (Oxford Quick Reference)*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 368: “Here [“neoliberal”] is often linked to the so-called ‘Washington Consensus’ (privatization and deregulation; trade and financial liberalization; shrinking the role of the state; encouraging foreign direct investment) and to the structural adjustment programmes promoted by the IMF and World Bank. More recently, it has been used (for example, by the anti-globalization movement) to characterize the economic ideology behind capitalist globalization. Whilst all of these usages are related, the economic use of the term neoliberalism is somewhat general and imprecise.” For a further delineation and direct critique of neoliberalism by a Christian philosopher, see Daniel Bell, *The Economy of Desire: Christianity and Capitalism in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

However, the commercial aspect of neoliberalism is only one facet of Hargaden's argument. It would be one thing to argue that there is a force governing *part* of today's world that we define as neoliberalism. Yet, this is not Hargaden's argument. Rather, he posits that neoliberalism is an all-pervasive force that shapes economic and political policy on both the right and the left (14). Thus, neoliberalism's omnipresent rule should provide cause for alarm to Christians, for blind adherence and allegiance to neoliberalism is nothing short of idolatry. "To enjoy the rights and freedoms of neoliberalism is to adopt the belief that our deepest desires can be expressed through commodities. To accept such an account of reality is to reject the claims of the one Christians call Messiah" (31).¹⁹

In chapter 2, Hargaden suggests that the parables of Jesus depict a reality that is in direct conflict with the order of neoliberalism. If neoliberalism provides western society a guiding story of wealth, "Christianity is an alternative story about wealth: what it is, how it happens, and why it exists." (35). The parables are particularly pertinent to this alternative story of wealth, for "it is in the parables that we find some of Jesus's most striking words about money, wealth, and the economy" (41). Yet, it is not just any reading of the parables that shape Hargaden's second chapter, but rather particularly Barth's apocalyptic reading of the parables that set the course of this chapter. "Barth's interpretative method for the parables involves reading the tales through a christological lens, attuned to the presence of the kingdom of God" (48). Barth's reading of the parables do not prescribe standard left/right dichotomous responses, but rather present a vision of the inbreaking kingdom of Jesus that destabilizes our systems that comfort us. Thus, a Barthian reading of the parables refuses to let one get too comfortable with the dominant system of neoliberalism that guides our lives.

Chapter 3 is the most contextual chapter of the book in the sense that it seeks to narrate a particular story within neoliberalism, that of Ireland's Celtic Tiger. Hargaden's rationale for engaging in an explicit narrative is purposeful. He recognizes that just as the parables tell particular stories of particular people, when engaging ethically with theology, we too much begin with the particular and avoid the risk of obfuscating theological points. Thus, by examining Ireland's Celtic Tiger—specifically three "parables" of Ireland's economic history—the

19 Cf. The 24th Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (2004): "We believe in God, Creator and Sustainer of all life, who calls us as partners in the creation and redemption of the world... We believe that God is sovereign over all creation. 'The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof' (Psalm 24:1). Therefore, we reject the current world economic order imposed by global neoliberal capitalism and any other economic system, including absolute planned economies, which defy God's covenant by excluding the poor, the vulnerable and the whole of creation from the fullness of life. We reject any claim of economic, political, and military empire which subverts God's sovereignty over life and acts contrary to God's just rule." Cited in Douglas Hicks and Mark Valeri, eds. *Global Neighbors: Christian Faith and Moral Obligation in Today's Economy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 155.

particular is brought to the foreground, and real explicit theological engagement with the parables is able to take place.

Chapter 4 is *Theological Ethics*' constructive chapter. Here, Hargaden weaves together the generalities and particularities of our neoliberal story along with Barth's reading of the parables in an attempt to offer a prophetic vision of how Christian's may respond to the problem of wealth today. Hargaden begins the chapter with a bold and forthright claim that expresses the pinnacle claim of the book: "worship can be an exercise of our liberation from Mammon's claim over our lives" (131). Drawing heavily on the work of William T. Cavanaugh to further his Barthian proposal, Hargaden's claims that Christians are retrained to see the world through the act of worship. The call to worship, which begins not with religion but with God's self-revelation, is the place where this retraining begins. Thus, Hargaden does not say that simply by going to church that one will be retrained to combat the problem of wealth. Church history has exhibited far too much corruption for that to be true. However, this does not mean that one is to dispose of worship. It remains true for Hargaden that worship as a response to God's self-revelation is the catalyst which enables Christians to confront the problem of wealth.

In *Theological Ethics in a Neoliberal Age*, Hargaden has crafted a poignant, in-depth, accessible argument on why wealth is a problem for Christians, and how we may move forward to dealing with this problem.²⁰ While contextually it deals specifically with Ireland's Celtic Tiger, readers throughout the western world, who similarly find themselves living under the guise of neoliberalism, will be able to draw positively from Hargaden's work. *Theological Ethics in a Neoliberal Age* will benefit scholars, pastors, and lay readers as we continue to discern what it means to follow Christ in the age of neoliberalism. As many churches continue to avoid conversations about wealth and financial prosperity, *Theological Ethics in a Neoliberal Age* can serve as an entry point into these hard conversations, as it does not seek to provide a definitive answer to how each Christian must approach their individual financial situation, but does provide enough engagement for Christians to wrestle with their place in this neoliberal world.

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²⁰ In addition to the previously cited works, other volumes make similar contributions on this subject such as Peter Heslam, *Globalization and the Good* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) and Bob Goudzwaard and Harry de Lange, *Beyond Poverty and Affluence: Toward an Economy of Care*, trans. Mark Vander Vennen (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991).

Authorized: The Use and Misuse of the King James Bible. Mark Ward. Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2018. ISBN: 978-1-68359-055-2. Pp. 154. Paperback. \$10.49 (USD). (Audio version includes appendix, pp. 1–6).

Translation is a tricky process. Words are slippery things. As an old Italian complaint goes: *Traduttore traditore*—“A translator is a traitor!”²¹ Is the King James Version (KJV), a venerable translation of ancient scripture that has shaped the church and the very *ethos* of the English language itself for over four hundred years, exempt from this maxim? In the introduction to the King James Bible, the translators state that Christians must “hear CHRIST speaking unto them in their mother tongue” and, elsewhere, “we desire that the Scripture may speak like itself . . . that it may be understood even of the very vulgar.”²²

Within *Authorized: The Use and Misuse of the King James Bible*, Mark Ward, academic editor for Lexham Press at Faithlife and author of multiple high school Bible textbooks, including *Biblical Worldview: Creation, Fall, Redemption*, demonstrates “what exclusive readers of the KJV are missing as they read God’s Word” (back cover). His primary thesis is that “language change has made the KJV, not entirely unintelligible, but sufficiently unintelligible for today’s plow boy that it is time for change” (6; appendix in audio version).

In this way, *Authorized: The Use and Misuse of the King James Bible* stands apart from the plethora of other works that center on the King James debate. Unlike, for instance, certain other volumes that trace the history of the King James Bible and its not insignificant influence within Western culture and society at large, such as the esteemed monographs of Ryken²³ or McGrath,²⁴ for example, *Authorized* is not a “biography” of the KJV. Alongside this, it is also worth noting that Ward claims to maintain “a studied neutrality on the question of textual criticism” throughout his work (115). As such, *Authorized* does not particularly focus on the textual question(s) of the King James Bible, i.e., the *Textus Receptus* and/or the Byzantine text type(s), as do, for instance, Carson²⁵ and White.²⁶ Alongside this, Ward’s book is not a compilation of sundry essays on the KJV.²⁷

21 See Moisés Silva, “Are Translators Traitors? Some Personal Reflections,” in Glen G. Scorgie, Mark L. Strauss, and Steven M. Voth, eds., *The Challenge of Bible Translation: Communicating God’s Word To the World*, 37–50 (quotation from p. 37), (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

22 See Miles Smith, “Translators to the Reader,” in David Norton, ed., *The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible with the Apocrypha: King James Version*, rev. ed., vol. 1, xxxv (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

23 Leland Ryken, *The Legacy of the King James Bible: Celebrating 400 Years Of The Most Influential English Translation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).

24 Alister McGrath, *In The Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How it Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 2001).

25 D. A. Carson, *The King James Version Debate: A Plea For Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979).

26 James R. White, *The King James Only Controversy: Can You Trust Modern Translations: Updated and Revised Second Edition* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany, 2008).

27 This is unlike, for instance, Roy E. Beacham and Kevin T. Bauder, eds., *One Bible Only?*

Instead, Ward's volume primarily focuses on the English language. Because of this, *Authorized* fills a great lacuna in scholarship with respect to the KJV since (to my knowledge) it is the only work that not only clearly distinguishes between "dead words" and "false friends," thus rendering the old adage to simply "look it up, dear!" (19) null and void but also effectively addresses the readability problems that are caused by four-plus centuries of change(s) within the English language.²⁸

Prior to offering a critique of the book, it is prudent to give a general overview of the volume and a synopsis of each chapter. Aside from a short introduction and epilogue (regrettably, the volume contains neither index or a bibliography), *Authorized: The Use and Misuse of the King James Bible* consists of seven chapters of varying lengths.

In chapter 1 "What We Lose as the Church Stops Using the KJV," Ward queries whether "any venerable thing can survive the age of the tweet" (16). He also maintains that there are five main things that society loses "if we all decide to let the KJV die and another takes its office" (5). These things, Ward asserts, include: (1) losing inter-generational ties in the body of Christ, (2) losing scripture by "osmosis," (3) losing a "cultural touchstone," (4) losing some of the implicit trust Christians have in the Bibles in their laps, and (5) losing some of the implicit trust non-Christians have in Scripture. Concerning this, Ward ponders "do the negatives of losing the KJV outweigh any positives that might be gleaned from reading newer translations? Everyone who cares about reading the Bible in English needs to answer the healthy, diagnostic question: *What do we do with the KJV in the twenty-first century?*" (16; emphasis original).

Within chapter 2 "The Man in the Hotel and the Emperor of English Bibles," Ward makes clear that "objections to the readability of the KJV are not beside the point. They *are* the point. We need to examine KJV English to discover whether its difficulties outweigh all the values of retaining it" (21; emphasis original). In brief, Ward asserts that not only do many regular KJV readers often fail to notice what they're missing when they're reading from the King James Bible but that "habitual exposure did not work for me . . . I can't deny my experience: I thought I knew what the KJV was saying, but . . . I've discovered that, far too often . . . I did not" (28). The primary culprits for Ward's troubles are also the title of chapter three of the volume, namely "Dead Words and False Friends."

Arguably, chapter 3 "Dead Words and False Friends" is among the most stimulating and, perhaps, the most persuasive of each of the chapters within this

Examining Exclusive Claims for the King James Bible (Grand Rapids: Kregal, 2001)

28 In contrast, a few scanty pages (293–96) are devoted to the subject of "The Changing English Language" within White's volume and of Part Two of Carson's volume, "Nontextual Questions," only passing remarks are made about the changes in English language, mostly with respect to matters of style (see 96–102).

volume. In this section, Ward delineates, at length, a plethora of examples from within the King James Bible where, even if one did bother to take the time to look up the word(s), most people do not have access to the kind of dictionary that could truly help them with the archaic KJV words (namely the *Oxford English Dictionary*—now in its third edition of revisions). The reason for this, according to Ward, is that “the biggest problem with KJV vocabulary is not actually the dead, obsolete words . . . the biggest problem . . . comes from ‘false friends,’ words that are still in common use but have changed meaning in ways that modern readers are highly unlikely to recognize” (31; emphasis removed).

That is to say, according to Ward, many readers of the King James Bible do not realize that they would actually need to look up many “common” words in order to ascertain their true meaning. Some examples that Ward provides includes “halt,” a word that in 1611 meant “lame” not “stop,” “commendeth,” “incontinent,” “convenient,” “remove,” “spoil,” pitiful,” “issues,” “miserable,” “watchings,” “meats,” “overcharge,” and more. In sum, Ward states: “You can teach people to look up unfamiliar words, but *the issue here is not words you know you don’t know; it’s words (and phrases and syntax and punctuation) you don’t know you don’t know*—features of English that have changed in subtle ways rather than dropping completely out of the language” (49; emphasis original).

As noted above, Ward’s argument to this end is especially persuasive since the common-place, “traditional” attitude of “Just look it up!” is highly ineffective in this regard.

Chapter 4 “What is the Reading Level of the KJV?” first details the rubric(s) that are often involved in determining computer-based readability analytics, such as Flesch-Kincaid, ARI, SMOG, Coleman-Liau, and Gunning fog indices, then delineates why they are (mostly) irrelevant to KJV English for three reasons: (1) these tools measure a word’s complexity by syllable count (but that’s not a reliable way of judging whether a word can be understood), (2) word order (syntax) plays no role in these reading-level analyses, and (3) typography plays no role in these reading analyses (see 54–59). The author poignantly opines: “The mere fact that I own a four-hundred book called *The King James Bible Word Book: A Contemporary Dictionary of Curious and Archaic Words Found in the King James Version of the Bible* suggest rather strongly that the KJV is above a fifth-grade reading level” (59; emphasis original). Ward also, tongue-in-cheek, chortles: “No, you can read the KJV just fine. My computer says so” (59).

In chapter 5 “The Value of the Vernacular,” the author uses the following syllogism to further his argument: (a) “we should read the Scripture in our own language; (b) the KJV is not our language; (c) therefore we should update the KJV to be in our language, or we should read vernacular translations” (79). Chapter 6 “Ten Objections to Reading Vernacular Bible Translations” addresses many

concerns that are raised with respect to this issue. Of each of these objections, point 9 “The Modern Versions Are Based on Inferior Greek and Hebrew Texts,” (114–17), however, requires some further comments. To begin, Ward claims to maintain “a studied neutrality on the question of textual criticism” throughout his work (115). To this end, Ward also states:

Textual criticism is complicated. I think scholars should continue to debate their viewpoints, but I don’t think it’s wise for non-specialist to have strong opinions about the topic . . . I encourage people whose pastors use the King James Version to graciously (and privately) ask those pastors one question: “Can you help me find a translation of the Bible I can read in my own language?” If they bring up textual criticism, ask nicely again: “Can you help me find a translation in my own language of *whatever Greek and Hebrew texts you prefer?*” (116; emphasis original).

Elsewhere, the author also maintains:

Textual criticism has no bearing on my overall argument, which is . . . *English translations ought to be made into the current English vernacular because, through no fault of the KJV translators or of us, KJV language is no longer completely intelligible.* Modern readers of the KJV . . . quite literally do not know what we are missing (117; emphasis original).

The final chapter “Which Bible Translation is Best?” turns the whole question on its head by arguing that “English speakers are looking for the wrong thing when we look for *best*. We need to look instead for *useful* . . . [and] because of our embarrassment of financial and translational riches, we can even get very specific in our search for useful (127; emphasis original). Given such, Ward encourages readers to “make the most of our multi-translational situation, because it’s a truly great problem to have” (137).

In sum, Ward is not a “KJV—Only” nor is he a “KJV—Never!” (1; appendix in audio version). In point of fact, the author explicitly states, “I will not tell any individuals who have grown up on the KJV to close its covers forever. I still use the KJV daily in Bible study.” But I ask: is it inconsistent to tell existing readers to hold on to the KJV but nonetheless to help engineer a change for the next generation? If the plow boy is struggling with the KJV, when will Protestant institutions (churches, schools, camps, publishing houses), heirs of the Reformation, see the need for change on his behalf? (2; appendix in audio version).

Veritably, it is hard not to like this slim but sagacious volume. The author’s refreshingly witty sense of humor and cordial attitude, combined with a number

of engaging, personal anecdotes, does much to disarm the reader and foster a “comradely spirit” with all those who might wish to disavow the (numerous) benefits of this book. The author’s expertise in this area must also be commended. As D. A. Carson notes in his blurb to *Authorized: The Use and Misuse of the King James Bible*: “this lightly written and frequently amusing book gently hides the competent scholarship that underlies it” (1; endorsements).

In addition to this, Ward’s volume also has a pleasing format with ample, but not too much, white space, easily identifiable headings and subheadings, a thorough table of contents, and a sufficient amount of charts, graphs, tables, etc., all of which are offered in a remarkably clear format. Alongside this, each chapter is also of a reasonable length, as is the book itself. As such, it is my opinion that no one would feel overwhelmed or unnecessarily burdened if they were given this volume to read by a friend or co-worker or if one was required to read this text in its entirety for a small group Bible study or college level course, even if an additional text (or two) were also assigned in conjunction with it.

To critique, as noted above, one may begrudge the lack of indices (subject, author, and scripture) and the general absence of a thorough bibliography. Alongside this, I was also somewhat surprised that some other KJV “infelicities” were not mentioned, such as the King James Bible’s “howler” of a man’s breasts being “full of milk” (Job 21:24) and the oddity of one being able to hear “the voice of the turtle” in the land (Song 2:12). The reticence of the author to make more extended comments concerning certain “mythological” animals, such as the “cockatrice” (Isa 11:18; 14:29; 59:5; Jer 8:17), “satyr” (Isa 13:21; 34:14), “screech owl,” (Isa 34:14), and “dragon” (cf. Job 4:5), for instance, were also difficult to appreciate, although his discussion of “unicorn,” a semi-technical term that has nothing to do with “My Little Pony[®]” was quite good (30).

Alongside this, given the heavy influence of the King James Bible upon the Mormon “Inspired Version” by Joseph Smith,²⁹ it, perhaps, may have behooved the author to include at least a few comments to this end somewhere within the volume.³⁰

On a different note, while some may quibble with how the author seemingly chooses to “deflect” certain textual-criticism debates (including the place of the Apocrypha), this criticism is “off-track” since the author makes ample mention of various monographs and resources that effectually contribute to this discussion,

29 As one apostle of the Mormon church states (383): “At the command of the Lord and while acting under the spirit of revelation, the Prophet [Joseph Smith] corrected, revised, altered, added to, and deleted from the King James Version of the Bible to form what is now commonly referred to as the Inspired Version of the Bible.” Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1966).

30 Cf. “A Warning About Cultic Translations,” 247–53, especially 247–50, in Ron Rhodes, *The Complete Guide to Bible Translations* (Eugene OR: Harvest House, 2009).

including *KJVParallelBible.org*, a site set up by the author to “show English readers . . . all of the differences between the two major Greek New Testament textual families” (153). In addition, one should note that by focusing on ‘just the English,’ the debate is available to all. This prudent decision of the author helps to avert the unproductive “proxy wars” of textual criticism where, usually, “one blind guide strains at a gnat and swallows a camel.”

To conclude, *Authorized: The Use and Misuse of the King James Bible* makes a compelling case that has not been made at length until now, thus justifying yet another book on the King James debate, namely that (as noted above) “language change has made the KJV, not entirely unintelligible, but sufficiently unintelligible for today’s plow boy that it is time for change” (6; appendix in audio version). In this way, Ward’s volume is clearly the most accurate, up-to-date, cost-effective, and accessible resource that is available on the subject. Its primary readers will be all serious expositors and Bible teachers who have a vested interest in the subject. Highly recommended!

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Milstein, Sara. *Tracking the Master Scribe: Revision Through Introduction in Biblical and Mesopotamian Literature*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. ISBN 9780190205393. Pp. Xx + 244. Hardback. \$106.94 (USD).

In this intriguing study of Akkadian literature and portions of the book of Judges, Milstein manages to present very clearly and concisely a great deal of relevant data from Mesopotamian literature to readers of the Hebrew Bible.

Milstein begins by situating her work at the intersection of literary criticism, surveys of small-scale revision in Mesopotamian texts, and a growing body of work on the historical development of Hebrew Bible texts. Literary criticism and psychology support the notion that “initial content” plays a “key role in the evaluation of subsequent material” (3). “This tendency reflects what neuroscientists call ‘predictive coding’: the brain uses stored knowledge regarding the world and the probabilities of one event following another to generate predictions about what the current state is likely to be” (3).

Milstein acknowledges significant differences between the corpora of Mesopotamian texts—which are attested in multiple clay tablets between the third and first millennia BCE—and the fixed consonantal text of the Masoretic Text of which only later copies are available (4–6). Nevertheless, evidence of textual development in Mesopotamian texts can provide worthwhile comparisons to Hebrew literature. A relatively closed corpus of Mesopotamian texts had developed by the first millennium BCE, such that Assurbanipal’s libraries at

Nineveh contained basically the same corpus of literary texts (11), “‘reference libraries,’ in that they were surely used by magicians, diviners, and doctors that attended to him” (10). These libraries allow us to observe the development of specific texts (e.g., Gilgamesh Epic) over the span of a thousand years; “knowledge regarding tablets that were stored together” (12).

Whereas the literature on textual change in Mesopotamian texts has focused mainly on small-scale variation; Milstein hopes to demonstrate the value of analyzing large-scale revisions, for which there is “hard evidence,” for modeling the development of biblical texts (21). The lack of tangible evidence of textual development in the Hebrew Bible, she observes, “has not deterred biblical scholars from reconstructing older phases of biblical texts in painstaking detail.... Without hard evidence to substantiate these claims, it can be difficult to adjudicate among the dozens of hypotheses for reconstruction. This has led some scholars to abandon literary-historical pursuits altogether and to focus on the final form alone” (27). Milstein sees her own work “in line with David Carr’s call for a ‘methodologically modest form of transmission history’” (28³¹). Milstein helpfully surveys the most important recent studies in the transmission process of the Hebrew Bible (28–35).

In chapter 2 Milstein prepares for the detailed analyses in chapters 3–6 by presenting four widely-recognized examples of “revision through introduction”: the Sumerian King List, the Epic of Etana, the Community Rule document, and the biblical books of Esther (MT and LXX). Milstein prefaces the last two with a suggestive list of others in the Hebrew canon, along with a wealth of references to secondary literature. In each of these examples, the common thread is that the introduction(s) serve to cast the old material in a new ideological frame: 1) for the SKL an introduction replaced a linear sequence of history and kingship with a cyclical pattern of history (49), and “aimed to enhance the authority of Sumerian rule by situating its origins at the beginning of time” (50); 2) the new prologues of the Epic of Etana support the kingship of Etana and the primacy of his city, Kish (54).

Chapter 3 concerns the story of Adapa, which exists in several separate tablets (Fragments A, B and D). Adapa is a fisherman who somehow “breaks the wing” of the South Wind, causing the wind to cease for seven days (bad news for fishermen and sailors!). He is summoned to appear before the god Anu to account for and remedy this situation; he is advised in preparation for this audience by the god Ea. Milstein suggests that the so-called Fragment A attempts to frame the narrative tension in terms of a grander philosophical purpose than was perhaps intended by the original: “In this light, Fragment A represents an effort to repackage the

31 Quoting David M. Carr, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible: A New Reconstruction* (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2011), 40.

Adapa tradition in the context of wisdom and immortality” (85). Fragment D, in Milstein’s estimation, is intended as a second conclusion that “preserves a different resolution to the conflict” between Anu and Ea over mortal Adapa (93).

Chapter 4 addresses the Gilgamesh Epic. Though her treatment takes account of earlier studies such as Tigay’s, Milstein notes that her hypotheses are based on close readings of evidence [relatively] newly available, including George’s two-volume edition of the OB Akkadian Gilgamesh³² and a recently published MB prologue from Ugarit (123). Each of these developments represents a different framing of the philosophical questions at the heart of this legend: “The Gilgamesh of the OB version (and in SB I after the prologue) is a relentless boundary-crosser with people and gods alike. . . .” By contrast: “The Gilgamesh of the MB and SB prologues is . . . wise not simply because he realizes that immortality is unattainable, but also because he finally realizes that he, too, has limits.” (145–46).

The strength of Milstein’s work in the Mesopotamian texts is the meticulous attention to the philosophical and political interests reflected in the various stages of revision to which we have access. In Chapters 5 and 6, she then ventures to suggest multiple instances of “revision through introduction” by dissecting Judges 6–9 and 19–21.

Accepting W. Richter’s basic idea that the “hero stories” of Judges 3–16 are fronted by a Deuteronomistic introduction in 2:6–3:6 (148), she proposes that Judges 8:4–21 and 9:26–54 are the original units in the “Gideon Abimelekh block,” which were separately supplemented at the beginning, “buttressed” by 7:1–22, and then further introduced in chapter 6. The main criteria she uses to identify these layers are: 1) affinities between the governance structure represented in these “earliest” texts and the evidence from Amarna; 2) a trajectory from local leadership toward centralized political leadership; and 3) the hypothesized tendency of later texts to portray Abimelekh negatively but to “purge the name Jerubbaal of improper affiliations” (154–70).

In chapter 6 Milstein takes up the well-known narrative connections between Judges 19–21 and the stories of Saul: references to Gibeah, Jebus (David’s capital), Jabesh-gilead, and the muster of Israelite tribes using a dismembered body (175–78). Whereas many redaction-critical analyses start with Judges 19 as the original story and consider Judges 20–21 as added subsequently for polemical purposes (179), Milstein argues instead that “in its early form, without Judg 19:1–20:13, this complex was pro-Saul; at a later point, with the addition of Judg 19:1–20:13, the block was rendered anti-Saul.” (174) Milstein contends that while the Judges 19 episode “cannot stand on its own,” Judges 20:14–48 could have

32 *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition, and Cuneiform Texts*, OUP, 2003

originated as an independent account of a war between Benjamin and other tribal entities, which was then “revised by introduction” through the Gibeah Outrage story, which shifts the focus from Benjamin as a whole to Gibeah in particular (180). Milstein then argues that Judges 21:1–14 “revises” the Shiloh episode (21:15–24).

Convinced that 21:15–24 is the original story connecting Gibeah and Saul to Shiloh, Milstein transitions to the second case made in the chapter: “Shiloh and Benjamin: Evidence for an ‘Old Saul Complex’” (185–192). Milstein adopts the common (but questionable) view that the Samuel birth narrative originally pertained to Saul (based mainly on the association of שאול with the stated source of Samuel’s (שמאול) name: “from YHWH I have asked for/borrowed him” שאלתיני מיהוה, v. 20) (187). From this questionable starting point she argues for an original connection between Saul and the House of YHWH at Shiloh, suggesting that Judges 20:14–48, 21:15–24 and 1 Samuel 1 originally “circulated together” (190). Such a story originally connected Saul to Shiloh as (possibly) an Ephraimite, whom the Benjaminites later claimed as their own (192). The reader may well ask whether it is reasonable to postulate so many steps backward into the production of this piece of literature and suggest such contrasting purposes for these texts which were later combined by editors.

The remainder of the chapter (“Conclusions”) casts the polemical nature of Judges 19–21 in the context of Davidide/Saulide struggles of the Babylonian and Persian periods (200–206), a view which has broad acceptance apart from the detailed dissection that Milstein has performed. She allows for late editing of the stories, in the Persian period (203), but sees the original “Old Saul Complex” as reflecting an early period: “Though a range of dates is possible for this phase, the origins of such a complex may be best suited to the period prior to or shortly following Benjamin’s alliance with Judah, at a time when the Benjaminites were still capable of producing their own literature” (204).

Milstein concedes that these stages of development are “not indicated in hard evidence, as in the case of the Gilgamesh Epic and Adapa” (171). Yet she still maintains “with relative certainty that the complex as a whole includes a rage of ‘types’ of revision through introduction by master scribes” (171). Her suggestion of “revision through introduction” presumes in each section (Jdg 6–9; 19–21) that these tales existed in early form, underwent revision-by-introduction to reach a secondary independent state; and then were incorporated into the final form of the text (further revised and supplemented). How then can we be sure that the sources and layers she identifies are in fact “introductory” and not simply woven into the overall text—understood either as the received book of Judges or a so-called Deuteronomistic History? The model itself when applied on multiple dimensions

within a text (without hard evidence) seems to undermine the contention that the hypothesized layers of supplements are in fact “introductory.”

Biblical scholars and informed lay readers interested in literary structure and comparative studies will find much to appreciate about Milstein’s book. Theological readers will find in Milstein’s work and the stream of books on textual development of the Hebrew Bible an important reminder—dare I say, a corrective—concerning the significance of diachronic studies for theological readings of the Hebrew scriptures, amid the recent turn toward “Theological Interpretation” and other synchronic readings. In particular, *Tracking the Master Scribe* has drawn attention to the significance of introductory material in framing the body of a text—as a complement to significant studies that focus on narrative endings.

Even the reader who does not share all of Milstein’s conclusions will appreciate her contributions to close readings of the texts and her compelling comparative evidence from Mesopotamian literature, which remains relevant to non-diachronic readings of biblical texts. Finally, Milstein is a genuine pleasure to read for her brevity, her style in prose, her sense of humor, and the clever stories and sayings that frame the chapters—usually as part of the introduction, of course.

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