

Book Reviews

Engaging the Doctrine of Revelation. By Matthew Levering. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014. 363+xi pages. \$44.99. Hardback.

One of the biggest divides between Roman Catholics and Protestants continues to be the authority of the Church and Scripture. Roman Catholics tend to have a high view of both sources of authority, allowing for each to construct doctrine. Protestants, with their famous motto *sola scriptura*, tend to limit the importance of church tradition in understanding doctrine. Matthew Levering, who holds the James N. and Mary D. Perry, Jr. Chair of Theology at the University of Saint Mary of the Lake, does not deviate from the historic Roman Catholic understanding of the doctrine of revelation in this recent volume. However, his application of careful research and in-depth analysis make this a volume that will benefit academics from different theological perspectives for years to come.

The foundation of Levering's argument is a belief that divine revelation must be mediated through both canonical Scripture and the covenant community. His purpose in this book is, therefore, "to explore the missional, liturgical, and doctrinal forms of the Church's mediation of divine revelation and to appreciate Scripture's inspiration and truth in this context" (3). After the introduction, which surveys some of the previous academic volumes on this topic, the book is divided into eight chapters. In each chapter Levering explains how divine revelation is mediated by the Church through various means.

Chapter one begins with revelation mediated through the outward motion of the Church as she fulfills her mission. As the Church participates in the self-denying *missio Dei*, she demonstrates the very nature of God to herself and the world. The second chapter focuses on revelation experienced through the Church's liturgy, which is considered a demonstration of God's character on public display.

Levering then shifts to treating revelation and the hierarchical priesthood, arguing the accepted hierarchy of the Roman Catholic (and some "high church" Protestant denominations) affirms Jesus' design for the Church, and represents divine revelation. This is the weakest of the chapters because there is no clear

basis in the volume for the assumption that established liturgical forms represent Christ's intention for the order of worship. Chapter four relates the relationship between the gospel and revelation. In contrast to Chapter one, which focuses on the Church's collective demonstration of revelation through action, this chapter explores the life of the individual as impacted by the gospel.

The fifth chapter explains the necessity of tradition and Levering's belief that church tradition has been faithfully transmitted in much the same way Scripture has been transmitted. Levering seems to beg the question in this chapter, as he assumes that "divine revelation has a specific cognitive content that must be transmitted. Tradition cannot be less than this" (30). This is valid in the way that Levering intends it only the premise of supernatural infallibility of tradition is assumed. Chapter six argues that the Roman Catholic Church has necessarily been faithful in transmitting doctrine in the same manner that Scripture has been faithfully transmitted. This is necessary if the authority of Church Tradition is assumed, but the chapter fails to show why this assumption must be accepted.

Levering deals with revelation and biblical inspiration in the seventh chapter. This is a more helpful shift in the discussion, though Levering's conclusions concede too much ground. He points out the difference between modern expectations for historical and scientific accuracy, arguing for more latitude in interpreting Scripture so that contemporary hermeneutic constraints are not applied to an ancient document. At the same time, Levering's approach allows the denial of the historicity of significant events without clear guidance as to how one would have faith in certain facts over others. Therefore, he affirms the historicity of the resurrection, which is of first importance, but the same arguments he uses to allow for denial of other historical events could be used to undermine that one. This is problematic and there are significant tensions left unresolved by the discussion.

The eighth chapter closes the volume exploring some of the relationship between Hellenistic philosophy and Scripture, particularly places where Levering believes such philosophical elements were imported, not merely referenced, into Scripture. His conclusion in this chapter is that Hellenistic philosophical culture was provided by God and authorized by God to communicate essential truths in revelation. It would be easy to overreact to this statement, because it seems to imply too strong a link between pagan philosophy and Scripture. It would have been better had Levering nuanced his position to argue Hellenistic

philosophy provided a helpful framework for expressing truths about God, which seems more likely the case. In that sense, such philosophies shaped Scripture, but it does not seem they were a source for divine revelation, as it were.

Levering's summaries of differing positions are fair and accurate. However, his assumption that only the Church can mediate divine revelation is basic to the argument, but is insufficiently defended in this volume. This volume also seems to imply that the Church has faithfully done so through its history. Levering provides no reason to suppose this is so and history, at least as seen from a Protestant perspective, seems to argue otherwise. Levering argues that the Holy Spirit guarantees the Church's ability to interpret the most important doctrines. But on the same page he argues, "We can accept the existence of errors within the Church's works and teachings over the centuries, so long as we do not suppose that these (reformable) errors produced a rupture, that is to say a false definitive doctrine about faith or morals in the heart of the transmission of revelation" (27).

Based on this approach, in trying to argue for the consistent mediation of divine revelation through the Church as a close analogy to that mediation through Scripture, Levering does more to denigrate Scripture than to elevate the Church. He admits there are errors in the Roman Catholic Church's historic interpretation of doctrines, but not the most important ones. He has thus discarded a robust notion of infallibility of the Church and also Scripture by limiting the consistency of revelation to only the central aspects of doctrine. There is no mechanism provided that would help discern which sections of revelation are trustworthy and which are not.

Overall, this volume is well written and may replace Avery Dulles' book, *Models of Revelation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1992). It is the best explanation of a Roman Catholic understanding of the doctrine of revelation I have encountered. I would recommend it to those seeking to meaningfully engage in inter-denominational dialogue on this topic at either the pastoral or academic level. This book is a helpful addition to the discussion, but it is far from the final word.

Andrew J. Spencer
 PhD Candidate
 Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary
 Wake Forest, North Carolina

Luther and the Stories of God: Biblical Narratives as a Foundation for Christian Living. By Robert Kolb. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012, xx + 188 pp., \$ 24.00 paper.

In his new book, respected Luther scholar Robert Kolb explores the reformer's use of biblical narrative and, in the process, sheds new light on both Luther studies and modern narrative theology. Kolb focuses on Luther's practice of using biblical stories as models for Christian living in both his sermons to layman and lectures to students. But, as Kolb argues, Luther did not view these individual stories as unconnected moral lessons. Rather, Luther's use of them reveals that he possessed what contemporary terminology calls a "metanarrative" of Scripture that decisively shaped his preaching and teaching. Luther believed this master narrative, comprised of God's covenantal actions towards humanity, reveals fundamental truths concerning who God is and what it means to be human. Luther called upon these stories to illustrate the faith and piety that defined the people of God in biblical history so that he could instill that same spirituality in his students and parishioners. But at the same time as he explores Luther's use of biblical narrative, Kolb relates his analysis to the current scholarly interest in that area. Kolb justifies his exploration by noting the astonishing lack of research into Luther's use of biblical narrative and its similarities to contemporary narrative theology, even though scholars have often explored Luther's rhetoric, preaching and lecturing. Finally, throughout his analysis, Kolb demonstrates how a better understanding of Luther's use of biblical stories to unfold the Bible's metanarrative sheds fresh light on the reformer's theology, hermeneutics, and spirituality.

The first chapter sketches Luther's belief that Scripture summed up the whole Christian life as a life of repentance and trust in the promises of God. This finding is significant, Kolb points out, because it shows Luther saw the Bible's metanarrative as preaching nothing less than the doctrine of justification by faith alone. This was the spirituality Luther sought to foster in his hearers and readers in place of the medieval, ritualistic understanding of the Christian life. By about 1520, this perception of Christian living had come to maturation in Luther and subsequently framed and guided his preaching and teaching till the end of his life. In particular, Kolb sheds light on how Luther's famous hermeneutical distinctions – law and gospel, two kinds of

righteousness, and the two kingdoms – were central to his metanarrative interpretation of the Bible. Thus, while some truth resides in the oft repeated charge that “Luther was not a systematic theologian,” Kolb qualifies this conclusion by pointing out that the reformer nevertheless possessed an intelligible, interlinking biblical worldview (metanarrative) that guided his theological work.

The following chapter explores Luther’s characteristics as a storyteller and how the reformer’s thinking fits with the leading exponents of narrative theology over the last thirty years. At the heart of Luther’s metanarrative, Kolb asserts, lay his belief that the biblical narrative mirrored the narrative of sixteenth century Germany, and as a result he saw Israel’s history as an ideal model to fashion a biblical worldview and identity for Germans. Luther viewed the sermon as the primary medium for accomplishing this spiritual formation by sacramentally cultivating repentance and faith. Though some of Luther’s convictions about biblical storytelling differed from modern narrative theologians, Kolb reveals that the Wittenberg reformer surprisingly served as a forerunner to many of their conclusions concerning the nature, practical usefulness, and pitfalls of preaching and teaching biblical narrative in the church.

The last five chapters focus on the spirituality Luther sought to instill in his audience through retelling biblical stories. In chapter three, Kolb demonstrates that, for Luther, the core of being human lay in a trusting relationship with the incarnate person of God, Jesus Christ. While Luther refrained from defining this trust, he believed biblical characters, such as Noah, Jacob, Abraham, Lazarus, Mary and others, provided the concrete examples necessary to enable this faith to come alive in its hearers. Indeed, Luther saw the Godward trust exemplified in these stories as essential for combatting false faith and disobedience as well as trusting God’s providence in the face of evil, afflictions, and doubt. Consequently, Kolb observes that Luther’s handling of these stories adds explanatory insight into Luther’s conviction to uphold both divine sovereignty and human responsibility: Luther was content to hold these polar opposites in tension, because biblical narrative did the same.

Chapter four examines how Luther taught his students and parishioners to suffer as God’s people. His approach stemmed from a threefold source of suffering: human sinfulness, Satan and God testing and calling his people

to repentance. In light of God's ability to overrule evil for his people's good, Luther expounded biblical stories of human suffering to foster trust in God's purposes, so that his audience would praise God and love others, even in the midst of affliction.

The following two chapters examine Luther's emphasis on active obedience in the Christian life. Luther rejected the medieval insistence on works as the foundation of one's identity as a child of God, because he believed the metanarrative of Scripture taught that good works were natural outflow of repentance and justification by faith alone. Furthermore, Luther insisted that loving one's neighbor encompassed every aspect of daily life including the vocational callings of family, economics, and rulers or subjects. To find vivid illustrations of this vocational faithfulness, Luther turned to the biblical narratives of the patriarchs, judges, David and other kings.

Finally, Kolb examines Luther's use of biblical narrative to present his students and parishioners with paradigms for dying well. Luther stressed that the Bible's entire metanarrative centered on Christ's death, resurrection and corresponding hope of eternal life to all who believed. Therefore, every sinner that trusted in the one true God, both before and after Christ's incarnation, was justified by this messianic hope. Consequently, Luther felt just as confident preaching on the Patriarch's faith in Christ as he did examples from the gospels.

In conclusion, scholars frequently point to Luther's dependence on the letters of Romans and Galatians, for his breakthrough to the righteousness of God and justification by faith alone; However, Kolb sheds fresh light on the sources of Luther's spirituality by showing that he found biblical narratives resounding with the exact same themes. Moreover, Kolb richly demonstrates how Luther enthusiastically used these biblical stories as an ideal means of imprinting the life of faith in the hearts and minds of his audience. In addition to Luther's spirituality, Kolb sheds fresh light on Luther's biblical theology and hermeneutics which add significant insight to oft debated topics such as Luther's views on the law and gospel as well as the two kinds of righteousness. But while having one eye on Luther, Kolb skillfully weaves the thought of modern narrative theologians into his discussion as well. Though readers may not agree with all of Luther's hermeneutical methods, the book is an engaging and valuable study of Luther's thought and historical context. It should find appeal among historians, theologians, hermeneutical scholars,

and preachers seeking to use biblical narrative as a means to cultivate spirituality in their hearers.

Seth D. Osborne

Ph. D. Candidate in Church History

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Deuteronomy. The New International Version Application Commentary (NIVAC). By Daniel I. Block. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012, 880 pp., \$39.99.

If commentaries are exegetical conversation partners, then this work by Dr. Daniel I. Block is a valuable companion indeed. Dr. Block, Gunther H. Knoedler Professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College, proves not only to be a sound interpreter but also an insightful guide into contemporary issues and applications. His interpretive rigor applied to this cornerstone theological book opens channels to more expansive vistas of study in biblical theology, Christian ethics, and twenty-first century discipleship.

The NIVAC series is intended for a wide range of Bible interpreters who seek to both understand the world of the text and begin building bridges to the modern day context. The commentary begins with a brief but helpful introduction and is followed by a graphic which overviews the structure of Deuteronomy. A detailed outline provides a survey of each natural textual unit. The commentary portion begins each textual unit with the NIV (1984) text, though the exegesis is not limited to the English text (e.g. Deut 26:19). Hebrew and Greek terms are transliterated for those with limited original language skills and technical terminology is minimized. Each unit of text includes commentary in three distinct areas: original meaning, bridging contexts, and contemporary significance. The contents conclude with an extensive scripture index to assist in finding related passages throughout this volume.

“The Torah was Moses’ inspired commentary on the covenant ... (1:3)” (33). This authoritative commentary is made up of a collection of the last prophetic sermons of Moses to a new generation of Israelites about to enter the promised-land and see the covenant fully established. Thus, Block emphasizes repeatedly Moses’ role as teacher and its impact on the character of the

book (117). Nevertheless, he also argues that Deuteronomy's final form bears similarities to the structure of other ancient Near Eastern treaties, especially second millennium Hittite suzerainty treaties (36). This set of sermons forged into a covenantal mould is intended to serve as a foundational charter for the people about to enter the land so that by hearing its words they might learn to fear Yahweh and obey him, which leads to life (35).

An all-consuming theme in Deuteronomy studies is the nature of law. These sentences are indicative of Block's outlook on the importance of Deuteronomy and a biblical theology of law and grace: "if there is a second Moses in the New Testament, that person is Paul" (34–35); "Paul was in perfect step with Moses: obedience to the law was not a means for gaining salvation but a willing and grateful response to salvation already received" (26); "obedience to the law offers visible proof of righteousness" (40). Righteousness is further defined as "adherence to an objective norm, demonstrated in concrete acts that seek the interests of others and results in perfect harmony between them and their Ruler" (119). Harkening back to the suzerainty-vassal format of Deuteronomy, the commandment-keeping of the vassal is a visible demonstration of love to the covenant lord and a display of the blessings of salvation (123). Block concludes that this finds its new covenant parallel in Jesus' words in John 14:15, "If you love me you will obey my commands" (123).

Another example of Block's interpretive work can be seen in his comments on Israel's mission. He summarizes the whole of Deuteronomy stating, "The function of the book of Deuteronomy is to call every generation of Israelites to faithful covenant love for Yahweh in response to his gracious salvation and his revelation of himself (cf. 6:20–25) and in acceptance of the missional role to which he has called them (26:19)" (38). Israel stands in the line of the Abrahamic mission through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Their mission was fundamentally a centripetal mission (i.e., drawing in) to stand as a righteous light among the nations (618). "Like Aaron, Israel is to fulfill a priestly role, declaring to the nations the glory of her God and drawing the nations to him" (617). New covenant believers, however, live under a different administration and our mission has assumed a centrifugal aspect (i.e. sending out). Yet, Block points to 1 Peter 2:9–10 as a related New Testament example of this centripetal paradigm still functioning as part of our centrifugal mission (619). Righteousness based on right teaching of God's word is still to be foundational in the covenant communities that

spread throughout the earth.

In this commentary, Block seeks to move readers from the original meaning of the text all the way through the interpretive process up to modern day application. He has done an excellent job in allowing the best of his exegesis to shine through in the limited space of this commentary. Due to the format of the NIVAC series, and its emphasis on application, much of the exegetical legwork has unfortunately been omitted.

More developed examples of Block's exegesis can be seen in his two monographs that were published just before this commentary: *How I Love Your Torah, O Lord* (Wipf & Stock, 2011), and *The Gospel According to Moses* (Wipf & Stock, 2012). Further, the nature of the exegetical comments in the NIVAC text is decidedly less technical. Compared to another recent commentary, like Gordon McConville's work in the Apollos series (2002), Block's comments are neatly trimmed and focused on developing the main point of each textual unit. While a reader with original language capacity may find the array of technical comments in the Apollos volume more satisfying, they will not be starved in reading through this NIVAC contribution. Any palpable lack of detail is more than surpassed by the help that Block provides in highlighting the theological principles inherent in the text.

These theological principles are the foundation of making modern day application. "Moses' role in Deuteronomy is not that of a lawgiver but a pastor" (37). The pastoral nature of Moses' writings comes out in the pastoral nature of Block's application. He proves very adept at moving from the text of Deuteronomy into related New Testament passages. This approach offers a clear path to Christological application and brings the Old Testament text one step closer to contemporary readers and teachers. Block's analysis of the main theme(s) from each text unit are clearly connected to both the immediate context and related themes in the rest of Deuteronomy. This contextual reading proves especially helpful in pointing readers to other portions of his commentary, and hence Deuteronomy, that they may not have thought to consult when studying a specific passage. All in all, this set of cross-contextual readings, distillation of main themes, and direct applications via New Testament realities gives even the most unsure interpreter of the Old Testament solid exegetical footing.

Marcus Leeman

Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity. By Terryl L. Givens. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, xiii + 405 pp., \$34.95.

Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought by Terryl L. Givens is the first of two volumes that explore the historical development and contemporary status of Mormon belief and practice. Despite the author's preface that *Wrestling* is "not a work of either systematic or historical theology per se (ix)," it is hard to deny that the book is organized in an almost encyclopedic fashion with each subject loosely attached to those around it. Where Givens departs from a traditional systematic approach, however, is the way he tells the story of Mormonism. He views the faith not as a systematized set of beliefs but as a grand "cosmic narrative" that, from an evangelical perspective, ventures beyond the traditional metanarrative of scripture. Givens tells the story of Mormonism as a sequence of scenes in a drama set against the backdrop of the entire cosmos.

As such, the author organizes his play in two main acts: the first, "Frameworks," is designed to place the reader within the historical context of Mormonism. The second, "Cosmic Narratives," is the essence of *Wrestling*, where Givens explores the core of Mormon theology. This is no easy task since early Mormonism was "highly fluid and generally hard to pin down" (7). Indeed, any student of Mormon theology attempting to systematize the faith will quickly find herself or himself conversing with a frustratingly informal interlocutor, who delights in evading historical categories, widely accepted definitions, and cogent doctrinal statements. This is because the river of Mormon theology is fed by the myriad tributaries of Mormon scripture, prophetic writings, apostolic sermons, and voices of many Latter-day Saint (LDS) authors who have gone before. I believe the wrestling aspect of *Wrestling* is found here: recreating the footsteps of a young and raw religious movement that is often sold in the pristine packaging of the modern Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church). Mormonism is, as Givens aptly describes it, "a still evolving and sometimes inconsistent amalgam" (22). Thus, the author sets out on the Mormon studies equivalent of an expedition.

Readers must understand that Givens does not—in fact, *cannot*—speak authoritatively for the LDS Church. He is not theologizing from an appointed office or chair of an institution supported by the Church. Givens has penned this work neither from the halls of BYU nor from the echoing chambers of

the Salt Lake Temple. Rather, it comes directly from his own research in his own words from his own desk at the University of Richmond, where he holds the James A. Bostwick Chair of English and is Professor of Literature and Religion. Therefore, the reader may set aside any suspicion that Givens is writing for the LDS Church and not about it, or that Givens is writing *ex officio*. He writes from an LDS perspective, but *Wrestling* is certainly no hagiographic biography of his faith. It is obvious where his beliefs lie and, as I will critique, his support for Mormon theology occasionally leads him to spend less time surveying and more time apologetically substantiating certain Mormon beliefs important to him that have been challenged or misunderstood from the outside. Yet, he admirably refuses to shy away from controversy, which is especially seen in his willingness to engage the precarious topics of polygamy and the priesthood ban of African Americans in a book whose subject may have otherwise excused their absence (21).

Givens introduces the reader to Mormon thought with a historical prelude. He grounds the “cosmic narrative” of Mormonism in the story of one man, Joseph Smith, who claimed to have experienced a theophany in 1820 where two divine personages, the Father and the Son, absolved him of sin and pronounced the apostasy of the entire Christian church (3). From here, Givens outlines the “essential contours of Mormon thought as it developed from Joseph Smith to the present,” while offering his perspective on where ‘mainstream Mormonism’ stands on certain issues (x). Conveniently, Givens does so according to the metanarrative; his sections explore the “cosmic narrative” in creation (*Cosmology, The Divine*), fall (*The Fall*), redemption (*Salvation*), and consummation (*Theosis*). Each chapter carefully moves the reader through the history of Mormon thought in order to comprehensively survey the religion, articulating lesser-known heterodox doctrinal statements along the way. For example, where historic Christianity ends its story in glorified reunion of creation with Creator, Mormonism continues towards exaltation via theosis. Creation becomes ontologically like Creator (46) as humans are “inherently more godlike [and God] more anthropomorphic” (264). Givens does not shy away from this controversial idea (*exaltation*); rather, he hits it head on, sometimes opining in support of the doctrine as well. Yet, it is in these rare moments of deviation from historical theology to apologetic theology where I find the book less helpful.

Givens occasionally shifts from describing theological points to arguing them. In the chapter *Theosis*, he deviates from merely describing exaltation

to justifying the doctrine. He explains that because humans are “eternally pre-existing” beings who, in a system of radical materialism, are literally the offspring of God, then it only follows that humans are literal partakers in his nature (256). After all, Givens explains, Romans describes humanity as “children of God” who are “joint heirs with Christ” (260). This point, however, overlooks the preceding argument that explains humanity’s state prior to becoming God’s children. We have not *always* been God’s children but have *become* so through adoption in Christ (Rom. 8:29). Givens dismisses adoption as the foundation of Paul’s familial description of salvation. There were points like this in the book where I felt Givens shifted gears from surveyor to apologist-theologian when a specific doctrine was more interesting or important to him. This is when his LDS identity is most luminous. Accordingly, as a non-LDS student of Mormon studies, I found Givens to be refreshingly lucid in a genre that is typically opaque. And while I enjoyed him as a surveyor of historical and contemporary Mormon theology, I enjoyed him less as an apologist-theologian of the same.

In all, *Wrestling* is a must-read for those interested in Mormon studies and those with a desire to experience the caliber of contemporary Mormon scholarship. Givens does what few LDS scholars have done before him: collect, consolidate, and communicate the sweeping breadth of Mormon theology in a manner that avails itself to both laymen and academics, LDS and non-LDS, alike. The result is an invaluable resource for students of Mormon studies and missiology. Its publisher, Oxford University Press, testifies to the growing stature and audience of Mormon studies. This book represents an excellent unofficial treatment of Mormonism from an LDS perspective that will advance readers’ understanding of this often misunderstood new religious movement, introducing tyros to Mormonism while simultaneously challenging Mormon studies veterans. Givens does the world a great service by formalizing a very informal theology through remarkable literary artistry. Whether readers are interested in tuning into current Mormon studies or looking for a helpful missiological resource, *Wrestling* will serve them well.

Kyle R. Beshears

ThM Candidate

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary