

BOOK REVIEW

James M. Hamilton. *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2010. 639 pp. Hbk. ISBN 1581349769.

The quest for “the center” of the Bible has been a “theological crisis” in biblical scholarship and a debatable issue between theologians and biblical scholars of different ideological persuasions in recent years. The belief or disbelief that there is a unified principle within which all other themes derive and flow is a feature of the current state of biblical studies. The pursuit of a single center that reveals precisely both the worldview and the theology of the writers of the Old and New Testaments is not often regarded as a trans-historical phenomenon in the discipline of biblical studies. In this important work, biblical theologian James M. Hamilton Jr. argues that “the glory of God in salvation through judgment” is the metanarrative of the biblical corpus. He contends that this concept expresses a unified discourse of the written texts of the Old Testament and the New. The thesis is investigated, in all its complexity and challenges, through a book-by-book methodology and through a synthetic approach.

The book is divided into nine chapters, including a helpful analytical outline as well as literary and theological charts. Each chapter seeks to demonstrate how the concept of God’s glory in salvation through judgment is articulated in individual books in the Bible. In each case, Hamilton provides a succinct, book-by-book analysis, and proposes the theological center of individual texts. The first chapter, “Can the Center Hold?” lays out the methodological approach, which evaluates the various theoretical proposals and models articulated by both Old and New Testaments scholars concerning the hermeneutical question of the “center” of the Bible. The author deems all of them inadequate

and posits that collectively they do not represent the “singular voice” or motif of the Bible. Hamilton’s position is unapologetic, arguing that the Bible is radically God-centered and that Yahweh saves individuals through judgment for his glory—a thesis he defends rigorously through an inductive reading of the biblical canon. His purpose of writing this seminal text is “to seek to do for biblical theology what Kevin Vanhoozer has done for hermeneutics and David Wells has done for evangelical theology” (p. 38). Consequently, one could infer that this work is written within a particular ideological framework and theological tradition: Calvinistic, evangelical, and confessional. Yet the author’s goal is definitive: “to help people know God” through the theological quest of pursuing *the center* that all of “the Bible’s themes flow from” (pp. 38, 53).

The next three chapters focus on the corpus of the Old Testament, highlighting the concept of “God’s glory in salvation through judgment” in the Torah (ch. 2), in the Prophets (ch. 3), and in the Writings (ch. 4). The subsequent three chapters look at the corpus of the New Testament, showing the center in the Gospels and Acts (ch. 5), in the Letters of the New Testament (ch. 6), and in Revelation (ch.7). While chapter 8 engages possible (and anticipated) objections to the proposed thesis, chapter 9 demonstrates the relevance of the theme in Christian ministry.

Hamilton illustrates the development of the *God’s glory in salvation through judgment* thesis in various and complex ways. He argues for the text of Exod 34:6–7 (God’s revelation to Moses) as the ground of his argument and insists that this particular passage brings together the interconnecting themes of divine mercy, salvation, judgment, and God’s glory. In addition, the author sees a pattern of God’s saving action through judgment in each major biblical event, including the Fall, the Flood, the Exodus, Israel’s exile, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and (in anticipation) his second return. Yet there are other seminal events and epochs such as the creation story, the call of Abraham and his life narrative, the call of Moses, Israel’s wandering in the wilderness, the call of Jesus’ disciples, the coming of the Holy Spirit during Pentecost, etc., that the author fails to engage, revealing the book’s weaknesses and shortcomings. All

of these major events mentioned above simultaneously display divine mercy and loving-kindness as well as God's extended invitation to and fellowship with humanity, rather than the ambiguous thesis: "salvation through judgment."

Furthermore, the author has failed to study the many instances in the Bible whereby the motifs of salvation and judgment do not necessarily connect. In the biblical narrative, judgment is almost always the consequence of sin or a human's disobedience to God, whereas love is the basis of divine salvation and the fulfillment of Christian hope. Love rather than judgment is the triumph of God's mercy and unmerited grace. The cross of Christ as the good news of God to humanity reveals the truth that God takes upon himself the judgment reserved for humanity so that salvation can be extended to all who would believe in Christ. It is the theme of divine love that sustains the Christian life in the present and in the future world. In other words, that God saves because he loves is the guarantee of Christian hope, both christologically and pneumatologically. These observations provide an alternative to Hamilton's argument.

Although God's glory seems to be an important theme in the biblical narrative, salvation through judgment is not a unified biblical predisposition. God in search of man—an activity he pursues passionately and unreservedly from Genesis to Revelation—is an equally significant central theme in the New and Old Testaments. Additionally, the discourse of divine glory and redemptive judgment could be studied separately. The concept of salvation through judgment as the "big idea" of the biblical discourse, as Hamilton suggests, does not deal critically and effectively with the various divergent theologies and recognizable themes embedded in each individual book that the author examines. In other words, theological unity under the integrative grid of "salvation through judgment" as a comprehensive biblical thought and divine program is not sensitive to other equally valid theological ideas, paradigms, themes, and motifs in the Bible.

Hamilton's methodology is as problematic as his definition of biblical theology is too narrow. His theoretical contour is epistemologically controlled; the author does not engage inter-

disciplinarily. For example, he ignores the disciplines of Christian philosophy, ethics, and missiology, and what these fields might offer to the discourse of biblical theology. The biblical theologian must interact creatively, constructively, and understandingly with other theological disciplines. Biblical theology must engage critically, sensitively, and responsibly with contemporary social, cultural, moral, and ethical issues confronting the contemporary church and the Christian life. For example, Hamilton had little to say about race, racism, and gender issues in American Christianity. He fails to address the important issue of Christian unity as well as the Bible's clarion call for the corporate church and the individual Christian to practice social justice and care for the poor. What does biblical theology have to say about these things? Hamilton's silence is evident. If the project of biblical theology is solely an intellectual enterprise or dialogue, and does not sensitively deal with cultural and social issues associated with discipleship and Christian living, then this discipline offers no sustaining hope for the Christian existence and its dilemma in the present.

Hamilton's *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment* is an intelligent text that celebrates a particular theological category or tradition. Yet, its thesis is disturbing; its epistemological contours are too constrained. The book also reveals both the discursive practices and the problem of Evangelical theology and biblical studies that avoid serious engagement with contemporary issues of race, race relationships, location, geography, sexuality, and ethnic identity. Modern biblical theology must provide rigorous theological analysis, effective Christian imagination, and intelligent Christian response to and reflections on these vital issues of modernity. Scholars working in any Christian discipline must articulate and offer liberative and transformative hope and ideas through their scholarship.

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