

[MJTM 16 (2014–2015)]

BOOK REVIEW

Blomberg, Craig. *Christians in an Age of Wealth: A Biblical Theology of Stewardship*. Biblical Theology for Life. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013. 271 pp. ISBN 9780310318989. \$24.99.

In 1999 Craig Blomberg published *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions* (Eerdmans). Given positive reviews, the production of a significant amount of secondary literature over the last fourteen years, and a request from Zondervan to contribute to their new Biblical Theology for Life series, Blomberg has written this new volume. This book differs from the former in several ways. It aims at a wider audience, and is thus written with internal aids such as important words from the book in the margins and review questions. Blomberg has updated his sources rather than reciting the same references in his previous volume. Also, the scope of the topics differs; he writes, “a theology of stewardship would not cover quite the same ground as a theology of possessions more broadly, especially since a major portion of biblical stewardship—that of the earth—was to be dealt with in a separate volume on creation care” (17). His exegetical work in the previous publication undergirds his work in this new volume.

This book consists of three overarching sections. The first section is titled “Queuing the Questions” wherein Blomberg asks the larger question this book seeks to answer, “What are we to do with all our stuff?” (21). He diagnoses “the current dilemma” as follows: “advertising bombards us daily, creating a consumer culture that is designed to make us feel shortchanged . . . at least at Christmas time, [people] go into debt for them, because they expect presents and the retail stores require huge sales to meet their end-of-year goals. A widely distributed book and film refer

to this malaise of consumerism as ‘affluenza’” (21). He believes this problem has infected the church: “it seems that Christians and churches in capitalist countries have gladly embraced the lies that cultures tell, sometimes even claiming that Scripture teaches them” (23). He supports this point by considering the Christian church and its declining giving patterns.

To address this problem, Blomberg seeks to provide a biblical theology of stewardship. After surveying different models of biblical theology, he writes:

We will utilize a hybrid model, following primarily a canonical approach to the Old Testament, often taking large blocks of books together—the Law, the Former Prophets, the Writings, and the Latter Prophets. But with the New Testament where dating can frequently be more precise, we will follow mostly a chronological order of events” (34).

His method also includes modern-day application: “This book is not just a biblical theology, however. It is biblical theology *for life*. That means taking the answers to our questions that emerge from our biblical analysis and applying them to contemporary Christian living in the early twenty-first century, in view of national and global realities” (emphasis original; 34). He does not specify which method/model of application he intends to use.

The second section of this book is “Arriving at Answers.” In this section, he provides a biblical-theological survey organized under five topics related to stewardship. He covers “The Goodness of Wealth,” “Seduction to Sin,” “Generous Giving,” “Troubles with Tithes and Taxes,” and “How Much Is at Stake?” For each of these sections, he surveys the relevant Scriptures using his chosen hybrid-model, utilizing primarily traditional grammatical-historical exegesis to understand the texts. This aspect of the book is similar to his approach in *Neither Poverty nor Riches* for handling the relevant biblical texts.

The third section is titled “Reflecting on Relevance.” He covers “The Individual as Steward,” “Government and Business as Stewards?” and “The Church as Steward.” This section is the “for life” application section of the entire book. To apply the biblical theology, he uses case studies, addresses frequently

asked questions, and provides “relevant questions” for the reader to consider afterwards.

This book has several strengths. First, Blomberg has demonstrated the relevance of biblical theology for everyday life. This is no small task because many of the publications for biblical theology are generally reserved for a scholarly audience.

Second, Blomberg rightly makes some thought-provoking statements about modern-day practices. He writes: “Yesterday’s luxuries need not always become today’s necessities even if everyone around us acquires them. There is no reason I have to pay for an electronic device that enables people all over the world to interrupt my life any time they desire” (180). Perhaps most people who read this book will own some kind of electronic device as described, likely a smartphone. Although someone may not agree with this philosophy of stewardship given the multi-faceted usefulness of a tool like a smartphone, Blomberg provides reasons for people to reconsider their use of that device in connection with stewardship.

This book has room for improvement. First, Blomberg needs to discuss his method more thoroughly, especially providing reasons and rationale for his choices for the structure for biblical theology and drawing applications. One of the unfortunate aspects of the recent revival of interests in the Biblical Theology Movement (BTM) is that much of the work—methodology, structure, etc.—is derived from personal preferences as opposed to serious reflection on the pros and cons of a certain choice. This echoes a critique from James Barr: “In this modern theological attempt to relate theological thought to biblical language I shall argue that the most characteristic feature is its unsystematic and haphazard nature” (Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language*, 21). One finds this same unsystematic and haphazard nature in Blomberg’s work. As was already cited, Blomberg makes a structural decision for a hybrid model for how he will survey the entire text of the Bible. Although he is free to choose what he wants, he should provide the methodological rationale. What are the pros and cons to covering the Old Testament canonically and the New Testament chronologically? How will that affect the results? Or, what if someone swapped approaches for

the testaments—what difference would that make? Although these questions may seem initially obvious, these kinds of questions are being missed in the recent contributions to the BTM. This is unfortunate given the seeming potential of biblical theology that its advocates propound, e.g., serving as a link between biblical studies and systematic theology.

Second, the exegesis of this book suffers from a neglect of modern linguistics. This also echoes Barr's two other major critiques of biblical theology: "For this lack of system I think there are two reasons—firstly the failure to examine the relevant languages, Greek and Hebrew, as a whole; and secondly the failure to relate what is said about either to a general semantic method related to general linguistics" (21). For example, Blomberg writes: "Because 'repentance' in Hebrew means a complete turning around, an about-face in action, central to that repentance will be a transformation in our spending habits and our giving practices" (151). To support the meaning "repentance," he cites J. A. Thompson's and Elmer A. Martens explanation of this term in the *NIDOTTE*, 4:55–59. As seasoned readers of Blomberg's writings will notice, he utilizes a form of the grammatical-historical exegetical method that relies heavily (if not entirely) on the insights from traditional grammar for Koiné Greek, the existing lexicons and lexical resources, and from modern commentaries. Although there are certainly worthy insights from these resources, when someone uses these resources in such a way that they merely cite their findings without actually doing the original, firsthand work, they reveal a major weakness of this method. This method can be useful if one seeks to do firsthand work, but when it becomes a method that relies on dated lexicography and exegesis, one is really not contributing to the larger field of scholarship.

Third, his utilization of traditional grammar for understanding Koiné presents problems. He writes: "In 1 Corinthians 16:2a Paul insists that each believer in Corinth on the first day of the week 'set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income'" (130). Blomberg clarifies the underlying Greek: "The Greek is particularly elliptical in this half-verse, with a woodenly literal translation bordering on unintelligibility: 'according to the first

of the week let each of you all alongside of him- or herself place, treasuring, whatever something he or she prospers” (130). He explains his translation as follows:

The feminine form of ‘first’ clearly requires an understood feminine noun for it to modify (in this case, *hēmera*—‘day’). The context requires what is set aside to be money, because Paul is preparing for the collection that he wants to send to Jerusalem. The neuter relative pronoun *ho* combined with *ean* and followed by a subjunctive mood means ‘whatever.’ With the indefinite neuter pronoun *ti* inserted, we have ‘whatever thing.’ *Euodoō* means to ‘have things turn out well.’ In a financial context, this refers to having a good supply of income” (130).

First, this woodenly literal “translation” is not really a translation; it is simply a plug-and-play approach to reading Greek whereby one seeks the Greek word, its grammatical form, and then renders an English gloss without consideration of the syntactical arrangement in the receptor language. This is similar to what one would see in an interlinear Bible. Second, his final conclusion is a *non sequitur* from his previous explanation. Paul’s point is not the good supply of income; rather, he highlights proportionate giving according to how much one earned that week, as it may differ from week to week in the ancient world (cf. Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar, 2010, 843). Going from defining a few words from a lexicon to this conclusion does not follow. Blomberg needs to state reasons for his conclusion beyond citing a lexicon’s definition of this word.

Finally, the selected audience for a book like this one is too broad. On the back cover, Zondervan advertises this book as written for: “pastors, church leaders, students, and lay readers” while also noting a sentence earlier that this series of books is supposed to bring “groundbreaking academic study of the Bible alongside contemporary contextualization and proclamation.” Scholars, however, will likely notice this book is more aimed at the popular audience than presenting an academic study; his references consist primarily of commentaries, lexicons, and popular level works rather than academic monographs and

articles. This limits the book's usefulness and longevity given the often short lifespan of many popular-level works.

Despite these caveats, this book is worth reading for those struggling with how to negotiate the consumerism of our age. It could also be appropriate for students considering biblical theology, perhaps in a course on the topic or in a biblical interpretation course. This book could be presented to help students begin to understand the broad continuum of how biblical theology is practiced.

Ben Montoya
McMaster Divinity College