

THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY:
A REVIEW AND REFLECTIVE ESSAY¹

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Certainly the sage's evaluation of the unceasing literary productivity of humanity at the end of Qoheleth is applicable to the grand tradition of commentary in the history of Judaism and Christianity: "of making many commentaries there is no end" (Eccl 12:12b), and much study of these commentaries may lead, in the sage's words, to "a weariness of the flesh." However, I must part ways with that ancient sage and confess that I found the reading of Ephraim Radner's recent commentary on Leviticus a fascinating and stimulating experience, one that entailed regular pauses to reread this sentence or that paragraph or just to catch my intellectual breath.²

This commentary is another addition to the nascent Brazos Theological Commentary series, one which, in the words of the series editor R. R. Reno, finds in "the Nicene tradition, in all its diversity and controversy . . . the proper basis for the interpretation of the Bible as Christian Scripture."³ This "Nicene tradition," however, admittedly "does not provide a set formula," but rather "a pervasive habit of thought, the animating culture of the church in its intellectual aspect."⁴ In Ephraim Radner, Reno has found one for whom "the animating culture of the Nicene

1. This essay began its life as a review of Ephraim Radner's commentary on a panel at the Biblical Seminar at the Toronto School of Theology, University of Toronto (Toronto, ON, 10 April 2008). I am thankful for the rich and congenial discussion with Dr. Radner at that event and the hospitality of the conveners Heather Macumber and Agnes Choi.

2. Radner, *Leviticus*.

3. *Ibid.*, 11.

4. *Ibid.*, 12.

church” is his “pervasive habit of thought.” Radner is a true master at giving voice to ancient sources, both Jewish and Christian, long silenced in modernity, conversing for instance with the early church father Origen (185–ca. 254) on the one side and Leviticus Rabbah on the other.⁵ But this is not just a history of the reception of Leviticus in the early church and Judaism. Clearly Radner favors the ancient sources and he is, not surprisingly, dismissive of modern biblical study and usually skeptical of Reformation and even Medieval trends. But Radner does not merely echo his favored early sources. Though he usually embraces them, sometimes he revises and even rejects elements within the early traditions. Interestingly, Radner finds little to criticize within the Jewish traditions, claiming that in Leviticus Rabbah he finds “a critical, indeed essential, fertile, and in many ways easily adapted exegetical orientation for Christian reading of Leviticus in particular” because of its assumption of wider referents for objects of the text rather than reducing these referents to the “emblematic catalogues of the Christian Middle Ages.”⁶ These Jewish readings prompt Radner to find in Leviticus a microcosm of the world and with it “a kind of map that traces the work of God in history and whose apprehension provides a living structure to the actual life of the world in which the reader lives.”⁷ Radner’s voice, however, always emerges from the rich and extended dialogue with these ancient sages, to provide a deep theological construction. His commentary fulfils his claim at the outset of the work that it would not be “a history of interpretation, but a theological reflection.”⁸ But not all in the commentary is focused on conversing in theological categories removed from the surface of the text. At times Radner provides insightful, though brief, comments on the present shape of the text with special attention to the larger literary sweep of the book as a whole and the specific text’s place within it.

5. Leviticus Rabbah is a Jewish collection of homiletic material (midrash) on Leviticus, compiled around the fifth century CE.

6. Radner, *Leviticus*, 24.

7. *Ibid.*, 25.

8. *Ibid.*, 27.

In the introduction to the series, Reno appeals to Irenaeus's likening of Scripture to a great mosaic arriving in boxes and in need of the plan for arrangement of the pieces and to Origen's likening of Scripture to the many locked rooms in a house, the keys for which are not found at the corresponding room, but at various other rooms. Origen's analogy emphasizes the necessity of Scripture to interpret Scripture, Irenaeus's, the necessity of "a tradition of reading," "the rule or canon of truth," that is, "doctrine provides the clarifying principles that guide exegetical judgment toward a coherent overall reading of Scripture as a unified witness."⁹

Radner indeed follows the guidance of both Origen and Irenaeus in his commentary. It is doctrine that "makes sense" of the various elements in the text, most often in what he calls "figural" ways. At the same time and in the same breath Scripture is constantly used to interpret Scripture, as Radner or his ancient conversation partners cite the full breadth of the Christian canon to provide insight into the text under discussion. Let me give you a quick example from his fascinating explication of Leviticus 16, the Day of Atonement ritual.¹⁰

Radner begins by placing Leviticus 16 within the context of this section of Leviticus, especially the death of Aaron's sons in Leviticus 10 in relation to distinctions in creation that are then articulated in Leviticus 11–15. He also notes how Yom Kippur is a "coming near of God" to the whole world.

To fill out the cosmic significance of this, he turns to the Tabernacle/Temple as marking the pattern of all creation, as seen in Josephus and Philo, but also, he thinks, in Exod 25:40, which speaks of "the pattern."¹¹

He then converses with Origen over the significance of several aspects of the ritual: Aaron's clothing as pointing to both

9. *Ibid.*, 10.

10. *Ibid.*, 160–71.

11. I would suggest that this understanding of the Tabernacle/Temple as pattern of all creation in heaven seems to be suggested at least by the close association between the Holy City Jerusalem descending from heaven and the new heavens/earth in Rev 21:1–2.

Christ and creation, the focus on the timing of the event as expressive of the fullness of time, the central sacrifice providing not just a theology of Christ's sacrifice, but more importantly the differentiation of the fate of humanity into two groups (two goats): the repentant who die through penitential self-offering and the impenitent who are left in the desert without Christ, the fire that shows our need for cleansed lips (Isa 6), and the incense (the good works of Christ on our behalf as well as our own). His conversation with Rabbah brings out further insights, making Leviticus 16 applicable to the whole history of humankind. Of course, Radner leverages this but moves in a christological direction.

The commentary now returns to Origen, where the outer sanctuary represents the church in its historical existence and the inner sanctuary, the heavenly realm entered by Jesus (Hebrews). This inner-outer figure is extended in dialogue with Jewish traditions to indicate "the cosmic significance of history."

Things get a little confusing with the explication of "Azazel," with many perspectives offered, drawn largely from Jewish sources and ending with a Christian source in which the desert now reaches to the bosom of the Father where Christ goes outside the camp to take away humanity's sins.

As he nears the end, Radner tries to draw these various strands together and concludes that "all is laid out as a display by which the great chasm that is creation's grace is overcome somehow by God himself," and this "somehow" is the flesh of the son of God. At this point Jewish and Christian exegeses part ways, with the Jewish tradition focusing on the penitential spirit of the community after the Temple's destruction and the Christian tradition on Jesus as the perfect penitent and the community that has repentance at the center of its proclamation.

This focus on Christ and his body, however, opens the way for a climactic reflection on the mysterious relationship between creation and redemption. The redemptive act in Christ's sacrifice is related to the renewal of creation and so the atonement must by definition reach the world, not as substitutionary, but rather as the character of life.

The final paragraph returns to the place where the chapter began: the role of Leviticus 16 within the larger complex of Leviticus 10–16, with the ordering of the world in Leviticus 11–15 following the death of Nadab and Abihu. Thus Aaron’s loss is a yearning for Christ the hope of glory.

While I found myself nothing less than mesmerized by Radner’s ability to internalize the deep hermeneutic and even ornate style of early church commentary, I was not always sure which of the ideas culled from the early church and Jewish interpretation were to be adopted or rejected, since in many places there was little critical engagement and in the end Radner does find a way (and this is half of the fun) to incorporate most of the ideas into his own reflections.

Of course, this raises the question of the role of the text in this enterprise. As one editor of a competing commentary series said to me over coffee at SBL about the first contribution to the Brazos series, the text appears to be a point of departure to the various theological *topoi* of the early church, rather than the text itself being sufficiently theological or at least a primer in theological method. It will not be surprising then that I am concerned in all this for what Childs has called the “discrete voice” and Brueggemann the “wild and untamed” theological witness of the Old Testament.¹² So dare I ask in what way a Christian can listen to this text apart from the way this text was taken up in the New Testament or early church exegesis? Since Christians are given the Old Testament text as Christian Scripture, they are not limited in their experience of this text to the guidance of the New Testament authors, but rather have direct access to these texts to experience them in new ways. Is the Bible really just a series of random boxes of tiles in need of theological shaping by systematic artisans? Is the writer of these texts so secretive that he has placed the keys to their truths only at the entrance to other rooms? Is not the canon in its present form and shape “theological”? While modernity reshapes the text into a form appropriate to its historical agenda, it appears that premodernity at

12. Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 76; Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 107.

times had a tendency to reshape the text into a form appropriate to its early church theological agenda. Certainly such reshaping is a reality of all eras, but key to “reshaping” is the recognition that there is such a thing as an original theological “shape” that is engaged in the reshaping process. Possibly tradition and innovation are appropriate terms.

In order to create space for this commentary series, Reno first leverages postmodernity, with its critique of criticism and assertion of the inevitability of “interpretive frameworks” to undermine the modern consensus “that classical Christian doctrine distorts interpretive understanding.”¹³ With this definition of modernity, and with it modern biblical study represented by Jowett, Reno makes the reader choose between this modern straw man and his premodern theological reading of Scripture. Of course, there are other options available, including ideological, postcolonial, and feminist approaches ready to fill the space left behind by modernity. What compelling reason is there to return to this mode of interpretation? Does one have to choose between the historical-atheological approach of modernity and the ahistorical-theological approach of premodernity? Is it not possible to engage this text both historically and theologically in a way that gives voice to this text as a discrete and theological text in its own right with its own voice in the theological project?

These kinds of questions raise the issue of the nature of Christian theological commentary, especially on the Old Testament. The genre of commentary writing has been in a state of flux over the past decade and this shift is showcased most poignantly by setting the Brazos Theological Commentary series against the backdrop of two other commentary series produced by its Dutch Grand Rapids Competitors: Eerdmans’s Two Horizons series (with Joel Green and Max Turner in New Testament and Craig Bartholomew and J. Gordon McConville in Old Testament) and Zondervan’s NIV Application Commentary series (led by Terry Muck with Tremper Longman III, Robert Hubbard, John Walton, and J. Andrew Dearman consulting for the Old Testament, and Eugene Peterson, Marianne Meye Thompson,

13. Radner, *Leviticus*, 10.

Scott McKnight, and Klyne Snodgrass for the New Testament). All three of these series are devoted to transcending atheological modernist approaches to biblical commentary undertaken by those trained within the historico-linguistic guild of higher criticism. All three have sought or are seeking to relate the biblical text to the theology and life of the church, but all do it in very different ways.

Zondervan's NIVAC represents the efforts of conservative biblical scholars working with a hermeneutic that makes a clear distinction between grammatico-historical description of the text ("what it meant," included in the "Original Meaning" section of each chapter) and the theological relevance of the text ("what it means," included in the "Contemporary Application" section of each chapter). Between these two sections, one finds "Bridging Contexts" in which the commentator reveals hermeneutical and biblical theological insights that were essential in the move from "what it meant" to "what it means," that is, for discerning what is time-bound and what is timeless. The "Contemporary Application" of the NIVAC is largely pastoral-theological in character, identifying relevant points of application to issues in local congregational life. Largely missing is any deep engagement with historical or systematic theology. In this way the NIVAC appears to represent confessional biblical scholars taking matters into their own hands and; rather than hand their results off to systematicians to make Christian theological application, they do the work themselves. The original meaning does have some religious and theological content, but this content is only described in ways that would be understandable to its original audience. In many cases this series seems to fulfill the agenda set out long ago by Johannes Gabler in his inaugural lecture on Biblical Theology.¹⁴ This is the modernist-theological series.

Eerdmans's Two Horizon series also represents the work of biblical scholars, but the results are substantially different. The dominating hermeneutic of this series, New Testament volumes of which are still far from complete, and the first Old Testament

14. Sandys-Wunsch and Eldridge, "Gabler"; Stuckenbruck, "Gabler"; Boda, "Biblical Theology."

volume having just been published, is that the Stendahlian distinction between what the text meant and means inhibits the interpretation of the text.¹⁵ The commentaries are divided into two sections: Commentary and Theological Horizons, the first representing a close reading of the text with theological sensitivity, and the second a theological reflection arising from the book as a whole. The authors are trained in the biblical guild, but reflect a more nuanced hermeneutic that takes seriously the ideological character of all interpretation. The commentary series thus adopts a theological perspective for reading the text. Although the biblical scholar is responsible to produce the commentary, from my conversations with various participants, it is to be done in conversation with Christian theology and when in penultimate form is distributed to systematicians for input and response. This is a series that could be labeled post-modernist, but reflects some sensibilities of the modernist agenda.

With Brazos's Theological Commentary series, however, one sees the commentary enterprise entirely "usurped" (or from their perspective "retaken") by systematic and historical theologians. Whereas they were shut out of Zondervan's series, and limited to the role of consultant in Eerdmans's series, they have now attained the status of "king" or "queen" of the hill in Brazos's series. Not surprisingly, the commentary series offers little exposure to the massive modernist critical engagement of the Bible that has dominated the landscape of commentary for the past century. One might label it the pre-modernist series.

It may be that the Brazos's series is proof of the truth of N. T. Wright's evaluation: "many systematic theologians . . . have become impatient with waiting for the mountains of historical footnotes to give birth to the mouse of theological insight."¹⁶ Reno seems to admit this when he wisely writes that: "Theology has lost its competence in exegesis. Scripture scholars function with minimal theological training. Each decade finds new theories of preaching to cover the nakedness of seminary training that provides theology without exegesis and exegesis without

15. Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary."

16. Wright, "Letter to the Galatians," 206.

theology.”¹⁷ However, the series proposes that the answer to this dilemma is to commission commentators who are “not biblical scholars in the conventional, modern sense of the term,” but rather are “qualified by virtue of the doctrinal formation of their mental habits, for it is the conceit of this series of biblical commentaries that theological training in the Nicene tradition prepares one for biblical interpretation, and thus it is to the theologians and not biblical scholars that we have turned,” ending with the quip: “War is too important . . . to leave to the generals.”¹⁸

At times I wonder if there is not another way forward, one which no longer declares “us” and “them,” categories identified long ago not just by Gabler, but before him by the Pietest Spener and the Rationalist Semler.¹⁹ I have a sense that the Brazos series represents a longing for the ancient past that wants to ignore the recent past. Although Radner does state that “[many] of the conclusions of these historical-critical efforts surrounding the text of Leviticus possess real plausibility, and the questions they address cannot simply be ignored,” he immediately notes that “their usefulness in understanding the book as Scripture is limited,” and largely proceeds to ignore insights provided by the historical-critical efforts.²⁰

Today’s Christian theological commentators live and move within the realities of a theological encyclopedia that does not just identify areas of study, but actual specializations and disciplines.²¹ While it may be that one can create faculties that return to a pre-eighteenth-century view of the encyclopedia, an integrative model where scholars are able to move effortlessly between the various theological disciplines, it may also be that the present challenge to write theological commentary provides an oppor-

17. Radner, *Leviticus*, 13.

18. *Ibid.*

19. See further Helmer, “Reality, Interpretation”; Boda, *Severe Mercy*, 1–2.

20. Radner, *Leviticus*, 32.

21. On this encyclopedia and its development, see Lonergan, *Method in Theology*; Farley, *Theologia*; Gariboldi, Novotny, and Novotny, *Art of Theological Reflection*; Farley, *Fragility of Knowledge*; Muller, *Study of Theology*; Packer, “The Preacher as Theologian.”

tunity for community. What may be best is a true partnership between exegetical/biblical theologians, historical/systematic theologians and ethical/pastoral theologians. This would mean an abandonment of Zondervan's approach, which shunned systematians and sought to do an end run to pastoral theology and ethics with little nuance, and an abandonment of Brazos's approach, which shunned biblical scholars and seems to so immerse itself in the ancient world of the reception history of early Christianity and Judaism that at times it seems to have little relevance to the biblical text or to the contemporary scene. But also it would mean an abandonment of Eerdmans's approach, which gave priority to biblical scholars and lip service to historical/systematic theologians by allowing a conversation near the end of the project and in some ways had little room for practical insights. What would a commentary look like that brought together commentary triads including exegetical/biblical, historical/systematic and ethical/pastoral theologians with a common desire for academic hospitality and cooperation? This approach would not mean that one could write the exegesis and hand it to another to write the hermeneutics and theology, and finally another to apply it to the burning issues of church and society today.²² Instead, it would entail a true community of commentators who would sit with the text and struggle to hear it in its ancient contexts of composition as well as later contexts of reception until it breaks into a contemporary world in desperate need for wisdom from this key theological resource for Christian faith.

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22. As per the old *Interpreter's Bible*, edited by Buttrick, a shortcoming that was addressed in the *New Interpreter's Bible*, which assigned the entire process to one individual; cf. comments by the editor Leander Keck in the new series introduction.

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