

Review

Divine Scripture in Human Understanding: A Systematic Theology of the Christian Bible. By Joseph K. Gordon. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019. 458 pp. Hardcover \$65.00. ISBN 9780268105174.

Good watches are not for pelting cats. This much Alasdair MacIntyre suggests in his masterwork of moral theory, *After Virtue*. He employs this image in discussing the inextricable connection between what something *is* and what something is *for*:

To call *x* good . . . is to say that it is the kind of *x* which someone would choose who wanted an *x* for the purpose for which *x*'s are characteristically wanted. To call a watch good is to say that it is the kind of watch which someone would choose who wanted a watch to keep time accurately (rather than, say, to throw at the cat) (MacIntyre 2013, 70).

Reading MacIntyre, one wishes modern critics of the Bible—those who unequivocally condemn its “archaic” and “unseemly” ethical perspective—would keep this fundamental moral insight in mind: evaluations of an object cannot be divorced from what it *is* and what it is *for*. Mercifully, this is a judgment deep at the heart of Joseph K. Gordon’s recent publication, *Divine Scripture in Human Understanding: A Systematic Theology of the Christian Bible*.

In outlining this work (an adaptation from his doctoral thesis), Gordon acknowledges both the grandiosity and the humility of his project. On the one hand, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Bible* is a tremendously ambitious endeavor, perhaps more suited for a mid- or late-career oeuvre. On the other hand, Gordon stresses the indefinite article of his subtitle: this is only a systematic theology, one scholar’s attempt to locate Christian Scripture “at the level of our times”; and as such, he invites critique, correction, and thorough engagement with his work.

In chapter one, Gordon centers the concern many modern critics (as well as believers) have regarding the Bible’s moral status: “What are Christians to do with an authoritative Scripture that seems to depict God as not only condoning, but even sanctioning slavery, wanton violence, genocide, patriarchy, and racism?” (6). These troubling issues are exacerbated by the fact that passages of Holy Scripture have indeed “been invoked to justify atrocities in history” (6). Thus, Gordon outlines the constructive program of his book with brevity and clarity:

The only way to responsibly evaluate the various approaches to Scripture . . . is through having a responsible understanding of what Scripture *has been* and *is* and through situating Scripture responsibly and faithfully in its natural and supernatural contexts. What follows, then, provides a constructive systematic account of the *nature* and *purpose* of Christian Scripture that articulates the intelligibility of Scripture and locates it within the work of the Triune God in history and within human cultural history (8, emphasis mine).

Throughout the book, Gordon emphasizes this “locatedness” of Scripture—the idea that the Bible can only be interpreted in light of God’s economic mission and action in the world. In search of this location, Gordon employs the metaphor of *horizon* in chapter two, that is, “the bounded scope of understandings, judgments, and interests constitutive of an individual or group” (35). The meaning one finds in Scripture is necessarily constrained by one’s horizon, even in the case of historical criticism (whose “pretension . . . to total neutrality has revealed itself as a farce” [4]). Thus, a Christian interpretive horizon ought to be constituted by the work of the Triune God, a work that Christians have historically sketched via the “rule of faith.” Gordon points to Irenaeus, Origen, and Augustine as paragons of this rule, and having established “the inescapable subjectivity of all textual interpretation,” he sets out to construct his own “generalist rule” that channels his ancient exemplars while also addressing “contemporary challenges” (67).

Thus begins the heart of the book: four chapters that Gordon has arranged as a kind of *inclusio*—chapters three and six broaching the Bible’s divine location, and chapters four and five digging into the human. Starting with the divine location of Scripture, chapter three focuses on the life of the Triune God and God’s gracious gifts to humankind. These gifts are bestowed in the economic missions of both the Son of God and the Holy Spirit, who bring about humanity’s *sanans* (healing) and *elevans* (elevating) (97). This work of healing and elevating is the work of the Triune God “gathering up all things in Christ,” which forms “the orienting context for reading Scripture in a christologically responsible—and so distinctively Christian—way” (107). In other words: reading Scripture tells us what God is doing in Christ, and what God is doing in Christ tells us how to read Scripture.

Just as watches tell time *for* individuals and communities, one cannot systematically evaluate the Bible without deeper reflection upon the human beings God has ordained it to serve. Thus, in chapter four, Gordon turns his attention to Scripture’s subjectively human location, asking such anthropological questions as, “What is a human person? What is distinctive about human persons that makes them persons? What are the ends for which human persons exist?”

How are such ends ordered?” (120). Gordon answers that the ultimate goal of human life is to participate in God’s triune life, which we begin to do in the present through “sanctifying grace” and “the habit of charity” (114). Following Bernard Lonergan (one of two theologians, including Henri de Lubac, who Gordon cites as fundamental dialogue partners), he explores human beings as “self-transcending animals” (130). Self-transcendence, according to Lonergan, has four different levels of consciousness: (1) the empirical (sensate); (2) the intellectual (intelligible); (3) the rational (reasonable); and (4) the responsible (decision and action). Human beings operate on all four of these levels, each one giving way to further exigencies and complexities. The fourth level and highest attainment of self-transcendence is “responsible self-possession,” in which “we come to recognize that our own authenticity is at stake,” and thus “we determine and pursue that which is intrinsically valuable” (143). Throughout the chapter, Gordon evinces a nuanced articulation of human development, and furthermore, patient theological application. “Sustained self-transcendence in concrete persons is both rare and fleeting,” and this human failure is a manifestation of human sin (154, 159). Such sinful blindness and moral failure adversely affects scriptural interpretation, and must ultimately be overcome by the redemptive work of the Triune God.

Chapter five delves into a fascinating account of the material history of Christian Scripture. This stretch of the book is Gordon at his most deconstructive, like a patient seminary professor peeling back the Bible’s layers for a first-year fundamentalist. He pays careful attention not only to marquee topics like authorship and canonization, but also the Bible’s changing media and technology. Several pages are devoted to the ancient Christian copyist practice of emphasizing *nomina sacra*, or keywords, through systems of abbreviation and contraction in biblical manuscripts. These keywords—such as God, Christ, Jesus, Lord, cross, and so on—stand to unify the diversity both within Scripture and across manuscripts of Scripture. Gordon portrays the *nomina sacra* as a kind of “rule of faith” *in nuce*, tying the biblical text to the emerging kerygma of the church (344). Following Peter Candler, Gordon likewise cites the advent of the printing press in making it “easier to overlook the variable history of Christian Scripture and its location within Christian worship and Christian practices” (184). Instead, the differences and deviations of biblical manuscripts are not to be lamented, but lauded as “theologically instructive,” for “the judgment that God has done things in what appears to be a rather haphazard manner is not incompatible with the judgment that God has providentially ordered the history of Christian Scripture” (194, 206). In highlighting these many material variations, Gordon does not seek to destabilize Christians’ faith in the Bible’s sufficiency, but to gesture toward the greater sufficiency undergirding it. He writes, “It is unthinkable to suggest that the early Christians could have existed

without their sacred texts. But the referents, the *res*, of that testimony were more fundamental for them than were their texts” (178).

By chapter six, Gordon largely achieves the kind of unified account he has been building to throughout the book. Having up until now mostly eschewed some traditional bibliological words like “inspiration,” Gordon now gives an account of it in light of his earlier account of the Holy Spirit’s economic mission. Scripture as God’s “written” Word, likewise, is given a fresh account in light of his previous exposition of the historical mission of the Son of God. Though the written Word of God constrains our understanding of what God has done and is doing in Christ, Gordon warns believers against separating Scripture’s authority from the Triune God who uses them as his instrument. Laudably, he never loses sight of this theocentric (and therefore Christocentric) approach to the Bible: “The reading of Scripture well, then, has as its goal the transformation of our entire being to take our horizons of value, judgment, understanding, and experience captive to Christ” (236).

The Triune God uses Holy Scripture for God’s purposes, including the instruction and upbuilding of people for those purposes. Ultimately, “the divine *res* of Scripture are its true end and purpose,” and the Bible is God’s primary instrument in donating the mind of Christ to the church (252). Gordon’s account of the Christian Bible shines light not only on how to engage Scripture well, but just how tragically many have failed in their attempts to do so. That Scripture has been “invoked to justify atrocities in history” is not an indictment of its value, but an indication of the fraught and fumbling history of God’s people learning how to tell time. Gordon’s deft systematic treatment of the Bible’s true nature and purpose betrays its various abusers for what they have always been: people content to go cat-hunting with a perfectly good watch.

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