



While Lewis was disinclined to imagine angelic responses, William P. Young boldly envisions the words and manner of God Himself in his spiritual juggernaut, *The Shack*. The result is an emotionally charged novel with millions of copies in print, multiple translations, and all of the controversy one might expect from a novel wherein the main character eats dinner with the Trinity.

The story is simple: Mack, the victim of unspeakable tragedy, is invited to the very scene of the tragic event (a shack in the woods) by none other than God Himself. So begins a weekend-long journey of healing as Mack encounters the Trinity firsthand, complete with hugs, lively conversation, hiking trips, and all the camaraderie one might expect from a weekend in the woods with three close friends. Readers looking for numerous characters, intense action, or plot twists will be disappointed. The heart of the book lies in the exchanges between Mack and God. The story is just substantial enough to create a backdrop for the dialogue, and little else.

We must therefore realize upfront that although Young's book is indeed a work of fiction, its purpose is to teach about God. If the text itself were not obvious enough, the advertisements that follow the author's acknowledgements are a dead giveaway. Here, readers are encouraged to share *The Shack* with others. In this way, they may get "a magnificent glimpse into the nature of God."

It is therefore entirely fair to ask if Young's depiction of God is true. After all, I have no more interest in knowing a god of fancy than I do in knowing Frodo Baggins; both are a fiction. I wish to know the God who *is*. This issue I hope to address more thoroughly in part II, when I consider the theology of *The Shack*. For now, I wish to make some preliminary comments to motivate and frame such a venture.

As to Young's method, I tend to find the dialogical approach to teaching overly contrived, and *The Shack* is a perfect example of why. The veil (dialogue) that conceals the author's intent (exposition of God's character) can wear thin. The puzzled interlocutor (Mack) lobes up meatball questions as the teacher (God) winds up to spike the answer. This can make the story facile, or even trite.

My own preferences aside, however, the real difficulty in Young's method of teaching is that it is difficult to check (per 1 Ths. 5:21; 1 Jn. 4:1). As a Christian, I believe Scripture holds the place of absolute authority for truth when it comes to the character of God. Everything should be weighed against Scripture. Since *The Shack* is a piece of fiction, Young doesn't cite Scripture references to back up his theology. This makes it difficult to weigh what is being said, because you do not always know its basis. The reader is left to wonder if a statement is either based on or inferred from Scripture, or simply Young's artistic imagination.

This is especially problematic because Young does not give us much insight into his view of Scripture. The glimpses that we do get tend to be pejorative, or at best, focus only on the abuses of Scripture rather than its proper use (see pp.65-66). Much greater emphasis is given to knowing God through experience (e.g., pp.195, 198). Indeed, the very premise of the book is about a man coming to know God through experience! This is not intrinsically wrong, but it is dangerous to let experience hold the highest position of authority in a Christian's life.

CATEGORIES

1-2 Samuel
 Apologetics
 Bible Translations
 book review
 Christianity and Culture
 church life
 Current vents
 Evangelism
 family
 Galatians
 hermeneutics
 housekeeping
 hymns
 Joshua
 movies
 music review
 Old Testament
 Pentateuch
 prayer
 Resource of the Month
 Romans
 theology
 Uncategorized

TAGS

1 Corinthians Apologetics
 Bible
 translation
 Biblical Training Bill
 Maher Bob
 Kauflin Books
 Bruce
 Waltke church
 history Clinton
 Arnold context is
 king craig blomberg
 culture David Douglas Stuart
 entertainment Evangelism
 exegesis Films Galatians 6
 historical
 background Holy
 Spirit hymns Islam
 Jesus Made in
 America Law marketing
 Martin Luther media

Therefore, given the book's purpose, it is advisable to read it with a critical eye. While I take no issue with suspending a critical reading to allow the emotive force of the book have its effect, the content oughtn't be taken for "Bible Truth" at face value. It is worthy of a critical reading as well, perhaps even more-so since the emotional weight of the book could easily suspend our better judgment. As good as Young's god might *feel*, we must test him and ask, is he really God? I believe the answer is a mixed bag, but we shall make a better go at this in Part II.

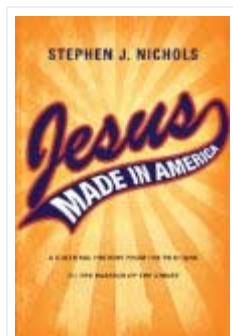
Posted in [Christianity and Culture](#), [book review](#) | Tagged [The Shack](#), [William Young](#), [C.S. Lewis](#) | [2 Comments](#) »

5 Favorite New Reads of 2008

Thursday, December 18, 2008 by danny

I set out this year to read some books from outside my normal genre, biblical studies (especially commentaries), in order to broaden my horizons a bit. I read a number of books I thought were excellent, some of which have been reviewed (click our "Book Reviews" tab and check them out). But, I thought I'd point out my favorites from this year. Note well: these books may not have been published in 2008, but I read them this year for the first time (hence the title "New Reads" rather than "New Books"). Here they are, in no particular order.

[Jesus Made in America, by Stephen J Nichols](#)



I loved this book. I certainly had some disagreement- the Puritan lovefest, some (but not all) of his criticisms of modern Christian music and movies- but overall Nichols succeeded in showing how American views of Jesus have shifted throughout the generations, often influenced by culture rather than the Bible. I came away from this book challenged about my own understanding of who Jesus was/is, and not so confident of our own ability to understand Him without cultural baggage making its way into the process. *Jesus Made in America* has catapulted Nichols into my "authors I must read" category (in fact, I'm finishing another book of his right now).

[An Old Testament Theology, by Bruce Waltke](#)

OT Theology

philosophy Prophets

Reasonable Faith recreation

Religulous

Romans 8 sin

sojourn Stephen

Nichols suffering Tim

Tennent video games

William Lane Craig World

Religions **Worship**

BLOGROLL

[Ben Witherington](#)

[Craig Blomberg](#)

[Euangelion](#)

[I Can't Believe It's Not a Real Blog!](#)

[Jesus Creed](#)

[Koinonia](#)

[Parableman](#)

[Parchment & Pen](#)

[Primetime Jesus](#)

[Support Ministry](#)

CHURCH HISTORY & ARCHAEOLOGY

[Bible Places](#)

[Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts](#)

[Christian Classics Ethereal Library](#)

[The Center for Early African Christianity](#)

MISSIONS

[Center for the Study of Global Christianity](#)

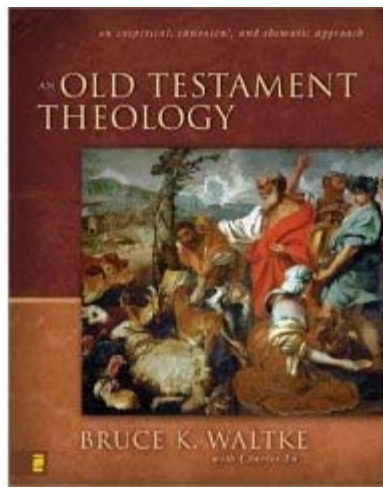
[Joshua Project](#)

[Operation World](#)

[US Center for World Mission](#)

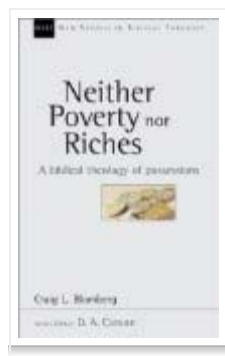
ONLINE BIBLE STUDY HELPS

[Analytikon](#)



I've been working on a multi-part review of this book for some time, due partly to its massive size and partly to my busy schedule. Don't let my last review of this book deceive you, it's an excellent read and a learning experience well worth the time. Students of the OT won't be surprised by this, however, as Waltke's reputation precedes him.

Neither Poverty Nor Riches, by Craig Blomberg



I'm getting to this book about 10 years later than I should have. Blomberg, as usual, was informative, challenging and enjoyable. For anyone interested in ministering to the poor, this is a must read.

Worship Matters, by Bob Kauflin



I'm not a worship leader. I have no musical gifting whatsoever. But I'm convinced that worship through music is an integral part of the teaching aspect of the church, so as a Bible teacher I'm fascinated with how we can better use worship to teach people about God. Bob Kauflin helps us in this area, and gives tons of great insight in practical matters for worship leaders as well.

- Bible Gateway
- Biblical Training
- NET Bible
- NT Introductions & Outlines
- Resources for NT Exegesis
- Support Ministry
- The Resurgence Greek Project
- Top 10 Bible Versions
- Worldwide Classroom

ONLINE BIBLICAL & THEOLOGICAL STUDIES ARTICLES

- Best Commentaries
- Biblical & Theological Paper Library
- BiblicalStudies.org
- Denver Journal (Denver Seminary)
- Discerning Reader
- Douglas J Moo Articles
- Institute for Biblical Research
- N T Wright Lectures & Articles
- Reasonable Faith
- Review of Biblical Literature
- Themelios Journal
- Thomas Schreiner Articles

RESOURCES FOR MINISTRY

- Desiring God
- Sovereign Grace Ministries
- The Gospel Coalition

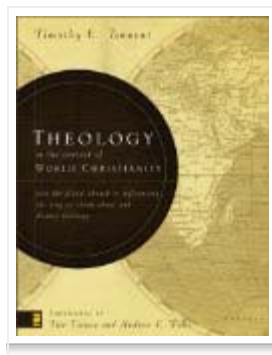
WORSHIP

- Institute for Christian Worship
- RUF Hymnbook
- Sojourn Music
- The Cyber Hymnal
- Worship Matters

ARCHIVES

- January 2009

Theology in the Context of World Christianity, by Timothy Tennent



This is the only book on this list I haven't reviewed. Full disclosure: Tennent was one of my professors at Gordon-Conwell, and one of the finest lecturers I've ever heard. I can't think of anyone more qualified to write this book. Tennent is a top-notch missiologist with a strong concern for a theologically grounded approach to missions. I remember in classes how he would plead for us to listen to the non-Western church and learn from how they "do theology." This book helps us do that very thing, by letting us see theology through the eyes of the global church. This has impacted me in a powerful way; I felt like I never really understood hermeneutics until I studied missions. It has made me a better student of the Bible. Anyone interested in theology and/or missions ought to read this book. I look forward to his next project, a Trinitarian Missiology.

Okay, I'll stop there. There were other good ones, to be sure, but these stand out for me. As for 2009, I have a number of books I'm looking forward to reading, but especially G K Beale's *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry*. I've been jonesing to read this book since I first heard about it, and thanks to Adrianna at IVP, I now have a copy and will be writing a review sometime in the future. I'm getting excited just thinking about it!

What about you? What have been your favorite books of 2008?

Posted in [book review](#) | Tagged [Bob Kauflin](#), [Books](#), [Bruce Waltke](#), [craig blomberg](#), [Jesus Made in America](#), [OT Theology](#), [Stephen Nichols](#), [Tim Tennent](#) | [No Comments](#) »

Colson's Commentary

Friday, December 12, 2008 by [bmarchio](#)

Chuck Colson has written a commentary about the recent corruption charges against Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich. Check it out [here](#).

Posted in [Current vents](#) | Tagged [Blagojevich](#), [Chuck Colson](#), [corruption](#), [pride](#) | [No Comments](#) »

Happy Winter Solstice from the Humanists!

Thursday, December 11, 2008 by [bmarchio](#)

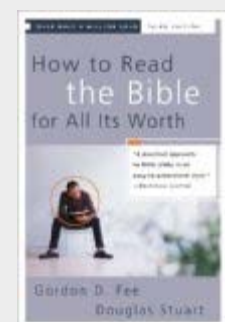
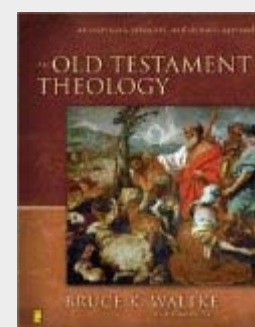
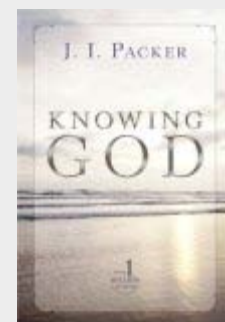
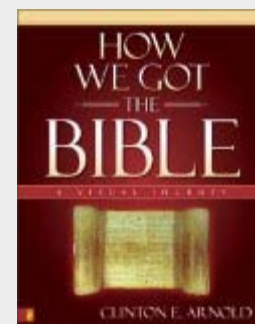
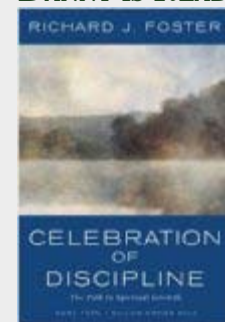
December 2008

November 2008

October 2008

September 2008

DANNY IS READING





The advertisement above is part of a controversial campaign sponsored by the American Humanist Association (AHA hereafter). Signs like the one above will appear on busses and at bus stations around Washington, DC this winter.

Humanism, per the AHA, "is a progressive philosophy of life that, without theism and other supernatural beliefs, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity" (per their [FAQ](#); the [Humanist Manifesto](#), quoted extensively below, expands on these themes). This "greater good" is achieved in part by cultivating caring relationships, responsible and informed decision making in a free, democratic society, toleration of other humane ideals, cooperation, and striving for the well-being of others.

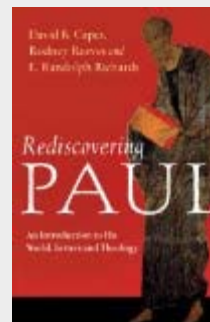
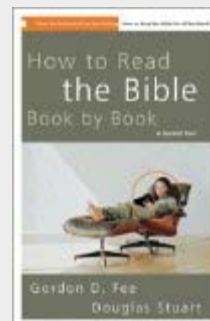
On the surface, I could say "Amen" to the AHA's bottom line, at least, *as I understand it* (foreshadowing!). Their efforts to put an end to human suffering, uphold the dignity of humankind, and spread of peace appear admirable. Why indeed, then, do we need a god? Allow me to answer this question.

Taking the ad's advice requires an understanding of what it means to be "good." As far as I can understand the AHA's philosophy, "good" is the maximization of personal happiness and fulfillment for all humankind, thus defining a subjective and vague term with two other subjective and vague terms. "Fulfillment" is what comes from the "participation in the service of humane ideals." "Humane ideals," of course, are concerned with seeking the personal happiness and fulfillment for all human kind. Thus spins the amorphous wheel of goodness.

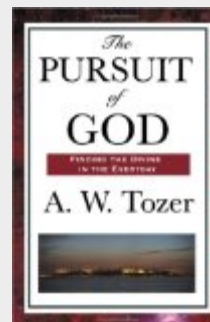
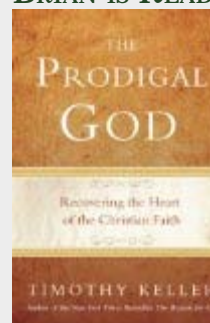
Indeed, the rhetoric found in the AHA's writing is full of positive terms: "human welfare," "happiness," "fulfillment," and "well being" are a few. The problem is that each of these concepts are hopelessly vague and ill-defined. The meaning of these concepts is assumed, presupposing a universal agreement among all people. AHA is therefore decidedly collectivist in its outlook. To reach their goals, we must agree on what these terms mean. How exactly do we do this, since in truth, these concepts are immensely subjective, and as diverse in meaning as the peoples of earth? This is especially problematic since the AHA is "committed to diversity."

What if it so happens that the maximization of my personal happiness has a negative impact on the personal happiness of others? How do we decide that case? The AHA enjoins us to resolve differences cooperatively without resorting to violence. But how do we know good and evil? The good cannot compromise, otherwise evil will win. When the Nazi party desires to wipe out the Jewish people, I see no compromise or cooperation available to us. They must be stopped, even to the peril of their own happiness and fulfillment.

Perhaps anticipating this problem, the AHA qualifies their respect for diversity by limiting it to "those of differing yet humane views." We're back to the original problem, though: Who gets to define "humane" here? Perhaps the "humane" view is to euthanize anybody we deem unable, for reasons of illness or handicap, to



BRIAN IS READING



"enjoy a good life?"

Even if we all agree upon these terms (PS: we never will), *why* is striving for them the highest good? Given the AHA's epistemology ("observation, experimentation and rational analysis"), how do we arrive at the conclusion that personal happiness, comfort, or fulfillment comprise humanity's *summum bonum*?

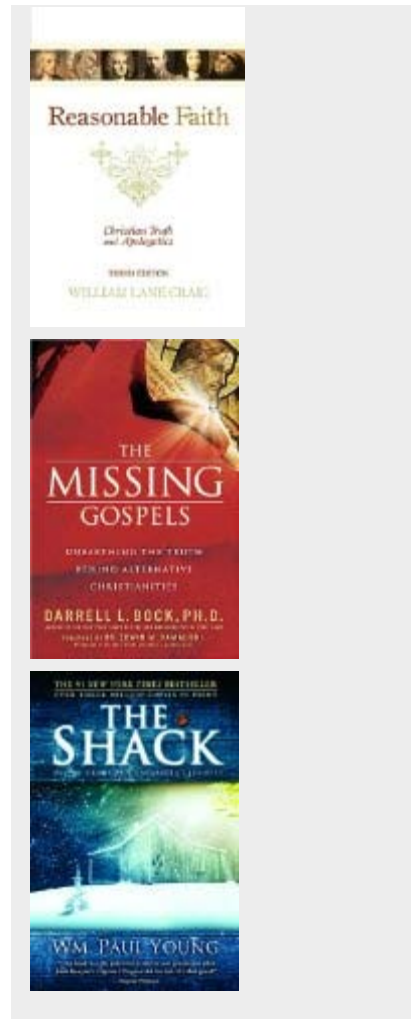
We're back at collectivism; or at best, "majority rules." Given the vaguely defined assumption that everybody wants to be "happy," is it therefore the highest good? Who says? Show me the logic, but only after you show me that everybody wants to be "happy," *as you define it*.

Most people in the world believe in the supernatural, too. Why doesn't the majority rule here, as well? If we take our cue from the natural world, (of which we are undeniably a product; see AHA's anthropology below) the highest good for any living being is the propagation of its genes to the next generation; it is survival of the race, independent of, and often to the demise of, any other race. Nature seems quite apathetic to personal happiness or suffering, why should we, nature's children, be any different?

We quickly realize that the AHA's anthropology is paradoxically exalted and impoverished. On the one hand, humankind is highly valued, with intrinsic "worth and dignity." On the other, we are the result of millions of years of "unguided evolutionary change": a cosmic accident of no greater intrinsic worth than an amalgam of organic chemicals. On one hand we are able to make sweeping decisions about what maximizes "good" and "happiness" for the most people possible. On the other, history shows us that the much of our "progress" carries the excessive baggage of new and unanticipated problems. On one hand we are noble, with the ability to "progress towards our highest ideals." Auschwitz, the Killing Fields, Darfur, and other sad histories speak to a very different human ability which is far from anything the AHA could call "noble."

Why believe in God? Because any human designation of goodness, purpose, or worth is ultimately subjective and arbitrary. These vague terms must be defined by something above ourselves. As Francis Schaeffer said, humankind "is not a sufficient integration point for himself" (*A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture*, 278). That is to say, we need something above and outside ourselves if we are to make any absolute claims about morality, purpose or meaning. Brian Marchionni cannot make such claims for all humanity, nor can 100,000 people like me. Even if we did, we have naught more than a small minority telling everybody else what's right and wrong, which smells an awful lot like the authoritarian tyranny so quickly condemned by humanists.

The job of absolute claims belongs to the infinite One who is outside ourselves - the One who is omniscient and omnipotent, yet knowable and personal - the One who has the authority and ability to say not only what "good" is, but also how we strive for it - the One who Himself acts in history to bring about the best for humankind- the One who helps and guides us to these ends. This One is the Triune God of Christianity, and *we need Him*. We need Him not only because we cannot make absolute claims of good and evil, but because thousands of years of



recorded history show us that we are incapable of consistently choosing the good. We need Him because, functionally speaking, we're lousy humanists. Indeed, the only truly good "humanist" is God Himself.

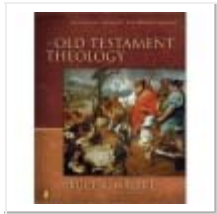
Posted in [Apologetics](#), [theology](#) | Tagged [ethics](#), [evolution](#), [humanism](#), [morality](#) | [No Comments](#) »

Book Review, Part 3: An Old Testament Theology

Thursday, December 11, 2008 by danny

Thanks to Chris at Zondervan for a review copy of this book.

In this portion of the review, I've opted to focus specifically on Waltke's treatment of the Abrahamic & Davidic covenants. I did this for two main reasons: 1) since Waltke's book is, in part, a biblical theology, I wanted to know how he develops these two covenants and 2) I tell my students every year (*ad nauseum*, actually) that these two covenants are foundational for understanding the rest of the Bible (more on that as we go along).



In chapter 12, The Gift of the Abrahamic Covenant, Waltke shows us how the story of Abraham and his sons (the patriarchs) connects with Genesis 1-11. "The story of the Fall [Genesis 1-11] poses the challenge; the patriarchal narratives... are God's definitive response" (p307). Much of his treatment of Abraham and his sons is terrific. For instance, he specializes in the structure of the patriarchal narratives (lovers of chiasms will love this chapter) and offers helpful insights into Abraham's faith (which is not unwavering, but still commendable).

Unfortunately, he doesn't show how the Abrahamic covenant is so crucial to the rest of the Bible, specifically in the prophets. How many times do we read about "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob"? How many times do we read prophecies (especially in Isaiah) about the nations being drawn to Israel? These are bringing us back to the stories of Abraham. Waltke offers an extended treatment of Romans 9-11, dealing with the relationship of Israel to the church. I imagine this is in part due to his turn from dispensationalism to covenant theology (one I happen to laud), so he may have felt the need to include this discussion. But, in the meantime, I felt like an opportunity to do some strong biblical theology was missed.

Waltke deals with the Davidic covenant (see 2 Samuel 7) in its own chapter (chapter 23). But unlike his treatment of the development of the Abrahamic covenant, Waltke does in fact develop the idea of kingship in chapter 24, The Gift of Kingship. He leads off by taking on the notion that

kingship is actually seen in a negative light in the Old Testament. For instance, Waltke also argues, persuasively, that Gideon is hardly a credible person in the narrative, so his complete objection to kingship (Judges 8:22-23) can hardly be seen as the narrator's point of view (p684).

I highly commend Waltke's survey of the views of the kingship in the Pentateuch, but I want to move on to how he sees the development of kingship, specifically Davidic, in the rest of the Bible. He even includes a helpful section on the relationship between the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants, noting that "the Davidic covenant fulfills, confirms, and supplements the Abrahamic covenant" (p692). I'm not sure I totally agree with his use of "fulfill," since while David's dynasty does fulfill part of it, we still don't see the nations of the earth being blessed in David or his sons (until, of course, Jesus).

Regarding how the Davidic covenant supplements the Abrahamic covenant, Waltke states, "*I AM* promises unconditionally to both Abraham and David an eternal posterity: to Abraham an enduring nation; to David an enduring dynasty to rule that nation. Indeed, David's eternal dynasty mediates the kings who *I AM* promised to give from Abraham and Sarah's own bodies" (p693).

Beginning on p699, Waltke includes a brief survey of how the prophets, psalms and New Testament develop the theme of Davidic kingship. When I say "brief," I really mean it- only 2 ½ pages. I would have liked more, but I'm thankful for what he included, specifically with the prophets. He quotes Is 9:6-7, 11:2; Jer 23:5-6; and Mic 5:2-5 to point out to the reader how these recall God's promise to David in 2 Samuel 7. Again, while it would have been nice for him to develop this more (and maybe talk about passages like Ezekiel 37:24-28), he gives enough to help the reader make a connection that many of us do not make at all. But, if we're paying attention to what Waltke's point is (that the prophets bring us back to God's covenant with David) and paying attention when we're reading the prophets, we'll begin to see these connections for ourselves.

His treatment of the Davidic covenant in the Psalms and New Testament, however, are a bit more disappointing. He gives one paragraph to the Psalms; the same goes for "Jesus Christ and the Davidic Covenant." And in his discussion of Jesus' genealogy in Matthew 1, he actually gives his opinion on why it differs from Luke's genealogy. Matthew sets him up for a chance to make a great point for his readers, and he misses it. Matthew starts with, "This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham." What more could an Old Testament scholar ask for!

I was waiting for Waltke to knock this out of the park, but in the end, he opted to bunt instead.

I started this review noting that I wanted to see how Waltke developed these two great covenants. As you can tell, I came away somewhat disappointed. What he does say is great, and there's much to learn from it, but I can't help but think more could have been said (yes, in a book weighing in at 1000+ pages).

I've thought about whether it's fair for me to judge Waltke on his discussion of topics that I'm interested in. But I don't think it's simply about my interest level. The Abrahamic and Davidic covenants are recalled time and time again throughout the Bible. Every time we read about "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" and the nations being drawn in to God's people, the biblical authors are reminding us of God's promise to Abraham.

Every time we read in the prophets about the coming king in the line of David, or the psalmists' prayers for blessings on the king, or the fact that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the city of David, the biblical authors are reminding us of God's promise to David. So, no, I don't think I'm simply importing my own wishes on Waltke. Back on p125-126, Waltke states, "Later texts by charismatic figures- be they prophets (such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel), prophets historians (e.g., the Deuteronomist and Chronicler), or an authorized exegete (such as Ezra)- occasionally transform the teaching of earlier texts of charismatic figures (such as Moses)." This was a chance for Waltke to demonstrate that point; I wish he would have taken that opportunity.

Posted in [book review](#) | Tagged [Abraham](#), [Bruce Waltke](#), [covenant](#), [David](#), [OT Theology](#) | [No Comments](#) »

Crafting a Crazy King

Wednesday, December 10, 2008 by [danny](#)

As I've taught through portions of 1-2 Samuel (I generally just refer to it as "Samuel", indicating the unity of the 2 books), I've become more and more convinced of the need to read this book as a narrative. I'm certainly not discounting the historical veracity of it; I'm simply trying to acknowledge that this book, and the stories that make up this book, uses literary and narrative techniques to make it's point.

For instance, readers are often confused at the end of 1 Samuel 17. We've just read the story of David killing Goliath, but we come across something that seems to contradict the previous chapter: Saul doesn't know who David is. Saul asks Abner, the army commander, "whose son is that young man?" (v55). The problem is this: in chapter 16, Saul is comforted by David's musical abilities and requests that David be allowed to remain in his service. He seems to know who David is then, so how is it that only one chapter later he doesn't have a clue who David is?

Now, some will suppose that the author/editor of the book is a buffoon and unknowingly included a contradiction. That seems unlikely, since it's so obvious that you would think that someone would have caught the "problem." So, it's far more likely that the confusion is intentional.

Is it possible that the author is wanting you to ask this question? Perhaps you, the reader, are supposed to wonder, "why is Saul asking who David is? Doesn't he know already?"

I think this is exactly what is happening here. You're supposed to wonder why Saul doesn't remember David. And the answer is unraveled in the following

chapters, especially in chapter 18: Saul is insane. It's not hard to notice, just look at the next chapter. Saul tries to pin David to the wall with his spear (he tries again in chapter 19). In fact, Saul tries to spear his own son, Jonathan, in chapter 20.

What I'm suggesting is that the author's portrayal of Saul is intentionally confusing. The narrative is inviting you to ask the question: why doesn't Saul remember David, who just a chapter earlier is favored by Saul? The narrative works in a way that we ought to expect a narrative to work. It isn't through an explicit statement ("then Saul lost his marbles and went nuts") that we learn of his insanity. It's through the story itself that we learn that Saul went crazy. The "problem" is really no problem at all; it's neither a contradiction nor an oversight. It's a literary technique used to craft a crazy king.

Posted in [1-2 Samuel](#) | Tagged [1 samuel 17](#), [context is king](#), [David](#), [historical narrative](#), [Saul](#) | [No Comments](#) »

Rearranging Suffering, Part II

Monday, December 8, 2008 by [bmarchio](#)

As promised in [part I](#), here are some further reflections on suffering, with a specific eye to some categories. After having a weekend to think this post over, the word "categories" might overstate my true intentions. I really have a distinction in mind, since categorically speaking, all suffering is the result of sin, be it mine, yours, or Adam and Eve's. One may pigeon-hole the various kinds of suffering that fall under this umbrella any number of ways, but I'm mostly interested in distinctions among them.

The main distinction I wanted to point out in this post was what I might call ordinary suffering and faith-suffering. Put differently, we could say that all people suffer to some degree; it is the way of our fallen world. There is also suffering that is a direct result of one's choice to follow Jesus. The promised persecution and self-denial that Christianity entails is a special kind of suffering, and it seems to me that is what is most often in view when the NT epistles interact with suffering. The best known examples are found in James 1 and Hebrews 12.

Here, the suffering is specific to the cost of being a Christian, and the purpose is framed in terms of strengthening one's faith. Here again we have an important consideration when praying amidst suffering, which I made in part I: our first priority is for God's glory. We oughtn't be so hasty, then, praying that the persecution of Christians in China should stop. Rather, like Paul in 2 Thessalonians, our prayer is that those persecuted stand firm, and God is glorified.

This is not meant to even hint that our hearts shouldn't break for those who suffer for the name of Jesus, or that we have no desire be for their peace and well-being. My point is that there is a greater good, nay, the greatest good, and that is for God to be glorified, and His Word faithfully proclaimed. Should we pray for religious persecution to end in China? Absolutely! It's evil and we therefore resist it and wish for its demise. But, said demise shouldn't be the *only* thing for which we pray.

One other very important aspect of suffering worth bringing to the fore is that

properly understood, it can point us to God. I believe that instinctively, all humankind recognizes that suffering is not the way it's supposed to be. Pain is painful because the body is telling us that something is wrong. Your head shouldn't hurt like this, your arm oughtn't be broken. Something is not the way it's supposed to be, and demands attention. The same can be said for emotional suffering. It hurts to be lied to, to lose somebody special, to be the object of fun, because things aren't meant to be that way. Humankind naturally *expects* good. Even the liar feels betrayed when s/he is the victim of a lie. The "bad" news that occupies the bulk of reporting is news because evil and suffering are intrinsically curious; they are out of the ordinary. "Father Loves His Son" is not a headline; that's normal. "Father Abuses His Son" is a headline, because it's abnormal.

The fact that there is so much suffering in the world points to the fact that something is fundamentally wrong, and humankind's best efforts have yet to fix it. For as much as our technical prowess has relieved countless millions from pain, it has equally inflicted pain upon countless more. Enter the omnipotent, omniscient, and loving God who since the introduction of suffering has stopped at nothing, (sending His Son to be tortured to death inclusive), to restore things to the way they should be.

Posted in [Apologetics](#), [theology](#) | Tagged [NT epistles](#), [persecution](#), [sin](#), [suffering](#) | [No Comments](#) »

Rearranging Suffering, Part I

Friday, December 5, 2008 by [bmarchio](#)

This week, the Marchionni household has experienced a number of light and momentary afflictions, each of which have conspired to keep us from getting a good night of sleep for nearly a week. "A good night" here means "more than 4 hours." One source of this sleep deprivation, which will come as no surprise to the seasoned parents among my readers, is my 15-month old son, who has taken ill this week with some flavor of virus.

Whenever my son is suffering, even from a simple cold (and praise God that it's naught more serious than that!), the cerebral circuits devoted to Christian suffering always turn on in my head, giving rise to a panoply of reflections and questions. Last night, I was especially struck by the words of the excellent Craig Blomberg in a [post](#) he wrote some time ago dealing with the particularly American response to suffering. Says Blomberg,

“ At an international evangelical consultation on contextualizing the gospel this summer in Oxford, the Asian representatives agreed that one of the biggest theological differences between Asian and American Christianity was that Asians assumed suffering was a normal part of life, especially if you were a believer, whereas Americans were always trying to avoid it or end it. One Chinese theologian explained, "The typical Chinese Christian, when suffering, asks, "How may I acquit myself in a God-pleasing way as I suffer?" The typical American Christian asks, "How may I get rid of the suffering?"

When was the last time you heard a public list of Christian prayer

requests that included prayers for people to be good witnesses in the midst of their suffering rather than for God to take away everything from terminal cancer to the common cold?

Clearly, in the case of my son, there isn't much he can do yet to be a faithful witness to God in the midst of his suffering. But what about me? How do I respond to my own suffering, or the suffering of others? Like a "typical American Christian," I usually ask God to take it away. As I reflect on this, however, I am increasingly convinced that I am due for a rearrangement of priorities.

I cannot address all of the dynamics of suffering here, nor will I attempt to introduce a theodicy. However, I do believe that the question of the Chinese Christian above ought to be ours as well. Specifically, our first priority in prayer concerning suffering ought to be bringing God glory, as opposed to bringing ourselves relief.

Consider Jesus' miracles: Many of Jesus' healings are explicitly explained as being performed to bring glory to God (e.g., Jn. 9:3; 11:4). Other miracles have a clear pedagogical purpose in revealing Christ's identity (e.g., Mk 2:10; 3:35-41; Jn.15:24), which is another way of bringing glory to God.

Also consider that in the first instance, Jesus' healings are about the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God; they are an eschatological announcement (c.f., Mt. 11:2-5). Part of that eschatology is the restoration of all things back to the way they were meant to be, viz. people aren't going to be blind, or lame, or subject to acute bleeding when the Kingdom of God is fully manifest on earth. Note the subtle distinction between healing somebody to relieve their suffering, versus healing somebody in order to reveal the coming Kingdom, which *includes* the relief of suffering.

Scanning deeper into the New Testament, I have trouble finding many prayers aimed only at taking away suffering. When Paul prays for the suffering Thessolonians, his prayer is that they are good witnesses in the midst of it; that their faith is strengthened (2 Ths.1:11-12). A plea for relief is nowhere to be found, but a promise for it *is* included in the eschatological encouragement preceding his prayers (vv.5-10).

So then, what is our proper response to suffering? Ought we pray for relief or healing? Of course! But, the effort must be framed in terms of a bigger priority: God's glory. Consider Christ's example as he predicted his torturous death on the cross (Jn. 12:27-30), or his agony in Gethsemane (Mt. 26:39-43). His first focus is God's glory and submission to His will. Our prayers for healing or relief should therefore start with the same focus: "God, be glorified; thy will be done. If it pleases you to bring relief, please do so quickly, only be glorified by it."

Suffering, as C.S.Lewis notes, is often God's megaphone. Within hard times, opportunities upon opportunities avail themselves to be redeemed to bring glory to our Creator. May this be our priority at all times, because God's strength is made perfect in our weakness (2 Cor. 12:8-10).

Coming in Part II: The broader categories of suffering.

Posted in [theology](#) | Tagged [eschatology](#), [healing](#), [prayer](#), [suffering](#) | [No Comments](#) »

[Older Posts »](#)

Blog at WordPress.com. | Theme: Mistylook by Sadish.

