

to tell that story from a Reformed Christian perspective, and they need to do so sooner rather than later.

ANDREW MUTTITT

Director
Wardell Graham Consulting
Johannesburg

Scot McKnight. *Five Things Biblical Scholars Wish Theologians Knew*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021.

Hans Boersma. *Five Things Theologians Wish Biblical Scholars Knew*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021.

The relation between biblical studies and dogmatics is the subject of a perennial debate often resembling a vicious circle: biblical exegesis needs a theological framework to avoid becoming a simple catalogue of mutually contradictory historical descriptions ... but theology must remain tethered to Scripture, taking into account the literary and historical contexts in which it was given. This discussion has been given fresh expression in two recent books, provocatively titled *Five Things Biblical Scholars Wish Theologians Knew*, by Scot McKnight, and *Five Things Theologians Wish Biblical Scholars Knew*, by Hans Boersma. Although written independently of each other, each author has read his counterpart's book and offers an introduction and friendly rejoinder.

The result is an invigorating conversation between two world-class and well-read theologians. Although no reader will be entirely convinced by either approach, the debate helps clarify the issues involved and points out where underlying problems can be located. The following review will summarize some major points of each book, highlight the strengths and weaknesses of each, and offer some concluding thoughts on the question.

McKnight begins by stating his fundamental position: "I am convinced that we must begin with the Bible, and we must let the Bible speak on its own, and we must cede to the Bible the categories it provides" (3). From this thesis, he develops five convictions, which he fleshes out in five chapters. Theology needs

- a constant return to Scripture,
- to know its impact on biblical studies,
- historically shaped biblical studies,
- more narrative,
- and to be lived theology.

Chapter one presents two typical approaches to Scripture, which McKnight calls “retrieval” and “expansive” models. The former basically defines theology as commentary on Scripture, the latter seeing the necessity of not merely explaining Scripture but expanding on it and building on its foundation. He then proposes a third way, which he calls the “integrative” approach, the two models not canceling each other out but forming “a dialectical relationship with each other, while the anchor is only tied to the Bible” (31). That this is not a thinly disguised “Bible only” approach becomes evident in the following chapters. McKnight shows the importance of the historical creeds for unlocking certain biblical insights, which, although firmly rooted in Scripture, are regularly missed by exegetes who eschew the strictures of systematic theology. At the same time, biblical studies can provide the systematic theologian with a more nuanced approach to revelation than classical formulations afford.

Chapter three shows the importance for theology to take its cue from the way Scripture itself defines terminology and logical categories such as sin, piety, and grace. Chapter four raises the question: What are the theological implications of the fact that the form God chose for revelation is not a handbook of doctrine but an unfolding historical narrative? As McKnight puts it, “What does how God speaks to us in the Bible tell us about doing theology?” (100). Wresting revelation from its narrative context and forcing it into a locus approach, warns McKnight, runs the risk of reducing the wealth of revelation to soteriological categories that neglect other important aspects of Scripture.

Of course, narrativity is not a panacea to a flattening approach to Scripture. However, realizing the story’s endpoint, for example, can give a clearer picture of its overall trajectory and priorities and provide room for the diversity of Scripture’s “actors” and various “scenes.”

In the final chapter, McKnight highlights his conviction—which should be shared by biblical theologians and systematicians alike—that theology and personal transformation are inseparable. McKnight concludes his book with a warning from Lauren Winner: “It is characteristic of modern academia that its participants get corrupted by pride; pride is a corruption that tells us something about what academia is” (147).

The theses McKnight advances correspond to a genuinely “felt need” often expressed by biblical scholars. He is, however, no opponent to systematic theology and brings into the conversation such varied theologians as John Calvin, Robert Jenson, and Katherine Sonderegger. He is well aware of the danger of reducing biblical studies—especially historical-critical studies—to merely historical research. There are quibbles: McKnight

spends a good deal of time showing examples of how recent exegesis can modify entrenched theological positions. *Five Things* sometimes reads like a “who’s who” or a laundry list of assorted exegetical tidbits. Furthermore, not all would agree with the value of some of the examples of recent biblical research or the implications they have for systematics. That being said, the examples are secondary to the book’s general thrust; focusing on them would detract from the positions McKnight presents and develops with cogency and clarity.

Boersma begins his book with a reminder of the Enlightenment distinction between dogmatics and biblical studies that, in practice, has driven a wedge between the two. It is this separation, says Boersma, that must be overcome. As he puts it,

The primary task of theology ... is not to explain the historical meaning of the text but to use the Scriptures as a means of grace in drawing the reader to Jesus Christ. In other words, biblical interpretation is not a historical discipline. To use a patristic expression, it is *mystagogical* in character. (6, italics in the text)

Like McKnight, Boersma develops his thesis in five chapters, which he states negatively:

- No Christ, No Scripture
- No Plato, No Scripture
- No Providence, No Scripture
- No Church, No Scripture
- No Heaven, No Scripture

While some of these are self-explanatory, others require explanation. Boersma underscores first of all his conviction that exegesis cannot be a self-contained discipline; its finality must be the living Christ who reveals himself through its pages. Scripture is thus, first of all, a “sacrament” leading to the living Christ. This means, for instance, that reading pre-Christian Scriptures christologically—as opposed to studying them as mere “historical documents”—is absolutely necessary. Boersma’s sacramental approach is most visible here. As he puts it, “For Christians, the Bible is Holy Scripture because it is a sacrament that renders Christ present. ... The books of the Bible obtain their status as Holy Scripture in relation to Christ” (38).

The second chapter will no doubt raise the most eyebrows. For Boersma, Scripture cannot be interpreted without a prior metaphysical lens that is necessarily Platonism, defined as reading Scripture in a way that is 1) antimaterialist, 2) antimechanist, 3) antinomialist, 4) antirelativist, and

5) antiskeptical. Of these five, Boersma focuses mostly on the third. As opposed to nominalism, Platonism begins not with the particulars of biblical data but with the universal, that is, Christ. Starting from the particulars tends necessarily toward mechanistic and materialist exegesis.

Chapter three raises the question of allegorical exegesis: just as one does not stop at Christ's humanity but seeks to look through it in order to contemplate his divine nature, so, claims Boersma, one must go beyond a literal understanding to reach the divine Logos who reveals himself in it. Authorial intent is thus of secondary importance. The text's meaning is not primarily what historico-grammatical exegesis can discern but what brings the reader to the living Christ.

Chapter four focuses on the role of tradition in exegesis. Rejecting the understanding of Protestant *sola Scriptura* in which tradition plays an ancillary role in interpretation, Boersma contends for a "two-legged approach" in which "church teaching must always be grounded in Scripture and tradition" (95), including the church's creeds and liturgy. This is true first because the canon of Scripture is connected with which books should be read in the church's liturgy.

Boersma's last chapter focuses on the "final end" of Scripture: not activity, which is penultimate, but "the heavenly contemplation of God in Christ" (113). In opposition to essentially this-worldly readings of Scripture (such as liberation theology), Boersma insists that Scripture cannot be made subservient to economic or political goals. Scripture fits us for eternal life.

Boersma's approach is richly documented and evidences a strong knowledge of the history of interpretation, in particular the period extending from the second to the seventh centuries. Each chapter raises points that exegetes will neglect to their own detriment. Having said that, this reviewer opines that Boersma raises as many questions as he answers. While a short review cannot deal with them all, several are worth touching on briefly.

One cannot but be struck, first of all, by what appears to this reviewer as false oppositions or unnecessary conclusions woven throughout the book: the purpose of exegesis is not to explain historical meaning *but* to lead to Christ (5); the eternal Logos identifies himself with human nature, *not* with a book (9); "Ur-platonism" is necessary because nominalism brackets out and excludes providence from interpretation (46). Some of these oppositions may stem from the fact that Boersma is interacting primarily not with generally evangelical or conservative biblical scholarship but with critical exegesis that treats Scripture as a merely human text. However, readers coming from a conservative standpoint may well feel that his criticism regularly speaks past them.

Second, Boersma's insistence on providence goes hand in hand with allegorical exegesis. If the God who sovereignly presided over the process of inscripturation is indeed the Triune God—so goes Boersma's reasoning—then one should logically be able to unearth Christ's presence in the Old Testament in ways that were not possible before Christ's advent. This begs the question of subjectivity in allegorical interpretation, which is often notoriously unverifiable when subjected to criteria based on the text itself. One could even conclude that such a position undercuts the very thesis Boersma seeks to establish. A strong doctrine of providence entails that divine inspiration ensured that biblical authors wrote what God intended. Yet, if *the true intent* is not what can be seen in the text itself but must be found in an allegorical or "hidden" meaning, one may well wonder why God's providence did not make this meaning more apparent to its original readers and hearers in the first place. Boersma's position is all the more striking, as Calvin himself, and most Protestant interpretation since, has rejected allegorical exegesis as going against the grain of Scripture as well as the doctrine of biblical "clarity" or "perspicuity." One could, in fact, fear in Boersma's approach an unintended denigration of human history—the very arena in which God chose to reveal himself and bring about salvation—not to mention Christ's humanity, which, far from being a mere means to the divine, is nothing less than the *locus* of human redemption.

For this reviewer, Boersma's approach raised the most questions in connection with his notion of Scripture as "sacrament." Part of the difficulty stems from the ambiguity of the term itself. At least in Reformation theology, the sacramental sign and the reality signified, while inseparable, are not identical. The bread *qua* bread in no way retains interest; it is only useful as a means by which Christ gives himself to believers. Applied to Scripture, does this mean that the original context and meaning of the text are unimportant, provided the text itself functions as a springboard to receiving Christ? While denying this, Boersma's position is not far from such a formulation. Boersma would no doubt reject the classical Barthian dichotomy "Scripture/Word of God." However, his sacramental terminology gives the appearance of running along parallel tracks.

As a New Testament exegete at home in Reformed theology, this reviewer found himself far more comfortable with McKnight's approach than with Boersma's. Beyond the details, both raise a double question for traditions holding to *sola Scriptura* as the touchstone of all theological construction: Is sacred Scripture—understood and interpreted in the context of the historical situations that gave birth to it—not merely the starting point of the

theological enterprise, but its constant resource and critic, as well as its final arbiter? Conversely, to the extent to which one is committed to the doctrine of Scripture as God’s inspired word and authoritative revelation, should not the biblical scholar expect a coherence and harmony to characterize Scripture, not merely in its overall message but also, to a large degree, in its discreet elements? In principle, the intended reader of the two books would answer both questions affirmatively, but there is a genuine tension between biblical and systematic disciplines in the way these questions come to bear on specific texts and specific doctrines.

As McKnight rightly emphasizes, each approach should inform the other. One cannot simply bracket off the “system” when doing exegesis. However, any theological enterprise taking its cue from *sola Scriptura*—as well as from the perspective of *semper reformanda*—must commit itself to a responsible, rigorous, and contextually sensitive understanding of the text. This could be seen as trying to fit a square peg into a round hole; however, a constant interplay between the two is the only means of avoiding a logical, as well as practical, conundrum: exegesis operates within the provisional bounds of the church’s teachings—which must themselves then be questioned and confirmed or, in some cases, revised in light of a more precise understanding of Scripture. Although this could seem unsettling from a confessional viewpoint, it is the only way of truly respecting the primacy of *sola Scriptura* and avoiding doctrinal stagnation. The great merit of McKnight’s and Boersma’s conversation is to highlight this truth and the ongoing interplay of both disciplines.

DONALD E. COBB

Professor of New Testament
Faculté Jean Calvin, Institut de théologie protestante et évangélique
Aix-en-Provence

Robert L. Wilken. *Liberty in the Things of God: The Christian Origins of Religious Freedom*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019.

The Presbyterian Church in America, like many Presbyterian and Reformed denominations, lays out in its Book of Church Order the fundamental preliminary principle that “God alone is Lord of the conscience and has left it free from any doctrines or commandments of men (a) which are in any respect contrary to the Word of God, or (b) which in regard to matters of