

# Reviews



**NUMBERS**, by Dennis T. Olson. Louisville: John Knox, 1996. Pp. xi + 196. \$22.00.

The book of Numbers is one of the most complex in the Old Testament. This can be seen in the variety of types of literature represented and the interweaving of law and narrative, which witnesses to a dynamic sense of law, as specific statutes emerge from specific life situations. From another angle, some of the texts in Numbers border on the bizarre, with talking donkeys, curses from a non-Israelite diviner turned into blessings that have messianic implications, the earth swallowing up people, bronze snakes that have healing powers, an almond-producing rod, an execution for picking up sticks on the sabbath, Miriam (but not Aaron!) turning leprous for challenging Moses' leadership, repulsive instructions for discerning a wife's faithfulness, and a judgment on Moses for very obscure reasons. One is tempted to claim that these strange goings-on were constructed to match the incredible response of the people of God to their redemption. To complicate these matters, God is often depicted in ways that challenge traditional understandings; at times it seems as if God's identity is in the process of being shaped too.

Dennis Olson, professor of Old Testament at Princeton Seminary (and a graduate of Luther Seminary), is a reliable and insightful guide through these and other complexities. While the difficulties of Numbers have discouraged commentators over the years, the last decade has seen an explosion of commentaries (Budd; Milgrom; Ashley; Levine; Sakenfeld). Olson's commentary, one of the last volumes to be published in the Interpretation series, differs somewhat from these other commentaries in the extent of his concern to address theological issues and link the book to modern realities. In this regard, he follows

the purpose of the series to be "both faithful to the text and useful to the church," writing "for those who teach, preach, and study the Bible in the community of faith."

Olson himself has contributed to this growing interest in Numbers with his earlier book, *The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New: The Framework of the Book of Numbers and the Pentateuch* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985). Olson discerns that the overarching structure of the book is laid out in terms of its two census lists. The first (chap. 1) catalogs the generation that experienced the exodus from Egypt and the giving of the law at Sinai. The people of God are now prepared to move toward the land of promise. When faced with the dangers of entering the land, however, the adults do not trust the promise; they experience God's judgment (14:32-33) and finally, in the wake of apostasy, a kind of golden calf revisited, die off in a plague (25:9). Even Moses and Aaron mistrust God and are prohibited from entering the land; only the faithful scouts, Caleb and Joshua, and the young (14:29) are allowed to do so (26:63-65). The oracles of Balaam (chaps. 22-24) provide a hopeful sign of things to come, as God blesses the insiders through this outsider. These oracles ironically gather the clearest references to the ancestral promises in Numbers; it is as if no Israelite, including Moses, retains sufficient stature to bring such a blessing.

The second census (chap. 26) lists the members of the new generation of God's people. This generation, a sign of God's continuing faithfulness to ancestral promises, will enter the promised land. The following texts (chaps. 27-36) lift up issues comparable to those taken up after the first census, but now focused on the future in the land. No deaths, no murmurings, no rebellions against the leadership are in view, and various hopeful signs are presented. This new generation is the audience for the book of Deuteronomy.

Olson's comments on two of the more difficult texts in Numbers are instructive. For example, in the case of the woman suspected of adultery (5:11-31) he notes that no amount of theological work can "erase the problematic portrayal of women and the inequitable human marriage relationship implied by the sole focus on the husband's jealousy...other texts of Scripture provide sounder principles and paradigms for the relationship of males and females" (38-39). In the case of Miriam (but not Aaron) becoming leprous (12:1-16), "The unfairness of Miriam's burden of suffering continues to find echoes in cultures where women...suffer greater abuse than their male counterparts." Yet, in chapter 20, "the figure of Miriam will ultimately be granted equality with her two brothers, co-leaders of the people of Israel" (74-75).

One might wish that Olson had more fully discussed the complicating nature of God's involvement in these and other texts. For example, it was God himself who commanded the woman's ordeal in chapter 5. What does that say about the kind of God the text presents, one who instructs Israel in "problematic" and "inequitable" terms? On what grounds is this divine command so evaluated and set aside? Or, what of the claim of "unfairness" regarding God's judgment on Miriam? I am sympathetic with Olson's direction of thought on these matters, but on what grounds does he bring a judgment against the text, and the text's portrayal of God?

As one of the world's experts on Numbers, and one with considerable theological sophistication at his disposal, I hope that Olson will pursue some of these theological issues in another publication.

Olson's theological sensitivity is especially evident in his description of the overarching concerns of the book and their links with the modern world. This can be seen, for example, in his use of "the wilderness" as "a powerful metaphor for describing the experience of many people and communities" (1). Or, Numbers struggles with strategies for transferring the faith from one generation to another (7). Or, Numbers is concerned again and again with issues of "boundaries": "The conflicts and struggles over these boundaries create in the book of Numbers a kind of dialogical

theology, an ongoing and unsettled dialogue of varied voices" (7).

Should you decide to take a journey through the wilderness of Numbers, perhaps as an accompaniment to your own journey this volume will be a thoughtful and reliable guide.

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**HEARING THE NEW TESTAMENT: STRATEGIES FOR INTERPRETATION**, edited by Joel B. Green. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, and Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1995. Pp. 444.

In the early 1970s, James Smart's *Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church* argued that historical-critical approaches had made reading the Bible more complex and thereby distanced it from the average reader. Over the last two decades a chorus of voices has arisen, not all of them sharing Smart's same "churchly" concerns, reciting the inadequacies of historical criticism and proposing alternative interpretive approaches. Interpreters of the NT today thus find themselves in the new situation that Anthony Thiselton in "New Testament Interpretation in Historical Perspective," essay two in this collection, describes as one of two great "paradigm shifts" in NT interpretation: in the eighteenth century toward a "single preoccupation with historical method," and in the late twentieth century toward a "methodological pluralism" (10). Part of this latter shift has been the growing recognition of the impossibility of neutral or "objective" at a distance reading that certain forms of historical criticism promised, and instead what editor Joel Green describes as the "growing recognition that we bring with us to the table of inquiry our own backgrounds, commitments, and traditions" (414). Furthermore, these presuppositions we bring are not to be regarded as meaningless or irrelevant, but it is to be thought necessary and desirable that these "ideologies, traditions of interpretation, and interpretive communities" be recognized and made to stand under the spotlight of evaluation and comparison so that

their reliability and faithfulness both to the texts under consideration and to the life experiences of the interpreters may be explored (415). Unfortunately, though such examination may promise to involve the reader more closely with the text of scripture and thereby to overcome its “distance” or “silence,” the real experience of many is of a “pluralism” of competing presuppositions or approaches of differing readers and aims. The effect has been a sense of professionalization or specialization that makes reading the Bible today seem perhaps an even more complex, difficult, and esoteric enterprise for the lay, clergy, or professional reader.

This collection of essays bears witness to that complexity while at the same time seeking to assist the appropriate “hearing” or “reading” of the New Testament through appropriation of the various perspectives presented. In two essays that frame the whole, editor Joel Green underscores his concern that all the various perspectives employed combine to emphasize reading the NT as a “transformative act” (411). Since “methodological imperialism is passing from the scene” and no one interpretive method can any longer claim to provide the “authentic understanding of any given NT text,” the goal is rather, within a “community of interpretation,” to “outline something of the range of questions that might be posed to particular texts and to demonstrate how different interpretive aims rely on different interpretive tools” (6-9). The essays in this volume, some more directly than others, together acknowledge that “subjective” perspectives are important in the “attempt to explore how it is that we may engage in faithful and transformative readings of the NT” (6).

Reflecting contemporary interpretive discussions, Green helpfully characterizes the perspectives offered in the essays included according to their location of meaning primarily “behind,” “in,” or “in front of” the text. “Behind the text” essays—i.e., more traditional issues of historical setting or world of the author—include perspectives offered by history of traditions, social science, Jewish texts, Greco-Roman literature and culture, and textual criticism; “in

the text” essays—i.e., more recent generally literary approaches—include perspectives from modern linguistics, discourse analysis, genre analysis, use of the OT in the New, narrative criticism, and rhetorical criticism; and “in front of the text” essays—i.e., those placing emphasis on the role of the reader and the recognition that different readers read differently—include perspectives on presuppositions in NT study, the reader, global perspectives, and feminist hermeneutics. Two further essays explore perspectives offered by consideration of canon and the inseparability of NT theology and ethics. Of course there is recognition throughout that the lines between all these approaches are not absolute. In practice they interact, converse with, and supplement one another.

I commend the essays here—twenty in all—as a most helpful summary of or introduction to crucial issues in the current discussion and practice of NT interpretation. They are not easy reading, in part because they are challenging and stimulating. For if interpretation is not neutral or objective, then its practice places not only our methods of reading and their appropriateness, but also and more importantly us as readers, interpreters, and witnesses, under scrutiny. A crucial feature of this collection in this regard is that the editor keeps at the forefront the concern that these essays assist the reader to that faithful reading of the scriptures through which we seek and expect to hear a transforming word of God for the present community of faith. “The texts of the NT were formed in the cauldron of community formation and witness; as a consequence, interpretation of those texts that does not lead to vital discipleship and mission hardly has a claim to being *New Testament* interpretation” (413). For pressing this concern this volume is to be commended. To keep this perspective to the fore, it may be helpful for the reader to read the first and last essays first.

Finally, two features of the essays in this volume add greatly to their effectiveness. The fact that each of the authors was asked to demonstrate how the method under discussion would work itself out when applied to one or more of a set of designated NT texts allows practical comparison of the

fruits of the approaches described. Second, for the reader who wishes to explore further the perspectives introduced here, each essay concludes with an annotated list of works the author regards as the best guides for the journey.

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**THE BIBLE IN MODERN CULTURE: THEOLOGY AND HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHOD FROM SPINOZA TO KÄSEMANN**, by Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995. Pp. 282.

This is an excellent study of the relationship between historical criticism of the Bible and Christian theology. If historical criticism sought to show how biblical texts are products of their time, Harrisville and Sundberg show in a fresh and stimulating way how historical criticism was the product of its time. Especially important in this book are the correlations made between biblical interpretation and political life.

The authors show that we contend with a war between worldviews. The inherited worldview of the western church depended on the theology of Augustine. Augustinian theology takes a dark view of the human condition. It emphasizes that divine grace is needed to overcome the sin inherent in human nature and it often fosters a spirituality that is distrustful of the world. Moreover, since people are sinful they are understood to need the restraints provided through the God-given authority of government and church. During the enlightenment, a more optimistic view of human nature emerged. This view insists that grace is not opposed to nature but that it inheres in nature, and one's goal is to produce a good life here on earth. This worldview was connected with the emergence of liberal political philosophy and the ascendancy of sovereign nation states over institutional Christianity. After the reformation and the wars of religion ended with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, the needs of civil order were considered more important than commitments to absolute

religious claims. After decades of religious warfare, many came to view religious passion as a danger rather than a virtue. Earthly existence became its own end and the legitimacy of a government was determined by its ability to protect property and to encourage opportunity, not by its ability to propagate true faith.

One of the chief architects of modern biblical criticism was Baruch Spinoza (died 1677), who although Jewish in origin eventually relinquished ties with organized religion. Spinoza wrote a treatise that was at once a defense of liberal democracy and the first extended presentation of biblical criticism. He argued that human beings are driven by passions and that passions breed superstition. He identified dogmatic Christianity with superstition and true Christianity with universal moral characteristics like love, joy, peace, temperance, and honest dealing with all people. Spinoza made a fundamental distinction between the truth and the meaning of a text. "Truth" concerns matters of universal significance which can be discerned by reasonable people in all times and places. "Meaning" refers to the cultural expressions that are bound to time and place. The result was that miracles and prophecies are matters of meaning, not truth; and truth is what agrees with the autonomous biblical critic who is free of dogmatic commitments.

The motivation for historical criticism of the Bible is clear. It is a primary means to free society from the destructive force of religious passion. That is to say, the purpose of this new exegesis is not proclamatory or dogmatic, but political...By undercutting religious passion, Spinoza encourages doubt. From doubt, Spinoza believes there will spring the social good of tolerance. (45)

Subsequent chapters take up some of the leading practitioners of historical criticism. All but one are German. Biographical sketches of each figure are accompanied by a summary of their contribution to the discussion and an evaluation of their work. The scholars show something of the diversity among historical critics. Some are the direct heirs to the Enlightenment pattern set by Spinoza while others attempt to use the insights of historical study in a manner

consistent with theological work in the classic Augustinian mode.

Those who followed most directly in the footsteps of Spinoza were Hermann Samuel Reimarus and David Friedrich Strauss, who understood historical criticism to be a way to nullify the political power of those who used the Bible to legitimate their authority. Spinoza and Reimarus moved toward a deistic rational religion, but in the nineteenth century there emerged a liberally minded Christian elite that was less hostile to the tradition. Friedrich Schleiermacher interpreted the Bible in terms of a romantic devotion to feeling, while Strauss and F. C. Baur did so through use of the Hegelian dialectic that sought to discover the One or Absolute that lies beyond all division and differentiation. Ernst Troeltsch in turn sought to explain faith through psychology and philosophy.

The use of historical criticism in the service of the church and its tradition was done by confessional neo-pietists like J. C. K. von Hofmann who protested the cultural hegemony of enlightenment ideas in German university life and among its clergy. He developed a way to conceive of salvation history in a manner that would comfort the believer with the assurance of grace. Another figure was J. Gresham Machen, who worked in an environment in which historical criticism no longer fought the establishment but served the new establishment of liberal theology and a secularized middle class in which religion was intellectualized and privatized. Machen stressed the "otherness" of Jesus and warned against attempting to resymbolize the biblical proclamation of the lordship of Christ into some other idea. Rudolf Bultmann and Ernst Käsemann also stand in this stream of biblical criticism. They made radical investigations into the claims of scripture, but understood that their work was inextricably connected to the proclamation of the word of God to human beings in rebellion against God.

There have been many accounts of the emergence of biblical criticism, but Harrisville and Sundberg make a distinctive contribution in allowing us to see so clearly the social function of the method. We live in a time of changing patterns of interpretation, and many are quick either to defend or dis-

miss historical criticism as a tool. Harrisville and Sundberg neither propose a new paradigm for biblical studies nor allow for a facile rejection of the enlightenment or Christian tradition. What they do is to call us to listen patiently to what our forebears have done in order that we might better understand the tensions with which we live. "Each generation of biblical scholars has too easily assumed that it has achieved the consummate approach to biblical analysis when, in fact, what it has done is to equate cultural norms with eternal truth" (3). This is as true today as it has ever been, and as we move into the future, this book prompts all interpreters of the Bible to ask who is being served by the methods we use.

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**IMAGING THE WORD: AN ARTS AND  
LECTIONARY RESOURCE**, Volume  
2, edited by Susan A. Blain. Cleveland:  
United Church Press, 1995. Pp. 278.

A resource unlike any other, *Imaging the Word* will serve as a significant and helpful tool for pastors and laity alike. Each volume matches the Sunday lectionary reading with visual and literary images that complement and expand on the assigned reading for the day. The images and writings are fresh, compelling, provocative, and powerful. The editors have carefully chosen works from a variety of places, times, and artists. One of the greatest strengths is their careful collection and use of images and writings from many cultures. One cannot help but be moved by a depiction of the ascension done by an Indonesian artist or a representation of the tree of Jesse by a Native American artist.

Though *Imaging the Word* is published by the United Church Press and was designed for use with their curriculum, it can readily be used in a variety of contexts and settings. Pastors will appreciate new sermon ideas that come from seeing different images alongside familiar texts. Christian educators will find that the pictures and readings enhance teaching church school

or leading Bible studies. Worship planning committees will find new ideas as they design and develop worship experiences. And families and individuals will find it a delightful addition to personal devotions or study of the scriptures.

Wise pastors and church leaders realize that their parishioners live in a highly visual world. This book reminds us that it is not only advertisers and the media who can employ images for their purposes. From Rembrandt's *Doubting Thomas* to Chagall's *Moses Receiving the Tablets of the Law*, the church has used visual images for centuries to convey its message. By using images like those found in this book we enter the text at two levels, with our eyes and with our ears. Even if you don't agree with the interpretation of a particular artist or writer you will be drawn in to the text and prompted to reflect upon it.

The artists used are many and varied, including familiar names such as Goya, Giotto, Rembrandt, Picasso, Gauguin, Chagall, and Michaelangelo. Media range from paintings, photographs, and catacomb art to sculpture. Writers from diverse backgrounds are also well represented, including Henri Nouwen, Madeleine L'Engle, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, St. Francis of Assisi, Brian Wren, Fred Craddock, Paul Tillich, Miriam Therese Winter, Walter Brueggemann, Kathleen Norris, and Martin Luther. One also finds the prayers of religious communities from around the world.

One of the most helpful features of this work is the gathering of a number of resources around each Sunday reading so that the reader can easily move from the scripture passage to several artistic and literary pieces that illustrate the assigned text. For example, on Palm/Passion Sunday we can read the appointed text from Matthew 21, see Giotto's *Entry into Jerusalem*, read "The Covenant of Peace—A Liberation Prayer," study the artist José Faustino Altramirano's *Blessed is He*, and read pieces written by Madeleine L'Engle, Natalie Sleeth, or Rubén Ruiz (168-171). These respective artists and writers all expand on the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. By the time the reader has studied, read, looked, and compared the pieces, the text's meaning has been multiplied by each entry and depiction. The contrasting artis-

tic works add to the richness by interpreting the same biblical story in different ways.

Luke 14, the Gospel reading for Pentecost 13, provides another example. "Jesus said also to the person who had invited him, 'When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brother or your sister or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite those who are poor, crippled, lame and blind.'" The editors have assembled three powerful visual pieces for the reader. The first, *The Picnic* by Jack Baron, is a brightly colored painting that depicts a birthday party complete with a cake and gifts. The second visual piece, a black and white photograph of three young children, is entitled *Tea Party* and is done by Kathryn Abbe. The final piece, a familiar one, is Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks* (22-25). With poignant words the editors interpret Hopper's piece for the viewer,

The alienation of modern urban life is suggested in Hopper's *Nighthawks*. The shadowy apartment buildings and shopfronts in the background appear gloomy and silent; the only light seems to be coming from the all-night diner. The weariness and passivity of the patrons contrast with the energy of the soda jerk who serves them, as he creates a space of hospitality in a threatening, lonely city. (25)

In four pages the image of a banquet is envisioned through the colorful warmth of a birthday party, in the simplicity of a child's tea party, and through the hospitality of a counter waiter in an otherwise lonely and isolated scene. Whether used for preaching or in a children's sermon, the contrasting pieces spark our imagination.

The United Church of Christ has provided us with a beautiful, artistic, and deeply spiritual publication, all at a very reasonable price. *Imaging the Word* would be a most helpful addition to any church or pastor's library, or for anyone who loves scripture and wishes to find new ways to explore the beloved and timeless texts of the lectionary.

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**THE PREACHER KING: MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. AND THE WORD THAT MOVED AMERICA**, by Richard Lischer. New York and Oxford: Oxford University, 1995. Pp. xiv + 344.

Initially, we suppose that Richard Lischer's book about Martin Luther King, Jr., will be a "rational account of King's prowess as a speaker and preacher of the gospel" (vii). Indeed, such an account does unfold in the succeeding narrative. This fascinating book has come almost to its end before the author unobtrusively inserts a pun that has been brewing for more than 250 pages. All along we thought we were learning about King the preacher (and we do), but after examining King's dramatic career, Lischer drops the other shoe. He lists the cohort of great preachers in the civil rights movement—Ralph Abernathy, Andrew Young, Jesse Jackson, Jim Bevel, among many others—and then says, "If these preachers were the princes of the Movement, Martin was the *preacher king*" (254, emphasis added).

Lischer deftly works out this paronomasia: we come to understand the career of the preacher King at the same time we come to appreciate that, of his generation, he is also the "preacher king." Surprisingly, King's years of preaching were comparatively few. He was born in 1929, was called to his first pastorate in Montgomery in 1954, and was assassinated in 1968. His time in the pulpit lasted a scant fourteen years.

A strong sense of heritage guided King; he liked to refer to himself as the son, grandson, and great-grandson of Baptist preachers (28). As the scion of this great tradition, King saw two lines reaching into the past: the Sustainers—those who ministered to the spiritual needs of enslaved and segregated people—and the Reformers—those who were willing to raise hell for the freedom of the race. In addition to the lifelong influence of his minister father, (King's "filial piety never wavered" [47]), King owed his early training to several respected African-American preachers of the mid-twentieth century: William Holmes Borders, Sandy Ray, and Gardner C. Taylor, each of whom Lischer discusses.

Lischer also traces the influence of

King's mentor at Crozer, J. Pius Barbour, on King's thinking and homiletical style. Something else that figured significantly in this period of preparation was the liberal protestantism of Walter Rauschenbusch and Reinhold Niebuhr. "Young King [learned] his lesson well, so well that he would intellectually engage the claims of the Western Christian tradition and graduate first in his class, the only student to be granted honors in his comprehensive examinations (at Crozer Seminary)" (52).

It was in 1955, when King was only twenty-six and still in his first pastorate in Montgomery, Alabama, that he delivered what has come to be known as the Holt Street Speech, which catapulted him to national prominence. In this speech the preacher King summarized the mood of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. He drew on the teachings of Jesus and merged Christian doctrine with the rhetorical style of the black preaching tradition. It was in this speech, says Lischer, that the civil rights movement was born.

In his detailed analysis of the Holt Street Speech (85-89), Lischer establishes the pattern that he follows for the rest of his book. Most of the time he arranges the texts of King's sermons in the format of blank verse poetry. Some justification exists for this device, since "Martin Luther King was the product of a preaching tradition that valued originality of effect above originality of composition. The United States is honeycombed with little clapboard Holiness and Baptist churches whose part-time preachers are the last folk poets in the land" (114). Lischer, of course, regards King as the poet laureate of this body of preachers.

In his narrative Lischer refers to or analyzes over twenty of King's sermons, many of which King repeated and developed over his preaching career. One of King's set pieces, "The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life," receives much attention. Since King preached this sermon repeatedly, changing it over time, we get a glimpse of the preacher king's oratorical development. Because Lischer was able to do his research by listening to recordings of King's speeches—recordings made, ironically, by spies and detectives in King's audiences—he is able to base his analysis on

exact accounts of King's words. Without these recordings, such analysis as Lischer's would probably not be possible.

But with the recordings, we can recapture not only the sense of poetry, but also a sense of rhythm. In his chapter on the strategies of King's style Lischer tries to analyze what it was in his preaching that captured and maintained listener attention. King's "high style included both unfamiliar and highly resonant words that he sculpted into careful patterns of balance, antithesis, and climax. He played with alliteration, assonance, metaphor, and internal rhyme, and allowed himself and his audiences to drink deeply of the pleasures of repetition until they laughed and clapped in amazement. 'I like the *way* he's saying it,' his hearers said" (120).

African-American preaching relies on tonal nuances which Lischer compares to the music of Ray Charles. The reader gets some of that lyrical quality in the many lengthy quotes from sermons spread throughout the book. King's unself-conscious poetry was meant to be heard. It cannot fully be captured in a written text, but anyone who has seen film clips of Martin Luther King will hear the preacher's intonation in a quote such as the following:

Through our airplanes, we've dwarfed  
dis-tance  
and placed time [*t-i-i-i-ahm*] in chains  
(134)

Such words (like all preaching, really) were meant to be heard, not read.

While Lischer's book is primarily about the preaching of the preacher King, it touches other things as well. For instance, the author talks about the linguistic building blocks of effective speech, such as alliteration, assonance, and anaphora. Through the medium of the preached word he provides a spoken history of the civil rights movement during the mid-years of this century. He listened closely to people talking about God at work in their lives and the life of the nation, as the sixty-seven pages of notes and bibliography attest. This reading and listening must have been a prodigious undertaking. In comparing the language of Malcolm X with Martin Luther King, for example, the author reports: "Malcolm's language was peppered

with imperatives and sarcastic rhetorical questions. More than 90 percent of the sentences in Kings' published sermons are declarative; only 22.5 percent are openly imperative" (154).

The overall effect of *The Preacher King* is impressive, even though Lischer's descriptions of King may occasionally be a little effulgent for some readers. Throughout the text the preacher king is compared more than once to the King of Kings—as well as to Moses, Paul, Origen, Abraham Lincoln, and even Billy Graham. Furthermore, Lischer places a very kind interpretation on King's dependence on previous sources (which some regard as plagiarism) as 'bo-

rowing'—something, in actuality, nearly every preacher does from time to time.

Whether or not one agrees entirely with Lischer's heroic assessment of King, this is a splendid book which should stimulate anyone who practices the art and craft of preaching. This homiletical biography should also appeal to anyone, even non-preachers, who wishes to find insights into a turbulent period of American history, one which still confronts us with unfinished business. It might be said that King preached the same sermon over and over. The plot of that sermon was always Exodus, while the key was always love. But the preacher King was the preacher king because he knew how to ring changes on those themes to make them resonate in the hearts of his listeners, black as well as white. In one of his great set pieces, "Great...But," King reiterates why human beings fall short because there is always a *but* in the way. The ecstatic climax to that sermon can only be hinted in written form, but it can still ring in the inward ear.

"When I delve into the inner chambers of  
my own being,  
When I delve into the life of mankind,  
I don't end up saying with the Pharisee,  
'I thank thee Lord that I'm not like other  
men,'  
but I end up saying, "Lord [pronounced  
*Law-ah-aw-awd*]  
be *mer-ciful* to me a sinner."  
[*Amen. Go ahead!* great excitement]...  
We must open our lives to him; let him  
work through  
Jesus Christ our being.  
And he can remove that *but* from our  
lives." (140)

Such preaching really should be heard rather than read. But, for those who do not have access to the tapes of King's preaching, Lischer's book will give profound pleasure and almost evoke the power of the word proclaimed by King the preacher king.

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**A RABBI TALKS WITH JESUS: AN INTERMILLENNIAL, INTERFAITH EXCHANGE**, by Jacob Neusner. New York: Doubleday, 1994. Pp. 154.

What if a modern rabbi were able to engage Jesus directly concerning Jesus' interpretation of the Torah? What if he or she could sit at Jesus' feet on that mountain in Galilee on which, according to Matthew's gospel, he preached his most famous sermon? In this work, the prolific and always provocative Jacob Neusner gives us his picture of what such an encounter might look like, and has produced in the process a very significant and challenging stimulus to Jewish-Christian conversation.

In Neusner's view, relations between Jews and Christians have at long last entered a stage in which genuine dialogue between the sibling faiths might become possible. Throughout most of the troubled relationship, Jews have been on the defensive, defined in terms of what they do not believe, their right to define Judaism on its own terms denied them by the overwhelming force of (western) Christian culture. He considers this book to be an invitation to a substantive dialogue between traditions of equal standing, a dialogue "addressed to issues of truth and falsity, right and wrong in the service of God" (153).

It is important to note that Neusner at least partially avoids the obvious anachronism of evaluating Jesus through the lens of the tradition that only later became definitive of Judaism (i.e., the rabbinic tradition) by conversing not with a scholarly reconstruction of Jesus, but with the Christ embraced by believing Christians (xiii; 147). He has chosen Matthew's portrait of Jesus because he feels it is the natural place for Jews and Christians to listen to Jesus together: Jesus explicitly places his teaching in relation to the Torah of Israel (Matt 5:17-20), and presents assertions which can be and are meant to be examined and debated (as he notes, "How do you argue with a miracle?"—or the empty tomb? [146]). He takes Jesus' reading of the Torah as an argument for how it ought ultimately to be understood—indeed, its "fulfillment"; it is an argument which, in Neusner's view, merits and demands a response.

The modern rabbi does not hold the

reader long in suspense regarding his ultimate response to Jesus' teaching: Neusner is compelled to offer a "polite but unapologetic dissent," for at important points Jesus' teachings contradict the Torah, and "where Jesus diverges from the revelation by God to Moses at Mount Sinai, he is wrong, and Moses is right" (xii). Or, as he puts it near the end of the book, "much set forth in fulfillment of the Torah [by Matthew's Jesus] in fact either violates the clear teaching and intent of the Torah, or offers a religious message inferior to that of the Torah as Israel reads the Torah" (147). The main body of the book lays out in eight brief chapters the grounds for this dissent.

Neusner's first objection turns not so much on the substance of Jesus' teachings as on their *form* and *audience*. In some of the so-called "antitheses" of Matt 5:21-48, Neusner sees Jesus doing what the rabbis have always done: building a "fence around the Torah," heightening its demands to minimize the risk of transgression (24ff.). But Jesus departs radically from rabbinic tradition when he places himself above the Torah: "But I say to you...," and addresses his teaching not to the "eternal Israel" of Sinai, but to those who do *his* will. Neusner understands this as an either-or proposition. If some of Jesus' disciples had approached him after this sermon and invited him to join them, Neusner's response would have been "If I go with you, I leave God" (35).

Indeed, Neusner finds that on many fundamental issues Jesus forces such a choice between his own word and the Torah's: Jesus' individual call to drop all and follow him in order to make God's kingdom and righteousness one's reason for being contradicts the Torah's clear demand that family and community are to be the context in which one fulfills God's will ("Honor your father and mother" vs. "Do not think that I have come to bring peace" [chap. 3]). Jesus claims lordship over the Sabbath, and that in him one finds rest (Matt 11:28), but the Torah sees the Sabbath and its regulations as an island of time set aside for divine-human encounter, and as an indispensable piece of Israel's identity and self-understanding ("Remember the Sabbath..." [chap. 4]). Jesus demands of the

rich young man perfection beyond the ten commandments (Matt 19:16-22), which means selling all he has and following Jesus, while the Torah demands holiness, defined precisely as the keeping of the commandments (chap. 5). Jesus' call to leave everyday existence in home and family for a higher righteousness contravenes the rabbis' reading of Torah, which sees God concerned for the sanctification, the making holy, of just that everyday reality (chap. 6). Finally, Jesus appears categorically to subordinate the ritual demands to the moral (e.g., Matt 15:10ff.), while the Torah admits of no such distinction (chap. 7).

In his concluding chapter, Neusner asserts that, finally, Judaism and Christianity present two opposing conceptions of what Heaven wants: membership in a community whose attention is directed to bringing heaven into the here and now, the sanctification of real, lived life; or individual preparation for an other-worldly kingdom, an orientation to a future event which relegates all earthly concerns to penultimate status (140ff.).

Thus Neusner's dissent revolves around some fundamental issues, to say the least. One hopes that in other contexts he will receive more fully the "compliment" he desires: to be argued with. His central objections to Christianity as an interpretation of the Mosaic Torah—its concern for the individual and its flight from the here and now—demand careful consideration on the part of Christians, but also response both from the standpoint of his reading of Matthew as well as from other voices in the Christian tradition. But in any case it is extremely valuable for Christians to hear how Jesus "sounds" to another interpretive tradition.

In a sense, Neusner circumvents (though is well aware of) the central problem facing Jews and Christians in conversation about the Torah: the foundation of the Christian faith is an experience which caused a rereading of Israel's Torah in its light; faithful Christians cannot *but* understand Jesus—including his interpretation of the Torah—in the light of the empty tomb. In other words, has Neusner really found, even in Matthew's Jesus, a place

where the issue to be debated (Torah) truly is common?

But perhaps the most valuable thing about Neusner's book, which should put it on every Christian's list, is that Christians can see and experience Judaism presented not as the unenlightened, decaying misunderstanding of the true meaning of Torah, over against which Jesus' message appears obviously superior, but as a living, authentic, passionately held alternative to the Christian reading. In other words, we see Judaism not in terms of what it lacks, but in

terms of what it offers: a people called into existence to bear witness to God through a particular way of life, and a clear picture of the continuing faithfulness of that people's God. Christians need to begin to define Judaism in this way, as challenging as that might be, and Neusner's book is an excellent place to start.

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