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The CRESSET is published seven times during the academic year, September through June, by the Valparaiso University Press as a forum for ideas and informed opinion. The views expressed are those of the writers and do not necessarily reflect the preponderance of opinion at Valparaiso University. Manuscripts should be addressed to the Editor and accompanied by return postage. Letters to the Editor for publication are subject to editing for brevity. The Book Review Index and the American Humanities Index list Cresset reviews. Second class postage is paid at Valparaiso, Indiana. Regular Subscription rates: one year – $8.50; two years–$14.75; Student subscription rates: one year – $4; single copy – $7.50. Entire contents copyrighted 1995 by the Valparaiso University Press, Valparaiso, Indiana 46383, without whose written permission reproduction in whole or in part for any purpose whatsoever is expressly forbidden.

Cover: Reinhold Marxhausen, American b. 1922 (VU’50). UNTITLED (CHURCH), n.d., gelatin silver photographic print, 9-7/8 x 8 inches. VUMA. Gift of the artist. 95.7.9

Back cover: Reinhold Marxhausen, American b. 1922. LANDSCAPE, n.d., stainless steel, 11-1/4 x 7-3/4 inches. VUMA. Gift of the artist. 95.7.11. These works were included in the VUMA's Reinhold Marxhausen Retrospective Exhibition during the winter of 1996, part of the VUMA Inaugural Year celebration of VU student and alumni art and artists.

Now retired, Marxhausen founded the art department at Concordia College, Seward, Nebraska, exhibited his art widely, and accepted numerous commissions including two eighteen foot high mosaic murals in the Nebraska State Capitol building. A pioneer in the development of sound sculpture, Marxhausen is perhaps best known for his inspirational presentations demonstrating creative seeing, thinking and making.
Green and Pleasant

A Handelsman drawing in a recent New Yorker shows a man addressing the Speaker of the House with these words, "I'd like to propose a bill to the effect that we can remain freshmen indefinitely." I can't imagine it put any better. Though I know very few congressional representatives, I've known a great many college freshmen over the years, and I'd say that the tendency to refer to newly elected representatives as freshmen is remarkably apt.

Freshmen are in many ways appealing, in small doses. They believe that they know almost everything; they believe that paying attention in a few classes and taking good notes will fill in those last remaining blank spaces in their knowledge banks, and then—look out, world! Their confidence in their own understanding is immense, leading them to pronounce on large and complex issues as though a strongly-held opinion were self-validating if held strongly enough. They are enthusiastic about the things they care about, and apathetic to the point of catalepsy on things they don't. They are certain that the reason for the institution in which they find themselves is their own experience there. They believe that almost anything on tv is important because it is on tv. They write all the time about how demanding it is for the first time in their lives really to have to worry about a budget, and making money last in order to pay for a lot of things they never before thought of as costing money, like laundry or telephone calls. They are gregarious and they enjoy slogans, group appearances and beer.

Really, up until the laundry and the beer, I'd say the resemblance is uncanny. Of course, however much they want to be freshmen forever, first year college students usually turn into sophomores. And some of the time, one can see them turning into thoughtful people, right before your eyes. Recently, on a midterm exam, one freshman student wrote, "I chose this question thinking I had an answer, but the more I think and write, the more my clear cut answer fades away." How I would love to read that in a press release from a politician!

Of course it is true that politicians cannot luxuriate, as collegiate students may, in speculation and reflection. Enjoying the play of ideas—watching them and indeed manipulating them as they fade from clear cut to unshapely and then back again—is indeed a luxury. Representatives have to vote, and so far, votes have to be yea or nay. But I would like to be represented by someone who could say, "I used to think I had an answer, but the more I think and write..."

More and more often, one hears that the American voter feels that members of Congress "do not represent my interests." One wonders what people have in mind when they make that statement. I don't think there is anyone in the congress who represents my interests as a 55-year-old Lutheran woman English teacher/editor with a husband and four grown children, living in the Midwest, addicted to reading, modestly fond of good scotch, and capable of being driven crazy by a perfect sentence. Does this mean that my interests as an American citizen are not being represented? How shall we recover enough commonality to feel ourselves represented in terms of our participation in the common good?

Thoughtful Americans are writing a lot of sentences about a loss of the concept of "the common good." In a class whose subject is university life and how it helps us to learn, I have introduced this topic, partly through the students' required attendance at a lecture by Jean Bethke Elshtain, in which she reiterated the critique raised in her recent book Democracy on Trial.

These freshmen insisted that she was making too much out of nothing. "No problem," they said, "you can do what you want unless a law stops you." Well, I asked, how many of you walked across the newly-planted ground around the Arts Center on your way to class? Every one contributed some version of this rationale: "well, I know you're not supposed to, because it's probably bad for the grass, but I was late/1 needed to have a short-cut/it's closer to my dorm that way/there's no sign that you shouldn't/ I wouldn't do it unless I needed to...

But what if everybody's individual desire for convenience means that the grass will not grow?

"Well, they should make a rule, and try to stop us from crossing" was the universal answer. Does that make my students social-legislating Democrats or law-and-order Republicans? A lot might depend on how they defined the "they" in their request for a law. What seemed natural to them was to deny that the responsibility for the well-being of
the grass—the common good—was the responsibility of the individuals who could choose to walk over it or not. Do what is best for you until a law says you can’t. That’s the principle that seems clear cut to my freshmen at this point. They believe that this principle will produce the common good.

So far, it has produced a vast muddy place where grass seed will have to be re-planted. No easier than it has ever been, I suppose, to build Jerusalem in any green and pleasant land, especially with freshmen.

About this issue—

What book is more demanding of our attention and unease and love than the Bible? In this issue, writers and artists give us space to think about reading the Bible today. In a rich variety, Joel Kaminsky of St. Olaf College, James Voelz of Concordia Seminary-St. Louis and Marcia Whitney-Schenck of the magazine Christianity and the Arts provide thoughts and images for reflection. Columnist Vandersee muses and provokes with some suggestions for change. And film reviewer Fredrick Barton looks at a film that shows what it might mean to take the Bible seriously as a part of modern living.

Moving from winter into spring, the Church guides us toward Easter through the late snows and bitter gusts of Lent. No longer needing to brace ourselves against the attacks of cold, we’ll begin to feel the liberation of warmer days. A prayer for our celebration of Easter would ask that we be freed also from the deathly cold that makes us fear to live, and that in our rising we thank the God whose Word springs up again and again to liberate us.

Peace,

GME

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Eve and Adam

When they walked in the garden, it was the sound of her laughter that delighted him.
More than the velvet grass they came to rest on, and all that nature revealed, it was her scent that lingered with the man.
Even then, in innocence, he knew she belonged with the creatures and the earth more than he.
Maybe God was secretly pleased when she held the apple, while Adam, afraid but not surprised, waited.
With one bite she was shunned by angels, awakened by fire, and possessed with a strength of one who had changed the world.
She did not regret the moment as her body had tasted the beginnings of life within life, within life.

Mimi Hennessy
After receiving from Professor Kaminsky a critique provoked by his reading of a column from The Cresset in 1994, the editor felt that, although too late for a Letters column, the issues were important enough to address more broadly. I asked Professor Kaminsky to expand his original letter, and I have asked Professor Niedner, of the VU Department of Theology and member of The Cresset's Advisory Board to provide an introduction so as to remind readers about the original column and its place in several discussions of importance to the church today. The Editor

Professor Niedner's introduction—

As my teacher Robert Bertram would occasionally remind us, Christians have from their beginnings engaged in the strange habit of reading other peoples' mail. The apostle Paul sent letters to his friends in places like Corinth and Philippi, sometimes expressing himself on matters quite personal, and soon folks were circulating these letters all over the Mediterranean world. Christians who knew nothing of life in Corinth or Philippi read this mail as though it were addressed to them and spoke directly to their situations. Later on, someone writing under the name John wrote an encoded missive to persecuted friends who risked death by resisting the Roman demand for emperor worship. This strange letter promises Rome’s demise but covers its seditious intent by describing bizarre collections of beasts, seals, and angels, and it castigates not Rome, but the Great Whore Babylon. To this day people far removed in space, time, and culture from Roman death squads read this rambling epistle, assume they have cracked its code, and apply it to their own lives. Sometimes—and we don't need only to recall the Branch Davidians—disaster results.

In several important ways, once Christianity and Judaism parted company and the newer movement became almost solely a gentile phenomenon, continued use of the Jewish canon was a bit like appropriating someone else's family stories, photo albums, and correspondence and claiming them as one’s own. On one hand, these writings gave groups who had no sense of common identity a shared history and an idea of who and whose they were. Or as I Peter (2:10) says, borrowing from Hosea (2:23), “Once you were nobody, but now you’re somebody,” for now you have a story.

Adopting oneself into somebody else’s family, partly even against that somebody’s will, has multiple consequences for everyone involved and precipitates a host of potential dangers and difficulties. The original family members understandably take offense, for example, when the interlopers claim to know better than they do what the family's stories and sacred texts really mean. They bristle, too, when the new, self-proclaimed cousins decide whether and how to live by the family rules and proceed to follow some, ignore others, and completely reinterpret the rest.

In a September 1994 Cresset piece entitled “Living with Leviticus,” Maureen Jais-Mick, a professing gentile Christian, addressed some of the questions that arise when her fellow appropriators of Jewish legal tradition cite as authoritative some pieces of Torah but have no intention of taking others seriously. Specifically, she raised critical questions for those claiming to have the last, condemning word on issues related to homosexuality when they cite Leviticus 18:22, but who at the same time have no intention in faithfulness to the host of requirements and prohibitions which surround that text. One may read Jais-Mick’s as an

Joel S. Kaminsky teaches in the Department of Religion at St. Olaf College. This is his first appearance in The Cresset.
Professor Kaminsky's article—

Over the past year or two I have read several articles on the question of homosexuality and the church written by a variety of individuals who belong to different churches. In this article I would like to express my reactions to these conversations, taking as a departure point an article written from a liberal position, published in The Cresset in 1994. My attempt to analyze and critique this article and its presuppositions should not be construed as an endorsement of those who wish to exclude homosexuals from the church or society. My intention is rather to engage certain arguments put forth by those who claim that there is really no good biblical or theological reason to view homosexual behavior as a sin. It should be noted that the immediate motivation for writing on this topic was my realization that some of those who have defended the legitimacy of homosexuality have done so by arguing that such legislation is part of the cultic package of laws that was rightly rejected by Christianity. In doing so, they have taken a common path of portraying Judaism as a rigid and legalistic religion and have once again blamed it for any problematic materials found within the Christian tradition. This argument is wrongheaded from a Christian perspective not only because it endorses a type of anti-Judaic Marcionism but also because the New Testament contains passages that appear to support the ban on homosexuality found in Leviticus. From a Jewish perspective, this argument is flawed because it fundamentally misunderstands the Levitical laws attempting to drive a wedge between the ritual and ethical parts of Leviticus. Moreover, the argument provides at least the possibility of authorizing a latent anti-semitism.

In her column, Jais-Mick criticizes the tendency of certain conservative Christian thinkers to quote Leviticus 18:22 as evidence that God hates homosexuality while failing to abide by any other laws in Leviticus. In order to preclude the possibility that one of her opponents might argue that all those other laws might perhaps deserve greater attention, she mocks Levitical laws by representing them at the level of the ridiculous. Unfortunately, along the way she makes incorrect statements about the Levitical laws and, instead of viewing these laws sympathetically in their historical setting, opts to read them in an anachronistic and derisive fashion. The article demonstrates a way that Christians typically utilize aspects of the Hebrew legal codes, and in doing so touches on a serious theological problem which most Christians, to their detriment, continue to side-step. The result of such an article is that it convinces no one in the fundamentalist camp, while at the same time it manages to insult many Jews who continue to take the Levitical laws seriously.

The first type of error is nicely exhibited with the

all-or-nothing, take-it-or-leave-it ultimatum, and she seems to opt for leaving all and keeping nothing of the old rules, at least the ones in Leviticus.

In the responding essay which follows, Jewish scholar Joel Kaminsky points to a number of unfortunate implications which Jais-Mick's approach has for those who choose to follow seriously the whole of Leviticus. Observant Jews take understandable offense when Christians smugly or cavalierly scoff at things close to the heart of their spirituality and identity, especially when those very matters are part of the sacred canon Christians claim to honor. But Kaminsky's approach isn't exactly the opposite of Jais-Mick's, taking everything and leaving nothing, nor does he advocate simplistic readings of the ancient texts. Readers will notice, for example, that Kaminsky distinguishes between differing meanings of the same Hebrew word for "abomination" in Leviticus and Deuteronomy on grounds that different authors were involved who didn't necessarily use the same terms in identical ways. That, surely, would come as a surprise to the folks Jais-Mick wishes to criticize, who in turn might have thought they had an ally in Kaminsky, because such types generally hold that the sole author of the whole torah is God, and even Moses was merely God's amanuensis. If God switches the meanings of words from one book to another, then what does anything in the Bible finally mean?

All this points mostly directly to the excruciating complexities inherent in the moral questions which confront us today. We know more about some things than the ancients who handed down the torah to us, and so, for example, we no longer stone rebellious, incorrigible teens at the city gates as Deuteronomy 21:18-21 requires. (Sadly enough, we mostly just let them shoot each other dead.) But we would love nothing more than to avail ourselves of the deep wisdom which might lie behind the strictures of the ancient lawcodes. It would seem, finally, that we need to keep alive the tradition of finding and making halakah, which is Hebrew for a path, or way, and refers to a system of following torah which is simultaneously faithful but leads to life and community rather than isolation and death. Like Rabbis Hillel and Shammai of old—and here some would add Jesus—many good and earnest people today seek such ways through the dilemmas of our age, and among them are Maureen Jais-Mick and Joel Kaminsky. In hopes that continuing the conversation about living with Leviticus, and with our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, might lead to the most salutary halakah, The Cresset herewith offers another chapter in that discussion.

Frederick A. Niedner
words that eating any of the prohibited foods "is an abomination—the very same word used to describe one who lies with a man as with a woman." But this is incorrect, for the word abomination, "toebah," in Leviticus is only used in relation to certain sexual practices that are problematic. (The complete list is Lev. 18:22; 26, 27, 29, 30; 20:13.) It is true that Deut. 14:3 uses this word of prohibited foods, but that text is written by a different author who uses vocabulary in different ways. The problem here is that Leviticus uses a technical vocabulary whose words carry special meanings differing substantially from our usage. When something is said to be "unclean" that is not the same thing as saying it is detestable, nor as saying it is an abomination.

Furthermore the term "unclean" itself carries no ethical import in Leviticus. The purity laws in Leviticus are an attempt to recognize that humans sometimes experience a partial death or a type of imperfection that affects them in a concrete manner. Publicly acknowledging such ritual states is useful for the individual and the community. Thus the assertion that Leviticus discriminates against women because women are unclean after giving birth to a child (and unclean for twice as long for a female child) has little to do with any form of discrimination based on the value of a girl child. It is more likely that the amount of down time is doubled because the postpartum loss is considered twice as powerful with a female child inasmuch as one has lost not only her life force, but has also lost the life-force of the future children the newly born daughter will eventually bear. If so, one could argue that this discriminates against men who are here viewed as less valuable and need to be mourned for a lesser period of time. Reading in an anachronistic and unsympathetic fashion, one may fail to observe that these laws may be animated by a set of spiritual ideas, that, although unfamiliar, are worthy of being admired in their own right.

While the above-mentioned errors are serious, pointing them out will not necessarily lead one to reject the argument completely. So let us turn to the second difficulty in this approach, that is the joking attitude that is used throughout this piece. I fully acknowledge that parody and sarcasm are often useful as rhetorical devices. But in this instance, because the author is an unsympathetic outsider, the use of such literary devices is inappropriate, and their use leaves one with the distinct impression that Ms. Jais-Mick is mocking those who created these laws and by implication those people today who still affirm the validity of these laws: Torah-observant Jews. Thus lines such as "So, if you've eaten eel, rabbit snake and frog legs, you might as well march in the next Gay Pride Day Parade" in reference to the kosher laws, or "It's official—The Almighty loves barbecue" in reference to the sacrificial system do a great dis-service to those people who are earnestly trying to understand the spirituality of the Levitical laws.

Understanding Leviticus is a difficult task when one approaches the laws with sympathy but an impossible task when one misrepresents and mocks them. Portraying these laws as crude and exotic leads the writer into the trap many Westerners experience when they describe the other in terms of "the primitive." For those who did these rituals they were no more exotic than the idea that one eats a wafer and wine that represent some dead Jewish person's body and blood. (Yes, I realize that this is an incomplete as well as incorrect description of the Eucharist, but it is no more incomplete or incorrect than the way Jais-Mick describes the laws in Leviticus). Leviticus seen casually as a loose amalgam of disconnected laws appears to lack a logic which a more careful consideration will reveal.

To assume that one's own liberal views are superior to anything in this ridiculous book without ever stopping to ask how such a book became part of the sacred Scriptures of the West denies the possibility that its outlook might pose a serious challenge to her current religious and ideological presuppositions. Simply mocking animal sacrifice, for example, without ever wondering why this practice was (and in some instances still is) normative for vast portions of humanity closes off entire worlds of human experience and wisdom.

However, the most serious problem with these arguments is a tendency to assume that law has no theological function in Christianity. There are several aspects to this problem. First one must ask whether a Pauline approach to the law in and of itself will do. One should note that some of the Gospels, such as Matthew, seem much more positive toward the law; e.g., Matt. 5:18: "For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one iota, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever annuls one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." Also note Matt. 23:2 ff. in which the authority of the scribes and Pharisees is confirmed by Jesus even while he rejects their example. If this law is important to Jesus it would strike me that Christians ought not to dismiss it so lightly.

But let us assume a more Pauline stance just for the sake of a good argument. Even Paul, in his letter to the Romans (Galatians is admittedly more problematic here) tells us that "the law is holy and the commandment is holy and just and good" (Rom. 7:12). If this is so, one might try to prove, as did Paul, that humans were the problem not the law. But to ridicule the law seems equivalent to saying that God is, or at least for a time was stupid. (Paul seems to
come closer to this conclusion in Galatians, especially 3:19 ff.) Now ultimately Christianity seems to favor Paul's reading in Romans over his reading in Galatians, because if the law is utterly useless it leads down the road to a type of Marcionism in which the Hebrew Bible is cut off from the New Testament. Thus Christians need to start taking account of these legal parts of the Hebrew Bible in a more serious manner. Dismissing them as silly implies that God merely engaged Israel in a series of frivolous activities until Jesus came along.

More importantly, even if one agrees with Paul's reading of the law and thus finally dissolves the law, one needs to know that Paul does not totally dissolve all responsibilities to God. Thus I Cor 7:19: “But obeying the commandments of God are everything.” It is obvious that Paul's list of commandments is not identical with Leviticus' list. But Paul himself lists homosexuality as a sin that will prevent one from inheriting the kingdom of God according to I Cor. 6:9-10. Also in Romans 1:26-27 he seems to equate homosexuality with rebellion against God's natural law. I am not arguing that we today must agree with Paul. But if one argues in favor of accepting homosexuality as a valid lifestyle rather than viewing it as a sin, one should acknowledge that one is disagreeing with at least part of Paul's writings.

Having surveyed some of the problems too often found in arguments surrounding the connection between biblical law and modern social issues let me briefly summarize my points and clarify one or two other issues.

1) Christians should not vilify the Old Testament as being regressive when their texts say the same thing.

2) Inasmuch as the New Testament makes statements similar to that found in Leviticus 18:22 it is not possible for Christians to argue that these laws are irrelevant unless one wishes to keep all the laws in Leviticus. Clearly, Paul did not wish to keep all the laws in Leviticus, but he did retain this one and the Christian community should acknowledge and perhaps struggle with this fact more seriously.

3) Christians need to develop a firmer conception of the challenge that the law and specifically the laws found in Leviticus pose to their religion. The Sabbath and its observance is a classic instance of the inconsistency of Christianity on a legal-ritual issue. Many Christians and the culture at large view Sunday as a Sabbath and thus the various blue laws found throughout our country. But both the Jewish and Christian traditions know that Sabbath is on Saturday, not Sunday. More curiously, one might inquire why any Christian would observe the Sabbath when it is a ritual observance that seems to cut against Jesus' message (he might be perceived as having denied the importance of Sabbath in Mk. 2:25-3:6), or certainly against Paul's argument that the law is nullified once Jesus arrives (Gal. 3:23ff.) Christians who are not theologians seem quite confused in that they think they are observing the Sabbath on Sunday rather than observing the Lord's Day. It is well and good if Christians want to observe the Sabbath, but perhaps they should observe it on the correct day. And if they do observe it, they should decide whether it is a ritual observance and if so, why this ritual remains in place when all the others have been dissolved. An interesting exploration of this issue and the difficulties it poses to Christian theology can be found in The Sabbath in Jewish and Christian Traditions, edited by T.C. Eskenazi, D.J. Harrington and W.H. Shea (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

Furthermore, Christians need to recognize that the Hebrew Bible never drew a distinction between ethics and ritual and that the commandment to love one's neighbor comes from Leviticus. One even wonders whether Jesus himself signals the unity of ethics and ritual but notes that when they directly conflict, ethics takes temporary priority over ritual. "So when you are offering a gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5: 23-24).

4) Christians as well as secular humanists and secular Jews need to stop treating the laws in Leviticus in such reductionistic terms. There is an assumption that the laws are a primitive code which can be fully dismissed once one has understood this fact. I read an article published in the New York Times during the fall of 1994 in which someone representing a gay church argued that keeping the laws against homosexuality would be like keeping the laws against eating pork after the invention of refrigeration. But what if these laws were not primarily concerned with issues of physical health but were part of a coherent and profound spiritual worldview (as argued at length by Mary Douglas in Purity and Danger)? If this is true (and I happen to believe it is and would be happy to expand upon this point) then not only might the prohibition against eating pork still be in place, but so might that against homosexuality, at least according to those who belong to the religions animated by these texts.

If we want to live a life different from that suggested in these texts, then we should do so honestly, fully acknowledging what we accept and what we reject from this corpus as well as engaging the issue of biblical authority. And if we do so we should not mock those who wish to maintain a more traditional stance toward the Bible. (I realize that
there is the further issue of the authority of the tradition to which one might belong—but this problem needs to be discussed at length elsewhere.) Furthermore, before we relegate these texts to the scrap heap of history we should bear in mind that certain notions dismissed by one generation are often reappropriated by a later generation. I am not advocating that the rules against homosexuality will, or should come back in vogue. Rather I am arguing that the Levitical system may have much to teach us and thus we owe it to ourselves to appreciate its unique spirituality. In particular, Leviticus' attention to the connection between body and spirit and between ethics and ritual are insights that are of obvious value today. One only need examine the language employed by the environmental movement and the health craze to see just how much appeal such religious ideas have in the contemporary world. A fuller appreciation of the Levitical system might help clarify the spiritual roots of certain modern phenomena, might provide a potential critique of some aspects of these phenomena, and finally might give those engaged in attempting to live a spiritual life that is attuned to the connection between mind-body and ethics-ritual some important and all-too-often ignored resources.

Ms. Jais-Mick responds—
I like Kaminsky's article a lot. Perhaps to his dismay, I believe we're trying to make the same point—that using the directives of Leviticus out of their cultural context as a one-stop checklist for the rightness or wrongness of someone's behavior was not the intention of the book's writers. Kaminsky, unfortunately, felt that I was making fun of observant Jews. Quite the contrary, I was making fun of dense Christians, particularly those who use Biblical quotes out of context. Happily, the result of our apparent miscommunication is Kaminsky's splendid article.

Maureen Jais-Mick
(Jewish on the maternal side; Christian on the paternal)

Apple

Sitting alone in a seminar room eating an apple,
I feel I may think something new about Eve.
The sexist story coils eternally at her feet.
Did she coax ignorant Adam toward the classroom?
If she were seated at the head of this table,
woman graduate students all around,
what would her subject be? This apple?
Eve's daughters, still not equaling God in knowledge,
nevertheless write dissertations on every tree
that grows in the mind. She'd love those descendants
savoring life and learning down to the core.

Dorothea Kewley
WHAT DOES BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP TODAY OFFER THE CHURCH?

James W. Voelz

The Turn to Literary Criticism

What, indeed, does contemporary Biblical scholarship offer the church today? Before we can answer this question we must first “back up” and answer a prior question, “What does contemporary scholarship in general offer Biblical scholarship today?”

And it is right to ask this question, because today the dominant forces influencing Biblical scholarship are not specifically Bible-oriented (a kind of “sacred hermeneutics,” to use the traditional terminology), but other forces which are part of what might be called the academic world at large. Biblical scholarship today is affected most fundamentally, not by the problems raised by science (which may surprise readers over 45 years old), but, rather, by literary criticism. That is to say, building upon the insight of the Reformation that the books of the sacred Scriptures are, in addition to being the Word of God, also themselves literary documents, current Biblical scholarship has gone the way of contemporary criticism of works of literature in general. And what direction has this general literary-critical focus taken? Overall, it has moved from a focus upon the author or the production of the text, through a focus upon the text exclusively (cf. structuralism), to a focus upon the reader or the receptor of the text. Such a focus understands the receptor of any communication as key to its understanding, especially given the basic tri-partite model of communication theory, which has been generally embraced:

Another way to express this focus or concern is as follows. All literary works are forms of communication, and no communication is complete unless it is received. Furthermore, it is up to the receiver—the reader, the hearer, the observer, the listener, whoever that may be—to make sense out of the signs which are received, the communicating signs, be these signs verbal or be they physical (whether deeds, actions, gestures, clothing, situations, or whatever). Indeed, it is worth noting, and not simply in passing, that many signs—in fact, most signs—are not verbal or word-based at all. Consider stop signs, traffic lights, button-down collars, clerical collars, uniforms of every type, make of car, limp or jaunty gait, long hair, buzz cut, menacing gestures, looks of affection—the list is endless but familiar to us all. We interpret words and we interpret deeds, actions, situations, etc., and we do so all the time.

The Problem of Intention

But at this point an objection might arise. What about intention? Must not we focus upon authorial intent? Isn’t the key “what the communicator meant to say?” Why worry about the receiver, when the sender is the key? Yes, there is authorial intent. But should we focus only on the sender? Should we focus only on intention? Consider the following which would temper this sender/intention zeal: When we interpret a text from the past, a text such as the Sacred Scriptures, the text is all we have. We do not know the author as a person in any sense. Sometimes we do not know him at all, such as the identities of the evangelists or of the

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authors of the so-called Epistles of John, which are given in later manuscripts and known by tradition alone. At other times we may know the bare identity of the author, such as the elder John of the Apocalypse or Jude of the epistle which bears his name, but who exactly he was or what he was thinking when he wrote his text, what his motives were as he wrote the text, what his attitudes were as he wrote the text—these we do not know. In all of these cases, we reconstruct the author from the text, i.e., he is something which we discover, through the medium of the text. A diagram which has become popular depicts the situation thus:

1 2 3 4 5

The outer lines represent the extra-textual real world, while the inner lines represent the physical text, and the cloud is the "story" (3) generated by the physical text itself. The real author (1) is not in the text (in a literal, physical, sense), while the author which we, the real readers (5) detect, the so-called "implied author" (2) is not in the real world—that author is a construct we construct from the story of the text—and never the twain shall meet.

The same can be said of intention; it is only "in the text." Consider 2 Cor. 5:13-14: "For if we were beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ constrains/controls us, because we have judged that one died on behalf of all; therefore, all died." Does Paul mean here—does he intend to say—that Christ's love for him controls him, or, does he mean—does he intend to say—that his love for Christ controls him? Some interpreters present good arguments for the former; some present good arguments for the latter; and some present good arguments for both at once. Which is correct? We cannot interview St. Paul, so any determination of his intended meaning must rest upon the analysis of his text. But we are interpreting the text!

This problem is especially acute with the genre or literary form of story. Here the question of author is often problematical (so frequently it is unknown [cf. the four Gospels or the OT books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles]). But the problems of meaning and authorial intention are especially severe, much more so than in the genre of discourse or epistle. For the meaning of the text of a story—whether that story be fiction or history or something in between—as opposed to the meaning of the text of a discourse/letter—revolves basically, not around the meaning of its words. Rather, it revolves around the meaning of what is depicted by those words, that is, the actions, situations, people, events, etc., which the words of the text evoke (what might be called a "second level" of signs and meaning). In other words, for the genre "story"—note that historicity is not the issue here—the problem of meaning, and, therefore, the problem of authorial intention, lies below the surface meaning of the words, where non-words are the key. But seldom are the meanings of such items given in the text. Seldom are explanations of actions, events, deeds, situations, people, etc., stated explicitly by the author's words. These the interpreter must see. She is left to consider, on the basis of her own knowledge of the times, her own experiences in the world, and her own understanding of the rest of the books of Scripture what it means, e.g., that the priest and Levite passed by the beaten man on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, or that the workman covered up the treasure which he had discovered in the field. (Indeed, it is even more complex than this, for meaning arises only through a relational understanding of actions, events, people, etc.)

Consider the example of John 2:1-11, the Wedding at Cana, the first miracle of our Lord. The words of the story (with the exception of v. 4) are fairly clear. But the meaning of the deeds described? That is not so clear. Do they "tell us" that our Lord fulfilled the end-time hope of the prophet Amos, chapter 9, verse 13?: "Behold, days are coming, declares the Lord, when the plowman will overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows seed; when the mountains will drip sweet wine and all the hills will be dissolved."

At Cana wine flows full and free. At last the vineyard production is more than the vines can bear! Or, do we relate what is described to Genesis, chapter 1? Our Lord is the creator God. Then, he made complex beasts from basic earth. Now, from simple water he makes fine wine. Here, the creator stands on earth, amidst his own created world! Is either meaning right? Neither meaning? Both meanings? You may be the judge—you, another reader!—but the rules for evidence are not clear. The fact of the matter is, that just as the receptor is an active participant in the determination of the meaning of words and of the intentionality of the author on that basic level of sense, just so it is true that the receptor is an active participant in the determination of the meaning of "things"—the whole complex of deeds, events, actions, situations, people, etc., depicted by the words of the text—and of the intentionality of the author with regard to these. (And application is another issue still!)

Role of the Receptor/Reader in the Interpretation of a Text

What, then, is the role of the receptor/reader in the interpretation of a text? On the basis of the things which we have just said, each reader is an active participant in the process by which meaning arises in a text. And this is true in two ways, at the very least.

First, it is true by default. What I mean by this is that the texts we have in the Scriptures are really all we have. We cannot interrogate St. Paul. But in theory we could question St. Paul. And if we could, our activity as receptors
would be much more limited in scope. At each point of uncertainty, St. Paul could clarify himself, and we, the readers, would, theoretically, have very little work to do (though authors [cf. Ezra Pound] are not always the best interpreters of their own works). This is true for the genre "story", as well. We can ask James Michener about his works. But normally we cannot; we cannot ask St. Matthew or St. Mark. Thus, by default, the meaning of the text and the intention of the author are at the mercy of the interpreters themselves. Second, however, it is true, not only by default. In one important area the reader is important to the meaning by the very nature of the case. And that is in the genre history. Or, perhaps we should say, in any genre in which history is a key. For history is story, but it is story with a "twist." Yes, it is the author’s tale. But it is not only the author’s tale. For, unlike simple fiction, it begins, not in the author’s mind. Here, external occurrences are the key. Here, the story, at least to some extent, precedes the storyteller. It is independent of him, in part. And, therefore, in part, it may be interpreted apart from him. His intention for the "facts"—his intention as he weaves his web—cannot fully control the story which precedes. And we may read that story—apart from his intention, apart from his conscious meaning, even beyond his own intention—even as we read the deeds and put together the situations and events in other tales as well.

Therefore, whether by default or by the nature of the text itself, the role of receptors in the interpretation of the text is a very active one, indeed. For apart from them, a text lies dead; no meaning can arise.

Who is a Valid Interpreter of a Text?

From the discussion which has ensued, the questions which now come forth are: If the interpreter is a key and if the interpreter is an integral part of all meaning of a text, are "all interpreters created equal"? That is to say, if interpreters are active participants in the process by which meaning arises in a text, and if it is not entirely clear how we may interpret a text—especially a story—as we read deeds and events and situations depicted by the words of a text, does that mean that all interpretations are equally valid and "correct"? Who is a valid interpreter of a text? Can any standards be applied?

This is a proper set of questions and one to which a proper answer can be supplied. Indeed, it is here especially where modern scholarship offers Biblical scholarship something singularly helpful and refreshing. Let us consider once again the diagram we saw before:

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What is on the other side of #2? It is #4, a reader for whom the author writes. And this "reader" stands in the same relationship to the actual reader as the implied author stands to the actual author—it is, again, a construct, not in the extra-textual real world—and is "implied" by/detectable in the text. And this "implied reader" is detectable only by a reader, even as the text is read.

But, who is this implied reader and how may he be defined? He is a person, a receptor, with that knowledge, those abilities, that competency, which enables him to find meaning in the text. Otherwise put, she is a conception of the author—an assumption of the author—it is she for whom the author writes—though she in no actual fact corresponds to any actual reader of the text. Who, then, is a valid interpreter of a text? One might say, it is the one who conforms to the expectations of the author. Better put, it is the one who conforms to the given text's assumptions. It is the one who becomes the "implied reader"—and only such a one—of a given text.

But a reader is not alone. A reader does not see the text in isolation. A reader is taught to read. A reader knows facts because he is instructed. A reader develops attitudes by conversation and discussion. A reader is brought to faith because she has been baptized and evangelized. That is to say, a reader interprets in a community, with other readers/receptors, with those who are her contemporaries, and with those who have gone before. This is now increasingly understood (cf. Jonathan Culler). Therefore, readers can become implied readers, only as they are trained to be those implied readers, within a context where the implied reader of a text is appreciated and understood.

Who, then, is the valid interpreter of a text? It is that person, that man or woman, who assumes the role required by a given text—who becomes the reader implied by that very text. And such a one is instructed to assume that role. Such a one is instructed by a community, a community which has assumed that role itself.

Meaning for the Church Today

What, then, does all of this mean for the church today, as literary criticism has influenced Biblical scholarship and thereby influenced us who confess Jesus Christ as Lord? We have examined the process of interpretation. We have considered the problems of meaning and intention. We have looked at the importance of the receptor. And we have seen the importance of the community as receptor of written texts. Now what can we say?

First, it is important to realize that we must—and will—be active as we interpret all our texts. And this includes the sacred Scriptures, which are divine—yes, they are the very words of God—but which are also human texts. Meaning arises as we interpret words. And meaning arises as we interpret deeds. Story especially is complex. Actions must be noticed; sequences must be followed; similarities must
be traced out. To interpret the meaning of any text, we must actively engage the text! And we are not led by the hand. Oh, yes, St. John may give us general guidance. He may say in chapter 20: “These [signs] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God . . . .” But as we saw in our discussion of Cana and the meaning of the wedding there, it is much more complex than most Christians ever think.

Second, personal faith is not an intrusion in Scriptural interpretation. On the contrary, it can be seen as positively demanded by these very texts. What does it take to become the implied reader of the Bible’s texts? The reader must know Jewish culture, ancient Mediterranean civilization, the entirety of Scripture, and even more. Of that there is no doubt. But the reader must also believe, that is, embrace the faith. A believer is implied. Indeed, a believer is demanded! St. Paul writes explicitly “to the saints” (cf. Rom. 1:7). And St. Luke says directly to Theophilus: “. . . that you may know the surety of those things in which you were first instructed” (Luke 1:4). And only such a one can read the text and, as the implied reader, receive the fullness it contains, whether the books are in the New Testament or (much more controversially!) in the Old (see Paul’s argument in 2 Cor. 3:15-16, and Luke 24:45).

Finally, the community is important in the interpretation of sacred texts. I have said communities are very key. Communities teach us readers to read a text. For us this means that, as interpreters, we must stay within the church. No wonder the book of Hebrews says: “...not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together” (10:25). It is not only a Scriptural truth; it is a good literary idea, as well! Indeed, what I have said promotes a “confessional” stance, one might say. From the first, the church has said that it is properly the Scripture’s home. Otherwise expressed, it has said that all interpreters of the sacred text must hold to the church’s faith, or they cannot really treat that text (which is not to say, of course, that absolutely nothing can be understood apart from faith). This was the consistent witness of Irenaeus (Adversus Haereses 1.1.15), Tertullian (De Praescriptione Haereticorum 15-18), and a host of other fathers of the church, as well. And now literary studies suggest their view is true. For the Scriptures are the church’s book. And, as a result, those who adhere to her words, those who confess the faith which she has sworn she will confess—these are they who can interpret these books for those both within and without the church. Historic Christianity, true “catholic”—universal—doctrinal and belief, these are the womb of the church’s book. Which can only mean that the readers who are among those who both believe and hold this faith, these are the implied readers of that book which is the foundation of that very faith.

One final word. What we have presented in this essay will settle few questions for you, the reader. In fact, it will inevitably raise as many problems as it solves, giving rise to questions such as: Who constitutes the church? Is Jewish exegesis of the Hebrew Scriptures inappropriate or even wrong? Will reader subjectivity now reign? This is, however, where Biblical scholarship and the church now stand, and we can only proceed forward from this place.

Suggested Further Reading


Tenebrae

Crosses on a hill
a socket-eyed rock pile;
a petty mob and soldiers,
the priests, the curious, the sick,
the loud and laughing.

The empty sky, splintered
over a forsaken god,
hung like a tapestry.

Among the rocks, the dogs sleep.

The hill sinks and flattens
under the long weight of griefs.

Blood and wine spill
together in the ragged heat;
a scream shreds the veil.

It has been a long time.
The years are piled up behind me
the way bones are heaped;
from their shadow I stare out.

Kyrie eleison.
Christe eleison.
Kyrie eleison.

Tim Gustafson

Spring

Christ springs
in leaf and flower
growing swaying finding sun
along running water winding
among rock and root
winter’s chrysalis cracking
becoming something other
some-thing
unword
unsong
except song in it
the thing itself
the searching voice
of spring
this Christ blossoms
blooms and blesses now
all life emerging reaching
alive in dirt and branch
awake in rain and sun swift and sweet
in pulse and heart
grace in sap rising
flexing petal and twig
old limbs and souls asleep
pulling upward into sun
into grace into life
this Christ comes.

J.T. Ledbetter
The Prodigal Son mural translates the parable into contemporary images for the Uptown neighborhood.

PHOTOS AND TEXT
BY
MARCI WHITNEY-SCHENCK

Chicago is better known as the city of the big shoulders than as a center for Biblical art. But nestled in church hallways and on gritty brick walls, there is a variety of Biblically-inspired art ranging from popular expression to refined images.

One of the most innovative works is a 25 x 90-foot mural of the Prodigal Son on the west wall of the Bank of Chicago/Lakeshore on the corner of Wilson and Broadway. The work commissioned by the bank to counteract graffiti in this uptown community was designed and executed by Brian Bakke, director of church in community at Uptown Baptist Church. He was assisted by Michael Anderson from Jesus People USA, and several other artists.

"We selected the prodigal son theme, showing the many temptations of Uptown—gangs, violence, and drugs—and the son returning to a Christ who is depicted as an African-American (center above)," Bakke said.

"On the left, people who have found Christ dance joyously."

Another popular expression is Joseph's Coat hangs in a hallway at the United Church of Rogers Park near several murals on Joseph from the Old Testament. The Vacation Bible School did the project in 1993.
Coat, a multicolored striped coat in the hallway at United Church of Rogers Park, 1545 W. Morse. The coat and several murals were done by the church’s Vacation Bible School in 1993 as a way to involve young people in the Old Testament story.

More traditional is the carved angel (left) at Second Presbyterian Church, 1936 S. Michigan Ave. Holding the scriptures, the angel is one of 175 that can be found in the various media of glass, wood, stone, plaster, and mural art. The familiar image of Christ at Gethsemane (below) is the focus of the east window at St. James Lutheran Church, 2048 N. Fremont Ave. A ray of light is cast down from heaven upon the praying Jesus. A characteristic of the window is the thickness of the panes creating rich hues and textures. Memorials written in German are a reminder that the church was founded by a German-speaking congregation in 1869.
Two images from the West Suburban Temple Har Zion in River Forest were done by William Gropper in 1967. The dove (previous page) is from the Window of Good and Evil and the animals (below) are from the Window of Creation. As the Torah is read from right to left, the five windows begin their story with the creation depicted in the right window and end with the Window of Joseph.

Also in River Forest is a 21-foot banner (previous page) in the Krentz Center for Education and Communication at Concordia University. Designed by art professor Darlene Crampton-Fahrenkrog, the banner depicts the scriptural reading from Isaiah 6:1-3. Depicting ecstatic angels, “each one had six wings,” she used papier-mâché molds of angel heads and silver lame to suggest the flowing movement of angels.

Churches often have scripture written on their walls. The psalm, “I was glad when they said unto me, we will go into the house of the Lord,” is above the limestone portal of St. Chrysostom’s Episcopal Church, 1424 N. Dearborn, (left) built in 1925. A New York composer set the psalm to music for the church’s 100th anniversary.

The Miracle of Loaves fresco was painted by Josef Steinhage, commissioned in 1938 by the Benedictine nuns to create frescoes for the chapel at St. Scholastica, 7416 N. Ridge Blvd. The frescoes had fallen into disrepair and were painstakingly restored by artist Joseph Ramirez. The restoration took five years.

Marci Whitney-Schenck is publisher and editor of Christianity and the Arts, a quarterly magazine based in Chicago.

William Gropper, who executed the windows for Har Zion, was noted as a brilliant colorist. The animals in the Creation window are vividly bright.

Biblical verse is often included on church facades, in this case, above the portal at St. Chrysostom’s Episcopal Church. The Miracle of the Loaves is the subject of a fresco in the apse of the chapel at St. Scholastica, the motherhouse of the Benedictine Sisters of Chicago.
Belting the Bible

Charles Vandersee

Dear Editor:

Allan Bloom in his cantankerous *Closing of the American Mind* (1987) had little to say of the Bible. Understandably, since his ideal university curriculum focuses on philosophers—the writers "who best addressed" the permanent questions of humanity. Thus Bloom's index has only five subheads under "Bible," while Socrates gets 27, Aristotle 20, Plato 18, Locke 15, Tocqueville 14, and Hobbes 11.

The Bible is testimony and history, poetry and prophecy and theology, not philosophy, and Bloom agonizes for a long paragraph about where it belongs in the curriculum—in

Alumnus Charles Vandersee says he likes to think about religion, but is not a pillar of the congregation. He did cross the Blue Ridge lately to take in an all-day workshop on the new Evangelical Lutheran Church in America worship supplement, With One Voice.

courses in the humanities? Anthropology? Comparative religion? Literature?

Bloom says that "The gods never walked very tall in our [American] political life or in our schools," and as a student of American culture, I think he's accurate. He says that knowledge of the Bible, which in the 1980s has "diminished to the vanishing point," used to be acquired by Americans at home and in houses of worship. Again I think he's right. Coming across Ruth "in tears amid the alien corn" in a Keats ode, my African American students last semester recognized the biblical story—knew who Ruth was, and what "alien" means—but their Anglo counterparts were mostly strangers in a strange land.

Thus one is not surprised by memory-building strategies in the "study Bibles" widely available. The last time I bought a Bible was in 1985, needing a brighter and sturdier King James Version than the cracking leatherette one earned in parochial school, for selling the same box of Christmas cards from Concordia Publishing House to all members of Trinity congregation who lived on Ridge Street. On the sale table at 40% off, at the university bookstore here in Dogwood, was *The Visualized Bible*, from Tyndale House in Wheaton, Illinois, published 1984. It was irresistible. Each book of the Bible has H. L. Willmington's introductory essay and extensive outline—and a greeting in all caps. For Genesis: YOUR ATTENTION PLEASE! THE INFINITE AND HOLY CREATOR OF THIS UNIVERSE IS NOW READY TO BEGIN HIS AMAZING STORY!

Esther: THE ULTIMATE IN SUSPENSE! HOW HISTORY'S FIRST ATTEMPTED HOLOCAUST WAS NARROWLY AVERTED!

Revelation: THE STORY HAS A HAPPY ENDING! THE BRIDEGROOM AND THE BRIDE ARE MARRIED AND LIVE HAPPILY IN A BEAUTIFUL CITY FOREVER!

The text is frequently interrupted by lists, some of which are splendidly efficient, such as the 48 most important chapters in the Old Testament, chosen for "historical, prophetical, theological, or practical significance." Others are somewhat contrived; Ephraim in the book of Hosea is denounced, desired, described, disciplined, and delivered. The Song of Solomon is divided into three "acts": The Shulamite Cinderella, The Mysterious Stranger, and The Mighty Monarch. The woman in John's second epistle is commended, commanded, cautioned, and comforted by the Apostle. Third John concerns an Exhorter, an Egotist, and an Example. Expositor Willmington likes alliteration.

So do I, especially when used shamelessly and egregiously. Here is no sanctimoniousness; plainly being catered to is the audience sped along by TV, freeways, and brisk commercial jingles. Americans still never ever have time. In Dogwood we're sponsoring a Bosnian refugee family, and a May 1995 sheet of "Adjustment Challenges," from the national resettlement agency, notes that in the U.S. "the pace of life and 'living to work' as opposed to 'working to live' is a significant cultural adjustment for Bosnians, especially those from rural backgrounds. Many Bosnians had expected to have much more free time than they actually have in their new American lives."

*The Visualized Bible* is designed for...
the Bible-surfer. Page around anywhere, and you find a list, a chart, a series of exclamations to grab your attention. These are tactics to overcome the nervous restless fear and induced reverence (have we any English word for this combination?) which this ancient Text uniquely evokes.

How to think about the Church? There are six similes, in Ephesians, to which this ancient Text uniquely evokes. English word for this combination? the Bible-surfer.

You get jagged pieces of, say. Isaiah body, temple, mystery, new man, bride, soldier. The most important events in the life of Christ? There are 24 of them, beginning not with conception but with birth. Which surprised me, but then I'm keen on conception, having as natal day the Feast of the Annunciation, exactly nine biological months before the Nativity.

Does surfing lead to long distance swimming or scuba diving? I actually think it might, and while thinking on this question realized again what doesn't seem to lead to such ocean-acquaintance: the Three Year Lectionary. The Lectionary, in the liturgical denominations, is an ecumenical set of three texts read aloud each Sunday, changing each year but repeating after three years. Though designed with care, it tends to flatten the Text into an unsurable tepid pond.

This flattening is a consequence of three anti-Text maneuvers (which of course may matter only to an English professor): repetition, decontextualization, and fragmentation. Repetition means that if you attend faithfully year after year you will hear certain narratives and points of theology over and over, excluding and thus erasing other stories and messages. Particularly you keep hearing certain parables, since one of the three readings is always from the Gospels, and there are only four of these, with much repetition from writer to writer.

Decontextualization means that you get jagged pieces of, say, Isaiah and Pauline abstraction, without cues as to what went before and after the passage read. No longer, in fact, are you told that the “Second Lesson,” more often than not, is a genre called epistle—a letter sent to specific people, and people who anticipated no posterity—no as reading their mail. A week intervenes from one shard to the next, and the real-life human mind restless forgets last Sunday. Reading the readings before the service can help in concentrating, but at least one Lutheran parish in Virginia supplies the written text of the readings only if you ask the usher. Visitors, of course, don’t know to ask, and while Bibles are available, they’re on an invisible shelf under the pews. The reason for withholding readings, if I understand correctly, is someone’s rule that in public worship you are supposed to hear only, and not to read.

Fragmentation, of course, means that you don’t hear books whole, except over a series of Sundays—some of the books. It’s as if unity, integrity, and design had no place in the original construction of the books of the Bible, yet there may be designs. A colleague here in Dogwood, anthropologist (and Episcopalian) Dell Hymes, has lately handed me a study of his, arguing contra Luther, Martin Dibelius, and others, that the epistle of James does not lack “coherence” and “continuity.” That indeed it has a formal design with “relationships of the kind that I have found in a number of American Indian languages” (International Journal of the Sociology of Language, 1986).

So with the Lectionary you get only a “canon within the canon,” and message only, not design. If you’re not a Bible-surfer at home or a Bible class attendant, you forever get only certain pieces. It’s like swimming at only one beach for a lifetime. Not exactly the notorious Jefferson Bible, in which the ex-president excises all miracles, but not exactly God’s full seascape of ideas either.

A further problem is the Lectionary’s handling by the professional clergy, which means preaching almost always on the Gospel lesson, or on one of the less recondite portions of Paul. Almost invariably, however, the most interesting snippets in the Lectionary are from the Hebrew Scriptures (the “Old Testament”). Any number of times I’ve settled into a Lutheran pew saying a sinful selfish heartfelt prayer: that this Sunday the sermon will be on the interesting (enigmatic, cryptic, possibly aberrant) passage in hand, and let the wearied ungospeled visitor this Sunday go on being damned.

Typically functioning as either the troubled Galilean masses or the anxious mission congregations in places like Galatia and Ephesus, worshipers over the years develop the notion that God is interested only in salvation, a rather small agenda. But here is protean David, in The Visualized Bible: the Shepherd, the Singer, the Soldier, the Sought, the Sovereign, the Sinner, the Sorrowful, the Statesman, the Census Taker, the Sponsor, the Scribe. We could try, besides gaining redemption, humbly being Renaissance Persons, reverently maximizing our God-given potential, rather than everlastingly mourning over “coming short of the glory of God.”

It’s difficult thinking about the Bible at all, since few people experience it whole. So one turns to commentaries. Some time back I mentioned owning the Paul Kretzmann Popular Commentary of 1921, from Concordia, used a long time ago by my father when teaching Sunday school. It has fascinating divagations. For example, it’s unhappy with providers of “opportunities for sin . . . in theaters, dance-halls, pool-rooms, saloons, [and] through suggestive pictures and stories” (Luke 17:1-2, on giving offense). Or Luke 21:8-11, on signs of the End; “the false Christs and false prophets of our days are multiplying with great rapidity; in Eddyism, in Russellism, in Dowieism,
Jerusalem as world of letters in our days has destruction of the Church of God by Roman Catholic should help lay readers interpret the every new theory of true and false are despised as stale prattling, but changed in appearance, but not in ever wishing to hear new things: 'The ground that Bible expositors should not vacate contemporary life, and should help lay readers interpret the Bible in their own decade, not only try to understand the Bible's history and testimony as truly something Other, in time, climate, mindset, and problematic audience. Still, in teaching literary texts, when one sends students to the library, it's always with the warning that no single literary critic is alone adequate. Neither is one single commentator; it's possible, even in Protestantism of the 1920s, that the Pope was not the only candidate for Antichrist. But again, where is time coming from, to get and compare commentators?

First Thessalonians: REPEATED RAPTURE REMINDERS!

One says to oneself, therefore, that God never intended the Bible to be read in full, and understood—that only the "canon within the canon" matters, or the main stories, or, let's say, the Seven Certainties of The Visualized Bible, from Romans: The believer has a New Position, a New Guest, a New Adoption, a New Hope, a New Prayer Helper, a New Knowledge, and a New Goal. Perhaps add the Moral Failures of the Ancient World, as insight into another era entirely. Among the 15 failures: rapid advances in technology, grossly materialistic attitudes and interests, population explosion, widespread violence, and corruption throughout society.

A lifetime spent studying the Bible is certainly plausible—a matter of budgeting time; acquiring commentaries (also acquiring languages); and pulling one's historical and critical faculties away from wooze by challenging the face value of all commentators, all translations, and all one's own inclinations as shaped by one's decade and one's surroundings. But "studying the Bible" would also have to include studying the controversies. The Text, the commentaries, and the controversies—these add up to a superhuman task for all but professional academicians.

This is an old issue, surely tiresome to scholars, whose proper rejoinder to the ignorant layperson would be the same as the literary scholar's soothing of undergraduates quasily beset by origins, influences, canonicity, and the heavy winds of theory: Don't worry too much! Just keep on reading—everything. Keep on thinking about everything, adopting (in the case of the Bible) the mind of Christ, the mind of Christ's father, the mind of Christ's mother, the mind of Luther, the mind of the Vatican, even now and then a Dowie mentality. Aspire to be a Renaissance mind, and go with the flow.

Perhaps also be a promoter, if you have a trust fund handy. Mount two campaigns. First, get the authorities to give us a sabbath every seventh year, from the Lectionary. We would then spend 52 weeks with other salient readings from the Text. Second, publish the full texts of the Lectionary readings in a cheap pew version. Forget the weekly bulletin inserts, also the whole Bible in with or under the pew, and hand every worshiper at the door the whole lectionary with the bulletin itself as the insert, at the First Lesson. Be sure that in the new cheap lectionary the weekly readings are clearly demarcated from one another by a note saying what's going on in each Sunday's portion. In other words, keep the present fragmentation, but by printing the fragments as an annotated sequence, enable the reader to surf backward and forward, as waves of curiosity may develop. When a series of readings does not cover a whole book of the Bible, explain what comes before or after.

Dowieism? John Alexander Dowie (1847-1907). Didn't recognize the name, but he turns out to have founded Zion, Illinois, just north of Chicago, on the Lake, a twentieth-century theocracy. A Scottish Australian evangelist and faith healer, according to the online Britannica: In Zion, no doctors, dance halls, or drugstores. During that sabbatical year from the Lectionary, why shouldn't we read some of the passages that inspired the Dowies and Donatists all through church history—using, for undermining them, a bit of Deconstruction, that dreaded strategy determined to show that the apparent meaning of a text, so easily an idée fixe, may not be all that's there.

What do I think of when I think of the Bible? A measure of the faintness and ahistoricity of institutional imagination, for one thing, and also hope for some sort of eventual reformation, if ignorant laymen will do a little pertinacious pleading.

From Dogwood, yours faithfully,

C.V.
Tenebrae Command

O GOD WHO CRACKS
the shine of ice!
Who ruptures
bedrock!
Who blasts
the gleam of peaks,
Who batters
beaches,
Who slits
the crusts of soil,
Who dashes
roads in rain,
Who shakes
the night in thunder,
Who speaks
the seed with water,
Who breaks
the crocus open,
Who wreaks
the bed of mushrooms,
Who rips
the flower of a thistle,
Who explodes
the milkweed pod,
Who smashes
berries in soil,
Who splinters
trees in lightning,
Who torches
mountainsides,
Who shocks
the baby newborn,
Who tears
the mother,
Who slashes
the curtain of churches,
Who buries
the father alive,
Who pounds
the dying heart,
Who punishes
those who love,
Who violates
our grieving,
(who isolates
our tears):

You! Shatter
this lovely grave!

John Gidmark
Crime, Punishment
and Hopes for
Redemption

Fredrick Barton

I.

One hundred twenty-five miles up the Mississippi River from New Orleans, a lonely country road winds through cypress and pine and dead ends into Louisiana's maximum security prison at Angola. Nearly fifteen years ago now, I drove that road with my radical Baptist preacher friend Will Campbell who had been asked by a death-row inmate named Robert Collins to serve as his spiritual counselor. I was fresh out of graduate school then and a long way from a tenure decision, so I had the kind of time and inclination to involve myself with causes and people that it regrettably seems I possess no longer.

Will had flown from his home near Nashville, Tennessee, and asked me if I'd be his chauffeur for the day. We drove up Highway 61 through the antebellum plantation town of St. Francisville and off on state road 66 which curled past unpainted shacks through pecan orchards and fields of cotton. A heavyset black woman, clad in a blue denim dress, her head wrapped in a red bandana, walked barefoot down the dusty roadside, a cane fishing pole balanced on her shoulder. It was as if we'd driven into a Walker Evans photograph.

We stopped for refreshments at a country store in the little burg of Turnbull. Three men in overalls sitting in rockers on the porch stopped talking as we clattered up the worn wooden steps, though one returned a "howdy" when Will greeted them. The inside of the store was dimly lit with naked light bulbs, and I squinted to locate a counter and a proprietor chatting with a white-aproned clerk stacking tin cans onto a shelf. The floor was gritty with sawdust, and the whole store smelled of flour and seed and raw cloth.

"Where y'all from?" the proprietor asked as he rang up two Cokes, a cellophane of salted peanuts for me and a bag of Red Man chewing tobacco for Will. "New Orleans," I replied. "Long way," he said, "if you're planning on getting back tonight." He presumably understood that we were headed on to Angola, though, of course, there's no way he could know the precise purpose of our journey. Staring at the rusted tin Jax Beer sign nailed above the store's door as I climbed back behind the wheel of the little red Horizon I drove in those days, I asked Will just when it was we'd crossed out of West Feliciana Parish and into Yaknapatawpha County. He stuck a pinch of Red Man in his jaw and said, "Let's get on up there before they cook the poor bastard."

The prison officials wouldn't let me through the main gate with Will, so I sat in the car in a small...
parking lot and read Newsweek for a couple of hours while Will visited with the condemned man. On the way home Will had little to say, which was unusual since he loves to find something we can argue about. Robert Collins wasn’t going to live much longer before being marched to the electric chair, and Will was heavy with that fact and uncharacteristically somber. Another day he’d have tried to spark a disagreement about sports or fundamentalist Christians or abortion, try to force some blanket statement out of me so that we could arm wrestle over the particulars. But he wouldn’t have tried to provoke an argument about capital punishment, since my presence with him that day presumed our shared opposition to the death penalty.

And indeed we did share an opposition to the death penalty in 1981. I had first formed my opposition as a college student in the 1960s when I read George Orwell’s deft "A Hanging" and Albert Camus’ ardent "Reflections on the Guillotine." And it’s important to recall that in the 1960s a majority of Americans opposed capital punishment. We were an optimistic country in those days, and I was one of the country’s millions of young idealists. Some folks whose personal philosophies were forged in those heady times have remained true to their ideals. Some folks, like Will, who came of age in the 1940s and were our heroes in the 1960s have never wavered in their understanding of our obligations to one another. But as time has passed these last thirty years, we’ve become less hopeful as a people, and in matters of public policy, anyway, less generous too. Rising crime rates and a national obsession with firearm ownership, and, of course, the pure ravages of aging have left many who came of age in the era of civil rights fearful and resentful in a way we couldn’t even imagine ourselves becoming thirty years ago. And what seemed so clear to our fresh intellects in the 1960s we find ourselves viscerally questioning in the 1990s. I speak with certainty about this change because I am one of the afflicted.

Susan Sarandon, Sister Helen Prejean and writer/director Tim Robbins on the set of his film DEAD MAN WALKING, a Gramercy Pictures release.

Easter (April) 1996
II.

I grew up in New Orleans and have resided here most of my adult life. During my adulthood the city has become one of the most violent places in America. Over the last three years, New Orleans, with a population under 500,000, has averaged slightly more than one murder per day. And in New Orleans, as elsewhere in urban America, crime and race have become psychically as well as statistically intertwined. The vast majority of murders in New Orleans are committed by African Americans (who are the vast majority of victims as well). This climate of crime has frightened the mobile portion of the population, most of which is white, and as a result, there is a resurgence of white flight (middle-class blacks are relocating to the suburbs as well). Many of my colleagues at the University of New Orleans, for instance, are moving north of Lake Pontchartrain even though the commute across the causeway takes an hour and longer.

New Orleans did not become a black majority city until the late 1970s, but less than twenty years later the city's African American population has reached seventy percent. In my adult years we have seen a complete reversal of the city's public racial image. Where once all officials were white, today the mayor is black, five of seven city council members are black, the police chief is black. Critically, for the purposes of our concerns here, the jury system is now dominated by African Americans. Black majority juries are the rule. Entirely black juries are not at all uncommon. And for the two decades that blacks have been in the majority, Orleans Parish juries have been notably reluctant to return recommendations for the death penalty.

As we witnessed in the O.J. Simpson case, our nation's black citizens are far more suspicious of the criminal justice system than are its white citizens. African Americans are acutely conscious of the long history of overt racism by white law enforcement officials and in white-dominated courts. Proceeding from that, black juries have judged even those they deem guilty of capital crimes still in some regard themselves victims, thus the jurors' reluctance to accompany guilty verdicts with recommendations for capital punishment. There is little doubt by greater New Orleans citizens of whatever race that a defendant is far more likely to be sentenced to death if he is tried in a suburban parish court than if he is tried in the city itself.

That fact has been the ironic cause of racial resentment even among those stubborn white residents of the city who believe in racial equality and have historically themselves opposed the death penalty. This past December Juan Smith was convicted of smashing his way into a house and coldbloodedly gunning down five people. But a black jury refused to return a recommendation for the death penalty against Smith even after hearing testimony in the sentencing phase of his trial that he had bragged about murdering three other people, including a three-year-old child.

If several court decisions in the last year represent the beginning of a new trend, however, the reluctance of black juries to recommend capital punishment may be in the process of changing. Black majority juries have recently returned death recommendations in three highly publicized murder cases. In separate trials Antoinette Frank and her accomplice Rogers Lacaze were sent to death row for murdering three employees of a Vietnamese restaurant, two of whom (both devout Catholics) fell to their knees and prayed for mercy before being executed. Then a week ago Shareef Cousin was sentenced to die for shooting a man in the face as he left a French Quarter restaurant. Many whites in our city have found these three decisions encouraging as a sign that our city's long racial rift might finally be narrowing. I am deeply troubled to admit this, but I am one of them.

III.

I took my city's recent crisis of crime and my own eroded opposition to the death penalty with me to see Tim Robbins' Dead Man Walking. I knew beforehand that it was a picture about capital punishment made by and about people deeply opposed to the death penalty. I went hoping to be rejuvenated in my youthful idealism. But Robbins understood from the beginning of this project what I perhaps only glimpse after seeing his completed film: Opposition to the death penalty can be embraced by the intellect, but the intellect is easily defeated by a fearful and angry heart. In the end, the only abiding opposition to the death penalty must be located in the spirit.

Near the beginning of Dead Man Walking, a New Orleans nun named Helen Prejean (Susan Sarandon) sets off a metal detector as she attempts to enter the death house at Angola, the same death house where Sister Prejean's friend Will Campbell met with Robert Collins fifteen years ago. In the film, Sister Prejean is both confused and frightened as guards swoop around her, squeeze her in tight fists and begin waving hand-held detectors up and down her body. She has come to visit with a death-row inmate named Matthew Poncelet (Sean Penn), and she has, of course, not come armed. But for the briefest moment, as the guards buzz around her, she is a suspect, the object of intense scrutiny by people whose job it is to keep men locked away for the rest of their lives, lives that once were ended with a jolt.
of electricity, today by a poisoned needle. Eventually, the guards determine that Sister Prejean has tripped their alarm with her metal crucifix. And thereby Robbins establishes his central metaphor. Sister Prejean is armed after all, armed with the incredible power of her faith. And with that faith she has indeed come to Angola to set Matthew Poncelet free.

Scripted by Robbins and based on the real Helen Prejean’s memoir, Dead Man Walking is a dramatization of a nun’s spiritual journey. Sister Prejean leaves her middle-class childhood for a life working with the poor and residing in New Orleans’ violent St. Thomas Housing Project. Without seeking the role, she becomes a counselor to the condemned and an outspoken opponent of the death penalty. Ultimately she comes to understand that her opposition to capital punishment must be accompanied by an involvement in the lives of the unseen victims, the surviving loved ones of the slain. Matthew Poncelet is a composite of two convicted killers, Robert Lee Willie and Elmo Sonnier, that Helen Prejean counseled as they awaited execution. In the film, Poncelet has been convicted of the brutal rape of a young woman from suburban New Orleans and the subsequent pitiless murder of both the woman and her fiancé. Poncelet admits he committed the rape, but claims an accomplice did the actual killing.

Dead Man Walking strives to do several very imposing things. First, it urges a belief in the possibility of redemption. Matthew Poncelet’s initial motives for summoning Sister Prejean to his cell may be limited to his desire to have her file motions on his behalf for a new trial. But Sister Prejean continues to involve herself with him right up until the moment of his death in a desperate determination to save his soul. And that means a continuing attempt to get Poncelet to accept responsibility for his actions and to understand and acknowledge the evil nature of what he’s done.

In addition, Dead Man Walking illustrates the agony of those who lose their loved ones to a killer’s misdirected rage and cold indifference. The parents of one of the victims become so obsessed by their daughter’s death that they seem able to talk of nothing else; the parents of the other separate, their emptiness and sorrow driving a stake into their own love. Grief over the murder of a child is so shattering, we learn, that seventy percent of victims’ parents separate in the aftermath of their loss.

Most prominently, Dead Man Walking seeks to raise searching questions about the death penalty. And in this regard the picture plays uncommonly fair. Among the traditional reasons for opposing the death penalty is concern over the possibility of executing an innocent person. But Matthew Poncelet isn’t innocent. We don’t believe even his claims not to have pulled the trigger, and indeed, as he finally admits, we are correct not to. Moreover, Poncelet himself gives us little reason to feel sympathy for him. He is infuriatingly illogical in his determination to blame any and all but himself for his crimes. His primary attitudes are those of disdain and defiance. He makes racist proclamations about his solidarity with the Aryan Brotherhood. And rather than showing Sister Prejean his gratitude, he sneers at her with insulting sexual innuendo. Then in the film’s closing passage, given its intentions, Robbins does something strikingly honest and therefore brave: He intercuts Poncelet’s last moments, strapped to a gurney and awaiting the drip of the lethal liquid, with the specific, heinous events of his crimes. Matthew Poncelet does not come to his end, in other words, by accident. He is guilty, and in the directives of Exodus 21 he deserves to surrender his own life in payment for the lives he has taken.

But without citing the textual references, Robbins invokes a Biblical imperative that for Christians supersedes Exodus 21, namely the teachings of Jesus who beseeched us to turn the other cheek, to love our enemies, to forgive those who would harm us not once or even seven times only, but seventy times seven, who warned us that those who live by the sword will die by the sword. The Sister Prejean we meet in Dead Man Walking is not a woman for making speeches or, unless pushed, even one much for quoting scripture. But she is a woman of tenacious faith who explains her actions quite simply as “trying to follow the example of Jesus.” It is her premise that however evil his actions and however fierce his defenses, Matthew Poncelet is still a human being and therefore the possessor of an immortal soul. And where there is life, there is hope for redemption. Oppose the death penalty though she does, Sister Prejean never believes that she can save Poncelet’s life, and that’s why she feels such urgency to save his soul.

Sister Prejean knows, of course, that she cannot save Poncelet but can only offer him assistance in saving himself, a salvation that must begin with his facing the truth of his guilt. As the film plays out the last thirty minutes in the murderer’s life in something approximating real time, Poncelet finally confesses to killing and at Sister Prejean’s urging prepares a statement which he hopes will provide at least a modicum of comfort to the survivors of his victims. And yet it remains unclear, as no doubt it should, whether Poncelet has been freed by such truth as he’s finally embraced or has only cracked under the pressure of facing the imminence of his death. Still, the harrowing nature of this closing half hour has an enduring impact as the minutes at once rush and crawl by. In the final
sequence Poncelet is strapped to the gurney and pricked with the needle before he is craned to an upright position to make his final statement. Whatever his unspeakable crimes, in that moment his circumstance of helplessness and humiliation is chilling.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus warned us to "Judge not, that ye be not judged." And Robbins seems to have taken that counsel seriously, but in two ways rather than only the most obvious one, for he has not judged those who cry out for justice even when their understanding of justice is different from his own. Both families of Poncelet's victims want to see the murderer executed, and Robbins never undercuts the power of their feelings. Indeed, as we witness first the horror of Poncelet's crimes, next the unrepentant hardness of his nature and finally the unending suffering of those who loved his victims, we understand their desire for vengeance. And this fact gives to the end of Dead Man Walking a profound feeling of discomfort. At the sold-out afternoon screening I attended in New Orleans, a distraught viewer leapt from his seat in the film's final minutes and demanded in a loud, anguished voice a movie that was sympathetic with the victims. Oddly enough, I think the viewer became so upset precisely because the film is so sympathetic with the victims and yet even in the fullest illustration of its sympathy cries out for mercy for Poncelet, not because he deserves it by any measure apprehensible by the human mind, but because Jesus demands it of us in his name.

IV.

In thinking about Dead Man Walking, it is critical to notice the strategy of the film's underlying argument. It merely brushes at the Constitutional debate about "cruel and unusual punishment." Robbins' careful rendering of Matthew Poncelet's last tormented minutes documents that the death penalty is cruel. But many might respond that the state's cruelty to the condemned man is nothing compared to the condemned man's cruelty to his victims. The fact that the poor (who are disproportionately people of color) are sentenced to die far more often than the rich (as the Simpson trial again illustrates) argues powerfully that the death penalty is legally unusual. So does the fact that the mere place one commits a capital crime dramatically influences the chances of a death sentence, a fact on which all suburban and urban New Orleanians would readily agree. But proponents of the death penalty would argue that this problem could be solved by executing killers more often and more routinely.

Tim Robbins' effectiveness both at portraying the suffering of those who mourn the loss of murdered loved ones and at making us understand the fury survivors feel toward their loved ones' killers does not mean, of course, that suffering is eased or fury extinguished by a killer's execution. Still, a consideration for the survivors raises important questions for those who oppose the death penalty. Foremost among them is how a sense of justice may be achieved.

I think that's the exact dilemma that plagues those of us seemingly caught in the contemporary urban crossfire. I have never had a loved one murdered, thank God. But I have known urban crime quite personally. I have had a car stolen; more traumatically, my wife has been held up at gun point. And I know the sense of outrage I have felt in the aftermath of these events. So at least in some small measure I can feel the anger of a murder victim's survivors. In a very real way, every violent crime robs all of us who live in urban America of a feeling of security in our daily activities that ought to be our birthright. The outrage of the citizen whose sense of fundamental physical security has been violated now manifests itself in the nation's overwhelming support for capital punishment, though hardly all who support the death penalty believe that it can be made to play a significant role in reducing violent crime. In short, as a people we have come to endorse capital punishment because we so desire a sense of justice that seems absent from our daily experience.

But perhaps this need not be. What we crave is a maximal accounting with those who have murdered our loved ones and destroyed our peace of mind. And perhaps indeed such a maximal accounting need not require state administered execution. If the death penalty were not available under the law in this state, then we would not have to endure the agony of watching a convicted man and his supporters demand and so often receive from troubled juries a mercy the killer has not shown his own victims. But a harsh sentence, short of death, is requisite. There is no justice without genuine punishment. And the aggrieved, indirect as well as direct, have a right to the satisfaction that justice has been done. In this regard the implications of Dead Man Walking must be applied to all society. As Sister Prejean must counsel the family of the killer's victims, those who oppose the death penalty must marry to their own crusade an equivalent demand for a system of justice in which punishment becomes the result of crime.

V.

But whatever the merits of these complicated reflections, they proceed from the mind rather than the heart. As I write these words, another high profile murder case is
being tried in an Orleans Parish courtroom. Percy Hawthorne and Leon Burton are on trial for killing a seventy-year-old crippled artist named Phil Thomasson. Though each blames the other for pulling the trigger, in their taped confessions Hawthorne and Burton agree that they carjacked Thomasson’s van, put him out in a dark vacant lot, and as he supported himself on his cane and pleaded for his life, shot him in the head. I presume that an Orleans Parish jury will find Hawthorne and Burton guilty. And when they do, I hope the jurors will return as well a recommendation for capital punishment.

And yet, I wish I didn’t feel that way at all. Though my angry heart demands they be condemned, remembering the last awful moments of Matthew Poncelet, I can’t honestly say that I hope Hawthorne and Burton someday find themselves strapped to the gurney. What I really wish is that I was still that younger, more idealistic man. I wish my life had not been tarnished by frustration and fear. I wish my conscience on this matter were clear in a way that it most certainly isn’t. I wish I could still ride along through the verdant Louisiana countryside on a mission of mercy with a man like Will Campbell.

I had intended to conclude these reflections by offering a single criticism of Dead Man Walking, a criticism I felt quite strongly while watching the film. As Poncelet lies on the injection table in the very last moments of his life, Sister Prejean stretches out her hand toward him and mouths words he cannot hear but perhaps can understand coming from her lips. “I love you,” she says. I struggled against this scene at the time I witnessed it because Poncelet is so thoroughly unlovable. Even at the end when he has finally done some tiny thing we might judge as right, as perhaps redemptive, he is still almost utterly despicable. How could she conceivably love him. I thought. Better, truer, I thought, shouldn’t she say, “God loves you.” But upon reflection, what I originally thought as inappropriate is simply a measure of the difference between Helen Prejean and Will Campbell and me. Sustained by their profound religious faith, Sister Prejean and Will know without question that the death penalty is wrong and have found in their hearts the astonishing grace to love their enemies. I once shared the ideals of Helen Prejean and Will Campbell, but my beliefs were housed in the intellect, the flimsiest of vessels. And would that it were otherwise, my faith lacks their certainty. I am imprisoned by the battle between what I think and what I feel. So today I pray that the spiritual truth of Helen Prejean and Will Campbell’s example, the example of Jesus, will someday set me free.

Robert Prosky and Susan Sarandon star in the Tim Robbins film DEAD MAN WALKING, a Gramercy Pictures release.

It is a bit unusual to review a book for which one has written a blurb. They are, of course, different genres. If you are invited to write a blurb, you decide whether you can honestly commend a book with the sort of high praise appropriate to a publicity notice (and whether you want to). Let this review begin, then, with the observation that the decision to write a review of this book was not a hard decision. A good book prompts thoughtful response, and Sondra Ely Wheeler is a scholar worth quarreling with.

The book asks how the New Testament can and should form and inform moral discernment in the churches concerning possessions. The introductory chapters are methodological. The next four chapters, the heart of the book, are exegetical, focusing on a careful reading of Mark 10:17-37, Luke 12:22-34, II Corinthians 8:1-15, and James 5:1-6 respectively. In the next two chapters Sondra Wheeler undertakes a synthesis of the New Testament’s treatment of wealth. She surveys other relevant New Testament passages briefly (and still more briefly the Old Testament tradition on possessions) and identifies certain “themes” as central to the New Testament: wealth as a stumbling block, as a competing object of devotion, as symptom of economic injustice, and as a resource for human need. The final chapter returns to the question concerning how the New Testament can form and inform the churches’ moral discernment concerning wealth. The themes identified in the previous chapter are transposed into questions for the ongoing examination of the life of our communities, and contemporary readers are invited to share certain aspects of the “moral world” of the New Testament.

There is much here that warrants the high praise of a blurb, but there are also some occasions to quarrel a little. Sometimes the execution is better than the methodology. The quarrel here is one Sondra identifies in her review of her own methodological proposal. (The methodological section begins with a brief critical review of five proposals for the use of Scripture in Christian ethics, considering the recommendations of Jim Gustafson, Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen, Allen Verhey, Stanley Hauerwas, and Thomas Ogletree.) Sondra objects to my refusal to move directly from the concrete moral prescriptions and prohibitions of scripture to identical moral rules for the Christian community today. She claims that my proposal fails “to grant the specific moral injunctions of Scripture any authority at all” (10-11). However, I did not and do not propose ripping the specific moral injunctions and discarding them; they are a part of the whole Scripture that has authority for moral life. Rather, I did and do propose that the Christian community not use Scripture to defend a particular concrete moral claim by simply finding an “identical” concrete moral claim in Scripture. Given the passage of time, an “identical” rule may not be identical at all.

For example, Jesus’ command to “lend, expecting nothing in return” (Lk. 6:35) is not to be torn from Scripture and discarded, but we may not defend a contemporary prohibition of interest on loans by simply repeating this concrete injunction. Given the changed economic world, the “identical” prohibition of “usury” may not be identical at all. “Identical” prescriptions and prohibitions are sometimes appropriate, of course, but their appropriateness can (and must) be tested by the discernment of the
and to a conviction of a distinctive mission. The New Testament conveys at once a "moral world" which is strange and alien, composed of clients and patrons and friends, dependent upon agriculture and upon traditional roles, and a "moral world" of God's good future making its power felt. The second is, perhaps, no less strange and alien than the first, but it is normative for the continuing church in ways the other "moral world" is simply not. Because the first "moral world" is always conveyed, my own proposal refused to authorize contemporary moral claims directly from the rules of the New Testament, but that quarrel has already been identified.

Her execution is sometimes better than her method, and her method is sometimes better than her execution, but such quarrels do not and ought not prevent me finally from reiterating the sort of praise appropriate to a blurb. It is a splendid book. It describes and displays how the New Testament can form and inform Christian dispositions toward wealth. It is a significant contribution to Christian communities which gather around Scripture in an effort to discern the shape of lives "worthy of the gospel."

Allen Verhey

Blackbird

Sometimes a blackbird
is just a blackbird
Not Satan
or God
or my mother.

But look—
he shakes his wings,
drops from the wire
and from the ground, metaphor
swirls up to meet him.

Katherine G. Bond
contrary to a strong doctrine of salvation by grace. Hebrew and Christian virtues like faith, hope, and love are formations of personality precisely in response to God’s grace. Internal to such virtues is an attitude of humility in which God is given the credit as the ultimate source and sustainer of any virtue that is in one. A person who thought he was justified before God by his own love—justified, that is, in the sense that God owes him salvation on the basis of his own character achievement—would, by this pattern of thinking, disqualify himself as exemplifying Christian love. Thus, far from being contrary to a strong doctrine of grace, the Christian virtues are embodiments of that doctrine in the thought, attitudes, and response-patterns of believers. To neglect the virtues would be to neglect the deepest Christian education in the doctrine of grace. It would be to allow the doctrine’s presence in the community to consist in its being “on the books.” We should note, however, that it is possible to draw a false conclusion from the fact that faith and love acknowledge God’s grace to be the only source of salvation and the ultimate source of one’s virtues. That is the distortion of supposing that human will and discipline may or must play no role in the formation of the virtues. Some Christians who are committed to live a holy life fear that self-discipline implies works righteousness. But self-discipline that is undertaken in the spirit of humility will avoid works righteousness, and discipline is normally a part of Christian formation.

Another strength of Farley’s book is what we might call its empirical character. He doesn’t seem to feel any compulsion, such as the ancients and medievals felt, to box the virtues according to some preconceived schema such as the four cardinal virtues, or those four plus the three theological virtues, or the virtue counterparts of the seven deadly sins. Instead, he just takes a look in the Bible to see what virtues are actually being commended and exemplified there. Seeing that the character of a virtue is determined by the larger views that people take of the world in which they live, including their concept of God, Farley ties the biblical virtues to such biblical themes as God’s nature as creator out of self-giving love, human nature as in the image of God, human nature as finite (created out of “dust” and “rib”), and God as the final definer of good and evil. Such beliefs as these become ingredient in Abraham’s FAITH, but Farley discerns in the narrative a number of subordinate virtues as well, such as TRANSCENDENCE OF THE PURELY EGOISTIC, TRANSCENDENCE OF THE PURELY MATERIALISTIC, KINDNESS, TOLERANCE, ACCEPTANCE OF THE INSCRUTIBLE EXIGENCIES OF LIFE, and TRUSTING ACCEPTANCE OF GOD. Sarah’s virtues partially overlap with Abraham’s and partially are distinctive. With Abraham she shares ACCEPTANCE OF THE INSCRUTIBLE EXIGENCIES OF LIFE, but also displays INTENSE REALISM, DEPTH OF INNER PERSONHOOD, STRENGTH OF CHARACTER, INITIATIVE, and AWE (see pp. 40-44).

There is something undiscriminating and conceptually errant about Farley’s empiricism, however. He would have done better to stick to the virtue-vocabulary of the Bible, and then to treat the various features that he identifies in his proliferation of biblical “virtues” as features of the main biblical virtues. Such a treatment would be more conceptually unified, more intrinsically coherent, and more generative of understanding, than his rather desultory sketching of this and that as it comes up in the biblical text.

Some of the virtues that Farley discerns in the biblical thought and narratives go by so fast that reference to them hardly amounts to more than naming them. Some systematic understanding of them is provided by Farley’s subordinating some to others and relating them to biblical themes, but still this guided tour of biblical virtues reminds us of one of those tours of Europe in which one visits Toulouse in the morning, lunches in Carcassone, and spends the evening in Montpellier. It is not worthless. A running peek at virtues is better, for some purposes, than no acquaintance at all, and some profit is to be gained from seeing them fast in an overview. But this book will not take anybody very deep into the biblical virtues, and if a preacher used the book in preparing sermons she would get little more than schemas. If she tried to preach what is actually in the book, without psychological development that would

### Taking in the View

I must begin with a twig—no the drops of rain on the twig: globes kaleidoscoping the hill, shattering it into fragments each one rose and turquoise and hanging upsidedown.

So
I reach up
and wet my hands
with small planets.

Katherine G. Bond
take some rather penetrating and creative thought, she would produce the kind of sermons on the virtues that we often hear and fast forget. As I say, there is a place for a book like this one. But it is not the most valuable kind of book to write on the biblical virtues. A more valuable book would select a representative handful of major biblical virtues and then treat them in enough psychological depth and detail so that the presentation would actually constitute a heart-sounding "call" to exemplify them. Such a book would inspire and "preach" in a way that this one does not.

Farley's conceptual framework for discussing virtues, and his understanding of classical sources, are shaky. For example, he says that "virtue may be defined as an activity of the whole person in conformity with love of God and love of neighbor" (160), and "Aquinas follows Aristotle's lead in making the virtues the mean choices and acts between emotions and actions" (19). But it is neither correct, nor correct as an account of Aristotle and Aquinas, to say that virtues are activities or acts or choices. Virtues are dispositions, states of character, readiness for choice, action, and activity. Throughout the book Farley follows Stanley Hauerwas in a distinction that is dubious in itself and unwarranted by the classical sources, between virtues and character. He writes repeatedly of the virtues as "developing" (11) or "reinforcing" (161) a person's character, as though a person's character is one thing, and the configuration of a person's character is one thing, and the configuration of a person's virtues is something else. Character and the virtues are indeed distinguishable, inasmuch as a person's vices are just as constitutive of his character as his virtues. In Hauerwas's vocabulary, character seems to be that part of a person's character that is characterized by autonomy, self-determination, and proper choice, whereas the virtues are mere "skills for action" or "operative habits" in some fairly thin sense of 'habit.' But this is a perverse way of assigning vocabulary, since in contemporary English as well as in the classical sources 'character' includes the more automatic response patterns of a person's moral constitution, as well as his or her powers for deliberation and choice; and the reduction of virtues to mere skills for action or operative habits is neither classical nor warranted by contemporary usage. Virtues are characterized by intelligent discernment and are, as Aristotle says, "concerned with choice."

In Praise of Virtue will be useful to scholars and pastors who want a quick survey of the Bible in terms of the virtues that it displays and commends, but are conceptually sophisticated enough not to be discouraged by the thinness of the analysis or misled by the awkwardness of the philosophical framework in which it is cast.

Robert C. Roberts

The Editor would like to point out two books with relevance to this issue of The Cresset, though both were received too recently to be reviewed here. One is Reclaiming the Bible for the Church, edited by Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jensen, a collection of essays published in 1995 by Eerdmans. In addition, we have just received Walter Wangerin Jr.'s new novel, The Book of God, a telling of the story of the Bible in a strongly novelistic manner. Now widely available, it was published in January by Zondervan.

Notes on Poets—

Mimi Hennessy lives in Fairfield, CT. Her work has appeared in Queen's Quarterly, Night Sun, The McGuffin and Amaranth.

Dorothea Kewley writes from Washington, where she was a student of the late Nelson Bentley. Her work has appeared in The Cresset in the Christmas issue, 1995.

Tim Gustafson is an assistant professor of English at Concordia College, Broxville, NY.

J.T. Ledbetter is a teacher and poet at California Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks, CA. He publishes frequently in The Cresset and elsewhere.

John Gidmark is a staff attorney at the Minnesota Workers' Compensation Court of Appeals in St. Paul, Minnesota, having formerly been a Lecturer in English at Augsburg College in Minneapolis and the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul.

Katherine G. Bond is a free lance writer from Seattle, who has published mostly fiction for children. These are her first published poems.