

Book Reviews

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Christopher J.H. Wright, *How to Preach and Teach the Old Testament for All Its Worth* (Zondervan, 2016), 288 pages, \$19.

Christopher J.H. Wright has taught Old Testament interpretation in India, has been principal at All Nations Christian College in London, and is currently director of the Langham Partnership International. Known for his many publications, including *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (IVP, 2006), Wright also wrote the chapter "Preaching from the Law" for an international project, *Reclaiming the Old Testament for Christian Preaching* (IVP, 2010). There he cautioned against moralistic preaching, demonstrating how obedience to God's *torah* instruction is a response to grace and not a means to receive it. Those two commitments to mission and divine initiative shape his approach throughout *How to Preach and Teach the Old Testament for All Its Worth*. For example, he insists preachers should remember that the Psalms call not only Israel but all nations to praise God for blessings already received.

The title of the book, as the cover of my paperback copy advertises, is "a follow-up to *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*," the popular book by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, now in its fourth edition. Of course

Wright also talks about the importance of reading the Bible properly. It is his primary objective, with strategies for preaching and teaching to flow from it. Three chapters are given to understanding and preaching Old Testament narrative and two each for preaching law, prophets, and psalms. Sadly, only one chapter covers the wisdom books Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, leaving the oft-neglected Song of Songs and Lamentations untreated.

Wright describes the individual Old Testament stories as communications to Israel that are now part of the larger biblical narrative that points to Jesus Christ. That narrative can be outlined in six stages: creation, fall, promise, gospel, mission, and new creation. The story of Israel, from the call of Abraham to the rebuilding of the Temple in Ezra and Nehemiah, is the stage of promise that looks forward to a prophet and messiah. Wright repeatedly uses this simple outline to remind preachers to keep both the original audience and the whole story in mind when speaking to contemporary audiences. Fortunately, dangers of oversimplification are mitigated by those chapters that give guidelines for reading each of the Old Testament genres.

Wright takes two chapters to discuss Old Testament law: one to understand it properly and the other to examine communication strategies. Regarding the first, he finds it telling that when the ten commands are written on church walls or other public monuments, the preface of God's deliverance from Egypt is omitted. "Never preach the law of the Old Testament without the story of the Old Testament that goes before it" (p. 142). He takes pains to dissuade preachers that the story of Israel is a failed plan A to which Jesus and church become plan B, along with any misreading that the people of Israel earned their salvation by keeping law. Paul did not believe that was what the Scriptures taught, and in his letters he argued strenuously with those who did.

Not only will the book provide a clear introduction for those new to Old Testament studies; it also offers a model for how teachers might convey these principles of interpretation. Wright's writing style reflects a way of teaching that is down to earth, almost folksy in its logic and illustration. For example, Wright suggests that if we want to get close to Jesus by making an Israel trip to walk where Jesus walked, wouldn't we also want to read his Bible? We would want to listen to the stories he heard, the songs he sang, the commands he obeyed. The point is made concrete with details, demonstrating the preacher's talent for speaking in everyday terms.

Checklists and questions help preachers move beyond the generalities that often result in platitude-laden sermons. Examples of sermon outlines show how one can make the teaching clear and interesting, but they leave it to the preacher to make connections with contemporary issues. I wish the author had done more to bring together the disciplines of exegesis and preaching and had said more about respecting the faith of Judaism. I recommend this compendium of Wright's Old Testament teaching directed to preaching and teaching as essential reading.

PAUL KOPTAK

Justo González, *The Mestizo Augustine: A Theologian Between Two Cultures* (IVP, 2016), 176 pages, \$24.

Since the birth of liberation and feminist theologies in the 1960s, many have come to see the importance of knowing the biography of those who write theology in order to discern the particular biases they bring to their works. Had this approach been followed much earlier, many generations of seminarians and others would have had a more accurate understanding of the most influential Christian theologian since the fourth century, known throughout the ages as Augustine of Hippo. Most important, they would not have assumed that he was a white European.

Fortunately, one of the most distinguished church historians of our time, Justo González, has provided the world a new look at the life and thought of this extraordinary theologian. The book's title, *The Mestizo Augustine: A Theologian Between Two Cultures*, clearly reveals its novel approach, which is destined to change the world's understanding of Augustine for all time. Readers should carefully consider this concise and informative introduction wherein the primary marker of Augustine's identity is being a *mestizo* (a Spanish term for a person of mixed racial or ethnic ancestry), his father as a Roman and his mother probably of Berber descent. This awareness informs the reader regarding Augustine's works as a preacher and theologian living in the historical context of both church and society.

González claims that Augustine's training in Latin hindered him from accepting his mother's less erudite understanding of Christianity. Yet it did influence him subconsciously, as was evidenced later in the conflicting understandings of "authority" between the Romans and the Africans (Lybian/Berber), the former viewing it as determined by law and the latter by personal character. Thus, from time to time the mestizo Augustine

was able to draw upon these two differing cultural understandings of “authority” as useful resources for resolving conflicts, depending on the needs and circumstances at hand. González clearly demonstrates this matter in the controversies Augustine encountered in his rejection of the teachings of the Donatists on the one hand and of the Pelagians on the other hand. In the former case, Augustine drew upon the Roman side of his identity by appealing to the law of God in favoring the church’s doctrines pertaining to ecclesiology, the sacraments, and the theory of just war. By contrast, in addressing the Pelagian controversy, he leaned toward the African side of his identity by arguing that the sin of Adam affected all humans, including infants for whom baptism was a necessary means for God’s redemptive grace.

González is fully aware that Augustine’s inclination to solve all problems either philosophically or theologically, rendered him oblivious to the sociological, cultural, and political dimensions of the issues posed by the various church schisms he faced. Most important, he was probably unaware of the impact they had on himself. With the help of his Roman education, Augustine had suppressed the mestizo in himself by consciously rendering invalid all things African, whether Lybian or Berber. Consequently, he failed to see how the mestizo character of a region that was wholly controlled by the imperial powers of Rome frequently expressed its freedom through various forms of populist resistance, such as Manichaeism, Donatism, Pelagianism, and Paganism—to each of which González devotes a full chapter in the book. Augustine’s endeavors to resolve the controversies through the arts of philosophical and theological disputations probably appealed only to the ruling elites in the church and the society but not to the masses who gave rise to the controversies in the first place. Consequently, various aspects of those controversies have remained alive up to the present day because their roots were deeply embedded in the spirit of the oppressed people themselves, which the Roman and Christian elites either ignored or suppressed.

This book clearly reveals the illuminating methodological effect of approaching the study of antiquity with a set of contemporary questions concerning its socio-political context. Let me hasten to affirm González’s claim that such an approach in no way seeks to change the past in light of the present; rather, it helps contemporary students see more clearly the full reality of the ancient situation itself. For example, such an approach helps us learn more about Augustine himself who throughout the ages has been such a pivotal force in the world’s understanding of Christian-

ity. To bracket the reality of his social context abstracts both him and it and thus renders both non-historical. Unfortunately, such an approach has characterized the way the so-called church fathers have been taught over the centuries and, hence, why they have seemed so meaningless to many subsequent readers.

Finally, this book has been highly praised by numerous distinguished historians not only for its unique contribution to Augustinian studies, but especially for its contemporary relevance. Thus, all who read it will be grateful to González for bringing Augustine and his works alive for contemporary readers so as to sustain the hope that his enduring influence on Christians will continue to enlighten men and women for many generations to come.

PETER J. PARIS

Mark Safstrom, *The Religious Origins of Democratic Pluralism: Paul Peter Waldenström and the Politics of the Swedish Awakening 1868–1917* (Pickwick Publications, 2016), 304 pages, \$28.

For most readers, democratic pluralism will seem at odds with religion. Where the former endorses the equal value of diverse views, the latter proclaims the truth of one. But even democratic pluralism rests on a dogmatic commitment. For the democrat, the discussion of political justice begins and ends with equality. Insofar as religion shares that commitment, it may have a constructive role to play in the contemporary West.

In the case of Sweden at the beginning of the last century, Mark Safstrom argues, the Free Church movement did play such a role. He persuasively shows how the political activity of Paul Peter Waldenström, a leading figure in that movement, helped Sweden take a “middle way” (p. 27). Sweden’s choice of social democracy, as opposed to the extremes of National Socialism and Marxist-Leninist socialism of neighboring Germany and Russia respectively, was not foreordained (p. 232). It reflected “a narrative of moderation” constructed in public debates in which Waldenström played a major part (p. 233). As the Evangelical Covenant Church of North America is one of the “chief custodians” of Waldenström’s “theological legacy,” this retelling of his story will be of particular interest to its members (pp. 1–2).

Safstrom focuses on the role Waldenström played in three folk movements (*folkrörelser*) of the period: the religious awakening, the labor movement, and the temperance movement. In each, he shows Waldenström

taking a moderate rather than an absolutist position. In the religious sphere, Waldenström argued that the Church of Sweden should continue to exist but also that it should lose its religious monopoly. Though he thought that the choice of religion should be private, he thought religious belief should have a public role. Safstrom writes, “much of Waldenström’s motivation in remaining active in politics seems to have been an effort to maintain a sense of normalcy for the inclusion of religion in the public sphere, and to not let Christian politicians be marginalized as moralizers and absolutists” (p. 132).

An attractive feature of this book is its inclusion of a number of political cartoons of the time in which caricatures of Waldenström appear. The frequency of such appearances, Safstrom observes, indicates how seriously his opponents took him in the public debates of the time.

Waldenström represented Gävle for seven terms in the *Riksdag*, the lower house of the Swedish parliament, in the years 1884–1905, and continued to take an active part in public debate until his death in 1917. This period includes what a Swedish historian has called “years of crisis” for the nation’s development (p. 111). During this period, Safstrom notes, there was a struggle for the leadership of the Social Democratic party between “orthodox Marxist leaders like August Palm and moderates like Hjalmar Branting” (p. 121). The fact that Branting won and that Swedish Social Democracy emerged as what political scientist Sheri Berman characterizes as “not a triumph of socialism over liberalism” but “a hybrid creature” (p. 118), Safstrom attributes in part to Waldenström. He writes that Waldenström’s critiques “forced the party to confront the fringe of radical anarchists that discredited the movement as anti-democratic” (p. 120). A speech in Karlstad in which Waldenström defended a middle way as “not simply a lukewarm position” but the safest path to “social progress” followed a radical anarchist bombing during a labor dispute in Malmö in 1908, the Amalthea Incident.

Safstrom shows the pluralist character of Waldenström’s thought, as well as his rhetorical skill, in the way he made *frisinne* (open-mindedness, free thinking) a key term in his political vocabulary. While some political leaders used *frisinne* as synonymous with an ideological position, Waldenström used it to mean the opposite: “an ability to engage with a question in a non-partisan frame of mind” (p. 178). Safstrom quotes from one of Waldenström’s speeches: “True liberal-mindedness (*frisinne*) attempts to understand the perspective of those who think differently. It offers reasons and it demands reasons. If it finds that the opponent has

a better explanation than it was able to offer, then it is not ashamed to change its position and opinion” (quoted p. 120).

The religious foundation of Waldenström’s pluralism, Safstrom argues, may be seen in his use of allegory in his novel *Squire Adamsson*, which Safstrom has translated (Pietisten, 2014). Where Christian allegory, as in *Pilgrim’s Progress*, tends to involve “a completely linear pursuit of truth,” for Waldenström it is also circular, which teaches a Pietist lesson about the pursuit of truth (p. 37). The truth “becomes nuanced, rather than threatened, by a diversity of subjective experiences. Conversely, whenever the characters attempt to construct certainty, they fail” (p. 42). In this way one learns to distinguish essential from non-essential principles. The result is “acceptance of the necessity of pluralism without conceding relativism” (p. 43).

This last point is critical and points to what Safstrom calls “the limits of democracy in the kingdom of Christ” (chapter 7 title). For all that subjectivity rules in the realm of the non-essentials, it has no place in the realm of the essentials. The Christian in the public sphere recognizes that the pursuit of truth is a collaborative endeavor and brings to that collaboration absolute commitment to what is essential in Christian belief.

JOSEPH ALULIS

Cindy M. Wu, *A Better Country: Embracing the Refugees in Our Midst* (William Carey Library, 2017), 82 pages, \$12.

I knew my heart had changed when an airplane conversation ignited every fiery bone in my body. The two men behind me had been chatting for a while, and try as I might to ignore their banter, the task proved rather difficult without any earbuds on my part and lack of decibel awareness on theirs. But when they began talking about America’s refugee crisis, it took everything within me not to interrupt with a thought or two of my own.

“Why would you let someone into this country with no assets and no education? Why would you let them take away our jobs?” The older of the two finished his soliloquy with a flourish of his hands, just as I sneaked a peak at him and shook my head in disgust. I may not have been Spirit-filled in that moment, but just as I knew our humanity made us more alike than different, I also recognized their deep-seated fear of not knowing. Less than a week before, I’d finished working my way through Cindy M. Wu’s, *A Better Country: Embracing the Refugees in Our Midst*,

and, as the adage goes, when we know better, we do better. While my beliefs on displaced peoples hadn't changed all that much from reading her book, my desire to act on those beliefs had changed—thus fulfilling Wu's hope for the short resource.

Formatted for small group discussion over the course of six brief chapters (or weeks), Wu equips the reader with facts, grounding the argument in the Bible while ultimately empowering the individual to go out and *do* something about the “more than 34,000 people [displaced] every day, or 12.4 million newly displaced people in 2015 alone” (p. xiii). Readers will learn distinctions between an asylum seeker, an asylee, and an internally displaced person (IDP) while gaining an understanding about the role of the United Nations. In true workbook fashion, Wu is both a teacher and a guide who encourages the reader to reflect on and respond to newly filtered information.

By the time the group—or in my case, the individual—gets to the third chapter, the reader is well equipped with the facts of the problem at hand. Here Wu challenges the reader to think biblically about how God looks at the stranger, based on the premise of 1 Chronicles 29:15, “For we are strangers before you and sojourners, as all our fathers were. Our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding” (ESV).

By building an argument on the Hebrew word for “stranger,” *ger*, Wu explains how various Bible translations render the word as “alien,” “foreigner,” “guest,” or “sojourner,” providing readers with precedents deeply rooted in the history and theology of Judaism (p. 21). Because this command to care for the least among us is the heart of God, and therefore of his son, this too can—and should—be our heart toward the strangers in our midst.

By the time the reader arrives at the final two chapters, a rumbling of empowerment comes alive in the pages of Wu's book. As American Christians we are to go and do, building on our country's foundation and following in the ways Christ teaches us to interact with and care for *all* of our brothers and sisters. “Today,” she states, “the ends of the earth are coming to America, and you have the opportunity to show God's love to them, without leaving your home. What is your vision for making the most of that opportunity?” (p. 40). Perhaps my favorite part of the book, Wu then equips the reader with eighteen practical ideas for caring for refugees in our midst. Whether we prepare a warm meal and invite a new family into our home or watch a handful of documentaries to better understand the plight of refugees, it is not impossible to care

for others out of who we already are and what we are already doing, no matter our situation.

I may not have responded verbally to the passengers on the flight that day, but this I do know: if my heart for refugees has been changed by the guidance of one woman's words, I don't doubt entire faith communities can and *will* be changed as well.

CARA MEREDITH