

‘An alien in the land’: A summary of *Singing the Ethos of God* by Brian Brock¹

Simon Woodman

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Diese Zusammenfassung des Buches *Singing the Ethos of God* von Brian Brock zeigt, wie Brock versucht, seine Leser auf eine „Reise in unbekanntes Land“ mitzunehmen, das seltsame Land von Schrift und Ethik. Das Buch trägt den subversiven Untertitel „On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture“ („Zum Ort der christlichen Ethik in der Schrift“), eine bewusste Umkehrung der vertrauten Frage nach dem Ort der Schrift in der christlichen Ethik. Statt wieder einmal zu fragen, wie die Schrift Ethik informieren kann, versucht Brooks, Ethik innerhalb der Begegnung zwischen Gott und Mensch zu verorten, welche die Schrift hervorruft. Er behauptet, ethische Imperative tauchten in der Gemeinschaft des Glaubens beim „Singen“ der Schrift durch die gemeinschaftliche Artikulation der Psalmen auf, da das Ethos Gottes dadurch in der Gemeinschaft vergegenwärtigt wird, dass das Volk Gottes die Schrift singt.

Für Brock stellt sich die Sache folgendermaßen da: Während Menschen sowohl der Schrift als auch Gott als etwas „Fremdem“ begegnen könnten, beginnt die Gemeinschaft bei der Vereinigung ihrer Stimmen mit den Stimmen der Schrift, die Sprache des Königreiches Gottes zu lernen, sammelt Erfahrung in ihren Gewohnheiten und ihrer Grammatik und wird dadurch transformiert, da ihr eigenes Ethos mit dem Ethos der Schrift in Einklang gebracht wird. Brock bezieht die Metapher von Bonhoeffer: Die Kirche ist ein Chor, der eine unbekannte Melodie einübt, und die anarchische Kakophonie wird nur durch Wiederholung und ständige Auseinandersetzung in eine transformierende Harmonie verwandelt. Auf diese Weise untersucht er die Frage, was es bedeutet, subjektiv in die Story der Schrift einzutauchen, eben durch das Singen der Psalmen, um daraus durch die Begegnung mit dem unbekannten Anderen wieder aufzutauchen, dem man dort begegnet ist. Christliche Ethik wird dadurch zum konstruktiven Abgleich der Gläubigen mit dem Ethos Gottes, wie es in der Schrift offenbart ist.

Zeitgenössische Christen haben sich von der Schrift

als einer moralischen und ethischen Kraft entfremdet, weil sie sie zu oft auf ein Studienobjekt für Gebiete wie Kirchengeschichte, Bibelwissenschaften und philosophische Ethik reduziert haben. Im Gegensatz dazu bietet Brock einen Ansatz zur Schrift an, der eine *Moraltheologie* erzeugt, weil er die treuen Leser einlädt, ihre Entfremdung von der Schrift dadurch anzugehen, dass sie ihre Sprache und Redewendungen lernen, dass sie durch die anbetende Begegnung innerhalb der Grenzen der Schrift heimisch werden und dass sie eine wachsende Vertrautheit zulassen, die darin resultiert, eine ursprüngliche und gelebte Beziehung mit dem Text als Schrift zu gestalten. So wird die Bibel zu einem „transformierenden Text“, und diejenigen, die sich entscheiden, als Fremde in ihrem seltsamen Land zu leben, entdecken „wundersame Dinge“ im Gesetz, in den Geboten und Ordnungen Gottes.

Der Artikel fasst den Argumentationsgang von Brocks Buch durch seine drei Teile hindurch zusammen. Der erste Teil gibt einen Überblick über gegenwärtige Ansätze zur Rolle der Bibel in der christlichen Ethik und stellt die Frage: „Wie lernen wir, die Bibel ethisch zu lesen?“ In den ersten fünf Kapiteln diskutiert Brock führende gegenwärtige Ansätze: hermeneutisch, kommunitär, biblisch-ethisch, biblisch-theologisch und exegetisch-theologisch (hier ist Bonhoeffers Leseweise der Psalmen das Hauptbeispiel). Der zweite Teil bietet den Lesern eine Gelegenheit, selbst in die Moraltheologien von Augustinus (Kapitel 6) und Luther (Kapitel 7) einzutauchen; hier wird die Frage gestellt: „Wie können wir anfangen, in die Fremdheit der Story Gottes einzutauchen?“ Der dritte Teil positioniert christliche Ethik *innerhalb* der Schrift und fragt: „Was passiert, wenn Gläubige lernen, das „Ethos Gottes“ zu singen?“ Kapitel 8 tut das, indem es das Konzept einer „ethischen Exegese“ vertieft untersucht, und Kapitel 9 erreicht dies, indem es demonstriert, was dieser bestimmte Ansatz in der Praxis bedeutet. Das geschieht durch ausführliche Anwendung von „ethischer Exegese“, besonders in Bezug auf Psalm 130 und 104.

* * * * *

RÉSUMÉ

Ce résumé du livre de Brian Brock intitulé *Singing the Ethos of God* (« Chanter l'ethos de Dieu ») montre comment l'auteur emmène ses lecteurs « en voyage en pays étranger », le pays étrange de l'Écriture et de l'éthique. Il a donné à ce livre un titre subversif : « Du rôle de l'éthique chrétienne dans l'Écriture », qui renverse délibérément les termes de la question plus courante du rôle de l'Écriture dans l'éthique chrétienne. Au lieu de se demander comment l'Écriture peut être utilisée pour bâtir une éthique, Brock cherche à déterminer quelle place tient l'éthique dans la rencontre entre Dieu et l'homme que l'Écriture produit. Il considère que les impératifs éthiques apparaissent alors que la communauté de la foi chante les psaumes, car c'est lorsque le peuple de Dieu chante l'Écriture que l'ethos divin se trouve réalisée en son sein.

Bien que l'Écriture et Dieu puissent être rencontrés comme étrangers au départ, c'est alors que la communauté joint sa voix à celle de l'Écriture qu'elle commence à apprendre la langue du royaume de Dieu et à se familiariser avec ses coutumes et sa grammaire. Elle est ainsi transformée par la conformité de son ethos à celui de l'Écriture. Brock reprend à Bonhoeffer la métaphore suivante : l'Église est une chorale qui apprend à chanter une mélodie dont elle n'est pas familière, et c'est par la répétition continue que la cacophonie anarchique se change en harmonie. Il examine donc comment on entre subjectivement dans l'histoire scripturaire, par le chant des Psaumes, pour ressortir transformé par la rencontre avec l'Autre mal connu que l'on rencontre ainsi. L'éthique chrétienne devient ainsi une façon pour le peuple de la foi de se conformer à l'ethos de Dieu révélé dans les Écritures.

*

*

*

*

*

*

*

*

ABSTRACT

This summary of Brian Brock's book *Singing the Ethos of God* shows how Brock seeks to take his readers on a 'journey to a foreign land', the strange land of Scripture and ethics. The book is subversively subtitled 'On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture', a deliberate reversal of a more familiar question regarding the place of Scripture in Christian ethics. Instead of asking once again the question of how Scripture can speak to ethics, Brock seeks rather to locate ethics within the divine-human encounter which Scripture engenders. He claims that ethical imperatives emerge as the community of faith engages in the 'singing' of Scripture through the communal articulation of the Psalms, because it is as the people of God sing Scripture that the ethos of God is actualised amongst them.

For Brock, while both Scripture and God may initially be encountered as 'foreign', it is as the community joins its voices with those of Scripture that they begin to learn the language of the kingdom of God, becoming skilled

in its customs and grammar, and so being transformed as their own ethos becomes synchronized with the ethos of Scripture. Brock draws the metaphor from Bonhoeffer: the church is a choir learning to sing an unfamiliar melody, and it is only through repetition and continual engagement that anarchic cacophony turns to transformative harmony. In this way, he explores what it means to enter subjectively into the story of Scripture, through the singing of the Psalms, in such a way as to emerge transformed by the encounter with the unfamiliar Other who is met there. Christian ethics thus becomes the constructive alignment of the people of faith with the ethos of God as revealed in Scripture.

Cet article résume les trois parties du développement de Brock. La première présente un survol des approches contemporaines du rôle de la Bible dans l'éthique chrétienne, en posant la question de la manière dont nous apprenons à lire la Bible d'un point de vue éthique : l'approche herméneutique, l'approche communautaire, celles de l'éthique biblique, de la théologie biblique et de la théologie exégétique (notamment chez Bonhoeffer). La deuxième partie immerge le lecteur dans la théologie morale de St Augustin et dans celle de Luther, en posant la question de savoir comment nous pouvons commencer à pénétrer dans ce monde étranger de l'histoire de Dieu. La troisième montre la place que tient l'éthique dans l'Écriture, en posant la question de ce qui advient lorsque le peuple de la foi apprend à chanter l'ethos de Dieu. Il traite à fond de la notion d'exégèse éthique, et termine par des exemples concrets de cette approche particulière pour les Psaumes 130 et 104.

Contemporary Christians have become estranged from Scripture as a moral and ethical force because they have too often reduced it to an object of study in disciplines such as church history, biblical studies and philosophical ethics. Against this, Brock offers an approach to Scripture which generates *moral theology* because it invites the faithful reader to address their estrangement from Scripture by learning its language and idiom, by

taking up residence within its borders through worshipful encounter, and by allowing the growing familiarity which results to shape a genuine and lived relationship with the text as Scripture. Thus the Bible becomes 'a transformatory text' and those who choose to live as aliens within its strange land discover 'wondrous things' in the law, commandments and ordinances of God.

The article summarizes the development of Brock's book through its three parts. Part I surveys contemporary accounts of the role of the Bible in Christian ethics, asking the question, 'how we learn to read the Bible ethically'. In the first five chapters Brock discusses leading contemporary approaches: hermeneutical, communitarian, biblical ethics, biblical theology, and exegetical the-

ology (of which Bonhoeffer's reading of the Psalms is the main example). Part II offers readers an opportunity to immerse themselves in the moral theologies of Augustine (chapter 6) and Luther (chapter 7), asking the question, 'how we might begin to enter into the foreignness of God's story'. Part III locates Christian ethics *within* Scripture, asking the question, 'what happens when people of faith learn to sing the "ethos of God"'. Chapter 8 does so by expounding in depth the notion of "ethical exegesis", and chapter 9 achieves this by demonstrating what this distinctive approach means in practice by engaging in extended 'ethical exegesis', especially of Psalms 130 and 104.

* * * * *

Open my eyes, so that I may behold wondrous things out of your law. I live as an alien in the land; do not hide your commandments from me. My soul is consumed with longing for your ordinances at all times (Psalm 119:18-20).

Introduction

Brian Brock takes those who read his book on a journey to a foreign land. He invites them to travel, with him as their guide, into the strange land of Scripture and ethics. The book is subversively subtitled 'On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture', a deliberate reversal of a more familiar question regarding the place of Scripture in Christian ethics. Instead of asking once again the question of how Scripture can speak to ethics, Brock seeks rather to locate ethics within the divine-human encounter which Scripture engenders. Specifically, he claims that ethical imperatives emerge as the community of faith engages in the singing of Scripture through the communal articulation of the Psalms, because it is as the people of God sing Scripture that the ethos of God is actualised amongst them.

While both Scripture and God may initially be encountered as 'foreign', it is as the community joins its voices with those of Scripture that they begin to learn the language of the kingdom of God, becoming skilled in its customs and grammar, and so being transformed as their own ethos becomes synchronized with the ethos of Scripture. The metaphor is Bonhoeffer's: the church is a choir learning to sing an unfamiliar melody, and it is only through repetition and continual engagement that anarchic cacophony turns to transformatory harmony. In this way, Brock explores what it means to enter subjectively into the story of Scripture,

through the singing of the Psalms, in such a way as to emerge transformed by the encounter with the unfamiliar Other who is met there. Christian ethics thus becomes the constructive alignment of the people of faith with the ethos of God as revealed in Scripture.

Brock's assertion is that contemporary Christians have become estranged from Scripture as a moral and ethical force, because they have too often reduced it to an object of study in disciplines such as church history, biblical studies, and philosophical ethics. Against this, he offers an approach to Scripture which generates *moral theology* because it invites the faithful reader to address their estrangement from Scripture by learning its language and idiom, by taking up residence within its borders through worshipful encounter, and by allowing the growing familiarity which results to shape a genuine and lived relationship with the text as Scripture. In this way, the Bible becomes a transformatory text, with those who choose to live as aliens within its strange land discovering 'wondrous things' in the law, commandments and ordinances of God.

Brock's invitation to encounter the foreignness of Scripture in transformatory relationship takes shape as a three-part discussion of Christian ethics. Although Brock rightly warns that 'a good book is always better than its summary' (xiii), nonetheless the précis which follows will hopefully assist a reader unfamiliar with the detail of his argument to orientate themselves quickly in relation to the salient points. Brock's argument is presented below in condensed form with minimal critical comment, leaving such engagement to the articles which follow. Part I of Brock's book provides a survey of contemporary accounts of the role of the Bible in Christian ethics, asking the question of how one

learns to read the Bible ethically. Part II offers an opportunity to immerse oneself in the moral theologies of Augustine and Luther, asking the question of how one begins to enter into the foreignness of God's story. Finally, Part III locates Christian ethics within Scripture, asking the question of what happens when people of faith learn to sing the 'ethos of God'.

Part I – Learning about reading the Bible for ethics

The five chapters which comprise Part I provide a detailed survey of a range of contemporary discussions on the role of the Bible in Christian ethics. Clarity and consistency are provided through asking of each approach how it might answer a specific ethical issue: namely the use of the Bible to determine understandings of the male-female relationship.

Chapter 1 surveys the contributions of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Daniel Patte and Charles Cosgrove. All three espouse approaches which are predicated on a desire to read with methodological self-awareness in order to prevent the Bible from being read oppressively. Underlying each of these three *hermeneutical solutions* is the question of whether the reader brings to the text inherently oppressive assumptions which ultimately render their reading unethical.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza writes as a self-consciously feminist critic, having notoriously challenged the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in 1988 to recognise their oppressive reading practices which, she claimed, systematically excluded female interpreters and interpretations of the Bible. Her preferred approach to the Bible is through the discipline of rhetorical criticism, which she sees as providing a route towards critical responsibility. Such an approach allows the text to be critically yet ethically engaged, as its ideology is recognised as 'foreign' to that of the reader.

Daniel Patte builds on the work of Schüssler Fiorenza, addressing what he perceives to be a weakness in her approach, namely a lack of attention to the role which community plays in interpretation. Like Schüssler Fiorenza, Patte self-consciously articulates his own ideology, speaking as an 'insider' member of the academic guild. He sees biographical self-analysis as the way to achieving an ethical reading, because it opens the way to reflective biblical exegesis which pays attention to the ideology of the 'other'. In this way, those

reading the Bible from within the academic guild can helpfully and productively interact with those doing so from within faith communities.

Charles Cosgrove takes Patte's distinction between the academic and faith communities a stage further, suggesting that justice in reading emerges when the reader achieves the status of expert or impartial referee. However, in enforcing this distinction, Cosgrove diminishes the Bible's ability to challenge the moral presuppositions of the reader. For Schüssler Fiorenza, Patte and Cosgrove, ethics is conceived of as a human activity, with the reader deciding the just course of action as they approach the text. Such a reader-centred approach raises profound questions about the place of the child and disabled, as well as leaving little room to critique the ideology of the suicide bomber. Nonetheless, there is an important insight to be gained in recognising that Bible reading cannot be divorced from the reader's ethical and moral presuppositions.

Chapter 2 asks whether a Christian exegetical and ethical methodology can ever exist. If the approaches outlined in Chapter 1 found morality certain and the Bible and the church foreign, those addressed in Chapter 2 find the church and ethics familiar, but the Bible foreign and unfamiliar, and so they seek ways in which the Bible can be brought to bear on the world of Christian ethics. These *communitarian solutions* emphasise the dependence of people on each other, locating a rediscovery of Christian ethics in a rediscovery of Christian community.

Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen affirm the inherent moral force of all human communities to shape behaviour, with the Bible simply playing its part in those ethical formulations determined within Christian communities. *Stephen Fowl and L. Gregory Jones* suggest that the problem of the relationship between the Bible and ethics is not one of temporal distance from the biblical writers, but of moral distance from the ethical worldview they construct, and that the church needs to pay more attention to moral self-criticism than to textual and historical biblical criticism. *Stephen Fowl* takes this approach one stage further with his suggestion that it is the activity of the Spirit which both draws the Christian community of faith together, and brings the stories of Scripture to bear on that community with ethical force. Significantly, these communitarian solutions recognise the place of divine action in the appropriation of the Bible for Christian ethics, as the people of God turn to Scripture for ethical guidance. However, by focussing primarily on the

narrative portions of Scripture, they also allow the formation of an ethical canon within the canon. The analytic and critical readings of Chapter 1 thus give way to an approach which locates interpretation within the Christian community.

Chapter 3 furthers the debate by surveying those who adopt a *biblical ethics* approach, where the ethical teaching of the Bible is synthesised and then applied through the use of overarching moral claims, principles, and guiding images. By this account, it is the church and specific parts of the Bible which seem familiar, while the Bible's unity and the morality it demands seem distant and foreign. Central to this approach is the attempt to summarise the Bible's moral teaching for use in Christian ethics.

Frank Matera recognises the diversity of Scripture's moral claims, and sees this as problematic for its contemporary moral relevance. His response is to treat each biblical book as a discrete unit, summarising the moral ideology of each text whilst retaining the diversity of the ethical voices found in the whole. *Richard Hays* also begins by summarising the teaching of the New Testament books, but then seeks to go a stage further in developing a robust synthetic account of the moral claims which emerge. His approach is a demanding one, requiring the Christian reader of Scripture to relate any given scriptural passage to the wider ethical synthesis he describes. *John Howard Yoder* takes a different approach, questioning whether it is actually necessary to produce a general survey of the New Testament's teaching before developing a synthetic view of the whole. His assumption is that the moral unity of Scripture will be especially visible in ethically problematic texts, such as those which address slavery or the role of women. Yoder concludes that such difficult passages testify to a collision between the messianic liberation of Jesus' message and a patriarchal culture, and that by engaging with them a reader is enabled to bring their own moral problems to Scripture, not with the intent of arriving at a definitive summary of Scripture, but of going deeper into it.

The biblical ethics solutions outlined in this chapter provide some important insights: Hays and Yoder agree that Christian action is the proper context for Scriptural interpretation, while Yoder compellingly suggests that of first importance for the development of a Christian ethic is perseverance in bringing ethical problems to Scripture, rather than in attempts to summarise the ethical teaching of Scripture. However, they also highlight the meth-

odological difficulties encountered when trying to arrive at a summary of the Bible's moral teaching for Christian ethics. Besides, it is important to note that there is a disproportionate attention paid to the New Testament, and an unspoken implication that the Old Testament has less value for Christian ethical enquiry.

Chapter 4 moves from a biblical ethics approach to those who seek a *biblical theology* solution to the question of the relation of Christian ethics and Scripture. The common thread in this chapter's examination of Brevard Childs, Francis Watson and John Webster is that they are all indebted to Karl Barth's insight that God's life is foreign to all human designs, meaning that those who wish to become familiar with the story of God must make a journey into the unknown. This is a journey which can only be undertaken at the invitation of God himself, as by his grace he draws the church into his story.

Brevard Childs builds on Barth's claim that the Bible is the history of God's speaking, and so surveys the whole canon of Scripture to discern the development of Christian doctrine. Childs, like Barth, sees in Scripture a collection of different witnesses to the single subject of God as revealed in the Trinity, with the biblical witness to the trinitarian God becoming actualised in the reading community through the activity of the Holy Spirit. Childs describes Scripture as 'a prism through which light from the different aspects of the Christian life is refracted' (55), meaning that for him the diversity of the Bible, as revealed by historical criticism, is not a liability but a resource. The Holy Spirit brings this diversity to reality in the diverse contexts of those who read Scripture. Therefore, for Childs, the church's ethical methodology must parallel this 'great diversity as a theological witness to life under the rule of God' (55). To this end, the believer does not turn to Scripture as a moral rule system, but rather discerns God's ethical commands by entering the foreign land of God's activity as revealed in Scripture.

Francis Watson differs from Childs in that he does not begin his exercise in biblical theology with a comprehensive summary of the Bible's ethical witness. Rather, he suggests that an ethical reading of Scripture is an ongoing process, and not something which can be completed. It is as the church engages with the complexity of Scripture, bringing together both secular and theological ethical traditions, that the Bible is re-read for the contemporary time and culture. The focal point of

this re-reading is the person and work of Christ calling the world to new relationship with himself and with Scripture. This Christological ethic is predicated on love of God and love of neighbour as the Christian hermeneutical criterion for reading the Old Testament. However, as with the biblical ethics solutions of Chapter 3, it provides an opportunity to disengage from those parts of the Old Testament which do not resonate with the dominant Christological ethic.

John Webster offers an approach to theological ethics which places doctrinal engagement with Scripture at centre-stage, something which is best expressed through the equation 'theology is exegesis'. For Webster, a proper reading of Scripture requires the transformation of character appropriate to Christian discipleship, meaning that the heart of Christian ethics lies in 'amazed acknowledgment' of the moral and theological truths revealed in 'the drama of human nature, origin and destiny'. It is this recognition of the Lordship of Christ over the entirety of history which generates appropriate Christian ethical engagement with Scripture. The significance of Webster's approach is in its re-emphasis of the way Christian doctrine can help hold open a methodological space for God's speaking in Christian ethics and biblical exegesis. He joins with Childs and Watson in asserting that the ethical imperative of the life of faith is found in the gradual assumption of an identity which is not yet fully possessed.

Chapter 5 focuses on Dietrich Bonhoeffer as an example of an exercise in *exegetical theology*. As with Chapter 4, it builds on the insights of Karl Barth, particularly his insistence that theology should begin with biblical engagement. In Barth's case, it was his *Epistle to the Romans* (1922) which set his theological trajectory. Bonhoeffer continues this tradition, charting his course by way of a lifelong engagement with the Psalms. For Bonhoeffer, as for Luther, the Psalms provided a 'child's primer' for learning to talk to God, and his daily meditation on them provided a framework for his writings in Christian ethics. His search for scriptural *mandates* represented his articulation of the ongoing and creative moral claim of Christ through Scripture, and in his exegesis of Psalm 119 Bonhoeffer sought to explore the possibilities for Christian ethics opened up by verbal meditation on Scripture. To this end, the quest of *philosophical ethics* for good acts becomes redefined as the desire to encounter Torah in lived relationship.

It is Bonhoeffer's close attention to the text of

the Psalms which shapes his ethical understanding, according to which it is only by learning to live in the strange land of Scripture that the moral decisions of the present are discerned. For Bonhoeffer, it is through the act of conscious listening that new connections within Scripture emerge as new questions are put to it. In this way, the word of God is not related to as an ethical programme, but as something which reveals the path of discipleship as it is 'treasured in the heart'. The metaphor of 'ethics as a path' becomes key, as the community of faith seeks to prepare a way for Christ through a continual process of theological exegesis of Scripture. In this way, ethical judgments are made 'in the middle' of life, not in the abstract. God is encountered *on the way*, and Bonhoeffer's *mandates* provide, not the answer to all of life's ethical problems, but the main categories through which particular moral questions may be addressed.

Part II – Listening to the saints encountering the ethos of Scripture

Brock claims that: 'The task for Part II is to experience for ourselves life on the other side of the ugly ditch between biblical hermeneutics and ethics' (99), and in issuing this invitation he draws the reader into the foreign land that is occupied by the 'saints' of old. If Part I was about charting the landscape of contemporary Christian ethical engagement, Part II is about navigating the turbulent seas of Augustine and Luther. It is through participation in the reading tradition, as articulated by these two exegetes, that new light is shed on what it means to read the Bible as Scripture, and so new light is also shed on the place of Christian ethics in Scriptural engagement. It will be seen that, in spite of their many differences, both Augustine and Luther demonstrate an understanding of reading Scripture as an activity of praise, which facilitates the entry of the church into its new life in Christ.

Chapter 6 begins by unpicking a common misunderstanding regarding Augustine's exegetical methodology, namely the accusation that he constantly uses an arcane typological or allegorical method to uncover the Christ symbolically foretold in the Psalms. The reality, for Augustine, is far more nuanced and can be paraphrased by saying that, 'if we read the Old Testament chronologically, the whole community, including Christ and the church, comes clearly into view for the first time in the Psalms' (111). In this way, for example, the psalm of praise offered by Hannah in the temple

becomes a parallel expression to that offered by Simeon at the birth of Christ. For Augustine, the original historical setting of the song does not preclude its functioning within the wider context of the biblical witness to Christ. By this understanding, the Psalms of the Old Testament can invite the Christological community of faith to sing God's praises, something which is significant because it opens up the Psalms as a source for Christian worshipful engagement with God revealed in Christ.

It is in this context, of the Psalms as a valid expression of Christian worship, that Augustine's ethical reading is developed. In his exegesis of *Psalms* 32 Augustine utilises the metaphor of the good, or fulfilled, life as a road on which God sets Christians by his work of forgiveness. It is this path of attentiveness to God in praise that leads the believer to recognise their difference from Christ, the necessity of moral reorientation, and the need for forgiveness. In the singing of God's praises, the believer articulates hope and confession in such a way as to shape their moral behaviour. In *Psalms* 22, Augustine finds that the strange land of the Bible becomes familiar to the believer through the activity of Christ, as the community of the body of Christ becomes the context for the living out of the ethically good life of mutual service encountered in the Psalms and exemplified in Christ. The church is thus conceived not as a safe haven from the world, but as the focal point of a praising people caught up in Christ's service to the world. *Psalms* 27 provides Augustine with the opportunity to explore the practical implications of his conclusions. He explores the human experience of fear, particularly fear of pain, and concludes that such fear is actually idolatry, because it requires humans to make obeisance to the gods of society which promise the good life through material gain or self-reliance. Augustine is thus driven to reject the idolatrous ethos of human society, which he characterises as Babylon, and to turn once again to God in praise, aligning himself with the ethos of God rather than the ethos of Babylon. In this way, for Augustine, Christ uses Scripture to shape the ethical response of the Christian believer.

Chapter 7 turns from Augustine to Luther, and immediately the differences in their exegetical styles become apparent. Whereas Augustine uses long and complex narratives to explore large chunks of the Psalms, Luther's theological points grow from concentrated analyses of Hebrew etymologies, single verses, and phrases. These differences of approach directly affect the way they

interpret Scripture: where Augustine sought the narratives that would generate the ethically good life, Luther wants to know specifically how God is present with the individual, and what it means to live with God. It is significant that Luther turned first to the Psalms for his answer to this quest. Barth noted that 'it was by studying and meditating on the Book of the Psalms that Luther was impelled to his remarkable discovery of justification: his movement was from the Psalms to Romans, Galatians and Hebrews, not vice versa' (167). Luther's approach to the Psalms was shaped by his exegesis of *Psalms* 1, which he understood as a summary of the whole Psalter. From this *Psalms* he drew four key hermeneutical points: firstly that Scripture is an indispensable part of learning of the divine; secondly that he cannot possibly have fully understood Scripture; thirdly that the Psalms are interpreted from within the processes of transformation into the form of Christ; and fourthly that the first-person voice of the Psalms facilitates the individual's entry into God's presence. In this way, for Luther, the Psalms draw the believer into the mystery of God, and in so doing act to transform the believer into the likeness of Christ.

Psalms 118:15-18 are presented as verses which demand a response from the reader, namely either to join voice with that of the Psalmist and sing these words of praise, or to withhold their voice and so reject the ethos of the *Psalms*. These verses defy analysis as they call forth performance, and those who join the Psalmist's song find that in so doing they begin to learn the grammar of life with God. In other words, it is through talking with God in praise that the language of God is learned. As with learning any foreign language, 'total immersion' is always more effective than abstract learning, and the Psalms provide that 'total immersion' experience by virtue of their all-or-nothing calls to praise. But in addition to praise, the Psalms also call believers to prayer, as Luther demonstrates in his exegesis of *Psalms* 1. It is in prayer that the believer moves toward God and away from their own ideas, and the Psalms provide a school for faith in which prayer is learned by repetition and through which God's grace becomes known. In his 1537 sermon on *Psalms* 8 Luther develops his claim that the Psalms place prayer and praise formed by Scripture at the centre of the Christian life, by naming this *Psalms* as the work of the prophetic Christ. By Luther's understanding, *Psalms* 8 requires those who encounter it as Christians to read it as an expression of longing which can only

be satisfactorily answered in Christ. On this reading, Christ is to be heard in every Psalm, because the presence of Christ is the rescue that the Psalms ask for, receive, and praise.

Psalm 111 provides Luther with an opportunity to explore the role played by the church in the redemption of all creation. For Luther this Psalm functions to inflame the gratitude of the faithful for God's provision of the Eucharist, something which is logically sustainable because he understands the Christian Eucharist to be the continuation of Israel's Passover. Accordingly, he offers a double reading of the Psalm: first as an expression of Israel's praise and second as an expression of the church's praise. It is this expression of gratitude to God which underlies the response of the whole of creation to the death of Christ. However, there is a dark underbelly to Luther's Christological reading of the Psalms, which is that it has been taken by many as opening the door to supersessionism and anti-Semitism. His use of phrases such as 'our Easter' and 'their Easter' in his exegesis of Psalm 111 can be read as pointing to an understanding that 'different' might represent 'inferior'. Whilst it is true that Luther inadequately appreciated the New Testament's affirmations that God has not rejected his people, nonetheless it needs to be remembered that he was writing to clarify how Christians can access Scripture, not passing judgment on the relationship between Jews and Christians. It may be that his double reading of Psalm 111 actually allows for a positive way forward by opening the door for both Christian and Jew to join voices against the idolatrous rejection of God by a rebellious world.

Part III – Singing the ethos of God

Part III represents a constructive task, in which the survey of Part I and the historical exegesis of Part II are seen to have cleared the ground for the task of reconceiving biblical interpretation as a continually developing craft through which the readers of Scripture are drawn into the divine drama and ethos. The key question is that of how scriptural form and content can shape both exegetical and ethical methodologies.

Chapter 8 offers a redefinition of Christian ethics as the task of making the grammar, or ethos, of a person's life explicit by bringing it into contact with Scripture. It then develops an account of this process as God's way of drawing humans into the divine drama, within which Scripture speaks

of God's transformational self-giving to humans. If contemporary Christians find the Bible and Christian tradition foreign, this is because they are insecure about whether they are participants in God's ongoing drama with humanity. The task of becoming familiar with this foreign land, the task of learning its patterns of behaviour, begins with learning the language. By this analogy, the task of exploring Christian ethics becomes that of discovering God's work in the world through exploring his words and learning his language. The essence of Christian ethics thus becomes an active participation in the process of acquiring the language, grammar and ethos of Scripture.

This understanding of Christian ethics suggests that learning ethically good words is the first step on the path to living an ethically good life, and that this learning of God's good words must take place within the context of a community which has positioned itself within the acoustic realm of Scripture. Such an engagement suggests a relocation of hermeneutics, away from seeking the meaning of the text, towards encountering the text through lived, intimate, generative relationship.

Chapter 9 is best understood as a conversation with Augustine, Luther and the thinkers surveyed in Part I, as well as more diverse discourses. This conversation is themed around a commentary on Psalms 130 and 104, in which Brock demonstrates what it means to 'sing the ethos of God' through Scripture. The engagement with *Psalm 130* explores what it means to pray when all hope is lost, to turn to God as the only source of hope when all other hopes have departed. The discovery that emerges is that prayer is itself an ethos, that to live as one 'waiting for the Lord' is fundamentally and sweepingly different from all other forms of life, because such a prayer contextualises the whole of the Christian life. The Psalm's emphasis on prayerful waiting grounds Christian ethics in an eschatologically based hopefulness, as the believer waits faithfully in expectancy for forgiveness. By this understanding, to confess powerlessness to God, to wait and to be forgiven, is to learn the ethos of God against an ethos of despair.

Psalm 104 turns the discussion from hopelessness and despair to praise for God's faithfulness, as the ethos of faithful waiting unfolds through articulated praise to encompass the whole range of contemporary ethical questions. The psalmist issues a call to praise because, without praise, life is valueless. It is through praise that the human life can encounter the eschatological reality of God's

being, and it is in that encounter that they can receive the gift of meaning and value. It is through the singing of praise that the notes sung to the tune of other gods are revealed. It is through the singing of praise that human voices join the eternal voice and find harmony with one another and with God. Transformative praise such as this can only be sustained in utter reliance on divine provision and presence, casting the believer onto the mercy of God.

Singing the Psalter thus becomes the activity of singing the ethos of God, as the voice of the church combines with the voices of the saints and the voice of creation itself in praise of Christ as Lord of all. Such singing brings the church into tuneful rhythm, turning it from an assembly into a communion, such that the singing of the community engenders an ethical reality. As the Psalms are sung, heaven and earth touch, and human time

conflates. It is in the singing of praise to God that all other gods are relativised, while those engaged in the song are themselves shaped ethically through the divine-human encounter.

Brock concludes: 'Praise takes us inside God's works....In praise the communion of saints continually rediscovers that God uses our faltering collaboration to bring humanity in tune with himself' (363).

Simon Woodman is Tutor in Biblical Studies at South Wales Baptist College. His most recent book is *The Book of Revelation* (SCM 2008).

Notes

- 1 Brian Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God: On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007). Page references in the text are to this work.

NEW FROM PATERNOSTER

A Prophet Like Moses?

A Narrative-Theological Reading of the Elijah Stories

Havilah Dharamraj

In evaluating Elijah as a prophet after the Mosaic paradigm, Dharamraj proposes a radically different schema for interpreting one of the most dramatic and difficult texts in the Old Testament – the earthquake-wind-and-fire theophany at Horeb (1 Kgs 19).

Havilah Dharamraj is Assistant Professor of Old Testament, at the SIACS in Bangalore, India.

978-1-84227-533-7 / 229 x 152mm / 300pp (est.) / £24.99 (est.)

God, Order and Chaos

René Girard and the Apocalypse

Stephen Finamore

Readers are often disturbed by the images of destruction in the book of Revelation and unsure why they are unleashed after the exaltation of Jesus.

This book examines past approaches to these texts and uses René Girard's theories to revive some old ideas and propose some new ones.

Stephen Finamore is Principal of Bristol Baptist College.

978-1-84227-197-1 229 x 152mm / 318pp / £29.99 /

Paternoster, 9 Holdom Avenue, Bletchley, Milton Keynes MK1 1QR, UK