

God of the Living: A Biblical Theology
An Appreciative Assessment¹

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Professors Feldmeier and Spieckermann have produced a major work that deserves the attention of anyone who combines appreciation of historical/exegetical knowledge with a concern for theological engagement with the biblical texts.² The eighteen chapters (plus Introduction and Conclusion), amounting to 550 pages of text, represent an impressive project. But it is impressive for more reasons than its bulk, and in what follows I will note some of its additional features. In the spirit of scholarly engagement with matters of shared interest, however, on a few topics I have some critical observations, and will make suggestions for furthering some lines of the discussion so helpfully set out in the book. But, first, a quick overview of its design and the authors' purpose.

The aim is "to present the Christian Bible's understanding of God as a coherent scheme" (Preface). That is, the premise for the book is that, with all the diversity of witnesses in the Christian canon, there is a basis for drawing a coherent picture of a single biblical deity. As the nature of this biblical deity is expressed mainly through actions and relations with the world, and with humans in particular, the book is given over to tracing the various ways in which biblical texts give witness to these matters.

There are three main parts to the book. Part 1, "Foundation", comprises six chapters, each of which focuses on a major attribute of the biblical deity, "God's being": "The Name and the Names" (chap 1), "From Lord God to Father God" (chap. 2), "The One as the Unifier" (chap. 3), "The Loving One" (chap. 4), "The Almighty" (chap. 5), and "Spirit and Presence" (chap. 6). Part 2, "Development", comprises a further twelve chapters devoted to "God's doing," i.e., ways in which the actions and character of the biblical God are witnessed to in the Christian Bible. To cite only a few examples, there are treatments here of "Word and Creation" (chap. 7), "Justice and Justification" (chap. 9), "Suffering and Lament" (chap. 12), "Covenant and Promise" (chap. 16), and "Salvation and Judgment" (chap. 17).

The authors emphasize that the biblical texts affirm "God's will for relationship," that "God's being is being God to the benefit of humankind," and so being human means "participation in the divine life." They see this expressed in most focused form in the incarnation of the divine Son, and the ultimate divine affirmation of humans is to involve "making the guilty dead alive through the divine life" (13).

My first observation is the boldness of the project. Ours is a time when many have noted the separation of biblical studies and theology (some lamenting this, others celebrating it, all of us aware of it), and when "biblical theology" is often viewed as a species of discourse that is either extinct or extant only in a few curious works that can seem to some as out-of-fashion as bell-bottom trousers. In this situation, it is remarkable to have this unhesitating and carefully considered work.

Indeed, the boldness of the authors goes further. They insist candidly that efforts to articulate a doctrine of the biblical God should relate to the aim of

¹ An invited contribution to the panel discussion on the book held as part of the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, 18-22 November 2011.

² Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann, *God of the Living: A Biblical Theology* (trans. Mark E. Biddle; Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011).

promoting knowledge of this God experientially (2-3). They see “the academic presentation of biblical theology in the form of a biblical doctrine of God” as congenial with “the biblical path” from experience of God to “the disclosure of knowledge of God for others” (6-7). In the historic sense of the word, there is a clear evangelical purpose in this work, the authors insisting that “the doctrine of God” should be formulated to communicate knowledge about God with the objective of promoting the recognition among people that God is “the source and savior of their lives” and their acknowledgement of God as “Lord of their lives” (7). These commendably forthright declarations will cheer those of us who admit to having theological interests, and will perhaps be bad for the blood pressure of those who passionately recoil at any whiff of theology in biblical scholarship.

The book also conveys amply the authors’ familiarity with biblical and extra-biblical texts and with scholarly studies of them. Clearly, the book is primarily a work of biblical scholarship, the authors bringing to their larger purposes ample competence in historical-critical investigation. One quickly has the sense of being guided through the discussions in each chapter by experts with a clear sense of direction and a ready acquaintance with the textual data and exegetical issues.

Although their concern is for a coherent understanding of the biblical God, they insist that “appropriate understanding of the voices of the biblical witness without scholarship in the history of literature and religion is deficient . . .” (8). So (especially in the discussion of OT material) there is regular reference to the situations reflected in various OT texts and to the wider historical and religious environment in which they emerged. I am also impressed that the discussion of OT texts often includes reference to the LXX as well as the MT. In some texts, Jeremiah for example, the textual differences are major, so it is good to see this effort to engage them positively.

As noted already, the book is organized thematically, each chapter tracing a theme (or set of themes) from OT into NT texts. In an obvious effort to do justice to the diversity in these corpora, the discussion typically proceeds by noting varying emphases of major textual witnesses, which, they candidly note, sometimes amount to very real differences in religious outlook, often among OT or NT witnesses, to say nothing of differences between the OT and NT. But in the individual chapters it was not always clear to me what the authors were proposing as the larger, coherent theological point to be taken from this diversity. Are we, for example, simply to note the differences as part of the historical record for informational purposes and to show that we acknowledge that there is such diversity? Or are we to consider the differences in testimony as amounting to a greater richness to be probed theologically? Or are we to see them as reflecting a progressive development (in which the later expressions are to be preferred)?

In addressing these questions and achieving the larger coherence that the authors aimed for, the Conclusion seems to have a crucial role. This chapter-length statement (31 pp.), comprises the entirety of “Part 3” of the work, which I take as confirming its significance. It is clearly intended as an important component of the project.

Interestingly, the first part of the Conclusion (519-41) is given over to various NT texts, beginning with the Mark passage where Sadducees engage Jesus over resurrection of the dead (Mark 12:18-27), and from which the authors derived the book’s title. Judging that there are “good reasons” to take this Markan scene as “the reflection of a historical event” (520), the authors then explore the OT and Jewish background of trust in the biblical God as life-giver. Thereafter, they discuss several

Pauline texts that illustrate Paul's focus on "The relationship of forgiveness granted by God in the death of his Son with new, eternal life" (528-33), followed by brief consideration of Lukan and Johannine texts, all of these showing that "New Testament eschatology understands itself as a christological explication of the Holy Scriptures' testimony of God" (541).

The final pages of the Conclusion are given over to texts from the OT, "not in order to correct or relativize it, but to demonstrate that the New Testament witness of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ condenses what the Old Testament had anticipated" (541). The authors hasten to add that "This assertion does not imply the claim that only the christological interpretation is appropriate for the Old Testament," and admit that there are "good grounds" for others, urging only that theirs is "a congenial interpretation" of the OT (541). I take this to mean that the premise for the interpretation that they espouse lies in the NT witness to Jesus, in the light of which the OT is retrospectively understood in a christological *relecture*. Perhaps the sequence of the discussion in the Conclusion, NT texts considered first, is intended to reflect this.

In the following pages, then, the authors discuss several OT passages, Deuteronomy 30 (the choice presented there between life, linked with adherence to God, and death), Hannah's song (1 Sam 2:1-10, with its celebration of God as the one who "kills and makes alive"), and Psalm 118 (another celebration of God's mercy and faithfulness), all three of which, of course, are cited and drawn upon in the NT. The main intention seems to be to establish links between the OT idea of God's life-giving/affirming power in the face of death and the NT declaration of God's decisive demonstration of this power in Jesus. So, in answer to the questions I posed about how we are to take the diversity of biblical witnesses, perhaps the authors simply wish to posit the sort of linkage or coherence that they illustrate here.

To turn to a related matter, it seemed to me that there was somewhat less attention given to the historical situations of various NT texts, in comparison with the discussion of OT material. Indeed, in some cases I suggest that the discussion could have been enhanced or nuanced differently had the NT texts been considered with more attention to their respective settings. For example, although the authors note that δικαιοσύνη and δικαίω terminology feature very prominently in Romans, and to some degree also in Galatians, but not so much in other Pauline letters (although δικαιοσύνη does feature in Philippians), they do not consider why. To be sure (as noted by the authors, 299-300), Paul's strong sense of the inadequacy of "the righteousness that came in the Law" (δικαιοσύνην τὴν ἐν νόμῳ γενόμενος, Philip. 3:6; cf. v. 9) and the necessity to embrace "that righteousness that is through faith in Christ" (τὴν διὰ πίστεως Χριστοῦ) likely emerged as a consequence of his "Damascus Road" experience, which involved the painful recognition that his own version of Torah-zeal had actually put him in rebellion against God's redemptive purposes in Jesus. But I think it is also likely that, thereafter, a further important stimulus in his development and (selective) deployment of "justification" language arose from his Gentile mission, specifically in the necessity to give a rationale for the inclusion of former pagans as fully enfranchised co-religionists with Jewish believers in Jesus. If everyone can stand before God acceptably only in the righteousness that comes through faith in Jesus, as Paul certainly believed, then the lack of Torah-righteousness is not such a problem. In short, if Torah-observance in itself is inadequate for Jews, it is unnecessary for Gentiles.

The authors of this book appear to expound the idea of “justification” as typically understood in German Protestant circles, e.g., as the key to Pauline thought and as the high point of NT theology, and they do so with particular eloquence. But, speaking for myself, I found the discussion here (299-306) insufficiently connected to the specific situation in Paul’s ministry and so tending very quickly toward the theologizing discourse of traditional Protestant thought, with the accompanying danger of abstract categories (but cf. the brief notice of the situation for Paul’s thought in Galatians, 461). It is interesting that in the discussion of Paul there is no reference to E. P. Sanders, Dunn, Munck, Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr and the various emphases associated with them, which collectively link Paul and his thought with his own distinctive (but in his own way very Jewish) mission.

One might also ask whether some of the contrasts drawn between Paul and some other NT texts involve occasional over-simplifications (esp. 323-37), and whether these might have been avoided with more (sympathetic) attention to the situations reflected in the respective texts. For example, Hebrews certainly emphasizes Jesus’ priestly, sacrificial and mediatorial roles in a distinctive manner. The authors worry that this can have the (unintended) effect of making God into “a fear-inspiring judge who confronts humanity as a destructive entity” (326), dividing “‘the two faces’ of God between Father and Son such that the attribution of grace to the mediator leads to a problematic one-sidedness regarding God the Father that foregrounds his threatening side” (327). But I wonder if this is to ignore the motivating concern reflected in Hebrews to emphasize to readers portrayed as in danger of retreating from Christian faith the absolute importance of Jesus, and the inadequacy of any form of religious faith (including Judaism) that fails to accord him centrality. So, are the statements about God in Hebrews that the authors take as “threatening” perhaps essentially intended to emphasize that any view of God that omits Jesus and any attempt to relate to God that neglects Jesus is doomed? I have somewhat similar reservations about their later critical treatment of Hebrews with regard to christology and new covenant (464-67), where, again, they make unfavorable comparisons with Paul. I must admit that I wonder if we see in this handling of Hebrews something of Luther’s discomfort with Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation, perhaps still exhibiting insufficiently examined effects.³

To be sure, the theology of Hebrews or Revelation (which the authors also find somewhat distasteful in comparison to Paul) is susceptible to distortions of the sort that the authors mention. But surely history shows that Paul’s teachings, particularly his emphasis on divine grace and freedom from Torah-observance, were also not immune to distortions. Indeed, distortions of Paul seem to have started early, to judge from his annoyed complaint in Romans 3:8 about being characterized as promoting an anti-nomian stance, and these continued on into the sort of “cheap grace” versions of Christianity condemned by Bonhoeffer. So, with all due allowance for the footprint of Paul’s teachings in the NT, I do wonder if they should really function, as they seem to in this volume, as the “key” to NT theology and the criterion by which to assess every other NT witness.

As another but much smaller reflection of the German provenance of the volume, I note the frequent use of un-translated Latin formulae, which are sprinkled throughout. This obviously reflects the admirable view in Germany that a working ability in Latin is an essential prerequisite for theological studies. It is a comparatively trivial matter, but I think that in the English translation it would have

³ In the SBL session where the book was reviewed, the authors denied this as in any way intentional.

been wise to include translations. Though it may be regrettable, it is nonetheless a fact that in English-speaking nations today very few students in theology and biblical studies have any prior study of Latin.

On a matter of greater substance, I think that the discussion of ancient “monotheism” needs greater precision. Time permits only a few observations in what is a complex matter. The authors refer repeatedly to “monotheism” as common and “a relatively widespread phenomenon” in “the religious practice of late antiquity” (e.g., 93, 108-9), but I think this is misleading (as I have pointed out for over 20 years now).

Granted, scholars refer to a “pagan monotheism” in antiquity, but on close inspection it is essentially a conceptual phenomenon cultivated in some philosophically-oriented circles in which the various deities of the religious environment were thought of as expressions (or representatives) of one supreme or common divine entity. But there is no indication that this view was promoted among the general populace. Nor is there any indication that those holding such a view sought to alter the cultic practice followed, not even among their own elite circles, in which all the gods were to be given their proper worship. Indeed, if anything, this “pagan monotheism” seems to have provided its own rationale for regarding all the gods as validly objects of reverence.

By contrast, the rhetoric of what we can call “ancient Jewish monotheism” (which came to more forceful expression particularly in the aftermath of the Maccabean revolt) made a sharp contrast between the one true/valid deity of biblical tradition and all the other deities. Indeed, the latter could be referred to as “demons” (as reflected in Deut 32:17 and alluded to in 1 Cor 10:20). This contrast was most forcefully and prominently expressed by Jews in refusing to join in public cultic reverence of any deity other than the biblical deity. In the ancient world, to refuse cult to a deity was effectively to deny the validity of the deity. Second-temple Jewish cultic exclusivity was known and regarded negatively by other peoples as peculiar and even anti-social behavior. Pagans rightly saw it as effectively challenging the validity of their deities, indeed the whole religious scheme of the time.

My point here is that the authors could have made their discussion of the biblical God as “The One and the Unifier” (chap. 3) more forceful and, to my mind, more interesting and potentially more productive heuristically, had they drawn more carefully the ancient religious scene, especially in the second-temple period. The strong, sometimes pugnacious, “exclusive monotheism” advocated among devout Jews and early Christians was not simply an intensification or acceleration of a tendency also operative in the wider religious environment of their time. That is certainly not how pagans treated their outlook and practice. The authors’ observation that the emphasis on one God in Jewish and then Christian circles was related to an emphasis on the particularity of God’s people (whether Jews or the church) is both intriguing and cogent. But the particular “monotheism” advocated in ancient Jewish circles was also a radical critique of gods and religion as typically operative in that time.

Moreover, a clearer sense of the pugnacious nature of “ancient Jewish monotheism” and the zealous efforts made to restrict cultic worship to the one God among ancient Jews also provides a clearer light in which to consider the early Christian inclusion of the risen Jesus with God as a rightful recipient of public worship. The strongly dyadic shape of early Christian faith and practice seems to have been an unprecedented development. Once again, a more adequate presentation of the historical setting of the NT affirmations of Jesus’ significance and place in

religious practice might have presented avenues of additional theological reflection in addition to those followed so eloquently by the authors.

I have to lodge one additional dissent, this one in the discussion of God as “Father” (in chap. 2). The authors posit a “transition in the New Testament from ‘Lord God’ to ‘Father God’,” which they claim to be able to show as “a development that can be documented statistically” (53). But their statistics are confined to counting the number of references to God as “Father” in the four Gospels, four in Mark, seventeen in Luke (which they somehow know to be the second-oldest Gospel), forty-five in Matthew, and 115 in John: “Crudely put, the frequency tripled each decade between 70 and 100 C.E.,” reflecting an “exponential growth of language concerning God the Father” (53).

As should be obvious, however, this calculation completely omits reference to Paul’s uncontested letters, which variously pre-date Mark by ca. 10-20 years, and in which God is frequently, indeed characteristically referred to as “Father” (some 28x by my count in these seven letters).⁴ The curiously uneven usage of “Father” in the Gospels is interesting, and surely is indicative of something about the literary purposes of the respective Evangelists, but hardly justifies the authors’ particular claim. Instead, to judge by Paul’s letters it appears that “Father” was a much-used epithet for God in Christian circles from the earliest years.⁵

But I sincerely do not wish these critical comments to be my last word here, or to obscure my appreciation for this impressive work. In addition to its breadth of coverage and the seasoned learning it reflects, there are many finely-expressed observations that reflect obvious sustained pondering of biblical texts. I have time to cite only a few examples of many more that could be provided.

In discussing the Johannine prologue, they concisely judge that it affirms “both an equation and a differentiation: The Logos can neither be separated from God as essentially different nor simply be identified with him” (47). In noting the expressions of a trans-national scope of God’s authority and purposes in Deutero-Isaiah: “The uniqueness of YHWH implies the incomparability of YHWH’s relationship with Israel, but not necessarily its exclusivity” (104). On Paul’s view of Jesus: “...the ‘one Lord’ belongs to the ‘one God’ in such a way that the latter is the ‘Father’ only in relation to him and, thus, according to the witness of the New Testament is fully himself” (113). “In the biblical context . . . , almightiness is not unbounded omnipotence, but a power expressed in God’s will for the salvation of his people” (197). “In significant distinction from other ancient cultures, supplicants in the Bible dare to complain to God himself . . . with the assurance that the lament will not provoke God’s wrath, but limit his wrath already poured out and awaken his love and mercy (again)” (361), and “God’s wrath is the inevitable expression of betrayed love that maintains fidelity in infidelity” (362).

In these and many other places the authors offer provocative and often memorably-expressed observations that show a commendable balance of exegesis and

⁴ The authors cite, but seem not to have absorbed fully, the brief calculation of uses of “Father” in NT writings in Christiane Zimmermann, *Die Namen des Vaters: Studien zu ausgewählten neutestamentlichen Gottesbezeichnungen vor ihrem frühjüdischen und paganen Sprachhorizont* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 74-76. See also Marianne Meye Thompson, *The Promise of the Father: Jesus and God in the New Testament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2000), for a focused discussion of the matter.

⁵ In the SBL session, Prof. Feldmeier judged that Paul’s use of “Father” for God appears more in formulaic references, and that this weakened their force. In my view, however, these Pauline usages are even more important as indicating devotional/prayer practices of early Christian circles.

theological inferences. Moreover, they do not shy away from the difficult biblical material (e.g., Job, Ecclesiastes, and the “lament” Psalms), or the demanding topics that will seem embarrassing to some, e.g., themes of God’s wrath, judgment, and existential distance from the devout at times, but which the authors engage with courage and insight.

This is a book that one must read slowly and carefully (rather the way that really fine single-malt should be inbibed!). There is a wealth of scholarly work and profound thought provided in its pages, which will sometimes require re-reading to ensure full absorption. Scholars who share the authors’ concern for theological reflection that involves serious grappling with biblical texts will find in this book a treasure trove to occupy them for some time, and from which they will derive much stimulus. There is the danger that the book might be confined to scholars, however, and that would be a shame. Despite the unavoidable demands that it makes on readers, I hope that it will be taken up also among students, aspiring scholars, and that invisible but real larger body of serious “general readers” who appreciate access to the sort of excellent minds that produced this volume.