Book Reviews

October 2024

Section Editors: Craig L. Nessan, Troy M. Troftgruben

Review a book!

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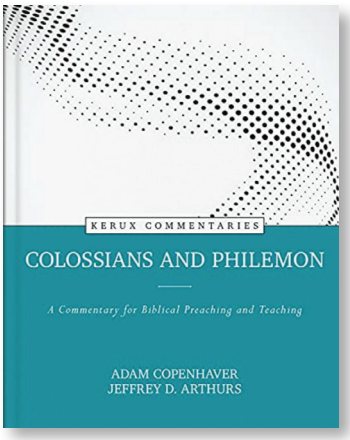

Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary for Biblical Preaching and Teaching. By Adam Copenhaver and Jeffrey D. Arthurs.

Grand Rapids: Kregel Ministry, 2022. ISBN 978-0-8254-5836-1. 335 pages. Cloth. $30.99.

This volume is part of the Kerux Commentaries series, which is based on a "big-idea preaching model." Co-authored by an exegete (Copenhaver) and a homiletician (Arthurs), it follows a four-fold approach that emphasizes the original context and message of the biblical text, the "timeless truth" of that message, a contemporary expression of said truth, and recommendations on communicating that truth to hearers. As the title suggests, it is intended for practical use in contexts of preaching and teaching. However, the setting for the latter would be the church rather than a university classroom.

The book begins with an overview of all preaching passages. These concise summaries include an exegetical idea, theological focus, preaching idea, and preaching pointers. The final item receives the most space. It is nowhere stated directly how the authors determined what constitutes a preaching passage. The segmentation makes sense from the standpoint of analyzing literary structures and arguments in each letter. However, it rarely matches the selections outlined in the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL). For pastors who use the RCL to determine their preaching passages, this will potentially limit the book's usefulness for sermon preparation.

Following the overview, there is a concise introduction to Colossians and Philemon addressing authorship, provenance, date, audience, occasion, genre, and theological themes. The authors avoid getting too deep in the weeds while still providing necessary background information and highlighting select areas of scholarly debate.

Individual chapters are punctuated with sidebars providing historical insights, excerpts from modern literature, and practical "helps." Each chapter ends with discussion questions that would be useful for study groups. The book concludes with a substantial "References" section. The target audience may have been better served by a more focused annotated list of suggestions for further study.

Overall, Copenhaver and Arthurs's commentary is a solid and useful resource for pastors and Christian education leaders. There is, however, one place where they should have gone further in the interests of addressing the fading sense of the Bible's relevance on the part of many congregants. The authors address the issue of slavery under both the "Historical Setting" and the "Theological Themes" sections of the introduction and in the relevant sections of each letter. They point out that slavery was inextricably woven into the fabric of ancient Greco-Roman society and argue that, although Paul accepts the practice and nowhere condemns it outright, he does subtly subvert it. Only two discussion questions occur on the topic: (i) "Are the commands to slaves and masters applicable to today's work relations? How so?" (241); and (ii) "How do you react to the designation that Christ-followers are 'slaves' of the Lord?" (275). Given the Bible's history with both slavery and abolition and considering the contemporary evils of human trafficking and other forms of modern-day slavery, I would have liked to see the authors engage the issue and the relevant texts more critically and forcefully. As it stands, their treatment of this troubling theme is too tepid and distant from the realities of this form of human suffering to offer much to pastors and other church leaders working toward justice and equity.

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Interpreting Jesus: Essays on the Gospels. By N. T. Wright.

Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic: 2020. ISBN: 978-0-3100-9864-5. Hardcover. 345 pages. $52.99.

Interpreting Paul: Essays on the Apostle and His Letters. By N. T. Wright.

Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic: 2020. ISBN: 978-0-3100-9868-3. Hardcover. 207 pages. $44.99.

Interpreting Scripture: Essays on the Bible and Hermeneutics. By N. T. Wright.

Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020. ISBN: 978-0-3100-9836-2. Hardcover. 387 pages. $52.99.

(Also available as ***Collected Essays of N. T. Wright Set***, ISBN: 978-0-3101-0738-5. 768 pages. $134.99.)

This trilogy of books by the noted and prolific scholar of Scripture, N. T. Wright, gathers many of his shorter writings scattered over various journals, Festschriften, lectures, and on special occasions during his academic career. The chapters, appear roughly in chronological order in each volume and are preceded by a brief introduction by the author that places the writing in its appropriate context both in terms of the scholarship of the day and the development of his own responses and insights found in his many book-length publications.

These essays offer a treasure trove regarding the biblical themes and concerns that have come to mark his oeuvre. N. T. Wright ("Nicholas Thomas" or simply "Tom Wright" as the UK publishers of his writings prefer to call him) is currently Professor of New Testament at St Mary's College in St. Andrew's University in Scotland, having earlier served the Church of England in various posts including the Bishop of Durham and teaching at Cambridge, McGill (Montreal), and Oxford where he himself studied and received his degrees. He is the author of some eighty books and hundreds of articles.

Interpreting Jesus collects essays on the Gospels that have their center of gravity in Wright's responses to the quest for the historical Jesus as he experienced it and responded to it in its early twentieth century post-Schweitzer incarnation, later in its mid-century post-Bultmannian days as the "new quest" initiated by Ernst Käsemann, and lastly by what he named the "third quest" which appeared in his early academic career. He displays a neuralgic reaction to what he considers the reductionistic and historicist preoccupations of the "Jesus Seminar" which famously employed color coding to indicate New Testament scholar "votes" on the relative historicity of the sayings and parables of Jesus, a few of which "made the cut" as Jesus' actual sayings.

Wright's consistent view is that the four Gospels, each in its own distinctive way, gives a historically plausible portrayal of a first-century Jewish prophet sent to Israel by God to be Messiah. Jesus appeared not only to his people but for the fulfillment of all God's promises by overflowing Israel to become the "temple" of the whole cosmos, the meeting place of God and the creation. Significantly, Wright argues that Jesus' *parousia* is not to be expected as an end-of-the-world scenario leading to an otherworldly heaven but as the eschatological "new creation" promised by Isaiah and Revelation, in which God-in-Christ comes to put an end to the injustice of this world and to inaugurate the full reality of the kingdom of God. I am reminded here of one of the latest of New Testament texts, 2 Peter 3:13: "But in accordance with his promise, we wait for a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness is at home." To my imagination, these words picture Jesus as the embodiment of God's justice, making himself at home (*oikos*) in the midst of his re-created cosmos. It's a very Wrightian image.

Interpreting Paul is a thinner text even though Wright is particularly a scholar of Paul's writings and theology. I suspect this is because a decade ago, following the publication of *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, he collected many of his Pauline essays written to that point of his career under the title *Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (2015). A recurring theme is Wright's critique

of how Reformation era polemics allowed Paul's limited use of the language of justification "to swell out of all biblical proportions" (98) and to warp perceptions of soteriology into a highly individualized emphasis on personal salvation. The chapter titled "How and Why Paul Invented 'Christian Theology'" is a masterpiece, demonstrating how Paul takes the greatest care to show the infant church how "to think in a new way" (33) with minds "transformed" by the reality of the "new creation" that Jesus' death and resurrection betokened.

My favorite essay is "A Poem Doubled," which looks closely at both the "kenosis" poem of Philippians 2 and the "image of God" hymn of Colossians 1, musing over how the poetry of these passages allows a depth of reflection unavailable to mere prose and speculating on the possibility that Paul may not have merely used these existing relics of the early church's liturgy but may himself have composed them!

Interpreting Scripture collects a wider range of Wright's writings on Scripture and hermeneutics going back to the 1990s, none better than the first chapter which reproduces his "Introduction" to the second edition of his Oxford mentor and doctoral advisor G. B. Caird's *Language and Imagery of the Bible* (1980; 1997). This is perhaps the most generous and persuasive review I have ever encountered, which resulted in my ordering Caird's book immediately in wonder that I had never encountered it previously. For all his renown, this opportunity to acquaint myself with the scholarly work of N. T. Wright over his lifetime is a delight too long delayed.

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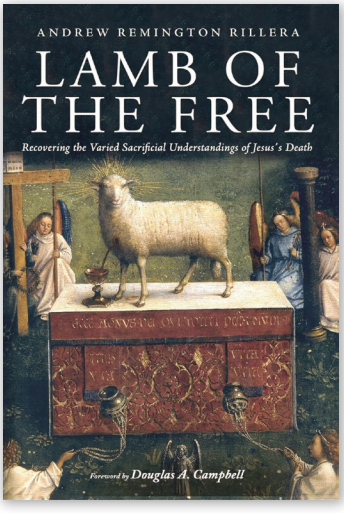

Lamb of the Free: Recovering the Varied Sacrificial Understandings of Jesus's Death. By Andrew Remington Rillera.

Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2024. ISBN: 978-1-6667-0304-7. xxvii & 325 pages. Paper. $38.49.

In *Lamb of the Free: Recovering the Varied Sacrificial Understandings of Jesus's Death*, biblical theologian Andrew Remington Rillera has performed two miracles: (1) he has shown that a biblical theology of substitutionary atonement cannot logically or exegetically stand and (2) he has made a book about Leviticus highly readable and sometimes even funny.

Rillera's monograph demonstrates what the Old Testament does and does not say about sacrifices, especially sacrifices of atonement (he prefers the terms "decontamination" or "purgation"). In so doing, Rillera uncovers a rich worship life in Second Temple Judaism and squarely places Jesus, his "saving significance," and the sacraments within that priestly and prophetic tradition (1). Key to understanding the religious life depicted in Leviticus, Rillera argues, is being "honest about the inherent limitations of what sacrifices can accomplish, which are expressed clearly in the Torah" (89). Sacrifices can forgive some sins, but not all; for those other sins, we must find that "[f]orgiveness can and does happen completely apart from the atoning aspect of Israel's sacrificial system" (88).

Lamb of the Free has two parts, consisting of an Introduction and eight chapters. The first four chapters delineate what Old Testament sacrifices are (and are not), their cosmology, and the prophetic critique that we find in passages such as Amos 5:21-22 ("I hate, I despise your festivals … I will not accept them"). After laying out an understanding of the sacrificial system, he turns to explicating Jesus within that system, carefully exegeting passages that have been cited in substitutionary atonement schemes. Throughout the book, he weaves memorable illustrations and exposes the illogic of substitutionary theologies.

The fundamental flaw in substitutionary theologies, for Rillera, is that "[n]either *death* nor *suffering* nor *punishment* of the animal has any place in the sacrificial system" (272). The old-time homiletical move of "You should've died on that cross, you sinner—but Jesus did it for you," just doesn't work because *"[t]here is no such thing as a substitutionary death sacrifice in the Torah"* (11). Instead, the Torah does not view sacrifice as a death at all. "The ritual [of animal sacrifice] is all about accessing 'life' and bringing that 'life' into the presence of the living God. . ." (16). The work of Christ, then, is not a substitutionary sacrifice, but a sacrifice giving us access to the sanctifying life-blood of the Son of God, which purifies the heavenly sanctuary and the priestly people of God (cf. 209). Using his Levitical insights, Rillera argues that substitutionary theology should be replaced with participatory theology: we join in the death of Christ just as we join in his resurrection.

Preachers and teachers of all sorts should read this work. The notion of penal substitutionary atonement is one of the basic assumptions among many North American Christians. It is the preacher's duty to expose the falsehoods undergirding our theologies while offering the gospel—which is always more multivalent than many preachers can imagine. Moreover, Rillera's exegesis offers an opportunity for the catechist to teach the Old Testament background of justification apart from works of the law. If the sacrifices and the Day of Atonement were not ever meant to save us from certain sins, then the message and work of Christ and his apostles is not a drastic break with Israel's tradition, but it's fulfillment. While Rillera did not set out to write a book on preaching, the homiletical value of *Lamb of the Free* is clear.

While there was no engagement with Fleming Rutledge's strong defense of penal substitution in *The Crucifixion*, nevertheless Rillera achieves his goals, arguing for more ethical and participatory understandings of the atonement. If, however, one

is to deconstruct the substitutionary theologies of our congregations, an ideological genealogy will be necessary. Substitutionary atonement isn't popular simply because it's an easy mistake to make—it speaks to the heart somehow. With Rillera's book, preaching a corrective is made easier.

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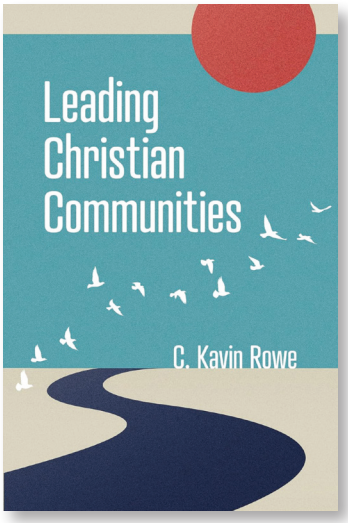

Leading Christian Communities. By C. Kavin Rowe.

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023. ISBN: 978-0-8028-8272-1. vii & 136. Paper. $19.99.

This first volume of three (second volume published 2024, third forthcoming) is a collection of essays from Rowe originally published from *Faith & Leadership*. Between the four sections are twenty-eight brief and easy to understand essays. Rowe's writing style is conversational while being scripturally based and often includes conveniently enumerated main points. The essays are vague enough to be broadly applicable to most ministry contexts.

Part one uses the early Christian church as depicted in the Book of Acts as a way of understanding what "thriving communities" of today look like and how they ought to exist. Ideas including inclusion of the "weak" (17-19) and networking (11-13), emphasize relation and mission.

Part two moves from communities to leadership. This section contains the best pieces of wisdom from the book, specifically "Humor as a Mark of Life-Giving Leadership" (33-35).

Part three examines forward thinking, holding the past in balance and conversation with the future. Again, Rowe looks to Acts, particularly the Pentecost story as an example (108-110).

The book ends with part four iterating the need for Christmas to proclaim Easter and vice versa (123-130).

Rowe's succinct collection of essays as curated in "Leading Christian Communities" is a thoughtful read for any person involved in congregational ministry.

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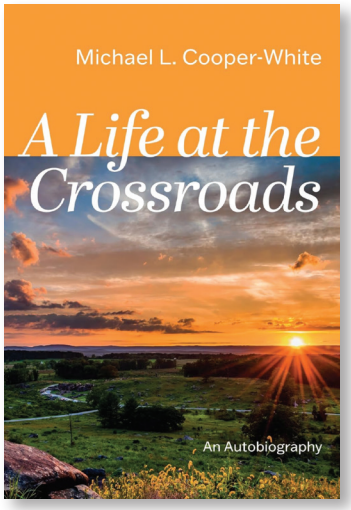

A Life at the Crossroads: An Autobiography. By Michael L. Cooper-White.

Eugene, Oregon: Resource Publications, 2024. ISBN: 978-1-6667-8988-1. Paper. xxi & 273 pages. $28.00.

Michael Cooper-White's autobiography is appropriately titled. A lifelong Lutheran pastor, professor, and administrator, Cooper-White has been at the nexus of many significant events in Lutheran church politics and policies, as well as in theological education. In this memoir, he weaves together the threads of his personal biography with the important changes he both experienced and led over the course of leadership in the Lutheran church. The result is a rich and layered portrait of a faithful, dedicated servant of God, who sought always to respond to God's "new thing" with an honest and hopeful, "Here I am, Lord, send me."

For church insiders, there is much here that will reward a close read. Particularly worth noting is Cooper-White's regional work in California during the time of the merger of the three synods that became the ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America). He played a critical role supporting the different work groups as what is now called the Sierra Pacific Synod came into being, and eventually served as an assistant to the first bishop of that synod, Lyle Miller. From there, Cooper-White went on to serve as the ELCA Director of Synodical Relations, first under Presiding Bishop Herb Chilstrom, and then under Presiding Bishop H. George Anderson. This was a very influential role as the chief staff person for the Conference of Bishops, as well as the liaison to a host of other committees and working groups.

Cooper-White was called from this position to serve as the president of what was then Gettysburg Seminary. His seventeen years at Gettysburg coincided with a great deal of upheaval and transition in theological education as a whole—many schools experienced challenges in finances and enrollment during this time. Under his leadership, and in collaboration with leaders at Philadelphia Seminary, the two Pennsylvania seminaries consolidated and became United Lutheran Seminary on July 1, 2017.

It is enlightening to read the account of these momentous events from someone who was "in the room where it happened," and whose record-keeping is outstanding. This book documents a very important period in American Lutheran church history. It is a valuable read for all those who seek to learn from where we have been in order to have a clearer sense of where God is calling us to go.

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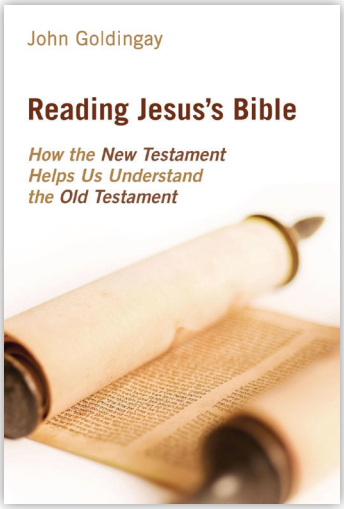

Reading Jesus's Bible: How the New Testament Helps Us Understand the Old Testament. By John Goldingay.

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017. ISBN: 978-0-8028-7364-4. vii & 262 pages. Paper. $28.99.

John Goldingay's book is based on the excellent premise that "when the New Testament writers sought to understand Jesus, they assumed that the Old Testament could play a key role in helping them" (1). To emphasize this, Goldingay chooses to address these two parts of Christian scripture as the First and Second Testament. Goldingay offers a solid argument to justify his approach and proceeds in a clear, well-structured, and easy-to-follow manner. An additional strength is Goldingay's clear description of many of the critical methods of biblical study. He discusses the differences between "story" and "history" and notes that the ancients would not have had the same expectations of history that contemporary readers do. He offers a discussion of ancient interpretive methods such as typology to help his readers understand the uses to which Second Testament authors put the First Testament. Tracing the history of interpretation of scripture and touching on the work of Hans Frei, Goldingay makes the case that one should read the story we have, without undue concern about the boundary between fact and story, noting that this method of revelation is God's choice.

Goldingay uses the Gospel according to Matthew as a framework for his examination of the First Testament, but he brings in other relevant parts of the Second Testament as well, with an eye to the way in which the authors draw on their scripture. Goldingay traces aspects of the story of Israel in Genesis through 2 Kings. He spends some time discussing the nature of prophecy and how prophetic literature should be interpreted in the context of the prophecy rather than as a prediction of future events. He delves into a variety of ideas and themes that the writers of the Second Testament develop based on the First Testament witness.

While there is much to appreciate in Goldingay's work, it is not for everyone. Goldingay approaches the subject from a more evangelical perspective, broadly speaking. Also, despite his clear and coherent discussion of the distinction between story and history and descriptions of using critical methods, Goldingay occasionally interprets Scripture quite literally. For example, he assumes a high level of historicity for the Book of Acts when discussing Peter's use of the Psalms. And he concludes a nuanced discussion of sacrifice with the conclusion, "Sacrificing Jesus is God's way of cleansing us from sin" (144). While he describes the communal aspects of Israel and the church, his focus is on personal faith, as when he makes the claim that the political and social liberation found in the Exodus narrative must also include spiritual and moral liberation that lead to personal trust and obedience. Finally, because the book's stated objective is to help readers read both the First and Second Testament better, it might be helpful if the Table of Contents reflected both Testaments.

Goldingay's discussion will be helpful for more conservative readers new to biblical scholarship. The book could be used as a textbook at the college or seminary level or for a congregational Bible study.

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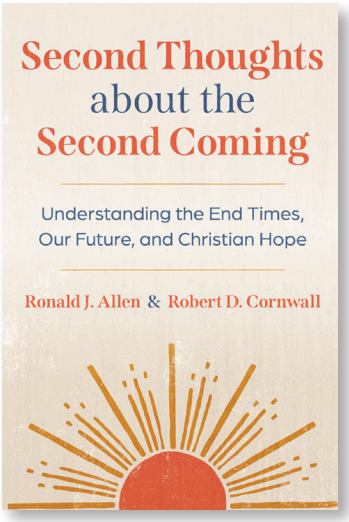

Second Thoughts about the Second Coming: Understanding the End Times, Our Future, and Christian Hope. By Ronald J. Allen and Robert D. Cornwall.

Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2023. ISBN: 978-0-6642-6806-0. xi & 180 pages. Paper. $18.00.

This book is a very good introduction to various Christian eschatologies. Allen and Cornwall do a thorough job of explaining historical doctrines leading up to today's newer, or sometimes revamped, beliefs, emphasizing the importance of "diverse perspectives" and context (4).

The book is divided into five sections. The first looks at scripture, including Old Testament/Hebrew Bible history along with some intertestamental material that adds to the depth of this text. The second section covers historical voices such as the Protestant Reformers and the early Eastern Church. Section three covers the "millennial" perspectives such as premillennialism and postmillennialism. The fourth section moves to contemporary beliefs. Especially important in this section are the chapters on hope, liberation theology, open theism, and process theology. The final section covers life after death, looking at ideas such as the soul, consciousness, and the body.

Short chapters make the reading accessible and allow for moving quickly without getting bogged down in theological jargon or complexities, although the authors acknowledge it is impossible to not mention or use at least some technical language. It stays introductory enough to glean information without being

shallow. A good-sized glossary at the back of the book helps the average reader with unknown words, and a further reading list is always beneficial to the curious reader. A scripture index rounds out the backmatter of the book.

This book excels at what it sets out to do, examining different perspectives, both historical and contemporary, on the end times and the afterlife. It can be useful for a reader who is not exactly sure what they believe and wants to be exposed to a variety of ideas to help form their own theology. It is also a reference text to compare eschatologies. Further, the study guide, which Allen and Cornwall added, can be used by a group for review and conversation.

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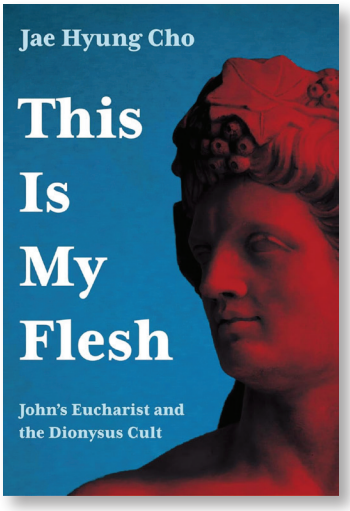

This Is My Flesh: John's Eucharist and the Dionysus Cult.
By Jae Hyung Cho.

Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2022. ISBN: 978-1-7252-9852-1. Paper. 155 pages. $26.00.

Jae Hyung Cho's book is a revision of his doctoral dissertation at Claremont Graduate University in California. Cho draws on the Greco-Roman meal tradition and the Dionysus cult in Greco-Roman religion and argues that while John 6:51–59 as a Eucharistic text partially depends on the Synoptic Gospels and 1 Cor 11:23–25, it is a unique text because of its cannibalistic language, a salient characteristic of the Dionysus cult featuring eating flesh and drinking blood. Furthermore, he argues that cannibalistic words such as "my flesh and my blood" present distinctive Johannine Christology and Eucharist, distinguished from the Synoptic Gospels or Paul, which come with "my body and my cup." The cannibalistic language in John is similar to the Dionysus cult, which emphasizes the union between the god and worshippers who share raw flesh and wine in their ritual. Cho claims that John 6:53 ("Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you") may be best understood in the context of the Dionysus cult because the vividness in cannibalistic rituals suggests the significance of Jesus's death and suffering. In addition, Cho also shows how Jesus in John's Gospel models Dionysus implicitly. For example, Jesus's wine miracle (2:1–11), walking on the sea (6:16–20), and vine discourse (15:1–11) reflect stories of Dionysus, son of Zeus, who does miraculous things for people and provides a sense of union.

Cho's study through the Greco-Roman sacred meal tradition and the Dionysus cult sheds fresh light on John 6:51–59 and its infusion with cannibalism. It makes sense when he finds textual evidence of the Greco-Roman meal traditions in John 6, John's feeding stories, and the Last Supper scene where we see reclining, giving thanks, praying, and drinking wine. There are benefits to reading this way because we may recover a vivid, realistic sense of the Eucharist with Jesus's sacrifice, seeing the sense of union between Jesus and members. While the Jewish Passover is not implausible in the image of John 6:51–59, we are often blind to the rich backgrounds in the Greco-Roman world where "real" people breathe in diverse cultural resources. How to interpret this language is open, as some read it as a metaphor emphasizing either Christology or Eucharistic theology of sacrifice associated with Passover. But I agree with Cho that the Jewish background of Passover does not explain blood drinking, among other things, since in that tradition it is taboo. Cho's proposal of reading John 6 through the Dionysus cult is worth considering as we grapple to understand the text.

Finally, I wish Cho could strengthen the distinctive Eucharist theology of John by analyzing the entire Gospel of John as literature. Nevertheless, I highly recommend this book to all readers of the New Testament who wonder about the Greco-Roman religious influences upon the Eucharist traditions.

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