

# A History of Christian Theology

*An Introduction*

SECOND EDITION

William C. Placher  
and  
Derek R. Nelson

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## Preface to the Second Edition

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I have followed William Placher in many ways. I followed him as a student to Wabash College twenty-five years after he graduated, where he was my first—and best—theological teacher. I followed his career as new and ever more interesting books appeared. After his untimely death in 2008 I followed him in teaching theology to new generations of Wabash students. And now I have followed him in working with the history of Christian theology. So my first and deepest debt is to Bill for his mentorship, scholarship, and friendship.

Gary Phillips and Raymond Williams acted on behalf of the college as the executors of Bill's literary estate, and I am grateful that they asked me to take on this editorial and writing work. Many people read portions of the second edition and made helpful suggestions, and I am glad to thank them here: David Blix, Stephen Bowen, George Branch-Trevathan, William Cook, Dan Eppley, and Curt Thompson. Conversations with Jeremy Hartnett and Rob Saler helped me think through a difficult portion of the text. The staff at Westminster John Knox, especially Bob Ratcliff and David Dobson, helped make this project manageable and enjoyable. My student Matthew Michaloski provided able and timely assistance with the manuscript. And my wife, Kelly, and many of our friends provided all kinds of encouragement along the way. It need not be said, but still is true, that all remaining errors, oversights, and infelicities are my own responsibility.

Wabash College—particularly its administration, Religion Department, and librarians—supported me in many and various ways throughout the process of updating this text. Its motto, *Scientiae et virtuti*—for learning and virtue—calls to mind what the history of Christian theology ought to be, and it

was certainly an apt description for Bill's own life. The virtues of generosity and concision are the ones, I hope, most evident in this book.

Historians of doctrine—and many others in the church—tend to forget that orthodoxy in theology is not an end in itself, but instead is a vehicle for faithfulness to God and the gospel. For many generations of theology students and those interested in Christianity this book has been a trustworthy guide along the way of faithfulness. My hope is that this second edition will do the same for future walkers along that way.

D.R.N.

Palm Sunday 2013

## Preface to the First Edition

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This volume rests upon the work of scholars and translators who have made a host of details of the history of theology available to the nonspecialist. The notes cannot indicate the extent of my indebtedness, which other scholars will easily recognize. For the convenience of readers I have tried to track down English translations of quotations cited whenever possible.

Many of my teachers—John Charles at Wabash; James McEwen at Aberdeen; Hans Frei, William Christian, Jaroslav Pelikan, Steven Ozment, George Lindbeck, and David Kelsey at Yale—have taught me things that have found their way into these pages. Much of the book was written during a year as a visiting scholar at Stanford, and Van Harvey and the Religious Studies Department as well as Robert Hamerton-Kelly, Donald Caughey, and the staff of Stanford Memorial Church made the year pleasant as well as productive. Adult Sunday school classes at First Christian Church and Wabash Avenue Presbyterian Church in Crawfordsville read portions of the manuscript with the eyes of intelligent laypeople. The staff of the Wabash College Computer Center initiated an unpromising student into the mysteries of word processing. James Heaney was the kind of editor who believed in the book more than I sometimes did myself. I am grateful.

I owe even more to David Blix for his continuing friendship, to my mother for her love and understanding, and to a great many Wabash students for their enthusiasm and patience, which over the years have meant more than they can know. I have returned to my old college as a faculty member, so those who first taught me theology have become my colleagues and friends, and it is to them that this book is dedicated.

W.C.P.

# William C. Placher and *A History of Christian Theology*

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When William Placher died in December 2008, he left behind a professional legacy of many books, articles, and other forms of the contributions of a scholar. He also left behind personal legacies of devotion to institutions like the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and Wabash College, and to decades' worth of students and colleagues. His influence and his following expanded significantly with the publication of his first book, *A History of Christian Theology*, in 1983. The three decades since then have seen the book become a widely used text for those who are beginning to understand the grand theological tradition at the heart of Christianity, and also introduced readers to Placher's elegant prose and vast learning in the history of theology.<sup>1</sup>

This thirtieth anniversary edition maintains the features that made the book so popular. It also makes use of advances in our understanding of the development of Christian theology, interprets many contextual sea changes and new theological voices, and offers some insight into the contributions Placher himself made to that continuing conversation. Readers will find here fully updated and revised bibliographies and chapters, as well as a new chapter charting the course of the most recent three decades of theological work.

Those familiar with Placher's work know that virtually every page of his theological writings are in dialogue with the greatest minds and enduring convictions of theology and philosophy. Though he rarely complained, one thing that frustrated him was when people did not realize how much work it took to make a difficult concept or a provocative point so simple and clear. But not too simple. His characteristic clarity and elegance resulted from his close and sustained study of the classic texts of the tradition. Therefore, virtually all of his later work can be seen as the working out of the core principles

of his first book: close attention to primary texts, alertness to subtle changes in context, winsome and temperate presentations of diverging views, and the convictions that the gospel and the resources of the Christian tradition have within them the power to meet the needs of the world at each time and place. Here follows a brief look at the development of Placher's work and its relation to this book in particular.

For several reasons, Placher's theological legacy is likely to endure. His attention to the problems of biblical interpretation and his insistence on theological interpretation of Scripture have helped build bridges between conservative evangelicals and culturally sensitive liberals. As Placher notes, "Whenever there's a really intense fight among American Protestants, sooner or later it seems to turn into an argument over the truth of scripture."<sup>2</sup> A second reason concerns the relation of theology both to culture and to alternative forms of articulating human experience, especially philosophy. Placher's postliberal approach represents a way to critically appropriate the best of postmodern thought while avoiding its slippery idiom and remaining free of its conceptual excesses.<sup>3</sup> And a third reason is his skill in connecting theology to the everyday lives of Christians. He admits, "The secular world will always provide more fun on Saturday nights than we can on Sunday mornings. But for folks who want to think about their faith, the meaning of their lives, or the possibility of hope in the midst of despair, we have wonderful, complicated, endlessly rich news. When it is well presented, they are eager to hear it."<sup>4</sup>

## **HISTORY, SCRIPTURE, AND POSTLIBERAL METHOD**

Placher, an ordained elder in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), belongs to what sometimes has been called the "Yale School" of theology, or the "post-liberal tradition." Postliberal theologians differ on many topics, but they share the common conviction that the modern period of theology is over and needs to be transcended.<sup>5</sup> That means, among other things, that their theology will not be "foundational," in the sense of being based on universal claims to rationality. Nor will it be "apologetic," in the sense of being primarily a defense of the possibility of religion against the attacks of its cultured despisers.

Placher went to Yale as a student after studying philosophy and religion at Wabash College. In the early 1970s, there was still a certain mystique about where exactly the field of theology was going at Yale. George Lindbeck's major work *The Nature of Doctrine* had not yet been published, and neither of Hans Frei's seminal books on Christology and hermeneutics had come out.<sup>6</sup> Placher's own doctoral dissertation took up the theology of Wolfhart

Pannenberg. At that time Pannenberg seemed to represent a promising way forward for American theologians, since he seemed intent on working with Karl Barth's categories of revelation and Christology, while integrating them with analytic philosophers like Gilbert Ryle and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Midway through the dissertation, however, Placher became convinced that Pannenberg's approach to the meaning of faith and history would not be successful. What had begun as an exciting focus on eschatology, hope, and the openness of theology to nontheological disciplines began simply to depend on those other disciplines, especially critical history and anthropology, for its own foundations.<sup>7</sup> Some of Placher's early reservations about Pannenberg may have been addressed in the latter's *Systematic Theology*. But Placher's own direction would be markedly different, as he followed Frei and Lindbeck in a new appropriation of Barth's agenda.

Frei discerned a major shift in the way people read the Bible. To simplify a complicated argument, Frei held that, before the Enlightenment, Christians tended to read the Bible in its full narrative sweep.<sup>8</sup> It told the whole grand story of the world, from creation to the end of time. The world of the Bible was the real world, describing things from a God's-eye view. The task of Christians was to adopt this view and make it their own. They made sense of their lives by learning about themselves in the stories the Bible told. After the Enlightenment, however, questions about the *reference* of the biblical materials came to the fore. By about the eighteenth century, Frei explained, "It is no exaggeration to say that all across the theological spectrum the great reversal had taken place; interpretation was a matter of fitting the biblical story into another world with another story rather than incorporating that story into the biblical story."<sup>9</sup>

Subsequent theology then had to go in either of two directions. First, the Bible could be said to be "true" if and only if the words of the Bible refer accurately to the events they describe. On that account, the methods of critical history become the major tool for reading the Bible. Second, the Bible could be read not as a series of propositions about "the way it really was," but rather as a book containing timeless truths about general lessons, usually moral ones. In that case, reading the Bible opened up possibilities for re-visioning human morality and experience, and if biblical stories can help do that, then they are "true."

Frei, and after him Placher, thought both of these approaches were dead ends. Frei's alternative vision is sketched out in *The Identity of Jesus Christ*.<sup>10</sup> Frei asks, "How is it that Jesus is present to us, when we read the Bible and live our lives?" His answer is to explore what it means to encounter someone's *identity*. In our ordinary ways of thinking, a person just ordinarily is his or her actions. There is no ghost in the machine that is the person's true



identity. Christians should not try to get behind the stories to learn about the real Jesus. Instead, we should let the stories narrate Jesus' identity to us. He is most present to us when we have understood what sort of a person he was. Placher was therefore suspicious of claims of the movement to identify precisely the "historical Jesus" and to use such historical reconstruction as the basis for theology.

When Placher was studying with Frei in the early 1970s, the perception in American academia was that people who took Barth seriously were in a small minority. Barth had always appealed to some conservative theologians in America, many of whom saw his doctrine of the Word of God to be a step toward biblical literalism. The dominant influences in university theology at the time were still Rudolf Bultmann and his American disciples, along with Paul Tillich. But Barth, not Bultmann, became one of the great inspirations of postliberal theology, for Barth was adamant that the gospel not be translated into the newest philosophical scheme of the day, nor that its peculiarities be flattened out into generalized moralisms. Instead, theology was essentially the self-description of a particular community, the church, from the perspective of the Word of God.<sup>11</sup>

Placher found in these postliberal themes a way for theology to remain biblically serious without collapsing into some version of fundamentalism. The reintroduction of narrativity into biblical exegesis and theology provided a means for Christians to do theology unapologetically. That theology is primarily self-description certainly does not, however, imply that theologians must not talk to anyone besides themselves and the church. On the contrary, Placher's major metaphor for theology is *conversation*. "Beginning a conversation does *not* require suspending all our previous beliefs or agreeing to appeal only to premises that would be accepted by any 'sane' person. Indeed, genuinely suspending all one's own beliefs—trying to wipe the slate clean—seems itself a recipe for disaster."<sup>12</sup> The ability to occupy this middle ground, between theology as the self-description of the Christian community and theology as conversation with other thinkers, is one of the great achievements of Placher's theology. He described such an approach as a "good natured muddling-through."<sup>13</sup> And the conversation that is theology involves conversing as much with the great voices of a long-distant past as with one's living colleagues.<sup>14</sup> Openness to differing conversation partners also represents a divergence from how other theologians have read Barth. Placher rejected any form of "positivism" in revelation—a kind of "take it or leave it, that's how it is" approach. Many Barthians seem to do theology in this spirit, though Barth himself did not.

Though certainly guided by Frei's approach to the Bible, Placher moved in new directions. Frei tended to talk about *the* narrative of the Bible, conceiv-

ing of it along the lines of a coherent, realistic novel.<sup>15</sup> Placher, by contrast, emphasizes the plurality of narratives present in the Bible. He sees no need to soften the edges of the differences they display. He relates the anger of a fifth-century bishop so furious at the existence of Tatian's *Diatesseron* in his diocese that he ordered every copy burned. The *Diatesseron* was simply a "compilation of the stories and sayings of the four Gospels into one continuous narrative."<sup>16</sup> That such an innocent streamlining of the different Gospel stories could cause so great an uproar alerts us to what is lost when we do not pay attention to the honestly different portraits of Christ they paint.<sup>17</sup>

Attentive reading of the Bible also requires the reader to discern what the Bible *teaches* and what it *assumes*. Sometimes the content of a particular text stems more from the cultural assumptions its author brings than what the author is trying to convey. Placher turned to surprising places in the history of Christian theology to make this point. Even as conservative a biblical interpreter as Charles Hodge, hero of the old Princeton orthodoxy, pointed out that we must distinguish between what was taught and what was assumed in the Bible. Placher agrees. The sad necessity of slavery, the picture of a flat earth, and a basically sexist structure to society were all more or less assumed in the cultures in which the biblical authors wrote. But that does not imply that the authors insist on the moral rectitude of slavery, suggest we throw away our globes, or continue oppressing women. As Placher puts it, "The author of the book of Joshua evidently *believed* that the sun moves around the earth, and he *assumed* as much when he described the sun as standing still, but he did not *teach* it, and therefore, Hodge thought, Christians did not need to believe it."<sup>18</sup>

Placher applies this distinction with many other texts. Take Paul's injunctions against homosexuality in Romans 1. Of this passage, Placher asks, "Is Paul teaching that same-sex intercourse is wrong? Or is he *teaching* something about the relation between human responsibility, the failure to worship the true God, and ethical faults, and in the process *assuming*, as a Jew moving out into Hellenistic culture in the first century would have, that same-sex intercourse is a good example of sin?"<sup>19</sup> Does Paul in his letter to Philemon *teach* that slaves should not be liberated, or does he assume that slavery is the law of the land and ought to have its harmful effects diminished as much as possible? In that case, he is not advocating slavery, but teaching mercy.

Placher turned his exegetical gifts to a wider theme when he became coeditor of a series of theological commentaries on the Bible. He penned the inaugural volume, a commentary on Mark.<sup>20</sup> At the time of Placher's unexpected death, the volume was nearly complete. All that was not present with the manuscript was the ending—an eerie parallel to the Gospel of Mark itself, the original ending of which many scholars think may have gone missing. Not content with commentaries that claim only to consider the original meaning

of a text for its original hearers, Placher's work insists that part of the original meaning is its wide applicability to the lives and needs of future readers.<sup>21</sup> And the work is generously seasoned with striking insights gathered from the history of theology, from the patristic period to Barth and beyond.

### **THE PIVOT OF HISTORY: GOD BEFORE AND AFTER MODERNITY**

The constructive book for which Placher is best known is probably *The Domestication of Transcendence*.<sup>22</sup> Placher argues here that the modern period lost sight of the radical transcendence of God when God came to be seen merely as one agent in the world like all the rest, describable in much the same language we use for everything else. Placher contrasts representative views on God and language about God from the post-Reformation era (Cajetan and Suarez among the Catholics, Quenstedt and Turretin among the Protestants, and Leibniz and Descartes among the philosophers) with representatives from before the modern era (Thomas Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin).

Placher takes with utmost seriousness Thomas's caution, "Because we cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not, we have no means for considering how God is, but rather how He is not."<sup>23</sup> Since we cannot say with any certainty what God is like, or even in what sense God exists, we are, Thomas implies, stuck with only negations regarding what God is not.

Many commentators thought Thomas had found a way around this difficulty with his doctrine of analogy. On their reading, Thomas disallows *univocal* language about God but insists that our language about God is not purely *equivocal* either. Univocal speech about God would say that what we mean by God's love, or justice, or mercy is much like our definitions of love, justice, or mercy in general. Equivocal speech would say that God's justice and ours have as little to do with each other conceptually as do the bark of a tree and the bark of a dog. Between those two extremes, according to the standard argument, lies analogy. Placher, joining many other Aquinas scholars, thinks such interpretations misread him. That is, the severity of our inability positively to know God is a deeper rupture than the doctrine of analogy can mend. Even if our language for referring to God is somehow analogously true, the equivocity of that language is so extreme that we barely know what we mean.

In their own ways Luther and Calvin, too, insisted on the tenuousness of our language about God. Placher notes the central paradox in Luther's celebrated "theology of the cross." Luther thought that faith tells us that in the crucified Jesus, God has really revealed himself, but that revelation comes as such a shock that we cannot really apprehend what it means. Commenting

on Romans, Luther writes, “Our every assertion of anything good is hidden under the denial of it, so that faith may have its place in God who . . . cannot be possessed or touched except by the negation of all our affirmatives.”<sup>24</sup> The language of the hiddenness of God, too, only reinforces this notion of the near impossibility of reliable language to describe an unknowable God. Placher writes, “By haunting us with that image of the unknown God, Luther reminds Christians of the insecurity with which we must be willing to live if we are to live in trust of a God who remains mystery even in revelation. It may be, he would have claimed, the most insecure among us—the doubters, those who struggle with despair—who are in the best position to understand what living such a Christian life might mean.”<sup>25</sup>

Calvin, too, employed his considerable rhetorical skills to insist that despite the fact that we must interpret the word of God, theology must remain essentially biblical and exegetical, and therefore antispeculative.<sup>26</sup> Placher points out how, for Calvin, “The words we speak of God can help us to a confident trust in God even as we recognize the inadequacies both of the words themselves and of our understandings of them.”<sup>27</sup>

That caution in claiming correspondence between our language about God and the divine reality somehow was lost in the seventeenth century. Placher is not, to be sure, arguing a historical thesis as to the cause of these “characteristically trivial images of God.”<sup>28</sup> Yet in a variety of ways Placher shows how, in the modern period, God came to seem more like one of the many objects and agents of the world whom our language could describe just fine rather than a radically loving and mysterious transcendent divine being.

Aquinas’s major commentators of the time, Francisco Suarez and Cardinal Cajetan, made theological hay out of the doctrine of analogy, causing it to seem like a Thomist really could say something positively and accurately about the being of God.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, Protestants including Johannes Quenstedt and Francis Turretin claimed greater similarity between theological reference and divine referent.<sup>30</sup> One of Descartes’ foundational proofs for the existence of God relies nearly verbatim on the kinds of analogical thought Suarez developed, and Leibniz himself only assented to Cartesian sorts of proofs of God when he pressed for ever greater clarity regarding the attributes of God.<sup>31</sup> All this was happening while the new scientific worldview, initiated by Newton, Galileo, and others, pointed out that the starry heavens above us existed in basically direct spatial continuity with the rest of the world.<sup>32</sup> To think that we might describe in our ordinary language heaven’s contents with as much clarity as we could earth’s became quite logical.

Placher tells similar stories about the domestication of other kinds of transcendence. Not only did Christian ways of describing God devolve through analogy into univocity, but our ways of relating God’s action to human action

were likewise domesticated. Whereas most premodern theologians thought God acted on a plane completely different than ours, in the seventeenth century God came to be seen as one agent among and alongside others. There developed a kind of zero-sum game wherein actions done in the world had to be attributed *either* to human agents *or* to God. The more we humans did, the less God did, and vice versa.

This accompanied a shift in thinking about transcendence in a new way: as *contrasted* with immanence. Thus, the more transcendent God was, the less immanent, and vice versa.<sup>33</sup> This contradicts premodern theology, which thought that God's ability to be the intimate companion of humans required a fairly radical ability to transcend real obstacles to intimacy. Augustine had famously thought of God as "closer than we are to ourselves," and such a conception of radical immanence is the logical partner, not opponent, of radical transcendence.<sup>34</sup> Placher agrees, insisting that while it is impossible (and even undesirable) to pretend that modern criticisms of premodern thinking did not happen, something in our way of conceiving and talking about God needs to be changed.

Placher certainly does not pretend to use equivocal language about God to combat the problems of the modern period's move to univocity. The fully equivocal attribution to God of predicates like "loving" or "powerful" would no more resemble ordinary human understandings of love or power than does the bow at the front of a ship resemble the bow an actor takes on stage. And in that case, God-talk seems virtually impossible. But the problems with analogical language seem legion, too. How then can we proceed?

To cite just one example of a viable strategy, Placher borrows a linguistic distinction from his teacher George Lindbeck, who in turn borrowed it from Thomas Aquinas.<sup>35</sup> Aquinas distinguishes between the *significatum*, or the "thing signified" by our language, and the *modus significandi*, or the "means of signifying."<sup>36</sup> When we insist that God is loving, for example, we are right to do so. The *significatum* of a loving God is accurately represented in our statements about the loving God. However, when we use predicates like "loving" about God, we cannot help thinking of a loving parent or a loving friend, and God may not be loving in exactly the same way. To use Thomas's terminology, the *modus significandi* does not apply to God in our God-talk. That does not mean our statements are false or equivocal, but rather that we are not sure how it is that God is loving or good or just.

A nontheological example may make the point just as well. Imagine that some beginning chemistry students were asked, "How many protons does boron have?" If they answered, "Boron has five protons," they would be right. They would have their finger on the *significatum*. However, if they thought about *how* it was true that boron had five protons, they would likely imagine

five tiny metal balls inside other larger metal balls. And this is not right. The *modus significandi* of how the correct answer they gave actually was true was not available to them. The same thing could be said of our language about God. We can faithfully speak of God's radical love for the world without domesticating the grace of God by claiming to know more than we do about God's ways. When attention is paid to the particular God narrated in the Christian Scriptures, and not the gods smuggled into theology through modern scientific notions of space and time—or Greek philosophical conceptions of the good and the perfect—the gospel shines in its dazzling and surprising particularity.

## HISTORY, CHRISTOLOGY, AND SUFFERING

Placher wrote two books in the field of Christology. The earlier of those two bears quite clearly the marks of Frei's approach to Scripture and Barth's approach to theology. One of Barth's main critiques of modern theology was that it had lapsed into a kind of generic theism. God was a concept philosophically honed, not exegetically presented. Placher follows suit, insisting that God is "willing to be vulnerable to pain in the freedom of love."<sup>37</sup> Many theologians have regretted that Greek philosophical concepts like *impassibility* and *immutability* have intruded into Christian theology, and Placher is among them. He rues, "Most people today, whether they believe in God or not, think that God is about power and think that power is about the domination of others, through violence if necessary, just as human success is about wealth and career advancement and national greatness is about military triumph."<sup>38</sup> Countering that widespread belief, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God* can be read as an extended meditation on the picture of God one might get by employing a kind of creative forgetting of the images of a distant, disinterested, impassive God and focusing on the particularities of God in Jesus Christ.

What that means, above all else, is that God is just love. And love is made impossible if one of the lovers is unfeeling or incapable of being affected by the other. This is not a new observation, of course. But the typical constructive position developed by someone who wants God to be affectable is usually a variant of process theology. Placher does nothing of the sort.<sup>39</sup>

Instead, Placher reflects on love. To love means, among other things, to be willing to risk vulnerability. When I love someone, I let them into my world. I open myself up to them. I tell them something about myself, give them something of myself. This is risky business, for doing so involves trusting that the beloved will not hurt me. The one who loves best can be hurt most. So it is with God's love revealed in Jesus Christ. In Jesus we learn that "God is the

one who loves in freedom, and in that free love, God is vulnerable, willing to risk suffering.”<sup>40</sup> Indeed, on the cross, “God is most God, for in coming vulnerably into creation God is not giving up the characteristics of divinity but most fully manifesting them.”<sup>41</sup>

That last quotation may do much to differentiate Placher’s position from other recent theologies of the cross. Eberhard Jüngel’s reflection on the theology of the crucified one is almost metaphysical in its themes (his terms for Jesus on the cross like “perishability” and “transience” read more like Hegel than anything else).<sup>42</sup> Jürgen Moltmann’s *Crucified God* focuses squarely on the suffering, even death, of God.<sup>43</sup> But Placher talks about the *vulnerability* of God. He writes that while suffering in itself is not a good, “the freedom of love is good, and that freedom risks suffering and, in a sinful world full of violence and injustice, will always find it sooner or later. Love does not regret the price it pays for making itself vulnerable, but to speak of paying a price is in itself to acknowledge that the suffering itself is evil. Vulnerability, on the other hand, is a perfection of loving freedom.”<sup>44</sup>

Some might object that this picture of God risking vulnerability can make no sense to those in our society who are already most vulnerable. Yet Placher responds to this with particularly sensitivity. He admits that since we are not God, it can seem risky to model human interactions on divine love when that love involves such openness to suffering. But such a model does not invite Christians to write a blank check for others to take advantage of their love, and thus to suffer unduly.

Much suffering has certainly been justified by claims to the importance of the imitation of Christ. But Placher makes a distinction between, on the one hand, the kind of senseless suffering that perpetuates the sinful status quo and, on the other hand, the kind of suffering that seems truly transformative, even redemptive. When a battered woman is called on to endure the beatings of her husband in the name of following Christ, a theology of the vulnerability of God shows the solidarity of God with the victim of the abuse, not on the side of the oppressor. Conversely, when Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr. called on their followers to take risks in their lives that almost surely would lead to suffering, the vulnerability of God provides a kind of hopeful model for their work.<sup>45</sup> Anyone who thinks the suffering of Jesus on the cross simply perpetuates the status quo has, after all, severely misunderstood the central Christian symbol.

The emphasis on God’s entry into human suffering through the vulnerability of the cross forms the basis for Placher’s second work in Christology, titled *Jesus the Savior*.<sup>46</sup> The result is virtually unprecedented in combining scholarly integrity with eloquent, clear prose. While it does not contain an abundance of material in the way of argument, the book’s central thesis is bor-

rowed from Calvin. Calvin wrote, "How has Christ abolished sin, banished the separation between us and God, and acquired righteousness to render God favorable and kindly toward us? To this we can in general reply that he has achieved this for us *by the whole course of his obedience*."<sup>47</sup> It is not only the cross of Christ, taken in abstraction from his incarnation, that is salvific, nor his resurrection taken in abstraction from his preaching. The whole course of his obedience in his life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension that saves. By "obedience," Calvin and Placher do not mean some kind of servile acquiescence to the wishes of a powerful authority. Instead, Jesus was so connected to God that Jesus' thoughts, actions, and being could only be what God had willed for him. Placher articulates this with a threefold scheme. First, Jesus saves us, in part, simply by being in solidarity with us. We feel alone, abandoned to our suffering. When we feel isolated in our pain, one of the cheapest things someone can say is, "Oh, I know how you feel." We want to reply, "No, you don't. How could you possibly know how I feel?" As Placher notes, "To speak of solidarity in connection with Christ's work is to say that, in the light of the cross, we cannot say that to God."<sup>48</sup>

But it is not just that we feel alone in our suffering. We need not only the solidarity of God but also, in the second place, reconciliation. We feel alienated from God. When we believe, with Placher, that our disobedience through sin actually affects God, the situation becomes all the more dire. "But in Christ God was reconciling the world to God's own self. Christ stands with us in our place of sin, and therefore it is no longer a place separated from God."<sup>49</sup> Lest that sound like yet another hackneyed version of substitutionary atonement, Placher argues that reconciliation is not effected through a bloodthirsty God insisting on "justice."<sup>50</sup> Instead, "reconciliation is not about how Christ's suffering appeases an angry Father. Our suffering has cut us off from God, and we can experience God's love only as anger. God comes to be with us in the place of sin, as the way to bridge the abyss that lay between us, so that we can be in loving relation with God again. But coming into the place of sin is a painful business that costs a heavy price. It is a price that God, in love, is willing to pay."<sup>51</sup>

Then, in the third place, Christ redeems us. To speak of redemption implies not just isolation or estrangement but bondage. Solidarity resolves a story with one element: our suffering. Reconciliation has two characters: God and us. But "with redemption, there are three characters in the story: ourselves, our redeemer, and the master or jailer in whose grip we lie."<sup>52</sup> Securing our release from the powers of evil is often cast as a battle for souls, but Placher never resorts to this kind of imagery, sticking instead to his insistence on the powerful loving vulnerability of God. "Trying to defeat evil with its own weapons of force and violence, in this kind of warfare as in any other, ensures



that evil simply triumphs, whoever wins. One aggrieved party avenges its grievance, creating a grievance for its opponent, and the blood flows through history.”<sup>53</sup> The path chosen instead, Placher argues, is that “Christ confronts evil with no weapons but sinlessness and love, and triumphs not through violence but through willingness to suffer. Sometimes, even in struggle against the worst of evil, that can suffice.”<sup>54</sup> Vulnerability and love are not disinterested powerlessness but redemptive strength at its greatest height.

The love that Christ is also constitutes God’s triune life. In his elegant work on the Trinity, *The Triune God*, Placher developed this thesis further. There he writes, “After Jesus’ death, the only way God is present is in the crucified Jesus, who still bears the marks of his manner of dying. But that is enough for us to see how much God loves us, and that is the most important thing to know about God.”<sup>55</sup>

## CONCLUSION

All histories, including the history of Christian theology, rest on the interplay between remembering and forgetting. In order for events, books, and figures to be translated into history, some details must be noted, and many thousands of times more must be forgotten. The work of some theologians has been forgotten, and others have had their work remembered, dis-membered, and re-remembered almost continually over time. Therefore, the task of a writer of the history of theology—and William Placher was among the best—is to remember rightly and forget willingly.<sup>56</sup> The historian must show care to primary sources, be alert to debates among experts and to their conclusions, and deftly craft a narrative from the many threads of meaning present in the materials examined.

But perhaps most importantly, the writing of history requires careful and sensitive analysis of one’s contemporary situation and concerns. Consider a pair of nonacademic examples. National exhaustion with McCarthyism created a context ripe for appreciation of Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*. And part of the success of Steven Spielberg’s 2012 *Lincoln* is its depiction of political maneuvering leading to genuine moral progress with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. Our contemporary frustration with intractable conflict in Washington and a do-nothing Congress meant that Spielberg (adapting historian Doris Kearns Goodwin’s brilliant book) had a public eager to hear and see a past with a vision for a better way.<sup>57</sup> Enough time has elapsed to count *The Crucible* among the American classics. Time will tell with *Lincoln*.

Placher’s *A History of Christian Theology* had a similar sensitivity to a conflicted public context. The book first appeared during the dominance of the

“hermeneutics of suspicion,” and the “hermeneutical circle” seemed more like a merry-go-round than a sine wave leading somewhere. The most influential theological text of 1983, the year Placher’s book was published, is probably Rosemary Radford Ruether’s *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*.<sup>58</sup> She devotes a great deal of attention to pointing out the near-futility of finding a “usable past” for theology. After laying out several possible sources in the history of theology for a feminist theology, Ruether bluntly states, “All of these traditions are sexist.”<sup>59</sup> Many teachers of religion around 1983 had been trained in the turbulence of the 1960s and 1970s and understandably wondered what value there might be in paying close attention to the “dead white males” who wrote many of the classic texts of Christian theology.

This perspective helps explain what was so refreshing and lastingly useful about Placher’s book. He was a sensitive writer, one who shared many of the commitments of the political left, and he told the story of theology unironically and passionately. He was attuned to the critiques of liberation theologians, practitioners of science, and social historians. Yet he was convinced of the worth of truly knowing Augustine’s thought, or Origen’s, or Calvin’s, even if some of their work reflected the problematic biases of their day. Placher’s former colleague Stephen Webb reflected on his own mentor’s style, contrasting it with the hocus pocus then in vogue: “After watching so many postmodern performances where the magicians are more anxious to show you that they know it is all a hoax, it was nice to watch someone just do it without the ironic meta-narrative.”<sup>60</sup> And again, “By narrating the Christian story so effortlessly, Placher makes an implicit case for the continuity and harmony of theology through the centuries. His prose says that the story can be trusted because it can be told so well.”<sup>61</sup>

Though the theological world lost one of the best tellers of its stories when William Placher died, many of us still benefit from continued conversation with his memory. And one hopes that many more students of religion will learn theology’s stories and their critiques from this new edition of his first book.

Derek R. Nelson

# Introduction

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However dogs may bark at me, and pigs grunt, I shall always imitate the writings of the ancients: these shall be my study, nor, while my strength lasts, shall the sun find me idle. We are like dwarfs on the shoulders of giants, by whose grace we see farther than they. Our study of the works of the ancients enables us to give fresh life to their finer ideas, and rescue them from time's oblivion and man's neglect.

—*Peter of Blois, writing in the late twelfth century*<sup>1</sup>

Most of us know something, anyway, about the history of Christian theology. Those who grew up going to church or Sunday school remember at least fragments of Christian history. Even non-Christians who have grown up in Western culture have encountered the history of Christian theology as part of the background of political history or art or literature or whatever. Paul, Augustine, the Trinity, predestination, and the Reformation are rarely totally unfamiliar.

The contexts in which we have learned about this history, however, shape our understanding of it. Churches and Sunday schools seek primarily to set out the historical foundations of their own denominations. They therefore tend to present this history as running in a fairly straight line from the beginnings of Christianity to their own position (with errors and heresies occasionally falling off to the sides). To the “secular” historian, on the other hand, theologians often appear primarily as the villains of the story, standing in the way of tolerance and intellectual progress.

This book will present the history of Christian theology as an aspect of intellectual history, a story of people and their ideas. That leads to a different

perspective. For one thing, the story turns out to be more complicated, more pluralistic than historians only in search of their own roots often admit. Christians have always disagreed about what they ought to believe, and both sides in those disagreements have often made a persuasive case. The study of the history of theology teaches that diversity within Christianity is nothing new. Studying the history of theology on its own terms, rather than only when theology touches on some other branch of history, also teaches greater respect for the intellectual coherence of the theological tradition. This is not simply a story of ignorant bigots fighting against intellectual progress, but of great minds using all their intellectual resources to understand their faith, and shaping much of our culture in the process.

## SOME LIMITATIONS AND WARNINGS

Any book has its limitations, and it seems only fair to set out at the start some of the choices that have gone into the making of this book.

1. This is a history of Christian theology, not a general history of Christianity or a general intellectual history of the West. It will say little about church politics, missionary expansion, liturgy, or a host of other topics except as they impinge fairly directly on the history of theology. It will also not wander too far into the history of philosophy, political theory, or art, though these fields and many more can often not be cleanly separated from theology.

2. Theology means the systematic reflection on one's faith. Whenever Christians think about what they believe, they are, in a way, doing theology. Inevitably, though, the historian looks primarily at those who wrote down their reflections and influenced the life and thought of other Christians. According to a common distinction, the history of *theology*, as opposed to the history of *doctrine*, focuses more on the ideas of individual theologians and less on the statements of the institutional church. In attending to the music of Christian history, the history of doctrine pays more attention to the chorus, the history of theology to the soloists. The history of theology therefore inevitably concerns itself with an elite: those who could read and write and had some leisure for reflection, most of them male and many the children of reasonable wealth (though some chose to live in extreme poverty). Any intellectual history is in this sense elitist, but the history of theology does always retain a connection with the church—its institutions, its creeds, its liturgies, and its people—so that the history of theology can at least never be the history of *isolated* individuals. The prayers and hopes and doubts of “ordinary” people will generally remain in the background in the following pages, but

they have always shaped the context in which theologians work, and often the work itself.

3. Even after defining a topic like the history of theology, a historian still faces a vast quantity of material, and must select some things and ignore others. Any such selection risks many kinds of distortion. Some issues traditionally important in the history of Christian theology do not matter much to most people today, while many people today find concerns scarcely mentioned in traditional histories of theology—Christian attitudes to women, or the relation of Christianity to science, for instance—matters of burning importance. Similarly, a book written in the United States can reasonably give special attention to that country's theology and its roots, but too much such special treatment tends to distort the shape of the story. One can only seek a series of awkward compromises that try to respect the past's own integrity and yet to provide contemporary readers with the things they want to know.

4. The process of selection also risks giving too favorable a portrait of the subject. One tries to present all sides, but the more interesting ideas, the more attractive personalities, the fruitful beginnings as opposed to the dead ends, inevitably exercise a greater fascination, and they will get more than their share of attention in the pages that follow. It is therefore important to remember that Christian theologians have sometimes defended ideas most of us would find repugnant or exceedingly odd. Christian ideals inspired many of the efforts to end slavery, but slave owners quoted the Bible, too. Both sides of every war fought by Christians have invoked religious principles. A Christian-inspired conviction that the world had a rational order often inspired scientific advance, but defenders of outdated scientific theories have also appealed to theological premises. In late antiquity, when many philosophers treated anything physical as evil, Christians affirmed the goodness of the physical world as a part of God's creation, but Christianity has led some to deny the value of this world. The very first Christians gave women positions of authority and influence unusual in their society, but in other times Christianity has been cited as a justification for assigning women a subordinate place. Christian theology tolerated and too often encouraged a long history of anti-Semitism, and no responsible history of Christian theology written in the twentieth century can ignore the haunting shadow of the Holocaust.

A history of Christian theology that tries to clarify its logic and its integrity as a tradition inevitably accentuates the positive. There is also a negative side. To be sure, sometimes the old gibe is true: Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried. Still, sometimes Christianity itself may have generated its share of the world's evil. At any rate, this warning at the start may allay the suspicions of some that they have

started to read a whitewash and remind the unsuspecting that history poses the whole tradition of Christian theology some very hard moral questions.

## SOME BASIC THEMES

Like most history worth telling, the history of Christian theology keeps changing directions. Theologians not only come up with new answers; they often ask new questions. The conversion of the emperor Constantine in the early 300s, for instance, forced Christians to think about the responsibilities of a Christian ruler. Questions about infant baptism, which had been taken for granted for centuries, arose in the sixteenth century. In our own time the role of women in the church, the definition of marriage, and the relation of Christianity to other faiths have generated a whole set of increasingly debated issues. And so on. Still, some basic issues keep appearing, if in ever-new forms. In particular the affirmation of two different but important elements of Christian faith often generates a tension that can never be fully resolved. Five such tensions have had particular importance.

1. *The Humanity and Divinity of Christ.* Many of the very first Christians talked about Jesus' birth and his death and his hometown. But they also prayed to him and hoped for salvation through him. They treated him, in short, as both human and divine. Yet Christians always felt that human beings are very different from God. So how could Jesus Christ be both at the same time? From the discussion of the Trinity in the third and fourth centuries, to current debates about the "historical Jesus" and his importance for faith, Christian theologians have wrestled with this problem.

2. *Reason and Revelation.* Christianity began within Judaism, where people believed that God, through the Law and the prophets, had revealed truth about himself and his will to Israel. Christians came to believe that God had further revealed himself in Jesus Christ. They soon moved, however, into a Greek culture where philosophers had applied human reason to understanding the structure of the universe, human nature and destiny, and the divine. How should they relate revelation to the conclusions of reason? What could be known by reason, and what had to be accepted by faith? Such questions have survived from Christianity's first contacts with Greek philosophy in the second century, through a long series of medieval debates, through the "rational" religion of the eighteenth century, to the most recent arguments about the relation of science and the Bible.

3. *Works and Grace.* Christians, according to most theologians, should not be proud of the fact that they have been "saved"; they should be grateful to God. They have not earned salvation, for all people are sinners. Rather,

they owe salvation to God's grace—God's unmerited love, poured out on the undeserving. If one can be saved only by unmerited grace, if no one can earn salvation, it might seem to follow that our moral efforts do not really matter—even that, as some of Paul's opponents already suggested in the New Testament period, we should “continue in sin in order that grace may abound” (Rom. 6:1). Not so, most theologians have insisted. Our efforts do matter, and the moral quality of our lives is important. So we can earn God's grace after all? No, that would lead to pride once more. So this dialectic has continued, from Paul to Augustine through the Middle Ages to the very center of the Reformation debates and still today.

4. *Spirit and Structure*. God's grace works unpredictably. One of the twelve apostles can prove a traitor while Paul, persecutor of the church, turns into one of its greatest missionaries. Yet few Christians have simply stood around waiting for unexpected grace. They have organized churches, with institutions and rules. They have designed liturgies and defined sacraments as the vehicles of God's grace. Other Christians have then protested that institutionalization was pretending to limit God's freedom, or that theories of the sacraments were trying to explain an inexplicable mystery. These debates have raged from the time of the Montanists in the second century, to medieval arguments about the papacy and the sacraments, through the Reformation to the present. Christianity cannot exist in history without taking a particular form—no faith can—but some Christians always resist identifying that form with the action of God.

5. *Church and State*. Christianity began as an illegal sect and in its first centuries suffered intermittent persecution, but throughout most of its history most Christians have lived in countries where they constituted a majority and held political power. The fact that they were Christians, it seemed, ought to shape the way they governed. At the same time, large-scale theocracy—the direct rule of territory by church leaders—has been quite rare in Christian history. The church has influenced the state but has rarely taken it over. That has inevitably generated yet another set of conflicts, from the time of Constantine down to current American debates about abortion, poverty, and guns.

It is not for a historian to judge who is right in these debates, but a historian can note that the tensions have generally been creative. Those who vote unambiguously for one side or the other—who deny Christ's humanity or divinity, or try to base their beliefs purely on reason or purely on revelation, or whatever—may have the truth, but those who have tried to affirm both sides have usually produced the most interesting theology. If these questions could be settled, then their history would come to an end, and this could be a much shorter book. Many Christian theologians, however, have seen valid

insights on both sides of these issues, and their attempts to find a way to preserve all the truth they saw have generated a long and fascinating story.

## FOR FURTHER READING

INTRODUCTIONS: The following are good introductory histories of Christianity: Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (Penguin, 2010) is awesomely learned and exciting to read; Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (HarperOne, 2010), blends the story of institutional Christianity with its theological development; David Bentley Hart, *The Story of Christianity* (Quercus, 2007) is beautifully illustrated and surprisingly comprehensive for a short introduction. On Protestantism, see Mark Noll, *Protestantism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2011), and on Catholicism, see Lawrence S. Cunningham, *An Introduction to Catholicism* (Cambridge University Press, 2009). Some reliable reference books are Van A. Harvey, *A Handbook of Theological Terms* (Macmillan, 1964); Justo Gonzalez, *Essential Theological Terms* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005); and the seven-volume *People's History of Christianity*, gen. ed. Dennis R. Janz (Fortress, 2010).

COLLECTIONS OF ORIGINAL SOURCES: The two companion volumes to the present book excerpt original sources and offer brief introductions to each excerpt: *Readings in the History of Christian Theology*, 2 vols., ed. William C. Placher (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1988). The many volumes of *The Library of Christian Classics*, published by Westminster John Knox Press, really do include most of the classics of the history of Christian theology through the Reformation. Many of those volumes, along with other sources, are cited at the end of appropriate chapters.

IMPORTANT BUT MORE DIFFICULT: Jaroslav Pelikan's five-volume *The Christian Tradition*, published by the University of Chicago Press, is more difficult but will be the definitive work for many years. The volumes are *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (1971); *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600–1700)* (1974); *The Growth of Medieval Theology (600–1300)* (1978); *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300–1700)*; and *Christian Doctrine and Modern Culture (since 1700)*. A reliable, widely available one-volume introduction is Bernhard Lohse, *A Short History of Christian Doctrine*, trans. Ernest Stoeffler (Fortress, 1985).



## The Hope of Israel

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“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

—*Deuteronomy 26:5–9*

It may seem odd to begin a history of Christian theology with the politics and customs of some small tribes living just east of the Mediterranean about 1200 B.C. What does this have to do with Christianity? What does it have to do with theology?

Well, the story of Christianity begins with Jesus, and Jesus was a Jew: born in a Jewish family, circumcised according to Jewish law, raised and educated in a Jewish culture. He worshiped at the Temple and in the synagogues; he chose all his disciples from among his fellow Jews. Jesus and his first followers set the shape for Christian theology down the centuries, and they had grown up within Judaism. They took many of its ideas about God, human beings, nature, and history for granted. One cannot understand them or what they said without knowing something about Judaism and the traditions of Israel that lay behind it. (For reasons to be explained below, most scholars refer to

“Judaism” only beginning with Ezra, about 450 B.C. Before that, it seems safest to talk about “the religion of Israel.”)

Yet the records of ancient Israel include almost no systematic theology. Mostly, they tell stories, stories about Israel’s history. The theology emerges through those stories and cannot be separated from them. Therefore, while one chapter certainly cannot recount even a summary of the history of Israel, a history of Christian theology has to begin with at least some notes on the beginnings of that history and the ways in which it made Israel different from its neighbors. Some of the special characteristics of Israel appeared from the outset, but others emerged only gradually, above all through the work of the prophets. So their story will have to come next. That sets the stage for the development of a complex religious tradition called “Judaism” a few centuries before the time of Jesus—and understanding that tradition makes it possible to understand Jesus himself in his historical context.

So understanding what Christians call the Old Testament is important for understanding Jesus, and therefore Christian theology. But it also has significance for theology simply because of its place in the canon—the accepted group of sacred texts for most Christians. It insists that there is just one God, that God offers laws (Hebrew: “Torah,” which also means “instruction”) to shape human life, and that God has chosen to bind his future with the future of what he has created, starting with Israel.

## THE TRIBES OF YAHWEH

Somewhere between 1300 B.C. and 1050 B.C. a group of tribes living between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea began to think of themselves as a single nation—Israel—and to worship a single God they called Yahweh. “Yahweh” is the best modern rendering of the name of God sometimes given as “Jehovah” and translated as “the Lord” in most English Bibles. Pious Jews never pronounced the name aloud. They were surrounded by unfriendly neighbors, and they needed to stick together if they were going to survive. Like many groups before and since, they found that telling a common history gave them a sense of unity. Even today, after all, immigrants seeking new citizenship or college students joining a fraternity or sorority have to learn something about the history of their new community. In reciting that history, they come to be a part of it, and that gives them a sense of belonging. So these tribes began to bind themselves together by telling a common story.

The accuracy of such stories as to detail often scarcely matters. Think of the history most Americans carry around in their heads—for instance, Columbus and Plymouth Rock and Paul Revere’s ride and the Declaration of Independence and

the Wild West. Skipping over centuries, we forget the hatred that the English Protestants at Plymouth would probably have felt for the descendants of Columbus. We treat all these events as a single story of our shared history, which helps define us as a nation. Those left out of that story, as women and minority groups often were, feel themselves alienated from society, and a new generation of historians retells the history more inclusively. So it was with Israel. Each tribe had its legends, its own famous ancestors. Gradually the traditions came to be incorporated in a single story. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, likely originally the heroes of different tribes, came to be fathers and sons. Apparently the worship of Yahweh had begun among a group fleeing slavery in Egypt, so the story of how Yahweh had led them to their freedom took a central place in the national history.

At first glance, Israel seems in all this very like many other peoples in the ancient Near East. The Hittites and the Edomites and many others also achieved some sort of national unity, also worshiped their own particular deities, and also shaped national histories. But Israel was different, and the difference centered on its religion. First of all, at least in principle, the Israelites worshiped only one God. To be sure, many neighboring nations also recognized one supreme “high God,” and the early Israelites did not necessarily deny the existence of other deities; they only said that Israel should worship none but Yahweh. The difference remains dramatic. A fairly typical Babylonian text describing a military campaign refers within a few lines to a host of deities: “Bel . . . Eturkamma . . . the gods of the city Marad, Ilbaba and the gods of Kish, Ninlil . . . the gods from Borsippa, Kutha . . . and Sippar.”<sup>1</sup> The stories of Israel just keep talking about Yahweh. Moreover, even in earliest times, Israel produced almost no statues or physical descriptions of Yahweh. Though the Israelites did refer to Yahweh as “he” rather than “she,” unlike many other cultures they did not dwell on their God’s virility or other “masculine” characteristics; Yahweh’s gender appeared almost exclusively in pronouns. Israel’s neighbors must have found all this bewildering. What did Yahweh look like? Where were his images?

The Israelites also thought of God’s *activity* in an unusual way. Other nations of course described their goddesses or gods as acting in history; Marduk, for instance, helped the Babylonians secure prosperity and defeat their enemies. And Israel saw Yahweh at work in the world of nature and the cycle of the seasons. But Yahweh acted *primarily* in the great events of the nation’s history, while the deities of neighboring nations generally had *more* to do with safeguarding the repeated annual cycle of vegetation. That meant that, in contrast to divinities whose function was to guarantee that the same thing would keep happening—the yearly flood of the Nile, the appearance of spring—Yahweh made *new* things happen. His people escaped Egypt, they settled a new land, and so on.

Israel's religion thus took particular interest in historical changes in this world. By contrast, it showed startlingly little concern for what happens after death. Egypt provides an obvious contrast, with so much of its religion, and sometimes a significant portion of its national economy, devoted to an obsessive quest for immortality. Apparently the early Israelites lived contentedly with the thought that death is final, survival—if any—being in the shadowy and lifeless realm of Sheol. They rejoiced in Yahweh's benefits in this life and hoped their children and grandchildren would survive and prosper—and that was enough for them.

Israel's God also stood in an unusual relationship with its government. The tribes functioned together for some time without a king—that in itself was unusual in that time and place—and Israel's histories reflect considerable misgivings about the idea of monarchy from the very start. The book of Judges describes the first Israelite to try to become king, Abimelech, as a thoroughly unsavory character who “killed his brothers the sons of Jerubbaal, seventy men, on one stone; but Jotham, the youngest son of Jerubbaal, survived, for he hid himself” (Judg. 9:5). It was not an auspicious beginning for monarchy, and the story goes on to present a fable in which the olive tree, the fig tree, and the vine all refuse to become king of the plants, while only the thorn bush accepts the job. The historians later tell how, shortly before 1000 B.C., Samuel, the great spokesman of Yahweh, agreed to anoint Saul as Israel's first king only after angry resistance:

“Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: ‘I brought up Israel out of Egypt, and I rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all the kingdoms that were oppressing you.’ But today you have rejected your God, who saves you from all your calamities and your distresses; and you have said, ‘No! but set a king over us.’”  
(1 Sam. 10:18–19)

To some, the monarchy seemed a betrayal of Yahweh and Israel's liberation. What a contrast with Egypt or a dozen other kingdoms where the ruler was virtually divine. Egyptian pharaohs did not make mistakes. Saul, on the other hand, appears to us as a bitter if heroic figure, rejected by Yahweh, driven to madness, and sent off to defeat and death. Israel always looked to Saul's successor David as its greatest king, but its story of him frankly portrays a man who disgraced himself over another man's wife and lost control of his own children.

Israel was thus unique, with its belief in one God, who made new things happen, who was the Lord of this world and this life, and who could criticize a king as easily as support him. Yet that uniqueness always faced all sorts of threats. The religions of their neighbors tempted the Israelites away from

Yahweh, and under David's successors the government grew more centralized and the court ritual more elaborate, and the worship of Yahweh itself might easily have developed into just another royal cult.

## THE FAITH OF THE PROPHETS

More than anyone else, the prophets prevented that. It could be argued that a history of Israel's religion should scarcely mention the prophets, since nearly all of them kept insisting that no one ever listened to them. Yet, however small their influence at the time, the prophets introduced the ideas that would shape the future.

"Prophecy" did not necessarily have anything to do with foretelling the future. The prophets were those who spoke on behalf of Yahweh—to warn, to promise, to advise, to threaten. The first references to prophets have to do with two different sorts of people. Wandering bands of ecstatic prophets went into trances or seizures as if some divine force had seized them. The young Saul, traveling around the countryside, met "a band of prophets coming down from the shrine with harp, tambourine, flute, and lyre playing in front of them; they will be in a prophetic frenzy" (1 Sam. 10:5). Many cultures think of such uncontrolled behavior as being connected to the divine in a special way—the madman or the epileptic must be in receipt of special messages from God. On the other hand, there were the official prophets of the royal court and the religious shrines who advised the king. "The king of Israel and King Jehoshaphat of Judah," one account begins, "were sitting on their thrones, arrayed in their robes, at the threshing floor at the entrance of the gate of Samaria; and all the prophets were prophesying before them" (1 Kgs. 22:10). Such prophets were clearly part of the hired help.

Other nations had ecstatic prophets (who rarely addressed social issues) and court prophets (who often told their employers only what they wanted to hear), but to a unique degree Israel developed something different—prophets who gave advice and warnings, not because someone had hired them, but because they felt a special call from Yahweh himself. Often they criticized the king or the religious ceremonies, and their criticisms began to change Israel's religion.

We tend to take a connection between religion and ethics for granted; one's faith ought to help shape one's moral values. For much of human history, however, worship meant making the proper sacrifices and following the proper ritual; it might have very little to do with morality. In Homer's *Iliad*, for instance, various gods and goddesses punish heroes for failing to offer the proper sacrifices, but they rarely call them to account for moral failings. The

prophet Amos, writing about 750 B.C., thus proposed a new idea of proper worship when he declared on behalf of Yahweh,

I hate, I despise your festivals,  
 and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.  
 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
 I will not accept them;  
 and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals  
 I will not look upon.  
 Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
 I will not listen to the melody of your harps.  
 But let justice roll down like waters,  
 and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

(Amos 5:21–24)

Yahweh, the prophets increasingly taught, cared about righteousness more than ritual. He had no respect for those who “sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way” (Amos 2:6–7), regardless of the sacrifices they performed.

The prophets also made Yahweh less a tribal or national God. Israel had long recognized that it should worship only Yahweh, but at first it assumed that other nations would worship their own deities. Yahweh was Israel’s God, but Marduk might be the god of the Babylonians and look after their affairs. Amos, however, declared that Yahweh had brought “Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Aramaeans from Kir” (Amos 9:7). Indeed, he “made the Pleiades and Orion, and turns deep darkness into the morning, and darkens the day into night” (Amos 5:8). Yahweh did not just watch over this particular nation; he ruled all nations, indeed, all the universe.

Later prophets also emphasized Yahweh’s relations with individuals. Tribal gods sometimes punished a whole people for one person’s sins, or chastened later generations for the evil actions of their ancestors. When the early prophet Elisha denounced King Ahab (about 860 B.C.), for instance, he declared in the name of Yahweh, “For the whole house of Ahab shall perish; I will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel” (2 Kgs. 9:8). The Israelites had a traditional saying that when the fathers eat sour grapes, their children taste the sourness, and it sets their teeth on edge. Jeremiah, however (writing about 600 B.C.), looked toward a day when “they shall no longer say: ‘The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’ But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge” (Jer. 31:29–30). That emphasized personal responsibility

and individual relationship with God. Yahweh was becoming at once the God of the whole universe and the God of individuals.

Yahweh had always been a God who acted in history, guiding, rewarding, or punishing his people, but the prophets began to change Israel's understanding of *how* he acted. Earlier stories pictured Yahweh dramatically interfering in the course of events—parting the waters of the sea, or making the sun stand still so that Joshua could win a battle. Many of the prophets now spoke of more “ordinary” events. The Assyrian army won a battle; the Persians conquered the Babylonians. All of that could be explained in terms of politics and military power. Yet the prophet said that Yahweh was at work here, too—not interrupting the normal flow of events but guiding all the events of history.

Even with this broader sense of divine action, however, it grew harder to see Yahweh at work in history. Earlier prophets addressed the immediate context: Israel needed to repent right now, or Yahweh would punish the nation. Later prophets grew less confident of Yahweh's imminent intervention. In 721 B.C. an Assyrian army conquered the northern half of the people of Israel. A hundred years later King Josiah, ruling the surviving Kingdom of Judah, instituted major reforms, seeking to return to the proper worship of Yahweh, but then was killed in a disastrous military defeat.

O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,  
and you will not listen?  
Or cry to you “Violence!”  
and you will not save?  
Why do you make me see wrongdoing  
and look at trouble?

(Hab. 1:2–3)

Then in 586 B.C., Babylonian forces defeated Judah, too, and led many of its leaders into exile. A faith based on Yahweh's relation with his people found itself with no land, no king, and no Temple.

By the rivers of Babylon—  
there we sat down and there we wept  
when we remembered Zion.  
On the willows there  
we hung up our harps.  
For there our captors  
asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”  
How could we sing the LORD's song  
in a foreign land?

(Ps. 137:1–4)

About fifty years later a remnant returned to Jerusalem, but something had changed irreversibly. The few prophets after the return from exile spoke mostly about their own inadequacy, and then the tradition of prophecy came to an end. “There is no longer any prophet, and there is no one among us who knows how long” (Ps. 74:9). Somehow, after centuries of tragedy, the sense that Yahweh advised his people and intervened at each stage of their history had lost its plausibility. The relation between God and people would have to be redefined if it was to survive.

### ALTERNATIVES WITHIN JUDAISM

When the present looks bleak, people tend to look to the past or to the future. Some Israelites exiled in Babylon argued that Yahweh did not need to keep sending new messages through his prophets, since the Law he had given Moses communicated once and for all everything he wanted or needed to say. Around 450 B.C. a priest named Ezra returned from Babylonia to Jerusalem determined to enforce a rigorous code of law. He particularly emphasized rules that set Israel apart from its neighbors—laws against intermarriage with non-Jews and special customs like circumcision or dietary laws. Reduced in size, without political independence, Israel risked simply disappearing into the morass of the ancient Near East. Ezra and the scholars of the Law who followed him argued that, to survive and preserve their faith in Yahweh, the people would have to emphasize what set them apart. That conscious decision to set themselves apart virtually created a new religion, so that historians begin to talk about “Judaism” rather than “the religion of Israel” when they reach the time of Ezra.

Others in those years after the exile looked to the future. A movement called apocalypticism declared that Yahweh has stopped acting in history so that the evils of the present age can run their course to disaster; only then will he intervene to establish his reign of peace and justice in a new age. The book of Jubilees states this clearly: “For calamity follows on calamity, and wound on wound, and tribulation on tribulation. . . . For all have done evil, and every mouth speaks iniquity. . . . Behold the earth shall be destroyed on account of all their works” (*Jub.* 23:13, 17–18).<sup>2</sup> The apocalypticists often claimed that a secret text of great antiquity revealed to them the pattern of all history and the details of the destruction and renewal that lay ahead. Such apocalyptic hopes made it possible to believe in Yahweh’s ultimate Lordship over history at a time when he seemed to have abandoned his people. Yahweh was merely waiting for the right moment.



Apocalypticism raised some problems for Israel's religious tradition. Israel's religion had concerned this life, not hope for existence after death. If we dismiss the present age as an evil time, however, and place all our hopes in a future age, then those who live and die, often tragically, before that future arrives seem abandoned by God. Hence the complaint of many:

“As we die, so die the righteous,  
And what benefit do they reap for their deeds?  
Behold, even as we, so do they die in grief and darkness. . . .  
And henceforth for ever shall they see no light.”

“Nevertheless they perished and became as though they had not been, and their spirits descended into Sheol in tribulation.”

(1 *En.* 102:6–8, 11)<sup>3</sup>

At first tentatively, therefore, apocalypticists began to talk about the resurrection of the dead—everyone, even those who had died in the meantime, would receive a reward or punishment when the new age begins. But that remained a matter of debate among Jews. The book of Acts (describing, of course, a much later time) tells how Paul was once brought before a Jewish council. To extricate himself from a tight spot, he declared that he was really on trial because he believed in the resurrection of the dead—and at once among his Jewish accusers “a dissension began between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided” (Acts 23:7). The hope of resurrection remained controversial.

Some Jews in the postexilic period did not want to wait for the fulfillment of such hopes and sought to improve their lot here and now by military rebellion. After Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire around 330 B.C., his generals divided up the territory, and dynasties based in Egypt (the Ptolemies) and Syria (the Seleucids) fought over the traditional land of Israel. In 168 B.C. a Seleucid king named Antiochus Epiphanes decided to end toleration of the Jewish religion and erected a statue of Zeus in the Temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem. Out in one village an old priest named Mattathias watched in horror as a fellow Jew offered the first sacrifice at a pagan shrine “and his heart was stirred. He gave vent to righteous anger; he ran and killed him on the altar” (1 Macc. 2:24). Mattathias and his sons, one of them named Judas Maccabeus, fled to the hills and began a guerrilla war that eventually established an independent Jewish state. Hope for a resurrection did not imply to the Maccabeans inactive waiting. Political independence at long last was not the fulfillment of Israel's hopes, however, for some of the Maccabean rulers proved quarrelsome and corrupt. When the Roman general Pompey

turned up in 69 B.C., one faction even solicited his support, and the Romans conquered the Maccabean kingdom without much resistance.

By the time of Jesus, Judaism had thus become quite diverse. Jews had spread throughout the Roman Empire and even beyond its borders, and many of them modified their faith to fit in with the culture around them. At Elephantine in southern Egypt, for instance, a colony of Jews survived for centuries, worshiping the mother-goddess as well as Yahweh at their own temple. Also in Egypt, in the great city of Alexandria, the Jewish philosopher Philo made important connections between Judaism and Greek philosophy, connections that influenced some early Christian theology, as we shall see in the next chapter. Even within the traditional land of Israel, there were conflicting parties. The Sadducees watched over the rituals of the Temple at Jerusalem. The Pharisees piously pursued a scrupulous obedience to the Law. The Zealots urged military revolt against the Romans. Many groups dreamed of a coming apocalypse; the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has disclosed a good deal about one such community, at Qumran, which retreated from society to a desert monastery to practice ritual purity and await the coming great conflict in which the armies of Yahweh would defeat his enemies. They baptized members, honored a great leader—the “Teacher of Righteousness”—and expected savior figures to deliver them at the end of history. These traits have parallels among early Christians, the exact significance of which scholars continue to debate. Most ordinary people probably “belonged” to none of these groups in a formal way but felt the influence of all of them in varying degrees.

A generation after Jesus’ death the disastrous revolt of A.D. 66 to 71 caused Zealot military ambitions to diminish, and a second failed revolt around A.D. 132–135 extinguished them altogether. Apocalyptic hopes gradually dimmed. As in the days of Ezra, an emphasis on the study and practice of Torah ensued. The Pharisaic rabbis (teachers) became the intellectual and later social leaders of Judaism for many centuries to come. Their interpretations of the law form the foundation of Judaism as we know it today.

## JESUS IN CONTEXT

Jewish apocalypticism survived among Christians. Basic Christian terms like “Messiah” and “Son of Man” developed in the context of Jewish apocalyptic, though Christians often exaggerate the importance of such ideas in Judaism. Hearing the Old Testament passages that seem to look forward to the coming of the Messiah so often every Christmas season, one tends to forget what a small portion of Israel’s Scriptures those selections represent. Still, messianic

expectations certainly do run a long way back in Israel's history. The word "Messiah" in Hebrew (*Christos* in Greek) means "the anointed one." Originally it could apply to any king ceremonially sanctioned by Yahweh. Samuel poured oil on the heads of Saul and David in a ritual of anointing and giving Yahweh's blessing. As kings became weak and corrupt and then the monarchy came to an end, however, the focus shifted from the present ruler to a great future king who would restore prosperity, justice, and peace to Israel—a Messiah, a great political and military champion of Yahweh and leader of the people.

Others had different hopes. The book of Daniel told of a vision of cosmic wonders and conflicts, and of their culmination:

As I watched in the night visions,  
I saw one like a son of man  
    coming with the clouds of heaven.  
And he came to the Ancient One  
    and was presented before him.  
To him was given dominion  
    and glory and kingship,  
that all peoples, nations, and languages  
    should serve him.  
His dominion is an everlasting dominion  
    that shall not pass away,  
and his kingship is one  
    that shall never be destroyed.  
(Dan. 7:13–14)<sup>4</sup>

This "Son of Man" is a heavenly figure, descending at the head of armies of angels, quite unlike the human, political Messiah.

Historians cannot determine the interrelations among these hopes or their relative importance by the time of Jesus. The Qumran community apparently hoped for several different messianic figures. Jesus certainly entered a society full of expectations and looking for a person to give shape to its dreams. His message responded to that apocalyptic context. The first words Mark quotes from Jesus are, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15), and the Gospels keep returning to the image of the coming kingdom of God. But how will the kingdom come? Sometimes the New Testament has Jesus describe a grand cataclysm that will give birth to the new age, with the imagery of Daniel's vision.

"But in those days, after that suffering,  
the sun will be darkened,  
    and the moon will not give its light,

and the stars will be falling from heaven,  
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.”

(Mark 13:24–27)

In other passages the kingdom of God is within us, a change in human lives already begun under the impact of Jesus’ preaching. To some extent these pictures seem inconsistent. Is the kingdom a private experience already happening or a spectacular public event that still lies in the future? Perhaps one of the Gospels’ most common images of the kingdom preserves something of both ideas. The kingdom, we read again and again, is like a seed, already planted and now germinating in secret, but still waiting to emerge and burst forth in flower in the future. Christians ever since, at any rate, have sought to preserve both ways of talking about the kingdom: a transformation already experienced in their hearts, and a transformation of the world yet to come.

The more we learn of the Judaism of Jesus’ time, through new discoveries like the Dead Sea Scrolls or more careful study of documents long available, the more difficult it becomes to make radical distinctions between most of his teaching and that of his Jewish contemporaries. To appreciate Jesus’ teaching it is unnecessary to denigrate Judaism nor even to sharply distinguish Jesus from it. Too many Christian historians, for instance, have contrasted Jesus’ message of love with “narrow Jewish legalism.” Some Pharisees may have become so obsessed with fulfilling the details of the law that they forgot about caring for their neighbors—it is a problem not unknown among Christians—but the greatest of the early Pharisaic rabbis, Hillel, Jesus’ contemporary, proclaimed, “What is hateful to yourself do not do to your neighbor. That is the entire Torah. All the rest is commentary.”<sup>5</sup> That seems identical with Jesus’ commandment to love.

The most distinctive feature of Jesus’ teaching, indeed, seems to have been the role of Jesus himself, yet on just this point the Gospels offer puzzling indications. Particularly in Mark, for instance, whenever people recognize Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus tells them to keep this a secret. Jesus often speaks of the “Son of Man” (Daniel’s apocalyptic hero), but nearly always in the third person and the future tense. Did he think of himself as the Son of Man?

Even a rather skeptical historian, however, will probably admit some features of Jesus’ teaching about himself. He claimed a special authority, it seems, and a special relationship with God. Bystanders in the Gospels remark that he speaks with authority, and, in a culture where most took the Law as God’s definitive word, Jesus did not just interpret the Law. He sometimes modified

it: “You have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you. . . .” To a first-century Jew, that represented a very strong claim to speak on God’s behalf. Further, Jesus apparently thought that people’s response to his message would determine their relation to the coming kingdom of God. Following Jesus led into the kingdom.

The themes of Jesus’ teaching are important, but of course he was more than a teacher. All the Gospels put the end of his life at the dramatic center of his story. Here all the hopes of Israel come together—he is the king of the Jews, the greatest of the suffering prophets. Yet Jesus transformed those expectations. He did not lead Israel to victory over Rome. Indeed, one of the remarkable features of the narratives of his last days is that his increasing isolation makes it impossible to identify him with any one “side” or cause. The Roman governor sentenced him as a Jewish rebel, but the leaders of Judaism also turned against him. He attacked the powerful on behalf of the poor, but in the end the mob, too, called for his blood. His own disciples ran away; Peter denied him. He did not go to his death agony as a representative of Jews, or of the poor, or of Christians, but alone, and thus, according to Christian faith, as a representative of all.

### FOR FURTHER READING

INTRODUCTIONS: John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Fortress, 2004), or the abbreviated version, *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Fortress, 2007), are reliable and widely used Old Testament textbooks. Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures* (Oxford University Press, 2010) is another thoughtful survey. Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2003) examines the OT writings in their literary and historical contexts while also attending to their theological aims and claims. Michael Stone, *Scriptures, Sect, Visions* (Wipf and Stock, 2007) is an accessible historical introduction to postexilic Judaism.

IMPORTANT BUT MORE DIFFICULT: A standard history of ancient Israel is John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 4th ed. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2000). Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols., trans. D. M. G. Stalker (Oliver & Boyd, 1962, 1965), remains a landmark study. On Jesus, a much-discussed recent work is Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ* (Yale University Press, 2000). The views set forth in the present volume, in this and much else, have been most deeply influenced by Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Fortress Press, 1975), and Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (SCM, 2010).