BOOK REVIEW: *MICHAEL PARSONS,* LUTHER AND CALVIN ON OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVES[1]

Jon Case, Glen O'Brien, Judy Rigby

Michael Parsons is Head of the Department of Christian Thought at the Baptist Theological College in Perth, WA, has taught theology at Murdoch University, and is a past contributor to Aldersgate Papers.[2] His stated concern in this volume is to 'examine and to explore the narrative exegesis of the Reformers...to elucidate *their* understanding of the narrative text as it is conveyed in their exposition.'[3] He admits that neither Luther nor Calvin can rightly be referred to as 'narrative theologians' in the current sense of the term. However, like all of us, they had to deal with the narrative passages of scripture, and they way they did so is helpful and instructive in terms of modeling an interpretive approach.

The approach taken in this volume may be compared to that taken by David C. Steinmetz who, in *Luther in Context*[4] and *Calvin in Context*,[5] examines the Reformers' treatment of given passages of Scripture set against the backdrop of the long and honoured exegetical tradition of the church, as well as the discussion of their contemporaries on the same passages, giving due consideration to their 'theological antecedents and contemporaries.'[6] Such study reminds us that the magisterial Reformers did not simply open their Bibles and read them, coming up with novel ideas fresh out of the blue sky. They

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[1] Michael Parsons, *Luther and Calvin On Old Testament Narratives: Reformation Thought and Narrative Text*. Lewiston, New York; Queenston, Ontario; and Lampeter, Ceredigion: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004.

[2] Michael Parsons, 'Passion and the Nature of God: Theology and a Biblical Text,' *Aldersgate Papers*, vol. 3 (2002), 27-49.

[3] Parsons, *Luther and Calvin*, v.

[4] David C. Steinmetz, *Luther in Context*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995.

[5] David C. Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

[6] Steinmetz, *Luther in Context*, x.

understood themselves to be part of an interpretive community, and to be entering into a centuries-long conversation about the church's book. According to Steinmetz, 'the best and most productive way to study Calvin is to place him in the context of the theological and exegetical traditions that formed him and in the lively company of the friends and enemies from whom he learned and with whom he quarreled.'[7]

Parsons does little of this contextualizing, choosing instead to indicate the ways in which the Reformers handled scripture in light of certain principles we now refer to under the term 'narrative theology.' He limits himself for the most part to the lectures and commentaries, with occasional reference to sermonic material. It would be unfair to criticize Parsons for failing to do what was never his stated purpose, but one is left with the sense that some greater degree of contextualization of each discussion would have shed more light. Did the way in which Luther and Calvin handled narrative passages differ in any way from patristic exegesis, for example,[8] or from Anabaptists such as Balthasar Hubmaier who took exception to Luther's doctrine of the bondage of the will along Occamist lines.[9]

These days church history tends to be studied as social history and, while this is a perfectly valid discipline, it is good to revisit the Reformation in terms of the history of its ideas – as intellectual history. Steinmetz describes Luther as being 'born to theology as Bach was born to music or Durer to color and light. Theological talk, disputation, and writing were meat and drink for him. It is therefore not possible to capture his full human reality without giving serious attention to his consuming theological vocation.'[10] Parsons cites Peter Matheson's view that the Reformation involved not so much a doctrinal shift or a structural reorganization as a shift in 'the root metaphors of the age.' [11] Yet surely these 'root metaphors' were forged

[7] Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, 209. Steinmetz gives fine examples of this approach throughout both of his *In Context* books, and is particularly good at demonstrating Luther and Calvin's dialogue with the Thomists and anti-Thomists. *Luther in Context*, 47-58; *Calvin in Context*, 141-56.

[8] David C. Steinmetz, 'Calvin and Patristic Exegesis,' in Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, 122-37.

[9] David C. Steinmetz, 'Luther and Hubmaier on the Freedom of the Human Will,' in Steinmetz, *Luther in Context*, 59-71.

[10] Steinmetz, *Luther in Context*, x.

[11] P. Matheson, *The Imaginative World of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: T, and T. Clark, 2000), 119.

partly in the heat both of doctrinal disputation and the reorganization of the church.

In chapter seven Parsons seeks to demonstrate how Luther's apocalypticism and his self-understanding within that worldview was shaped through his reading of the Noachic narrative. In broaching the subject of Luther's apocalypticism, Parsons aligns himself - over against Bernard Lohse - with Heiko Obermann, John Tonkin and James Nestingen in emphasising the signal importance of apocalypticism throughout the development of Luther's thinking. It was both a 'crucial part of the impulse' of his theology and a 'vital element in its goal.'[12]

How precisely did Luther appropriate the Noachic narrative in such a way as to shape the understanding of his world teetering on the apocalyptic brink? First, by drawing a parallel between his own time and Noah's. So Luther observed in both times a certain 'smugness,' 'disregard of the Word,' 'ungodly forms of worship' and so on. These telltale signs of the end were enshrined in the Catholic church of his day, of course, behind which he believed the hand of the devil was working. Secondly, Luther drew a parallel between the figure of Noah and his own role within the struggle of the reformation. The figure of Noah provided a 'new criterion' for Luther's self-evaluation. Like Noah, Luther came to understand himself as one who suffered on account of the faith, was harassed and thought foolish, and enjoyed little success in his ministry –all despite his divine commissioning. Finally, Luther discerned an apocalyptic 'pattern' in the flood narrative, a pattern of stages that he related to his own time: 1) God is patient with the world, overlooking humanity's sin; 2) as the world continues to disregard God's word, however, God responds in wrath, and ultimately pours out 3) the salvation and destruction of the Last Day. Luther located himself in the second stage, in which the ministry of the Word was an 'almost unbearable' burden, standing as he did (as the prophets of old), as a 'wall' against the wrath of God.[13] But for the world his concern was even greater, for 'what will happen when we are dead?'[14]

[12] Parsons, 127.

[13] Parsons, 139.

[14] Parsons, 140.

Given the present theological obsession with narrative, Parsons can hardly help but make the observation in his work that Luther and Calvin share some similar concerns: they enter the stories they expound, they seem to assume a 'grand narrative' extending from the Old Testament through the New Testament up to the present, and so on. Luther's handling of the Noahic narrative exemplifies a few of these interpretive moves. Overall, however, the Reformers' engagement with narrative can be seen to diverge from contemporary ('postmodern') reflection on narrative, Parson says, insofar as Luther and Calvin are interested in allowing narrative to ultimately 'point beyond itself to theology and further to experience of God.'[15] 'What matters is that believers are pointed beyond the narrative *per se* to their own encounter with the living and faithful God, through the Word by the Holy Spirit.'[16]

All of this is true, and it is stated clearly and with genuine pastoral concern, but it must be said that Parsons has set up a rather awkward comparison between the Reformers' and postmoderns' interests in narrative. Cardinal assumptions - with respect to God, history and human identity - motoring these interests in the sixteenth and twenty-first centuries are in some respects hardly commensurate. Further, it seems to me that Parsons' own understanding of what narrative can or cannot do is in need of nuance. With respect to his observation that the Reformers were concerned to let narrative 'point beyond itself,' many 'narrative theologians' (the appellation is so worn as to be almost useless anymore) would happily agree that narrative has a 'centrifugal' as well as a 'centripetal' force.

In the fifth chapter of the book, Parsons turns to discussions of gender. In his treatment of the rape passages in Genesis 34 and 2 Samuel 13, he poses a question asked by Marie Fortune, 'why is the church so quick to name sexuality a sin and so hesitant to name the sin of violence against women?'[17] Implicit in this question he asserts, is an accusation that the church is not only culpable today, but also historically culpable, which provides the stimulus for the chapter.

[15] Parsons, 230.
[16] Parsons, 231.
[17] Marie M. Fortune, 'The Way Things are is Not the Way they Have to Be,' in J. B. Nelson and S. P. Longfellow, eds. *Sexuality and the Sacred* (London: Mowbray, 1994), 326-34.

Allowing that the question is too large to adequately deal with in one essay, Parsons narrows his focus to the thinking of Luther and Calvin in their exposition of two particular rape stores in the Old Testament. He proposes to explore what the Reformers do when confronted with the rape narratives: Do they face the questions raised? Do they name the crime? And if they don't, what gets in their way and why?

Parsons investigates these questions by careful study of the writings of the Reformers in their commentaries and sermons noting that the body of writing is larger in the case of Dinah. He compares and contrasts the writings of each of the Reformers in respect to the stories, treating them separately at first, and then making collective observations. He takes care to name these observations as reflections, rather than presuming to draw conclusions.

Throughout the chapter, one discerns that the author perhaps finds himself disappointed in the Reformers. He expresses himself variously as surprised, disconcerted and disturbed at some of their comments. Use of italics and exclamation marks reinforce this impression. Indeed at one point he is forced to remark that Calvin's exposition of the Tamar story is not only surprising but has an 'unfortunate result.'

In this highly readable essay, clearly reasoned, Parsons is forced to conclude (although perhaps somewhat reluctantly) that Calvin and Luther *did* find it difficult to name 'the sin against women.' Suggesting several answers as to why this is so, it probably will not go far enough for some readers, as Parsons refuses to accuse Calvin and Luther of 'overt misogyny.' On the other hand, he does not really excuse them, seeking rather to explain their positions. Perhaps he is right in concluding, 'We begin by understanding the mistakes of the past.'

In offering summary conclusions, Parsons notes that the Reformers often entered into (or were absorbed by) the narrative passages they expounded, and that they understood God to be experienced in the same way in the present as in the biblical text.[18] However, when dealing with passages that seem to contradict certain existing theological propositions, such as the divine impassibility and

[18] Parsons, 228-9.

immutability, Luther and Calvin at times allow these *apriori* beliefs to take precedence over the plain reading of the text.

In making the text subservient to the lived experience of Christians, it is not to be forgotten that the narrative is always about God and God's relationship to a people. Its purpose is to 'facilitate experiential engagement between the reader and the living God.'[19] While Luther and Calvin accept the classical Christian view of God as immutable and impassible they also insist that God is no passive onlooker, but always God-in-relation, God who confronts, God who wrestles with us, startles, frightens, and dislodges us. God can be as much enemy as friend to the believer. To Calvin, God 'pursues Jonah to the fish's belly...punishes Jacob and David by the rape of their daughters' and judges David over his adultery with Bathsheba. In all of this, however, the Reformers want to exonerate and defend God as, in the final analysis, loving and paternal, and therefore, able to be trusted.[20]

For both Reformers, and perhaps especially for Luther, the believer's life is one of temptation, with the promise of triumphing over all trials through God's grace. The believer's weakness is simply cause for depending upon God's strength.[21] Parsons is right in reminding us that these Reformers were essentially pastoral in their theological orientation and motivation. 'They read and expound narrative in order to give pastoral warning, help, comfort, and encouragement.'[22] This is a fact often forgotten in the case of Calvin, who is popularly supposed to have been some kind of cold fish intellectual with a perverse delight in contemplating the damned as objects of God's predestinating reprobation. Nothing could be further from the truth, not only in the case of Calvin's commentaries, which often exude a warm pastoral intent, but also in the case of the *Institutes*. It is not predestination, or election, or the divine decrees, that forms the centrepiece of that work but the believer's mystical union with Christ. His discussion of election and predestination is couched in the much wider consideration of 'the way in which we receive the grace of Christ; what benefits come to us from it, and what effects follow.'[23]

[19] Parsons, 232.
[20] Parsons, 233-34.
[21] Parsons, 234.35.
[22] Parsons, 236.
[23] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T. McNeill and Ford Lewis Battled. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 537-986.

Luther and Calvin on Narrative Texts makes a good contribution to our understanding of the Reformers and their handling of biblical texts. It sets out to draw comparisons between today's 'narrative' approaches while conceding that, properly speaking the Reformers were not 'narrative theologians.' Parsons' comparison between pre-modern sixteenth century perspectives and today's narrative theology needs nuancing. However, his work gives us a valuable reminder of the essentially pastoral orientation of these Reformers and their concern to help the believer make sense of life under the gracious rule of a covenant God.