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profitability of the Scriptures in the matter of conveying a saving and an equipping knowledge of God. He does not present a theory about a perfect Bible given long ago but now lost, but declares the Bible in Timothy's possession to be alive with the breath of God and full of the transforming information the young disciple would need in the life of faith and obedience. I think we can all learn from this kind of concentration and orientation¹⁵. It is important for us to stress the practical effectiveness of the accessible Bible in facilitating a saving and transforming knowledge of God in Jesus Christ. We must not shift the emphasis to the unavailable Bible of the past, about which one can speculate, or to the inaccessible Bible of the future, after the experts will (supposedly) have cleared away every perplexing feature of the text, removing all possibility of doubt. It is this present Bible we need to be able to trust, this New International Version or King James Version, and this practical purpose of communicating the saving knowledge of God we need to be focusing on. Furthermore, it is this Bible that all Christians have come to trust through the grace of God, and this purpose that has proven valid in their experience. Given by God's breath, the Bible proves to be quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword and gives life and truth to the one who trusts in Jesus. This is the doctrine of Scripture I am concerned to discuss and defend: Not the Bible of academic debate, but the Bible given and handed down to be the medium of the gospel message and the primary sacrament of the knowledge of God, his own communication, which

is able to reconcile us to God so that we might come to love and obey him. Not a book wholly free of perplexing features, but one that bears effective witness to the Savior of all.

Why, in the last analysis, do Christian people believe the Bible is God's Word? Not because they have all studied up on Christian evidences and apologetics, however useful these may prove to some. Christians believe the Bible because it has been able to do for them exactly what Paul promised it would: introduce them to a saving and transforming knowledge of Christ. Reasons for faith and answers to perplexing difficulties in the text, therefore, are supportive but not constitutive of faith in God and his Word. Faith rests ultimately, not in human wisdom, but in a demonstration of the Spirit and power. Therefore, let us not quench the Spirit in our theology of inspiration, whether by rationalist liberal doubts or by rationalist conservative proofs, because both shift the focus away from the power of God in the Scriptures and onto our ability to rationally comprehend these matters. There is, of course, a place for ordinary understanding with the mind and a place for scholarly discussion and vindication. But it is greatly overdone if we leave the slightest impression that we are able to ground faith in God's Word by rational arguments alone and that God's working in the human heart in response to faith is not the main cause of faith. The Bible is not so interested in our academically proving, as in our holistically seeing the truth, in our believing the gospel and obeying God. This is something I have had to learn myself, and it is a liberating truth¹⁶.

¹ Edward Farley, *Ecclesial Reflection: An Anatomy of Theological Method*.

² Bromiley, "The Church Fathers and Holy Scripture," in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge, p. 217.

³ Virtually all evangelicals, including myself, have done this in times past, so eager are we to enlist such great worthies as Augustine on our side in the great battle with liberalism. Edward Farley calls our bluff on this practice very effectively; *Ecclesial Reflection*, pp. 83-105.

⁴ The subtitle of Woodbridge's book, *Biblia Authority is A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal*, and effectively refutes the view that classical theologians limited the inerrancy of the Bible to matters of faith and practice. The book referred to is by Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible*.

⁵ Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Crisis of the Scripture Principle" in *Basic Questions in Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 1-14. I appreciated the candid humor of Maurice Wiles near the end of his book *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, when he asked himself, in view of the radical nature of the changes he was proposing, whether the title of the book ought not to be "the unmaking of Christian Doctrine." His instincts are on target, of course.

⁶ Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King, ed. *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, p. 35.

⁷ For direct denials, in addition to the work of Farley and Pannenberg already referred to (notes 1 and 12), consult C. F. Evans, *Is "Holy Scripture" Christian?*; James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World*; and Holy Scripture: *Canon, Authority, Criticism*; Gordon D. Kaufman, *Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God*.

⁸ For indirect denials, note the shift of the "functional" authority of the Bible in a whole range of modern writers who take the Bible to be authoritative, not in its teachings as history but in its power to occasion new experiences of revelation in us. See David H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*. For Langdon Gilkey, the Bible is a fallible human witness reflecting all the biases and fears of its age and is subject to our correcting its errors. What he holds to be true is the symbolic structure and its power to illuminate our existence. See

Gilkey, *Message and Existence: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, p. 52 f. Many prominent theologians make the shift to the functional while continuing to pretend they are operating within the classical picture. Hodgson and King name Bultmann, Tillich, and Barth in this category: *Christian Theology*, p. 53.

⁹ Farley, *Ecclesial Reflection*, pp. 153-65.

¹⁰ Farley, *Ecclesial Reflection*, pp. 135-40.

¹¹ Auguste Sabatier, *Religions of Authority and Religions of the Spirit*.

¹² Compare Richard J. Coleman, *Issues of Theological Conflict: Evangelicals and Liberals*.

¹³ No conservative book I know of responds to anything like the full range of hard critical questions, though most of them are treated helpfully by someone somewhere. I hope this book will fill this important gap satisfactorily.

¹⁴ Barth and Berkouwer see themselves in line with the historic doctrine of biblical authority and address themselves to the contemporary discussion, but neither one, partly because of the European context, and partly because of their emphasis upon event rather than content, really speaks for or to the evangelicals in the English-speaking world. Carl Henry is the only one thus far to fulfill my prescription (*God, Revelation and Authority*) unless my own *Biblical Revelation* be mentioned as a poor second. There are signs that better work will come forth from the diverse circle that groups itself around the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. The appearance of Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, vol. 1, which will grow to three large volumes, is the best treatment of the subject so far in a full-scale systematic theology.

¹⁵ Paul's text is discussed helpfully in Edward W. Goodrick, "Let's Put 2 Timothy 3:16 Back in the Bible," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25 (1982), pp. 479-87; and Howard J. Loewen, *Karl Barth and the Church Doctrine of Inspiration*, (Seminary, May 1976), chap. 2.

¹⁶ While still wary of fideism, I understand better what scholars like Daane; Berkouwer, Rogers, Bloesch, Barth, Wink, and Grounds have been trying to tell conservatives like me who have an overly rationalist bent.

Reading the Bible as an Icon

by Duane Christensen

In the Baptist tradition, icons do not play a significant role; unless of course, as some more liberally oriented critics would have it, the Bible itself becomes an icon. There is irony here: whereas some would accuse a good many Baptists of "bibliolatry", or worshipping the Bible, these same Baptists would be quick to point the finger back at those who produce and make use of icons, accusing them of idolatry, or worshipping images. And though the language used in both cases is pejorative, there may be value in an attempt to combine these two negatives to see whether the result may somehow yet be positive.

My introduction to the field of iconography was a meditation by Henry Nouwen on "Rublev's Icon of the Trinity" published recently in the *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*.¹ I was struck with how deeply Rublev's icon spoke to Nouwen, and others as well, who have taken the time to enter deeply into its structure and symbolism. Let's take a brief look at this remarkable work, considered by some "to be one of the most perfect achievements in the history of art".²

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Nouwen was experiencing what he calls "a hard period of (his) life, in which verbal prayer had become nearly impossible".³ It was "a long and quiet presence to this Icon (which) became the beginning of (his) healing".⁴

Rublev painted his icon in memory of St. Sergius, in a desire to bring fifteenth century Russia together around the name of God so its people would conquer "the devouring hatred of the world by the contemplation of the Holy Trinity".⁵ He chose a moment in the Old Testament narrative of Abraham's three heavenly visitors in Gen. 18 to portray the Trinity. Notice that "the three men" of the story become three women in the icon. And the table which Abraham set for them beneath the oak of Mamre becomes an altar on which the flesh of the freshly slaughtered calf is placed in a chalice. The picture is shaped by two geometric forms. On the one hand, the figures compose a circle with the chalice at the center and each of the three figures speaks by means of her right hand. For Nouwen the central figure is God the Father and His two fingers point to the chalice and to God the Son.

The message is clear. It is the message of the incarnation itself; and the Son, understanding its full significance, accepts that painful



task in the gesture of the hand. The Holy Spirit opposite extends a hand of blessing on the action thus signified and at the same time directs our attention to the peculiar opening beneath the chalice. It is here, according to Nouwen, that the viewer is drawn literally inside the icon itself in an upward direction—through the chalice, to God the Father, and then to a tree.

At that point the second structural pattern becomes clear. For together with the alignment of the three faces, we now have a cross which speaks of the profound mystery of God's self revelation. As Nouwen put it, "It is a mystery beyond history, yet made visible through it. It is a divine mystery, yet human too. It is a joyful, sorrowful, and glorious mystery transcending all human emotions, yet not leaving any human emotion untouched".⁶

Is this a proper way in which to read the Old Testament? Are we permitted to use a single episode in a narrative complex in the book of Genesis as a window through which to view the whole of the Scriptures, as Rublev has done? I think so, in spite of the obvious tension such a reading creates with the historical critical method itself.

Then, the question of whether it is possible to press the analogy a bit further arises. Is it possible to read the Bible itself, as a whole, in a manner somewhat like Nouwen has read Rublev's icon? If we

the mountain of God's revelation to Moses where he too gains a glimpse of the glory of YHWH. But after each theophanic visitation the narrator is careful to comment that God was not present in the wind, nor the earthquake, nor the fire. This time God communicates His glory through the awesome silence of His absence. Needless to say, the confluence of these two encounters with God on that same sacred mountain seem to point beyond themselves to another mountaintop experience where Moses and Elijah are joined by a prophet greater than either of them through whom the glory of God is revealed in what the Gospel writers call the transfiguration of Jesus.¹¹

These two groups of four books focus on Moses, over against the subsequent succession of leaders in ancient Israel which extends from Joshua to Jehoiachin, the last king of Judah who is released from prison in Babylon. These eight books are framed by the stories of the "Fathers" (Gen. 12-50) and the "Prophets". Joseph Blenkinsopp has noted the structural parallel between Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the "Book of the Twelve" so-called minor prophets, on the one hand, and Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve sons of Jacob/Israel, on the other.¹² The designation of Abraham in the book of Genesis as a prophet (Gen. 20:7) who is the recipient of God's covenant promise now takes on a deeper dimension. In the

It is an empty tomb that draws each one of us inside the icon of sacred Scripture to discover the meaning of its curious structures.

take the long hours necessary to contemplate the structural detail of the Bible taken as a whole, is it possible to see the hand of an artist at work in the formation and structure of the canon of sacred Scripture? And if so, is it possible that this contemplative insight may touch our emotions and ultimately transform us? Let's take a closer look and see.

It is possible to see two structural configurations in the canon of the Old Testament which curiously seem to intersect and point beyond themselves to the same redemptive/revelatory act of God which Nouwen has seen in Rublev's icon. The first of these structures is concentric in nature and embraces what we commonly call the Law and the Prophets. At the center we have two groups of four books in the Hebrew canon: / Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy // Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings /.

The first group appears on first glance to be the story of Moses, beginning with his birth (Exod. 1-2) and ending with his death (Deut. 34). A closer look at detail within Exodus and Deuteronomy will reveal further aspects of a concentric arrangement. There are two "Songs of Moses", Exod. 15 and Deut. 32, which in turn frame two great covenant ceremonies under Moses' leadership—one at Mount Sinai (Exod. 19) and the other on the Plains of Moab (Deut. 29-31). The first of these is concluded by the giving of the "ten commandments" (Exod. 20) followed by the "Covenant Code" (Exod. 21-23); whereas the second is preceded by a second giving of the "ten commandments" (Deut. 5) followed by the "Deuteronomomic Code" (Deut. 12-26).⁷ And the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy seem to frame the two parallel wilderness books of Leviticus and Numbers. Edward Newing has investigated the concentric design of this section of the Pentateuch in some detail and argues that the very center is to be found in Exod. 33 which he calls the "Promised Presence", where Moses gets a glimpse of the glory of YHWH.⁸

According to A. H. van Zyl, the so-called Deuteronomomic History in the parallel group of four books also has a concentric design.⁹ We move from the conquest of the land under charismatic leadership (Joshua) to the loss of the land under monarchic government (2 Kings). In between we have the possession of the land under charismatic leadership (Judges and 1 Samuel) set over against the possession of the land under monarchic government (2 Samuel and 1 Kings). If I am not mistaken, this section too has a center which consists of two parallel mountaintop experiences on the part of Elijah.¹⁰ In 1 Kings 18 Elijah calls down fire from heaven in the great contest with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. In the next chapter Elijah, fleeing from Jezebel, makes his way to Mt. Horeb,

words of the great classical prophets of ancient Israel, the old epic story receives a powerful new meaning. Here we meet another structure within the Old Testament canon which points beyond itself as well.

The primary epic story of the Old Testament may be outlined in linear form in terms of a journey out of bondage in Egypt, through the waters into the wilderness, on route to the promised land. And though these terms are rooted in past events, however elusive they may prove to be to the historian, in the hands of the great prophets of Israel each of these symbols is transformed and projected beyond history into an eschatological dimension. The creation stories of Gen. 1-11 anticipate a new *Opus Dei*,¹³ the city of God which will be described as a "New Jerusalem". The people of God see themselves as once more in exile and bondage, awaiting a new deliverance which will carry them through the waters and the wilderness of a New Exodus to a New Conquest which will become the Kingdom of God.¹⁴

Is it any wonder that Luke, in his description of the transfiguration of our Lord, describes the conversation between Moses, Elijah and Jesus as focusing on "His Exodus" which was to be accomplished at Jerusalem (Luke 9:28-31)? As Rublev saw, in his own way, it is an empty tomb that draws each one of us inside the icon of sacred Scripture to discover the meaning of its curious structures. Those structures converge in a cross and a great circle, where the end is also the beginning.

¹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, "Rublev's Icon of the Trinity: A Reflection on the Spiritual Life", *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, XIV/5 (June-August 1984), pp. 8-9.

² Sr. M. Helen Weier, O.S.C., *Festal Icons of the Lord* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1977), p. 45.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 9, col. 1.

⁴ *Loc. cit.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9, col. 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9, col. 2.

⁷ On the close connection between the Decalogue and chs. 12-26 of Deuteronomy see Stephen A. Kaufman, "The Structure of the Deuteronomomic Law", *MAARAV* 1 (1979), pp. 105-158, who argues that Deut. 12:1-25:16 is in fact a literary expansion of the Decalogue on the part of a single author.

⁸ Edward George Newing, "A Rhetorical & Theological Analysis of the Hexateuch", *The South East Asia Journal of Theology* 22 (1981), pp. 1-15.

⁹ A. H. van Zyl, "Chronological Deuteronomomic History", *5th World Congress of Jewish Studies*, vol. 1 (1969), pp. 12ff.

¹⁰ For a more detailed discussion of the concentric structure of the Deuteronomomic History which focuses on 1 Kings 18 & 19, see my article on "Huldah and the Men of Anathoth: Women in Leadership in the Deuteronomomic History", *SBL Seminar Papers 1984* (forthcoming).

¹¹ Cf. Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), pp. 227-36 and 422-28.

¹² Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Prophecy and Canon: A Contribution to the Study of Jewish Origins* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), pp. 120-21 and G. Ostborn, *Cult and Canon* (Uppsala, 1950), p. 44 which is cited by Blenkinsopp.

¹³ The term is borrowed from Samuel Terrien, *ibid.*, p. 380.

¹⁴ Cf. Isa. 11 where all of these images appear.