

Briggs, Richard S. *Theological Hermeneutics and the Book of Numbers as Christian Scripture*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018. 333 pp. \$55.00 cloth.

Numbers, the fourth of the five books of Moses, is frequently overlooked as a source of theological insight for Christian readers. Richard Briggs, lecturer in Old Testament at Cranmer Hall, St. John's College, Durham University, offers a unique expedition through several key chapters in his exploration of theological hermeneutics. Following the work of Brevard Childs, Briggs finds the canonical text of Numbers to be both informative and formative for Christian theology. While he considers his work a kind of commentary, his approach is unique (even idiosyncratic) in that he does not explicate the text verse-by-verse, but selects sections which become theological foils for his "ascriptive realism" (6), by which he says Christians can approach the text as something more than a mere historical narrative.

Jacques Derrida, Stanley Fish and Henry James are used to introduce chapter one, which seeks to determine the most beneficial way to understand the book of Numbers. Focusing on a short story by James, Briggs chooses the image of a Persian rug, which contain several interlocking figures. He then moves to modern interpretive methods, affirming Child's approach, but then asserts, "The best argument for looking at the book of Numbers as a unit is that it is a traditional one" (23), that is "people took the text of Numbers seriously as sacred scripture" (24). Reviewing several recent commentaries on Numbers, he concludes, "We will need to consider how the reader is shaped by theological commitments" (32).

"Approaches to a Holy Text That Invites Little Approach," is the subtitle of chapter two, "Trust and Suspicion." Here Briggs continues his prolegomena with reference to the modern use of suspicion in literary study. He argues that Jewish readers often used rabbinic sources to ease their suspicion of texts and that, indeed, the book of Numbers is worthy of some suspicion. The contrast, he says, is trust. He states, "If the text is inherently trustworthy, then the interpreter has the task of seeking a way of reading it that allows its voice to emerge in and through its surface features, and to say what it would want its readers to hear" (41). Using the account in Numbers 5 regarding a woman suspected of adultery and then the accounts in Numbers 14, the spies' report, and Numbers 20, Moses striking the rock to bring forth water, Briggs suggests that each should draw the reader into self-examination regarding suspicion and trust and be moved toward faith.

In the next three chapters, Briggs begins what seems to be a more commentary-style exploration of the text of Numbers, highlighting specific verses and commenting on them in context. Chapter three deals with Numbers 10–12 in which Briggs draws out a distinction between reality and history, using ideas reminiscent of Marcus Borg. He distinguishes between descriptive and ascriptive narratives, arguing that the biblical texts are more

ascriptive, yet affirms “that much of what is related in the book of Numbers probably does correspond to some degree or other with events that did happen in the wilderness” (59). In chapter four, Briggs begins with what he calls his “theological reading of the text,” showing by contrast how Karl Barth’s understanding of sloth in Numbers 13–14 imposes Barth’s own dogmatic goals onto the text rather than reading the text as Scripture. In chapter five, Briggs first shows how the legislative material of Numbers 15 has been understood by other commentators, concluding that his theological interpretation only needs to look at “the overarching narrative” (129). He then plunges into the difficult story of Korah’s rebellion in Numbers 16, making his point that a purely descriptive approach is difficult for modern ears to accept and noting how the New Testament book of Hebrews views these narratives.

The only chapter which actually emphasizes a Christian (that is, Christocentric) reading of Numbers is chapter six, “The Rock Was Christ.” Briefly surveying the text of Numbers 20:1–13, Briggs moves quickly to his theological approach, which “seeks to relate the claims of the text in some manner to the claims of (or for or about) Christ” (168). Thus, he cites “1 Corinthians 10 as an exemplar of a critical theological hermeneutic in practice” (169). A Christian reading of a text will “find Christ,” to use Luther’s noteworthy phrase. As Briggs notes, “Paul reads Numbers literally. As long as it is understood that ‘literal sense’ is not here in this traditional way. In this ascriptive sense the rock is ‘literally’ Christ...” (183).

Returning to the commentary-style approach, Briggs’ second-to-last chapter looks at Numbers 25, the account of a plague among the Israelites because of sexual encounters with Moabite women. The priest, Phineas, reacts with zealous aggression, killing the couple in their tent and stopping the plague. After looking at the textual material, Briggs reviews recent studies which vary among laments over violence, commending such zealousness, and disgust with the sexualization as expressed by feminist readers, pointing out that “the interpretive framing and questions are always from a specific vantage point or perspective” (210). He concludes, “Readers are forced to engage with the politics of hermeneutics” (220).

Although he claims to draw his thesis together in the last chapter, Briggs engages in another foray of sorts, drawing upon Numbers 6, 22–24, and 33, as exemplars of his “theological and hermeneutical engagement with (Christian) scripture” (224). Regarding the Aaronic blessing of Numbers 6, he finds Luther’s appropriate use of it in the eucharistic liturgy as invoking God’s presence upon the people and then asks “why the practice of enjoining such blessings upon Christian worshipers would be frowned upon by Christians” (229). In the Balak-Balaam account in Numbers 22–24, Briggs again provides a variety of interpretations, finally affirming that “the word of God is neither defeated nor distorted, and cannot be co-opted to human ends” (240). Following Origen and Henri de Lubac, Briggs sees a helpful way to

apply the text to contemporary situations—as homiletical material for our Christian journey.

My own assessment of this work is somewhat undecided and imprecise, particularly because there are so many avenues by which to critique the work. Brigg’s writing style is winsome and easy to follow. His thesis is quite clear, yet the diversity of his chapters (each could be self-contained) and the variety of sub-methods he employs is disconcerting. He uses some historical-critical tools, yet dismisses them as being pointless on other occasions. He admires modern scholarship, yet advocates returning to pre-modern approaches. Although somewhat frustrating, I found the work to be enlightening, engaging, and informative overall. Certainly, it is worth reading in light of the lack of significant commentaries on the book of Numbers. The work provides a fresh look at important biblical passages and wrestles with ways to apply God’s Word to contemporary situations.

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Rae, Scott B. *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics*. 4th ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018. 522 pp. \$39.99 hardcover.

Some people would assert that loss of respect for the law and the failure to teach time-tested religious ethical standards in schools could be some of the reasons explaining the rise of immorality and the loss of civility in contemporary western culture. Therefore, it is vital that educational institutions of all levels offer classes in ethics, but teaching ethics from a biblical perspective is often met with skepticism by students, parents, or faculty, even in Christian institutions of higher education. Scott Rae, professor of Christian ethics and dean of faculty at the Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, has written *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics* to address this predicament.

This textbook is organized topically into sixteen chapters. The first four chapters cover the basics: why morality matters, ethical theories, the basics of Christian ethics, and ethical decision making. The next four chapters delve into issues involving life at the margins such as abortion, contraception, stem cell research, genetics, cloning, physician-assisted suicide, euthanasia, and withdrawing treatments at the end of life. The last eight chapters cover various ethical issues in no particular order: capital punishment, war, sexual ethics, environmentalism, the ethics of work, violence and gun control, race, gender, and diversity, and immigration issues. The back of the book has twenty-four pages of footnotes, a Scripture index, and a general index.

A companion DVD has sixteen 30-minute discussions matching topics in each chapter of the book. These short videos are suitable for showing in class. Key