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Ziegler Symposium Review Essay

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Militant Grace, the most recent book-length work by the Aberdeen theologian, Philip Ziegler, assumes an unusual genre. This might not be apparent at first glance. The subtitle on the book's front cover indicates that it addresses "the future of Christian theology," and the brief biographical blurb on its back cover identifies its author as a chair in dogmatics. This is all as one would expect: Protestant theologians—dogmaticians—publish works on Christian theology. The acknowledgements page of the book shows that each of its chapters represents a revision of a previously published article or chapter (ix-x). This, too, is hardly out of the ordinary, though it does lend to *Militant Grace* somewhat the character of an edited volume. Where the peculiarity of the book's genre first appears is in its introduction. There Ziegler discloses the theological encounter that inspired the project: a working group of scholars at SBL/AAR, which sought together to explore the ongoing significance of J. Louis Martyn's work for contemporary theology (xiii).

Martyn was, of course, a New Testament scholar: an exegete, in old-fashioned guild parlance, though not simply or solely that (on which, more momentarily). The fact that a professor of dogmatics like Ziegler would participate in scholarly discussion about the theological legacy of a New Testament scholar and exegete is, perhaps, less than entirely common—but it is not unheard-of, especially in this era of increasing traffic between the long-sundered theological disciplines. Most dogmaticians of the modern period, even during decades when the iron curtain separating biblical studies and constructive theology stood most impassable, engaged with New Testament research. The interest of a theologian such as Ziegler in the oeuvre of one, individual exegete maybe stands out a little. But we are not yet justified in describing the genre of *Militant Grace* as unusual.

This quality emerges more clearly in consideration of Martyn's particular career. He was, famously, a Paul scholar. He wrote about other parts of the New Testament—notably, the Fourth Gospel—but his major works, the ones that established his profile, interpret Paul's writings. And—it deserves saying—not Paul's writings at large and as a whole collection, running from Romans through the Pastoral Epistles (1-2 Timothy; Titus) or on to Hebrews. In keeping with the (sound) judgment of modern critical scholarship, the materials that gather at the tail end of the Pauline corpus, Martyn left aside. They did not concern him, since they are pseudonymous products of Paul's disciples and aftercomers. But Martyn's selectivity ran deeper. His published writings do not distribute attention equally over the seven authentic Pauline letters. Rather, Galatians looms large; Martyn's commentary on it for the Anchor Bible series is his most well-known and galvanic contribution. The Corinthian Correspondence and the letter to the Romans

were also relatively significant for him, 1 Thessalonians and Philippians, less so. Even in the case of Romans or Corinthians, though, Galatians presents the interpretive key.[1]

Martyn was no run-of-the-mill Paul scholar. Far from being an antiquarian or obscurantist, his work on the aforementioned letters presses towards their continuing viability as a theological resource for Christian life and practice. Martyn exposed Paul as a truly *apocalyptic* thinker, who everywhere assumes a fundamental dualism: on one hand, "the present evil age" (Gal 1:4), utterly enslaved to "elemental spirits" (Gal 4:3) and at war with the creator God—and on the other, God's own realm, "the [future] kingdom of God" (Gal 5:21). As the messenger of "the Good News of God" (Rom 1:1), Paul announced the irruption of God's future into the present, and the accomplishment of God's liberation of the cosmos through sovereign divine self-unveiling (apocalypsing!) in Jesus Christ. Martyn also advocated that Christians here and now must recover Paul's dualism and take up his message of God's effectual, past emancipation of the whole world from the domination of demonic powers. He was, then, a *theological* interpreter of Paul, and especially of Paul's letters to the Galatians, Romans, and Corinthians, and most pressingly, of these writings in all their stark, apocalyptic shape.

This means for *Militant Grace* that it consists of the reflections of a dogmatician on Paul's apocalyptic gospel, as that gospel appears in three or four of Paul's letters (107 n. 45), and as it has been recently re-appropriated by theological interpreters—signally, Martyn. Martyn was, of course, only one of a number of New Testament scholars who laid hold of Paul's message in its apocalyptic dimensions and its contemporary urgency: Ernst Käsemann preceded and taught Martyn, and several others followed him, whom Ziegler enumerates (xiv), and with whom he interacts throughout the volume. As a dogmatician, however, Ziegler does not, by and large, pursue exegesis himself. There are exegetical moments in *Militant Grace*: a brief treatment of Rom 8:31-39 (42-50), an "exegetical entrée" into 1 Cor 12:1-3 (72), and a wonderful chapter on the second petition of the Lord's Prayer ("thy kingdom come"; 81-96). But for the most part, *Militant Grace* is not a work of exegesis or of biblical theology. Rather, Ziegler offers "readings" (xvi) of other, modern, Protestant theologians so as to highlight and silhouette the operation of Pauline, apocalyptic motifs in their thought. The goal of this exercise is to draw out and demonstrate the persisting power of apocalyptic discourse for articulating the Good News of Christian faith.

Herein lies the book's unusual genre: it renders up one theologian's sampling, mostly of other theologian's works, but only insofar as they mobilize and interpret themes drawn from one tract of biblical text—or as they complement one interpretive "school" focused on that tract of biblical text. Consider what this would look like if a different selection from the Bible governed the project. What if there were a Protestant dogmatician who took special inspiration from, say, the Priestly materials of the Pentateuch? Or also—or rather—from a certain group of contemporary theological exegetes who dedicate attention to the Priestly stratum? (After all, Benjamin Sommer, a professor at Jewish Theological Seminary, writes that "the P document is in fact the most Christian section of Hebrew scripture."[2]) And then what if said dogmatician took

[1] As Brevard Childs observed (*Church's Guide for Reading Paul: the Canonical Shaping of the Pauline Corpus* [Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 2008], 104).

[2] Benjamin Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 136-7.

some of the characteristic motifs of that biblical text in hand—let us say, God's holy transcendence, a primordial "rupture" between God and humankind, and God's hazardous initiative to dwell bodily within creation[3]—and made a series of "readings" of other modern theologians in order to show the salutariness and fitness of just these elements for specifying the Good News of Christian faith?

Would this not be an unusual endeavor? Perhaps the peculiarity of this scenario is more obvious to many readers than that of *Militant Grace*. But if so, why? There is, naturally, the problem that the Priestly materials of the Pentateuch do not exist as such. Or rather, they do—but as a (good) insight of biblical criticism and not as a category indigenous to the Bible's self-presentation. But this observation applies as much to the seven authentic letters of Paul as it does to the Priestly layer. The Priestly part of the Pentateuch is just that: a constituent part of the canonical Pentateuch—just as the "historical Paul" is folded into the more expansive "canonical Paul." So: hermeneutical dependence on historical reconstruction cannot explain why a volume on the "Priestly turn and the future of Christian theology" would strike us as odd.

Perhaps it is the trouble that the Priestly literature—which includes the tabernacle instructions in Exodus, Leviticus with its detailed regulations, and some of Numbers, as well as narrative pieces in Genesis—has few contemporary proponents. It is unpopular in the theological academy, deeply out of sync with the "mood" of modern Christian theology. But again: much the same obtains in the case of Paul's apocalyptic gospel. Ziegler recognizes this full well; *Militant Grace* in many places bears the aspect of an *apologia*, a defense and "vindication" (xvii) of an unloved theological outlook. The first chapter of *Militant Grace* explains, for example, the great distance yawning between historicist trends in recent theology and the insistence of Pauline apocalyptic on *eschatology*, i.e., the radically new, discontinuous, gracious inbreaking of God. Or again, the second chapter quotes William Sandlay's opinion from 1911: that biblical apocalyptic constitutes "'an excrescence…rank and wild' and something properly 'left behind in the gothic nursery of the human imagination'" (18). These and other criticisms of apocalyptic function in *Militant Grace* as foils for Ziegler's positive arguments in favor of the necessity and validity of this "biblical idiom" for proclaiming the "full scope, depth, and radicality of the gospel of God" (26). But in any case, the fact that apocalyptic discourse and Priestly materials both share a relatively low status in the theological disciplines means that this cannot be the source of our sense that a volume tracing out Priestly motifs in contemporary theology would be a peculiar undertaking.

I suspect the more basic cause is this: Priestly theology belongs to the Old Testament. In consequence, many or most Christians approach this part of the Bible with an expectation that it is inherently less capable of contributing towards Gospel proclamation than Paul's letters. Especially for Augustinian and Reformed Christians, who look back on several historic moments when re-reading Paul catalyzed fresh discovery of the Good News about God's grace, it makes intuitive sense that Paul's letters offer more immediate access to the Gospel, than, e.g., the tabernacle texts of Exodus. But even besides this history of reception, Paul's reference to Christ by name and his declaration of Christ as the decisive *past* event of divine incursion would seem to justify giving a relatively lower theological priority to the Priestly materials. Of necessity,

[3] Sommer lists out these characteristics (ibid.).

since the latter originate in centuries well before Christ, they do not name him, and they cannot then declare his death and resurrection as the climactic advent of God's saving righteousness. For these reasons, even if we grant that the Bible contains a variety of "soteriological idioms," it seems natural enough to prioritize the New Testament's, and Paul's letters within it. This appears to be the force of Ziegler's opening claim that "[t]he apocalyptic eschatology, language, and imagery of the New Testament is integral to its witness to the accomplishment of God's salvation in Jesus Christ, representing *a primary idiom* by which faith sought to attest the gospel and conceive its consequences (xiii; my italics).

But now things become very interesting, because, as Ziegler is aware, some of the modern, Protestant theologians who align with his project argue that a quite different biblical idiom, or range of biblical idioms, deserves theological primacy. To take a more famous example first, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, during his incarceration in Tegel prison, read the Old Testament ravenously—"much more than the New."[4] In his first seven months in custody alone, he "read through [the Old Testament] two and a half times and learnt a great deal" (letter to Bethge on 18 November, 1943). This experience impacted him deeply. "My thoughts and feelings seem to be getting more and more like those of the Old Testament," he observed (5 December again).

Without wading into debates about the continuity (or not) of Bonhoeffer's prison writings with his earlier phases, suffice it here to say that his notorious suggestions about "nonreligious interpretation" of Christian faith directly intersect with his increased interest in the Old Testament. The two phenomena mutually inform one another. Martin Kuske in his little book on Bonhoeffer and the Old Testament goes yet further, baldly stating, "[w]hat 'nonreligious' and 'worldly' mean [in the letters] is determined by the Old Testament."[5] A case in point is Bonhoeffer's letter from 5 May: "I'm thinking about how we can reinterpret in a 'worldly' sense—in the sense of the Old Testament and of John 1:14 [i.e., the Word became flesh]—the concepts of repentance, faith, justification, rebirth, and sanctification."

The "soteriological idioms" of the Old Testament, it would seem, exercise a foundational, even a *primary* hermeneutical role on this line of thinking. Several further comments from Bonhoeffer's letters could be adduced in proof of this priority. The letter from 5 December, 1943 is instructive: "In my opinion it is not Christian to want to take our thoughts and feelings too quickly and directly from the New Testament." And the letter from 28 July, 1944 exemplifies the exact inverse: a short meditation on the Old Testament theme of "blessing," which is "not superseded in the New," but actually guides and conditions Bonhoeffer's interpretation of New Testament passages, including their witness to the cross of Christ.

A second, less-famous example will round out the point. Kornelis Heiko (K.H.) Miskotte was a Dutch pastor, theologian, and anti-Nazi activist (1894–1976). Like Bonhoeffer, he was a dedicated disciple and a personal friend to Karl Barth, and his theology shares many of Barth's emphases, especially in its prevailing theme of divine freedom and transcendence, its christological concentration, and its exegetical care. But Miskotte's theology also shows a close kinship—I would say, a closer kinship—with that of his younger contemporary Bonhoeffer, and in particular, Bonhoeffer's prison writings. Miskotte's 1956 opus titled *When the Gods are Silent*

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[4] Letter to Bethge on 5 December, 1943.

[5] Martin Kuske, *The Old Testament as the Book of Christ: an Appraisal of Bonhoeffer's Interpretation*, trans. S. T. Kimbrough, Jr. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 138

constitutes in many respects a more fully-wrought version of the theological vision that Bonhoeffer was only able to sketch out before his execution. As with Bonhoeffer's letters, Miskotte reflects on a world come of age, a situation in which the hypothesis of God and the practice of religion have receded into obsolescence. And also like Bonhoeffer, Miskotte sets forth a nonreligious interpretation of Christianity—for which proposal, the Old Testament provides crucial content and inspiration. According to Miskotte, "the Old Testament commits happy carnage upon traditional religion."[6] Or again: "YHWH"—the unique, four-lettered Name of God in the Old Testament—"constitutes a radical crisis for all religion, or, to put it another way, [YHWH's] self-disclosure includes the abolition of religion."[7] Positively: "impelled by the Old Testament, our journey goes in the direction of the profaneness of existence on earth."[8]

The primacy of the Old Testament "idiom" is, for Miskotte, explicit; or rather, its "idioms," plural, since he stresses the variety of discourses within this literature. Miskotte dedicates substantial space to the unity of the two testaments of the Christian Bible in their reference to the one God. At the same time, he criticizes the schemata by which Christians organize the contents of the testaments—type and antitype, law and gospel, promise and fulfilment—because they demote the Old Testament in favor of the New. Instead, Miskotte emphasizes what he calls the "surplus" of the Old Testament: the theological elements that the Old Testament contains and which the New Testament does not, elements such as its anthropomorphic god, or its experiences of suffering and pathos, or its explorations of politics and eroticism. "Compared with the New Testament," then, the Old, he writes, "possesses a formal *priority*."[9]

What I hope these comments about the Old Testament and two of its modern Protestant advocates achieve is this: to *denaturalize* Ziegler's claim about biblical apocalyptic as "a primary idiom" for the purpose of Gospel proclamation. It is, after all, unusual to isolate one part of the Bible and then to demonstrate its influence and viability within contemporary theology. Of course it is possible that Ziegler's procedure is tactical only: that he intends to "play up" Pauline apocalyptic solely in view of its relative unpopularity among theologians; or because it displays "notable explanatory power" (28) in our time of staggering oppressions, political disintegration, and ecological catastrophe. If this is the nature of the theological "primacy" that *Militant Grace* proposes, then I accept it: Ziegler has succeeded in showcasing the evangelical power of Paul's apocalyptic Gospel. His readings of other theologians are sharply-observed and his expositions often moved me. If, on the other hand, this theological "primacy" reflects a more material theological decision—that Paul's letters (or a few them anyway) broker the Gospel of God in a truer or more authentic way than other New Testament documents, or even than the Old Testament—then I have serious reservations.

It is clear to me that some of the scholars whom Ziegler engages do espouse this latter belief. Käsemann is one of the most important interlocutors of *Militant Grace*, and his thesis about "early catholicism" is well-known: Paul anticipated the imminent Parousia of Christ, but it

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[6] K.H. Miskotte, *When the Gods are Silent*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 65; hereafter, *WGS*.

[7] *WGS*, 120.

[8] *WGS*, 84.

[9] *WGS*, 175; italics are mine.

did not come, and Paul's successors therefore made critical adjustments to their theology to accommodate this disappointing fact. Their apocalyptic expectancy "slackened." Paul thought at first that Christ would return before he himself would die (1 Thess 4:15). Later letters find him more resigned to his personal mortality—e.g., Phil 1—but nonetheless still certain that "the Lord is near" (Phil 4:5b). This urgent sense of proximity is, however, nowhere in evidence in, for example, Colossians or Ephesians. The resurrection of believers that for Paul is future—"we *will* certainly be united with [Christ] in a resurrection like his" (Rom 6:5)—is relocated by these letters to the past (Col 2:13; Eph 2:5); in effect, they double down on what believers already spiritually possess rather than holding out for the full arrival of the promise in the imminent future. As such, the church takes on a more robust role for them, and they show a significant concessiveness to the societal status quo. Paul himself relates tensively and ambiguously to the institutions of the present order—"let even those who have wives be as though they had none…for the present form of the world is passing away" (1 Cor 7:29, 31b)—whereas the infamous household codes appear first in Colossians and Ephesians.

As a historical claim, all this is, to me, virtually incontestable; Käsemann is right, and the "delay of Parousia" helps to explain the theological profile of much of the post-Pauline New Testament. But Käsemann does far more than line out a historical theory: he makes a theological criticism according to content (*Sachkritik*). He adjudges the other New Testament writings as a theological devolution, even a betrayal, of the Gospel. In the strongest possible sense, Paul's letters are for him "a primary idiom" for articulating the Good News of Christian faith—as over against the idioms of the Deutero-Paulines, or the Pastorals, or the Gospels (let alone the Old Testament).

I am not sure whether Ziegler follows Käsemann in this judgment. Some of his remarks lead me to think so. Although I cannot find that he quotes Käsemann's short definition of apocalyptic ("imminent expectation of Parousia"), the sixth and final thesis in Ziegler's chapter on apocalyptic in contemporary theology recommends that "a Christian theology funded by a fresh hearing of New Testament apocalyptic will adopt a posture of prayerful expectation of *an imminent future* in which God will act decisively and publicly to vindicate the victory of Life and Love over Sin and Death" (30; my italics). If the *imminence* and *futurity* of this statement are taken at face value, it would automatically reflect rather poorly on the other New Testament texts that have adapted more fully to Christ's ongoing absence. Such New Testament texts would, of course, include the Gospels, which are, among other things, a literary compensation for the absence of Christ's person from those who love him—much as the Exodus tabernacle texts may well compensate for the absence of a physical temple in ancient Israel.

In sum: I do not wish to defend a "flat" Bible whose constituent parts are all of equal theological weight. Not every testimony has the same intensity of reference to God or his Christ; ask any Christian what book of the Bible they would take with them to a deserted island and no one will answer Haggai or Jude. But I do intend to hold open the *canonicity* of the whole Christian Bible. This corpus, or rather these two corpora, "chart the area in which God's word is heard" and "establish the context for [the] proper hearing [of that word] in prayer and

worship."[10] They also function as an ensemble: each testament offers up its distinctive range of "idioms," and within each testament, sub-collections such as "the Pentateuch" or "the Pauline letters" yield up their theological contribution as literary units with their own integrity.

Within such a vision, "canonical Paul" must take hermeneutical precedence over "authentic Paul." Romans stands at the head of the Pauline collection—not Galatians—and as such, it provides an introduction and a template for reading what follows it in the canonical sequence. On the other side, the Deutero-Paulines and the Pastorals close out the Pauline collection. If the latter documents mediate a de-apocalypticized form of Pauline tradition—and, as noted, they do—then exactly these theological claims must now inform the churches' reception of the apostle's theological legacy. I say "inform" advisedly: the heart of "canonical Paul" is still apocalyptic.[11] But if in the wake of Paul's preaching there was some danger of full-blown dualism breaking out—and the rise of Marcionism suggests this was the case—the Deutero-Paulines and Pastorals head off this theological possibility (e.g.: "everything created by God is good," 1 Tim 4:4). The "betrayal" of Paul's Gospel carried out by his epigones, as Käsemann saw it, represents in the New Testament canon a critical extension and annotation of Paul's proclamation.[12]

I am keenly aware of the critique that Käsemann leveled against theologians who accommodate any de-apocalypticized components into their canon; who reconcile themselves in any degree to the delay of Parousia. Ry Owen Siggelkow has recently and forcefully articulated this same criticism.

> [T]he gospel [when it is] translated and mediated in a non-apocalyptic key betrays, from Käsemann's viewpoint, a fundamentally white bourgeois perspective. Indeed, just this critique of white bourgeois stability consistently motivates Käsemann own constructive apocalyptic theology of liberation.[13]

And yet by the same token, I am as a seminary professor responsible to teach both testaments of the Christian Bible to soon-to-be pastors so that they can preach every week—from a lectionary that draws readings from across the canon. I would also be lying if I said I had not personally heard the Gospel from all kinds of places within the Bible, including portions of it that are not apocalyptic. Is this task or this experience merely evidence of bourgeoisie and whiteness, whether my own or the institution's that employs me? I am open to the possibility that these realities do explain an awful lot; the "elemental spirits" of this present evil age remain powerful, even in defeat, and one can, apparently, "turn back to them" after coming to know God (Gal 4:9). But have they hijacked most of the New Testament, as well as the Old? Is this entailed by Ziegler's evocation of biblical apocalyptic as "a primary idiom" of Gospel proclamation?

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[10] Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Mineapolis: Fortress, 1993), 721.

[11] See Childs, *Church's Guide for Reading Paul*, 194-218; also258-59.

[12] Childs, *Church's Guide for Reading Paul*, 65-78; cf. also J. Christaan Beker, *Heirs of Paul: Paul's Legacy in the New Testament and in the Church Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

[13] Ry Owen Siggelkow, "Ernst Käsemann and the Specter of Apocalyptic," *ThTo* 75 (2018): 37-50, here 44.