

## ***Critical Biblical Theology in a New Key A Review Article\****

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*Der Gott der Lebendigen/God of the Living, co-authored by Hermann Spieckermann and Reinhard Feldmeier, succeeds in its attempt to demonstrate the value of writing a theology in which God's attributes as described in biblical literature are the point of departure. The volume pays attention to commonalities and differences across the components of the canon. The authors conclude that the New Testament does not correct or relativize the witness to God of the Old Testament but "thickens" and particularizes it. The God who constantly gives life anew in the OT finds a congenial interpretation in the word and deed and cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The review essay nonetheless points out that this biblical theology fails to come to grips with biblical descriptions of God's interaction with other beings of immense power, and fails to present a systematic exposition of the remedies God pursues to put an end to spirals of human violence. Three topics are singled out for extended discussion: vicarious suffering, forensic justification, and atonement. The shortcomings of the English edition of Der Gott der Lebendigen are judged significant enough to warrant a reissue in a corrected and more user-friendly version.*

KEYWORDS: *biblical theology, God's attributes (middot), transcendent evil, wrath, mercy, vicarious suffering, forensic justification, atonement*

*Der Gott der Lebendigen: Eine biblische Gotteslehre* by Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann. *Topoi Biblischer Theologie* 1, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011. 689 pp., EUR 49,00, softcover.

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[\*God of the Living: A Biblical Theology\*](#) by Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann. Translated by Mark E. Biddle, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011. 620 pp., US \$59.95, hardcover.

*Der Gott der Lebendigen/God of the Living*, hereafter *GL*, seeks to demonstrate the value of writing a theology in which God's attributes as described in biblical literature are the point of departure. Its authors, Hermann Spieckermann, a professor of Old Testament at the Georg-August-Universität in Göttingen, and Reinhard Feldmeier, a professor of New Testament in the same location, succeed in that intent. Their description of the biblical God is attentive to theological commonalities and differences across the components of the canon. The point of departure of discussions of theological loci is most often an Old Testament text. Less often, a New Testament text, a classical text, or a contemporary question serves as a conversation starter. Almost without fail, the point of destination of discussions is a New Testament text. All roads lead to the New Testament in this theology. The NT is treated as the theological assembly point *par excellence* of previous theological reflection in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek literate Judaism. At the same time, the Old and New Testaments *together* are treated as a decisive critical standard against which current attempts to speak of God may be evaluated.

The New and Old Testaments, and the fields of academic study they have engendered, are understood to stand in need of each other if the goal is to do justice to the truth claims of the two-part Bible. For Spieckermann and Feldmeier, *GL* has the further objective of transforming disenchanted hearts into hearts burning with knowledge of the one who appeared to his disciples on the walk to Emmaus (pp. 11–12; ET p. 11). The God who encounters men and women in the Bible is understood by the volume's authors to encounter men and women still.

The authors' approach is therefore far from being close-minded. They remain open to the possibility that biblical literature discloses truth. Moreover, they demonstrate repeatedly that the theology that finds expression in the Bible is not confined to it. For example, in their discussion of the affirmation of God as the Almighty, they point out that "it is not the mighty who speak of the Almighty. Victims, sufferers, who hold fast to the power of their God in their own powerlessness and who, thus, open themselves *de profundis* to a new confidence in God, cry out to the Almighty" (p. 177; ET p. 175; here and elsewhere, I tweak the ET for the sake of greater faithfulness to the *Vorlage*). The thesis is aptly illustrated from the *Letter of Aristeas*, *Judith*, *Second Maccabees*, and *Third Maccabees* (pp. 175–78; ET pp. 173–75). These texts are rightly seen as authentic witnesses to an understanding of divine power with

deep roots in the Tanakh/Old Testament. The authors' conclusion, on a history-of-ideas analysis of *Pantokrator* in Greek-literate ancient Judaism, is trenchant and runs against current fashion: "Omnipotence receives emphasis as the condition for the possibility of God's delivering activity. Criticism of the language of divine omnipotence as a deification of the power idea at the cost of human freedom and divine goodness inverts the point of biblical language about the Almighty into its opposite" (p. 178; ET p. 175). The same understanding of divine power as the power to save is shown to be characteristic of New Testament literature (pp. 180–99; ET pp. 178–96).

A variety of texts are treated in *GL*. The primary canon of reference in the case of the Old Testament is nonetheless the Tanakh of Jewish tradition. At the same time, considerable attention is paid to the Septuagint insofar as it represents the text form New Testament authors know and cite as Scripture (pp. 9–10; ET p. 9). The canon of reference in the case of the NT is the entire NT corpus, with ample attention given not only to all four Gospels and Paul but to Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 1 John, and the Apocalypse of John. The discussions of aspects of the theology of e.g., *Tobit*, *Wisdom of Solomon*, *Serekh ha-Yahad*, *Psalms of Solomon*, *Joseph and Aseneth*, *Diognetus*, and *Clement of Alexandria* are germane to the discussion of *theologoumena* found in the OT more narrowly defined, and/or the NT.

*GL* traces the senses in which God in biblical literature is understood to be beyond our control (*extra nos*), yet always, even and especially under the form of its opposite (*sub contraria specie*), dedicated to our welfare (*pro nobis*), to the point of dwelling with us and within us (*intra nos*) and becoming one of us (*incarnatio*) (p. 247; ET pp. 244–45). The schema is flexible and allows the authors to offer a description of the God of the Old and New Testaments which does not drive unnecessary wedges between the divergent presentations found therein. The resultant biblical theology is not designed to prop up or shoot down a theology of later coinage; nor does it depend on the selection of one of the canons of the churches of the East and West over against another (p. 11, n.18; ET p. 10, n.18). At the same time, the discussion is framed in such a way that the continuity of biblical understandings of God's attributes with those of Reformation and Catholic theology is evident.

A strength of *GL* is the careful way in which it discusses New Testament theology against the backdrop of Greco-Roman philosophical religion, and, to a lesser extent, texts which open a window onto the rich and variegated world of Greek-literate Judaism of the Hellenistic and Roman periods. For example, sources as various as the *Letter of Aristeas*, *Jubilees*, *Josephus*, *Ps-Aristotle*, *Ovid*, *Macrobius*, and *Plutarch* are cited

in the treatment of Jewish monotheism and the trend toward monotheism in Greco-Roman philosophical religion (pp. 107–10; ET pp. 106–10).

*Critical* biblical theology is written with a sense of the reembedding of the Bible's parts in metanarratives both like and unlike the metanarratives which engendered the parts in the first place. The embedment of biblical literature in more or less compatible metanarratives continues to this day. *GL* reads the biblical witness to God from within a specific set of cultural loyalties yet often succeeds in noting the extent to which distinct witnesses to that God within the biblical corpus cannot be completely harmonized with the tradition of reference of the authors, or with each other. *GL*'s lack of a need to harmonize, along with a willingness not to erect false antitheses, is a refreshing combination.

*GL* is sensitive to the rootedness of diverse theological traditions in biblical literature, even if its own indebtedness to an understanding and experience of God rooted in a form of Christianity determined by the Reformation is everywhere evident. *GL* is a demonstration of the fact that the metanarrative of one's own tradition, insofar as it depends on a particular canon of reference received in text-forms of a particular type, need not lead to the anathematization of variant canons of reference, variant text types, and variant emphases.

Along the same lines, *GL* might have fleshed out the extent to which the doctrine of God (*Gotteslehre*) of New Testament Christianity dovetails with that of emergent normative Judaism of the same and later periods and of Judaism to the present. The literature preserved by the Sages, the *targumim*, *midrashim*, *piyyutim*, *talmudim*, and *hekhalot* literature, represent a theological assembly point in its own right, with wide-ranging commonalities and some crucial differences with the doctrine of God of Christianity. In that case the voices of Maimonides, Nachmanides, Buber, Rosenzweig, Heschel, Levinas, and Soloveitchik might have come to expression in the exposition, alongside the voices of Aquinas, Bonaventure, Luther, Calvin, Barth, Bonhoeffer, C. S. Lewis, and Pope Benedict. The volume would have benefitted from the concourse of a Jewish scholar with sufficient expertise in the Tanakh, Second Temple Judaism, the New Testament, the literature of the Sages, and Jewish thought to the present.<sup>1</sup> My point, stated in more general terms, is that the method employed in *GL* lends itself to extensions in more than one direction.

*GL*'s fundamental thesis is clear: the creator God who gives life anew by making the dead alive, to which the Old Testament bears

1. A model in that sense: Kevin Madigan and Jon Levenson, *Resurrection: The Power of God for Christians and Jews* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

witness, found a congenial interpretation in the word and deed and cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The New Testament witness to said God does not correct or relativize the Old Testament witness. The New Testament “thickens” or particularizes the description of God found in the Old (p. 537; ET p. 541).

If the understandings of God contained in the Old and New Testaments hang together as well as Spieckermann and Feldmeier claim they do, *GL* effectively calls into question a great deal of fashionable theology and anti-theology, lowbrow and middlebrow dispensationalism; highbrow liberal theology à la Adolf von Harnack (the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of men); and anti-theology à la Richard Dawkins for whom especially the God of the Old Testament is a moral monster. In my judgment, *GL* makes a persuasive case for theological continuity across the component parts of the Christian Bible; beyond that, across a larger corpus of literature treasured by Jews and/or Christians in Hellenistic, Roman, Parthian, Sasanian, and Arab antiquity. Still, I will argue below that the images of God in the Bible have less and *more* in common with images of God that dominate modern and post-modern thought than *GL* makes out.

The chief strength of *GL* is its chief weakness. Its authors are convinced that the God encountered in biblical literature wills a relationship with humanity to this day, on account of which the risk is run that this God is made more palatable to a set of modern tastes than, truthfully considered, this God actually is.

*Der Gott der Lebendigen* has four parts: (1) an overview of the endeavor (*Das Unterfangen*); (2) a “Part A” that seeks to identify God’s essential attributes as described in the Bible (*Grundlegung*); (3) a “Part B” that describes the unfolding of said attributes in God’s dealings with human beings and the world (*Entfaltung*); (4) a concluding essay that draws out the sense in which the God of the Bible can be characterized as the God of the living (*Beschluss: Der Gott der Lebendigen*).

Part A is divided six ways. Each chapter lays bare a foundational aspect of God’s being which works itself out in God’s constantly renewed will to relate to human beings and the world. Some 200 pages long, the discussion is rich and wide-ranging. The chapter headings: “The Name and Names”; “From God the Lord to God the Father”; “The One as the Creator of Oneness”; “The Loving One”; “The Almighty”; “Spirit and Presence.”

Part B of *Der Gott der Lebendigen* is divided three ways. The tripartite division, sadly, disappears in *God of the Living*. The titles interlock: *Gottes Zuwendung*; *Gottes Zumutung*; and *Gottes Zuspruch*. The translation equivalents in *God of the Living* retain the syntax and alliteration of the German but are not otherwise compelling: “God’s

Attention”; “God’s Audacity”; and “God’s Assurance”. Setting aside a dollop of the semantic complexity the authors intended to sum up with these expressions, one might paraphrase as follows: “a God who condescends”; “a God who challenges”; “a God who encourages”. Aside from the fact that the authors probably chose to avoid a term like condescension, the root of the problem lies in the use of the term *Zumutung*, a term that has taken on the meaning of a nervy, life-enhancing challenge to the status quo, something like *Herausforderung*, in ecclesiastical German. In this usage, *Zumutung* and *Zuspruch*, challenge and reassurance, are poles in a strategy of communication by which one person builds up another. At the same time, *Zumutung* retains the sense of an imposing negative response in the use to which *Der Gott der Lebendigen* puts it. *Gottes Zumutung* also refers to God’s punishment of those who betray his love. Thus (p. 13: ET p. 13):

Under the arch of God’s effective and declarative affirmation of a will to relationship—God’s effective condescension arching downward from one direction and God’s declarative encouragement arching downward from the other direction—God’s “challenge” finds its home. Denoted is both God’s reaction to negation of a relationship with God from the human side, and the resulting consequences for human existence. The challenge concept intentionally articulates the directional complexity of God’s punitive activity. The persistent challenge his will to relationship poses is at stake. God’s will to relationship repulses wanton human self-referentiality; at the same time, it encourages human beings who suffer from God’s remoteness to seize the opportunities life offers in relationship with God.

The offered translation includes unpacking and some restructuring; it depends on, but also diverges from, the translation of Biddle (ET p. 13). In an excursus at the end of this review, I examine the English edition and translation of *GL* in greater detail.

Part B of *Der Gott der Lebendigen*, more than 250 pages long, is, like Part A, full of wide-ranging and succinct analyses. Chapter and subchapter headings: (B I) *Gottes Zuwendung* (“Divine Condescension”): (1) “Word and Creation”; (2) “Blessing and Praise”; (3) “Justice and Justification”; (4) “Forgiveness and Reconciliation”; (B II) *Gottes Zumutung* (“Divine Challenge”): (1) “Hiddenness and Wrath”; (2) “Suffering and Complaint”; (3) “Transience and Death”; (4) “Eternity and Time”; (B III) *Gottes Zuspruch* (“Divine Encouragement”): (1) “Commandment and Plea”; (2) “Covenant and Promise”; (3) “Judgment and Salvation”; (4) “Hope and Comfort.”

Three features of *GL* stand out. (1) It formulates its discussion of the biblical description of God's nature and God's acts of salvation in sustained dialogue with overlapping and sometimes divergent descriptions of divinity derived from abutting (a) Near Eastern and Mediterranean religions; (b) ancient and modern philosophies; and (c) ancient and modern theologies. (2) It is a theology of the Old and New Testaments which tries hard not to tear down the theology of one to build up the theology of the other. (3) It is open to the insights of ancient and modern theology and to the insights of traditional Christian theology. The combination sets it apart from all other examples of biblical theology currently available.

*GL* is more than a systematic presentation of the attributes of God described in biblical literature. It also endeavors to present the unity and diversity of the biblical witness to God in harmony with a reconstruction of the history of the religion of Israel and of early Christianity. Inevitably, histories of the religion of Israel, Judaism, and emergent Christianity depend on judgments about date, provenance, orientation, and textual relationships of the component parts of biblical literature. On these questions there is little accord among scholars. Given the difficulties involved in making sense out of the available evidence, disagreement on these matters is welcome and to be expected.

I point this out because the assignment of so much of the Old Testament to the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E. in *GL*, including texts like Exod 15 and Deut 32, will be bewildering to a large number of North American biblical scholars—indeed, to a large number of scholars of all continents outside of Europe. Yet the assignment of a biblical text in *GL* to a mid- to late Persian period date is if anything an index of the formative importance *GL* attributes to it in the subsequent history of Judaism and the midwifing of Christianity.

The religion of ancient Israel of any given period, as well as the particular Judaisms represented by—for example—Qohelet, Ben Sira, Daniel, and Esther; the Qumran sect, Josephus, Philo, and the *Psalms of Solomon*; *1 Enoch*, *2 Baruch*, and *4 Ezra*; not to mention the various iterations of the Jesus movement reflected in NT literature; the Judaism of the Sages; and the Christianity of the Fathers, are first and foremost appropriations of a received heritage understood by the appropriators to be life-enhancing in the deepest of ways. To speak of *any* of the forms which Judaism and Christianity took in antiquity as a degeneration almost always signals a willful neglect of complexities and continuities and an exclusive focus on real or imagined discontinuities. Furthermore, over against a variety of coeval ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean religions, the emergent Judaisms and emergent Christianities which find expression in Old and New Testament, deuterocanonical, and

parabiblical literature share a strong family resemblance the nucleus of which consists precisely in a common presentation of the being and attributes of God. *GL* makes significant progress in the task of identifying the contours of that common understanding.

The chapter entitled “From God the Lord to God the Father” (pp. 51–92; ET pp. 49–91) is a case in point. Biblical theologies often overlook patterns of development that span canonical and extra-canonical literature. *GL* stands apart from that tendency. A line of continuity is traced relative to the experience of God’s proximity which finds expression in the address of God as “Father” across Isa 63:6–64:11; Ben Sira 51:1–12; Tob 13; Wisd 1–5; and the NT (pp. 61–66; ET pp. 60–65). Aside from the identification of three recurring elements in the use of the Father metaphor in the NT, the prehistory of which is not discussed—the mediation of Fatherhood through the Son, the soteriological result in the form of adoptive status as children of God, and the ethical consequences for those who now see themselves as “children of obedience” (1 Pet 1:14)—a fourth element, the cosmological connotation of divine Fatherhood, characteristic of Paul only, his students (the disputed Paulines), and other late NT writings, is assigned an origin in philosophical religion (p. 68; ET pp. 67–68). A further line of continuity is traced, in the concepts of rebirth and divine nursing through the milk of God’s word, a conceptualization which “integrates the maternal element into the father metaphor.” The line unites Philo, Ps-Philo, James, John’s Gospel, Titus, 1 Peter, and Clement of Alexandria (pp. 84–85; ET pp. 83–85).<sup>2</sup>

There is much to disagree with in *GL*, and much to appreciate in terms of depth of insight and elegance of presentation. There is also more than one significant lacuna.

#### THE SOCIAL LIFE OF GOD

*GL* fails to offer a significant treatment of biblical descriptions of God’s interaction with other beings of immense power.<sup>3</sup>

2. Appreciation of the fact that *GL* is attentive to historical trajectories that span canonical and non-canonical literature is not equivalent to a call for a more inclusive canon. On the other hand, a lack of interest in such historical trajectories is indicative of an underestimation of the historicity of the Bible.

3. Contrast the extended treatment of the topic by John Goldingay under the title, “Yhwh’s Aides and Representatives and Rivals,” in idem, *Old Testament Theology. Volume Two. Israel’s Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 43–58. For a trenchant analysis of a subset of the topic, with attention to issues of historical development, see Michael S. Heiser, “Divine Council,” in *Dictionary of the Old*



At first glance, the conceptualization of transpersonal evil and transpersonal good in terms of immensely powerful beings other than El Elyon/YHWH is underdeveloped in the Old Testament. On closer inspection, it seems more accurate to say that angels and demons and gods/angels assigned to individual nations play a conspicuous role in the Old Testament; a more conspicuous role in several extra-canonical Jewish apocalypses and Christian apocalypses; and a highly visible role in the God vs. Satan/the Devil/Beelzebub binary of the New Testament. The advantages inherent in conceptualizing evil and good in terms of powerful beings are commonly exploited in modern media: in comics; science fiction; supernatural thrillers; the genre of horror; and modern theology as expressed in (for example) *Paradise Lost* and *The Screwtape Letters*.

No wonder: good and evil are self-evidently more powerful than individual human beings. Moreover, it is clear from the generality of world religions that both good and evil and in fact a host of good and bad realities occur to people as endowed with personalities. One would have thought that any description of God as found in biblical literature would need to treat the fact that God is understood to consult with others in a heavenly court, the members of which are often referred to as his sons. At times he acts as spokesperson for all (Gen 1, 11; Isa 6). At times he negotiates a course of action with a member of his council (Job 1). He may simply overrule a member of the council (Zech 3:1–2); on the other hand, a sentence may be issued in the name of the council, not in the name of the Most High (Dan 4:14). YHWH apportions Israel to himself, the other nations to their respective gods (LXX and 4Q Deut<sup>l</sup> 32:8–10; MT Deut 32:8–10 demythologizes; as Judg 11:24 demonstrates, outside of the Torah it was not considered necessary to revise the text to accord with strict monotheism). The same gods are expected to praise him (LXX and 4Q Deut<sup>d</sup> 32:43; MT Deut 32:43 demythologizes, but not at Ps 29:1; 150:1; Job 38:7; the same beings are described as a choir of angels in Pss 103:20–22; 148:2). The entire council is understood to stand in awe of the one true God (Ps 89:8–9); none can compare to him (Exod 15:11); were one to turn to a member of the council to override a decision of its president, the endeavor would be foredoomed (Job 5:1). The assignment of a god to each nation stands in the background of the identification of Michael as the angelic prince of Israel in Dan 7; 10; 12.

The universal premise of biblical Yahwism is not the non-existence of other gods, but the exclusive assignment of YHWH to Israel (Deut 5:7; 6:4). YHWH leads the divine cohorts into battle; when he

marches out to war, “holy thousands” are with him (LXX Sam Vg Syr Deut 33:2; MT Deut 33:2 demythologizes). In one text, Elohim/Elyon browbeats his council/his sons and sentences them to death because they are derelict in their duties (Ps 82). In another, YHWH unleashes demons on his foes (Hab 3:5). When he appears to human beings, he is sometimes accompanied by others (Gen 18–19). It is often impossible to distinguish between YHWH and an angel of YHWH (Gen 32; Hos 12:4–6; Exod 3–4; 33:1–3; Judg 6). Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah, on the other hand, distinguish easily between YHWH and members of his retinue when transported to his heavenly court.

Finally, temptation is experienced in terms of an interpersonal conflict in which the other person cannot be identified with another human being or with one’s alter ego, not only according to Gen 3 and 4 and the Gospel accounts of the temptation of Jesus, but in the phenomenology of temptation in most times and places to this day.

The claim that evil is outranked by the good and the concomitant claim that evil is harnessed by the *summum bonum*, God immortal, invisible, and all-wise, for benevolent ends (Gen 50:20), the essential claim of Judaism and Christianity, is repeatedly worked out, within and beyond biblical literature, in terms of a social life of God with beings like him who transcend time and space in ways that mortals do not. Beyond that, God is described as doing battle with—and sometimes sporting with—Godzillas and Blobs (Pss 74:14; 89:11; Isa 59:11; Job 40:15–32; Ps 104:26). There is a reason why the representation of evil in monstrous terms is constitutive of almost every human culture. Evil occurs to people in monstrous forms. This is another instance in which ancient and modern apprehensions of reality have much in common. The rare devotees of a rarified philosophical religion—Qohelet is a biblical example—are just that, in any age.

*GL*’s failure to topicalize the biblical descriptions of the social life of God with other transcendent beings is significant. In a recent volume, footnoted in the English but not the German edition of *GL* (p. 9; ET p. 9), Benjamin Sommer speaks of “scholarly avoidance” of an overlapping topic: the various incarnations YHWH was understood to have across the length and breadth of the history of the religion of Israel.<sup>4</sup> One might also speak of a scholarly allergy to the topic of God’s interaction with beings endowed with abilities less than his but greater than ours. Nonetheless, these very topics stand in need of careful treatment.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 4–9.

## IN WRATH REMEMBER MERCY

Running through biblical literature is a narrative in which defiance of God's direction on the part of individuals and polities is highlighted. Time and again God's counsel is met with rejection. Again and again God's gifts are abused. Every abuse and every act of rejection is met with a fluid response from God's side that runs from counter-rejection, protection along with rejection, to forgiveness with and even without prior repentance. It is not really possible to describe the forbearing and forgiving God of the Bible outside of and unattached from an account of the instances recounted in biblical literature in which someone who should know better wrongs God, yet God shows forbearance and mercy to the point of remitting punishment in whole or in part.

There are many originating sins to which the Bible bears witness, beyond the first pair recounted in Gen 3 and 4 on which *GL* focuses attention (pp. 309–10; ET pp. 309–10): that of the divine beings who mated with humankind and produced the nefarious heroes of old (Gen 6:1–4); that of the entire earth the inhabitants of which devise nothing but evil all day long (Gen 6:5); that of the residents of Babylon who sought to build a city able to dominate the four corners of the earth, and a tower able to reach into the heavens (Gen 11); that attempted by the men of Sodom against innocent strangers (Gen 19); that of Sarah against Hagar and Ishmael (Gen 21:8–21); that of Jacob against Esau (Gen 27); that of the brothers of Joseph against Joseph (Gen 37); that of Pharaoh against the resident aliens of his land (Exod 1); that of Aaron and the people against God and Moses (Exod 32); that of Nadab and Abihu; like others before them, they do precisely what they were told not to do (Lev 10). The parade continues in Numbers–2 Kings and beyond. The common denominator is not a will to power or a blurring of the Creator/creature distinction but the choice of using power for an unconscionable end. Every recounted act of wantonness is fraught with consequences. At the same time, the consequences are *mitigated* time and again.

*GL* fails to offer an exposition of this history, which is—from beginning to end—a history of violence. I would argue that the remedies God pursues to put an end to spirals of human violence cry out for systematic treatment.<sup>5</sup> In a pattern of which the Exodus is an important prototype, God answers violence with superior violence. At the same time, he shows favor on whom he would show favor and mercy on whom he would show mercy (Exod 33:19). Pursuant to superior violence,

5. See Mark J. Boda, *A Severe Mercy: Sin and Its Remedy in the Old Testament* (Siphrut 1; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009). The exposition I offer here is brief and one-sided and should be compared with his.

Torah, God's direction and specific directions, is offered as an antidote *to*, and fence *around*, human proclivities of the self-serving kind. To be clear, the narratives of Genesis to Deuteronomy detail a longer series of provisions in the face of human need: the gifts of covenant, offspring, deliverance, land, law, a locus of God's presence, and ritual. The withdrawal of the gifts of land, a singular locus of divine presence, and associated ritual, the fulfillment of the curses of covenant law, the consequent devastation of town and country and the dispersal of inhabitants, is also detailed. Nonetheless, restoration is promised, and restoration follows.

The pattern of mitigated punishment described in biblical narrative intersects with contemporary life more compellingly than an understanding of divine initiative which underplays the threat of violence, and actual violence, from God's side. Life as we know it is characterized by violence, violent acts of God included. God in biblical literature participates in violence in a variety of ways. Much that needs to be said about divine violence receives scant treatment in *GL*.

Three loci I think *GL* treats unsuccessfully are "vicarious suffering," "forensic justification," and "atonement." The expressions as I deploy them designate solicitous behavior one person accords another. There are circumstances in which one, the other, or all three are appropriate actions to take. There are actions which qualify as all three.

#### VICARIOUS SUFFERING

The life of animals and humans is flush with the experience of one individual or one category of individuals, leaders of a pack for example, taking the brunt of a bad situation on behalf of others. Vicarious suffering in this sense is a pervasive fact of social life. A parent will starve herself for the sake of her children; a policeman will put himself in harm's way in order to protect the innocent. A king will offer his son to his god in order to stay the latter's wrath against an entire people. Sons and now daughters are sent off to war or "Freedom Square" to be maimed and killed in the name of a metanarrative (the need to triumph over a tyrant; a national or international interest). They are thought to suffer on behalf of their elders and future generations. In the absence of a metanarrative that assigns meaning to suffering on behalf of others, a mother would not choose to put her health at risk and commit enormous time, energy, and financial resources to the raising of children. A fireman would not risk his life to save a stranger; an officer would not lead his men into battle; a nurse would not expose herself to risks for the sake of

a sick or dying person; a son would not reorganize his life and the life of his family in order to care for an elderly parent.

A father would not agree to sacrifice his son (Gen 22); a warrior would not choose to die in order to bring death on his adversaries (Judg 16:23–30); a prophet would not stand up to power come banishment, prison, or death (Amos; Jeremiah; 2 Chr 24:20–22); the suffering of a generation taken away into exile could not be seen as expiation for the sins of past and present generations (Isa 53; an interpretation of the “servant” as an epithet for the generation “taken away” accords well with the recurrent “we” in the passage and the “my people” of 53:8, with the prophet speaking on behalf of “my people”<sup>6</sup>); the decision to accept death rather than renounce one’s faith could not be understood as a pivot point in the history of a nation (Daniel; 2 and 4 Maccabees); the death on a cross of the one who explicated God by word and deed, of God’s only begotten Son, could not be seen as a means to draw all human beings to God the Father (John’s Gospel).

The lines of continuity are strong. They cannot be undone by confusing the fact of vicarious suffering with the question of atonement, even if they are intertwined on those occasions in which suffering on account of and on behalf of others is seen as atonement for acts of omission and commission on the part of those others. Yet this is what *GL* does when it treats Isa 52:13–53:12 as an isolated passage (p. 146; ET p. 144; pp. 293–94; ET pp. 293; pp. 315–16; ET p. 316). The cost of placing a *cordon sanitaire* around Isa 52:13–53:12 would have been high indeed if it were not for the fact that *GL* treats the same passage elsewhere in a line of development that includes the witness of the books of Jeremiah, Job, Daniel, and 2 Maccabees before taking up NT understandings of the death of Christ at the intersection of suffering and lament (375–76; ET 374–75; also, 322, n. 164; ET 321 n. 35). Moreover, with respect to justification, *GL* notes the connection between Isa 50:8–9, wherein the definition of the servant’s salvation is vindication in the court of life from the side of YHWH, and Isa 52:13–53:12, wherein the servant’s obedient bearing of responsibility for a larger polity of reference brings salvation to many – once again, in the sense of vindication in the court of life (293–94; ET 293).

Still, the cost is unacceptably high insofar as *GL* walls Isa 52:13–53:12 off from the rest of biblical tradition with respect to atonement, with atonement construed in the narrowest of terms rather than as a subset of a larger category of social experience characterized by the transfer of the consequences of guilt and of paying an offsetting price from one party to another. A generation, group or individual often

6. A definitive fulfillment of Isa 53 in a servant individual is not thereby excluded.

understands the suffering it endures to be a consequence of someone else's wrongdoing. In a precise sense it often is. At times that same suffering is understood by others to occasion a reprieve from suffering they might have otherwise endured. In a precise sense it often does. Isa 52:13–53:12 is best understood in light of that anthropological constant. Prophecy, ritual, and lived experience on this understanding encode or embody social expectations of just desert. Reflections thereof are found in Lev 18:28 and Num 35:33 on the one hand and Ezek 36:16–38; Dan 11:33 + 12:3; and 2 Macc 7 on the other. It is not helpful, as *GL* does (p. 146; ET p. 144), to play off the plea for, and prediction of, an end to the experience of punishment for the sins of past generations against the acknowledgment, found in Isa 52:13–53:12, that a full measure of punishment had been meted out (cf. Ezek 16:1–52, which construes the disaster to come upon Judah in one generation as the end consequence of the sins of previous generations). That it is expected that God will give new life to those who were until now as good as dead (Isa 57:17–19; 59:15b–20; 63:1–9; cf. Ezek 37) is not in contradiction with the realization that the negative consequences of human actions reverberate for generations. The controversy over the cross-generational transfer of the consequences of human behavior<sup>7</sup> to which prophecy and lamentation in the wake of destruction and exile are a witness (Lam 5:7; Isa 40:2; 43:26–28; 50:1; Jer 31:27–30; Ezek 18) is resolved in Isa 53 according to a template—expiation for a multi-generational history of wrongdoing by a single generation, followed by restoration—that reaches analogous expression in Lev 26:27–45 and Deut 29:2–30:10. Expiation in the sense of this recurring template is seen by several NT authors, in relation now to *all* of human history, to reach definitive fulfillment in the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is hard to think of a more central axis of biblical theology. *GL* exaggerates the degree to which NT authors innovate on this axis.

7. On the general topic, see Bernard M. Levinson, *Legal Revision and Religious Renewal in Ancient Israel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 51–88. The difficulty with treating Ezek 18 as if it invalidated the principle of cross-generational transfer enunciated in the Decalogue (Exod 20:4–8; cf. 34:5–7) is that, on the one hand, this does not appear to be Ezekiel's own view (cf. e.g. Ezek 16; 23:47) and, on the other, the transfer principle finds obvious confirmation in our day no less than in Ezekiel's. Nonetheless, the Decalogue's *insistence* on the cross-generational transfer of the consequences of human behavior is of a piece with Ezekiel's circumstantial *denial* thereof. The goal in both cases was to nurture strong moral agency. *Stress* on the transfer in the context of the Decalogue is meant to deter moral slackness. *Denial* of the transfer in Ezekiel's moral tirades serves the same goal.

## FORENSIC JUSTIFICATION

Forensic justification is a natural way of conceptualizing the vindication human beings seek in the court of their peers, before God, and in the court of life. It may be true (I think not), that *expressis verbis* “the concept of justification appears only in a few texts in the post-exilic Hebrew and Greek traditions” (p. 288; ET p. 287). There is no doubt however that requests for deliverance contingent upon the verdict of a god were commonplace in the ancient Near East long before the psalms of David would have been composed on any analysis. A close reading of Akkadian prayers such as those found in the volume edited by Alan Lenzi leads immediately to that conclusion.<sup>8</sup> All the more reason to second *GL*’s conclusion: “The oft-asserted contrast in the history of scholarship between a juridical understanding of righteousness and the understanding of righteousness as God’s gift in the context of a more holistic understanding of life tears apart what belongs together. Both components participate inseparably in the Old Testament understanding of righteousness” (p. 288; ET p. 288). A verdict on one’s life at odds with the verdict that circumstances have dictated is the exact definition of salvation in countless prayers of the Jewish and Christian traditions, beginning with those found in intercessions scattered throughout biblical literature from Gen 4:10 to Rev 6:10, and including those uttered by mortals in the land of the living, e.g. Jer 12:1–3 and Ps 26. Ps 26 is explicit in its dependence on God’s kindness and reliability for a favorable verdict. It is not clear why *GL* drives a wedge between the declaration of a favorable verdict in the case of Abraham as a reward for his faith in Gen 15 (p. 294; ET pp. 293–94), and pleas for forensic justification by penitents found e.g., in Pss 51 and 143 (p. 295; ET pp. 294–95): “Gen 15:5 . . . hardly implies the concept of justification” (p. 294; ET p. 293). The point of departure in both cases is God’s presumed benevolence even if the latter is not mentioned *expressis verbis* in Gen 15. Justification, that is, a benevolent initiative or promise of God received as a favorable verdict on one’s life before, during, and after the effective turn in one’s life the verdict opens up, is a fair definition of the content of the message of salvation found throughout biblical literature, wherever and whenever human beings invoke God’s help *de profundis* and receive assurance *in media res*.

In that optic, the message of salvation Lev 16 and Isa 53 represent are variations on the theme of justification in the sense of a

8. Alan Lenzi, ed., *Reading Akkadian Prayers and Hymns: An Introduction* (ANEM 3; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011). On the topic of forensic metaphors in biblical and Akkadian prayers, see Shalom E. Holtz, "Praying as a Plaintiff," *VT* 61 (2011): 258–279.

favorable verdict from God's side. A particular means by which a favorable verdict is given is specified. Atonement for sin by a substitute (*Stellvertreter*) is, with Bernd Janowski, an accepted means of salvation in biblical literature.<sup>9</sup> No wonder: the transfer of the consequences of sin onto an innocent party is an absolutely recurring feature of human existence. On the one hand, it is maddening when a drunk driver runs over an innocent child. On the other, it is considered an act of great virtue if someone takes the brunt of a situation compromised by sin and sickness in place of, and on behalf of, someone else. It is the latter virtue which is understood to merit God's approval and result in salvation in Isa 53; Dan 11:33 + 12:3; and New Testament literature. Moreover, the principles of substitution and vicarious death inform Torah ritual at Exod 13:2, 11–15. Finally, willingness to practice self-denial for the sake of others, to intervene on behalf of the hapless at significant cost to oneself, and ultimately, to suffer and die for—to use a later expression—the sanctification of God's name, are ideals held up throughout biblical literature and are thought to reach their highest realizations in a champion like Samson, a prophet like Zechariah (2 Chr 24:20–22), the martyrs of the Maccabean period and, by Christians, in Jesus most of all, with followers like Stephen encountering the same fate. With respect to atonement, justification, faith, and divine benevolence, to be precise, the intersection thereof, the lines of continuity across disparate components of biblical and extra-biblical literature are stronger than *GL* supposes.

The point of a *critical* biblical theology has to be an examination of the extent to which the God of biblical literature speaks the truth about life and lives up to the promises attributed to him. Theology that shies away from such questions gives the impression that the biblical God cannot stand up to critical scrutiny. A critical biblical theology is of particular interest if, at one and the same time, it retains biblical teaching as the ultimate criterion of its own description of God's being and attributes. On this score, *GL* shines. It describes the truth claims of biblical literature from the vantage point of the literature's understanding of the being and attributes of God. It explores the unity and diversity of said claims. It presents those claims in such a way that the option of taking those claims seriously remains open to people fully adjusted to life as understood by a cross-section of educated twenty-first-century individuals. That is no mean accomplishment.

9. *GL* (p. 315, n. 148; ET p. 314–14, n. 19) interacts with, and dissents from, Bernd Janowski, *Sühne als Heilsgeschehen. Traditions- und religionsgeschichtliche Studien zur Sühnetheologie der Priesterschrift* (WMANT 55; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1982; 22000), 198–265; and (p. 316, n. 149; ET pp. 315, n. 20) with idem, *Stellvertretung. Alttestamentliche Studien zu einem theologischen Grundbegriff* (SBS 165; Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1997), 81–92.



EXCURSUS: THE ENGLISH EDITION OF *DER GOTT DER LEBENDIGEN*

Theological German is hard to translate. The register traffics in etymological figures and double entendre. Biddle's attempt to render *Der Gott der Lebendigen* into comprehensible English merits respect. Nonetheless, the attempt is successful only in part.

An example: the ET of the opening lines of "*Gebot und Gebet*" ("Command and Plea"), the volume's entrée into the topic of "*Gottes Zuspruch*" ("Divine Encouragement"), a key component of the exposition. The original (p. 424):

Gottes Zumutung, der das vorhergehende Kapitel gewidmet war, hat deutlich gemacht, dass der dem Menschen und der Welt zugewandte Gott unfähig zur Gleichgültigkeit ist. Gottes Leidenschaft für seine Schöpfung toleriert weder den Liebesverrat durch seine Geschöpfe noch deren Leiden, sei es selbstverschuldet, sei es dem Erfolg des Bösen in der Welt geschuldet. Gott mutet das Nein zum Liebesverrat zu, indem er der Liebeslosigkeit die Leidenschaft seines Zorns entgegensetzt, so dass das Leiden des Menschen für ihn zur Erfahrung des sich verbergenden Gottes werden kann. So notwendig dem Kapitel über die Zumutung Gottes (B II) dasjenige über seine Zuwendung vorausgeht (B I), so notwendig muss den in der Zumutung widerfahrenden Ambivalenzen und Abgründen der Gotteserfahrung das Kapitel über den Zuspruch Gottes folgen (B III).

The ET (p. 425):

God's audacious demand, the subject of the preceding chapter, has made it clear that the God who attends to human beings and the world is incapable of complacency. God's passion for his creation tolerates neither his creatures' betrayal of love nor their suffering, whether as the result of their own fault or as the result of evil in the world. God negates betrayal of love by countering an absence of love with the passion of his wrath so that human suffering becomes an experience of the God who hides himself. As important as it is for the section on God's attention (chapters 7–10) to precede the one on his audacity (chapters 11–14), it is equally important that the section on God's assurance (chapters 15–18) follow the ambivalences and the abysses in the experience of God encountered in God's audacity.

The translation of *Zumutung* and related language by “audacity” and “audacious demand” is not compelling. An alternative translation, with problem areas highlighted:

*God’s challenging behavior, to which the preceding chapter was dedicated, makes it clear that the God who attends to humanity and the world is incapable of indifference. God’s passion for his creation tolerates neither betrayal of love by his creatures nor their suffering, be it self-caused or caused by evil in the world. God enforces a “no” to betrayal of love by countering an absence of love with the passion of his wrath, such that consequent human suffering becomes an experience of a God who hides himself. As needful as it is for the chapter on God’s challenge (B II) to be preceded by the chapter on God’s caring attention (B I), it is no less needful for the chapter on the double edges and precipices encountered in the experience of God’s challenging behavior to be followed by the chapter on God’s encouragement (B III).*

An additional issue. The use of non-standard translation equivalents of technical terms in the ET is de-familiarizing in a negative way. For example, the expression “the only born God” will be familiar only to those who read the NT in the translation of Richard Lattimore; “the only begotten God”—and Son—is the established equivalent (*inter alia* pp. 47, 81; ET pp. 47, 80). The expression “Lord YHWH Zebaoth” (p. 40; ET p. 39) might ring a bell with music lovers familiar with Johann Sebastian Bach’s “Heilig, heilig, heilig, ist der Herr Zebaoth.” For everyone else, “Lord YHWH Sabaoth” would serve the purpose. “Ben Sira” works well as a way to refer to the author of the book he wrote; in a pinch, Sirach; “Siracides” on the other hand sounds hopelessly baroque (p. 162; ET p. 160). “Jesus Sirach” (p. 500; ET p. 503) and “Jesus ben Sirach” (p. 615; ET p. 601) likewise have an odd ring. The creed speaks of “one, holy, catholic [small “c”] church”; in a pinch, a “universal” church; but not a “comprehensive” church (p. 203; ET p. 201)—here, however, the malapropism is in the *Vorlage*. There can be no doubt that the verbal expressions in Rom 3:26, 28 are to be translated with “justify,” not “make just,” even if the latter translation preserves the wordplay in *GL* whereby God’s righteousness is seen to clarify both who God *is* and what God *does* (p. 304; ET p. 303).<sup>10</sup>

10. As *GL* well explains, the righteousness of God according to Paul refers to the fact that God is just and benevolent and that he rules in favor of the one who puts his trust in him, *apart from* and *before* the one so favored keeps the commandments. The Letter of James and Matthew’s Gospel on the other hand put all the emphasis on parenesis, whereas

Unfortunately, the printed text of *God of the Living* seems not to have benefitted from a careful review for errors of omission and commission. A few examples. The transliterated Hebrew in two instances is unintelligible: not *lou*' - 'ccl and *lou*' - 'aum, but *lō*' - 'ēl and *lō*' - 'ām (p. 4; ET p. 4). It is not of course “beenknown,” but “been known” (ET p. 6). Not “1 Cor 6:16b,” but “2 Cor 6:16b,” 2x (p. 188; ET p. 185). God “hides himself,” not “God hides” (p. 339; ET p. 339). Not *Why*, “YHWH,” but “Why, <YHWH>”; YHWH is a conjectural emendation of the authors (p. 343; ET p. 343). “Do not forget the sufferers,” not the “sufferer” (p. 345; ET p. 345). Not “Mal 3:1–5; 4; Ezra 5:1–3,” but “Mal 3:1–5; 4 Ezra 5:1–3” (p. 356, n. 44; ET p. 356, n. 44). Not “the transition from becoming into become that occurs,” but “the transition from becoming into that which has become that occurs” (p. 404; ET p. 404). “Extraordinarily” before “disparate” seems to have dropped out (p. 406; ET p. 406). The sons of Jacob are “not (yet) at an end” according to Mal 3:6 on this volume’s interpretation, not “(not) yet at an end” (p. 472; ET p. 475).

A host of errors is found in one locus (p. 291; ET pp. 290–91). Isa 49:17–19 is not the passage cited; 48:17–19 is; the index is also wrong (p. 601). It is not “Your name” but “His name” that will not be cut off according to Isa 48:19. According to *GL*, the passage relates *righteousness* from Israel’s side to salvation from God’s side, through “[God’s] lament over its former blameworthy absence, no less than [through his lament] over [Israel’s] decimated progeny; [said progeny] is characterized [in language] not without a literary connection to Gen 22:7 and 32:13” (my translation, with unpacking), *not* through “the lament concerning its former blameworthy absence, as do [?] the decimated offspring characterized in a literary allusion to Genesis 15:5 and 22:17”—the added [?] marks the chief difficulty. In point of fact, a literary connection exists between Isa 48:19 and Gen 15:4–5; 22:17; 32:13; *not* Gen 22:7; 32:13 per *Der Gott der Lebendigen*; and *not* Gen 15:5; 22:17 per the ET.

The English edition is less than ideal on other grounds. The table of contents of the German edition, five pages long, is reduced to *one* page in the English edition, an unfortunate choice since the *Inhalt* is a perfect introduction to the volume’s contents. The “Ancient Sources” list

parenthesis has a subordinate place in Paul (Rom 12:1–15:13; Gal 5:1–6:10). The emphasis in James and Matthew is on the fact that a believer is expected to keep the commandments: love of God and love of neighbor and disciplines of piety that embody those commitments. Righteousness from the human side consists in *doing* (Matt 5:20). The divergent emphases—*GL* speaks of divergent concepts of *God’s* righteousness, but that does not seem right—cannot be completely harmonized but are not antithetical either (pp. 300–309; 308–309; ET pp. 299–308; 307–308).

(pp. 547–553; ET pp. 557–61) provides an incomplete picture of the sources on which the volume depends. For example, the theology of the *Letter of Aristeas* receives careful attention on two occasions (pp. 107; 175; ET pp. 107; 173), but the *Letter* is missing in the “Ancient Sources” list: to be clear, this is also the case in the German edition, but the problem is compounded in the ET because discussions of the *Letter of Aristeas* are not indexed therein. Due to “space restraints” (p. 599), the indexes were severely truncated. The *Stellenregister* of the original edition occupies fifty-six pages; the abbreviated “Index of Biblical Citations,” a paltry *five*; the *Sachregister* occupies 39 pages; the “Topical Index,” a mere *eight*. The abbreviation was ill-advised. The importance of comprehensive indexes in a biblical theology is difficult to overplay. It is especially so in the case of *GL*, given its attention to lines of development it traces within and without its canon of reference. For example, one cannot know from the index of *God of the Living* that the volume ably discusses the meaning of “God of the living” in relationship to *Joseph and Aseneth* and *Shemoneh Esreh* (pp. 521–522; ET pp. 525–26). To be sure, neither the German nor the ET contains an author index, an unconscionable decision given the way the volume’s authors support their arguments with copious references to secondary literature.

Other features of the ET’s index of biblical citations are unfortunate: (1) the elimination of the distinction between important and less important treatments of biblical passages; (2) the elimination of references to a number of quoted passages. For example, John 14:7 is quoted *in extenso* on p. 6 (albeit not in block quotes) but does not appear in the index. *GL*’s claim to have made a selection of exemplary biblical texts which capture the essence of the biblical testimony about God (p. 10; ET p. 10) is not easily verifiable given these omissions.

A questionable shortcut: the bibliography of the German edition is simply taken over in the ET, with the subtraction however of the valuable listing of secondary authors with appropriate cross-references, and the addition of occasional errors. For example, the German edition, under HENGEL, M., lists:

-, »Setze dich zu meiner Rechten!« Die Inthronisation Christi zur Rechten Gottes und Psalm 110,1 (1993), in: DERS., Studien zur Christologie. Kleine Schriften IV (WUNT 201), Tübingen 2006. 281–367.

Under Hengel, M., the ET has:

– – –. “‘Setze dich zu meiner Rechten!’ Die Inthronisation Christi zur Rechten Gottes und Psalm 110,1 (1993).” In idem, *Studien zur Christologie. Kleine Schriften IV*. WUNT 201. Tübingen, 2006, 281–367.

If the entry adhered to the industry standard in American biblical scholarship, it would be listed under “Hengel, Martin,” and it would read as follows:

—. “‘Setze dich zu meiner Rechten!’ Die Inthronisation Christi zur Rechten Gottes und Psalm 110,1.” Pages 108–94 in *Le trône de Dieu*. WUNT 69. Edited by Marc Philonenko. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993. Repr. pages 281–367 in *Studien zur Christologie. Kleine Schriften IV*. WUNT 201. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006. ET pages 119–225 in *Studies in Early Christology*. Translated by R. Kearns et al. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995.

On the plus side, the hardcover volume produced by Baylor University Press is sturdy, a joy to handle. Footnotes are still footnotes (though not always on the correct page; e.g. n. 52 on p. 68 belongs on p. 67). Transliterated Hebrew appears as transliterated Hebrew (with errors here and there; e.g., read *'ehyeh* not *'eyeh* in more than one instance (pp. 29–30; ET pp. 29–30). Greek appears as Greek; Latin as Latin; often but not always with accompanying translation.

Why I have spilled so much ink on the plusses and minuses of the English version of *GL*? If I were a Baptist I might appeal to Amos 3:1–2. I’m not, but I think Baylor University Press, precisely because it wants to position itself as a top-tier publisher in the field of academic biblical studies, would do well to reissue the ET in a corrected and more user-friendly edition.

