“The Lord is Good”

A review of Christopher R. J. Holmes’s book *The Lord Is Good: Seeking the God of the Psalter* (InterVarsity, $27.00).

According to a recent Pew Research Center survey, people in their twenties in the United States contrast with many of their elders in seeing God as less likely to protect them and more likely to punish them. My own impression is that they find it easier to have confidence in Jesus; they find it less instinctive to believe in the goodness of God. How marvelous, then, that Christopher Holmes from the University of Otago focuses on this theme.

He begins his book by laying out his agenda. In discussing the nature of God’s goodness, he aims to conduct the exposition by talking about the Psalms, to do so in contemplative mode, and to work from a Thomistic perspective. Indeed, that is not all: among other things, he also wants to dialogue with Barth and with himself in an earlier book. In pursuing his bold aims he takes us on an illuminating, thought-provoking, and spiritually-encouraging journey.

His opening chapter on “simplicity” discusses the simplicity or oneness of God: “all the perfections in God are really one thing.” I found this an engaging exposition though I was puzzled as to why it was there, until I referred to Wikipedia and discovered its background—not least in the aforementioned Aquinas. For a biblical scholar, the discovery heralded the way reading a book like this one constitutes an invitation to listen in on a conversation (in this case, between Augustine, Aquinas, Barth, Sonderegger…) that has been going on for a long time, whose points of disagreement you don’t immediately get and whose shorthand you don’t always understand. It reminded me of an occasion some years ago when I was having lunch with my newly-married sons and their wives, when the women rolled their eyes at the way they only half-understood the exchanges between the three men because we were presupposing conversations that had been going on over decades.

After the chapter on simplicity, the book comes more directly to goodness. It discusses God’s own goodness, the way goodness works out in the three persons of the Trinity, the goodness of God’s acts, the goodness of his creative work, and the relationship between God’s goodness and evil. It considers the goodness of the Torah, the goodness of Jesus, and the perfecting of goodness to which we look forward.

The nature of theological interpretation of the Scriptures is a notoriously controverted subject, and Dr. Holmes naturally understands it differently from the way a biblical scholar does. The first footnote in the main part of the book notes the five aspects of the meaning of the Hebrew word *tob* as they are distinguished by the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, but the connotations of the Hebrew word do not otherwise come into the book’s discussion. One question this raises is the nature of the relationship between the word *tob* which the Psalms use and the English word *good* (not to say the word *bonus* which presumably Augustine and Aquinas use). Another question is the relationship between the words *tob* or *good* and the idea of goodness which can be present when the words are not—as conversely the words can be present when the idea is not. Actually, Dr. Holmes doesn’t confine himself to texts where the word appears, but to add to this book’s impossible agenda, there are some approaches to questions about semantics and philosophy of language that are presupposed by this study which ideally need teasing out. (I also might have expected a scholar in New Zealand to take into account his Aotearoan context, as biblical scholars in New Zealand often do; I wonder how the Maori think about goodness, and I am delighted also to discover from Wikipedia that they arrived in New Zealand in Aquinas’s day.)

Yet further, without irony that footnote appears in the first line of a chapter in which Dr. Holmes tells us he intends to “unfold the *are* in ‘You are good.’” But in the Hebrew of which “you are good” is a translation, there is no “are” (it’s a noun clause, literally “you good”). I was reminded of the old debates (perhaps they still go on) over the “is” in the expression “this is my body,” which shares the irony because the phrase that Jesus used would also have lacked the “is.” Furthermore, the Psalms hardly ever speak of the goodness of God. They speak of the goodness of Yahweh, and part of their interest lies in the fact that Yahweh is good in a way that other deities are not. It is a significant difference which adds a whole new nuance to the way the Psalms talk about goodness.

Naturally, if I were to try to write about the goodness of God on the basis of the Psalms and in a way that also dialogued with people such as Aquinas (which I can actually imagine doing), as a biblical scholar I would go about the project in a different way from Dr. Holmes. For me, the Psalms themselves would set more of the agenda and on their basis I would rummage in Aquinas; for Dr. Holmes, the procedure is closer to the reverse. I can hardly complain; his theological method is more like Paul’s.

As a biblical scholar, I am always a bit unclear what systematic theology is for, just as systematic theologians are a bit unclear what biblical scholarship is for. I guess I thought that the importance of systematic theology lay in its engaging in that conversation, which is also a conversation within an intellectual cultural context and constitutes an exercise in loving God with our minds as the people we are and the scholars we are in our context. In a way, Dr. Holmes himself does answer my question near the end of his book, and what a great answer it is: “the function of theology is to assist the faithful in remaining with the Lord himself. In our strange moment, when it would seem that, existentially speaking, chaos has never been more ubiquitous, there is God, theology’s very subject matter.”

In between receiving this book for review and actually reading it, I said farewell to California, and at a farewell event I was asked what exhortation I would want to leave with my theological community there. I thought for a moment and then replied, “Believe in God.” Alongside the illumination of the Pew Research Center survey I also am often inclined to think that in our context (our strange moment) we don’t believe much that God is involved in our world and we think that it depends on us to “extend the kingdom” and “advocate for justice.” In reality, what we especially need to do is lay hold of the God who is both goodness and power, in the way the Psalms do. And as I thought about this subject I reflected on the way, over the weeks since arriving back in England, we have been worshiping most often in Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford where the worship is conducted in a way that gently and unselfconsciously and unmanipulatively and simply draws our attention to the God who is good and powerful.

The fine-looking series of “Studies in Christian Doctrine and Scripture” to which this book belongs (and on which InterVarsity is to be congratulated) “promotes evangelical contributions to systematic theology, seeking fresh understanding of Christian doctrine through creatively faithful engagement with Scripture in dialogue with catholic tradition(s).” Dr. Holmes’s book fits well in that context.

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