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“THESE ARE WRITTEN”: Toward a Cruciform Theology of Scripture By Peter H. Nafzger

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for a more streamlined look at sin’s past, present, and ongoing effects without sacrificing the overall character of the book. Yet, Meyer’s task is not to provide an exhaustive outline of Christian doctrine; he is serving an appetizer that will frame the Bible in a certain narrative light. The main course, if you will, is the ongoing discipline of studying God’s word and wrestling with the questions that only emerge from ongoing contemplation. With this in mind, it seems remarkably appropriate that God’s Timeline ultimately directs to God’s presence in word and sacrament; Meyer rightly directs the reader to the font and table as the culmination of the Christian life.

I would encourage pastors, DCE’s, and lay educators to use God’s Timeline as an aid for catechesis instruction. The current push toward a more narrative understanding of the Bible may be able to draw together the six chief parts in ways that were formerly lacking. Rather than solely seeing each piece of our Lutheran doctrine as a distinct entity worthy of our attention, Meyer reminds us that our Lutheran perspective allows for a rich understanding of the whole cloth. Both micro- and macro-approaches to Scripture are vital as educators continue to press against postmodern resistance to meta-narratives. The Christian response, as articulated in God’s Timeline, can confidently proclaim a God who is both external to the world as he creates, molds, and shapes his people for his purposes, as well as a God who intimately dwells with us in the word, in the waters of baptism, and in the real presence at the Lord’s Table.

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In the past generation scholarship has continued and furthered its conversation concerning the Scriptures, specifically concerning their substance, characteristics, and role. The conversation seeks to move the question beyond the simplistic and unhealthy “Battle for the Bible,” a battle that is still actively fought, and towards an end that is greater than holding up or tearing down a book. In commentaries we have seen such a move with scholarship increasingly focusing on the received text and its implications as a whole. The discussion of the theology of the Scriptures has followed suit. Peter Nafzger in These Are Written enters the conversation.

Nafzger encourages the church to recognize the limitations of the doctrine of inspiration as the central guide to understanding Scriptures and to move towards an understanding of Scriptures that focuses on a Trinitarian economy of salvation and centers in the Christ event. He argues that the current focus on inspiration fails to address the questions of canon, authority, and interpretation in healthy ways.

Barth serves as a starting point as he recognizes three forms of the word of God: Proclamation (the Father’s act through people), Scriptures (used by the Spirit), and Personal (Jesus, the Son, himself). Nafzger argues that while Barth’s emphasis on the soteriological function of the word and its Trinitarian nature serve as a helpful foundation for further discussion, his perspective fails to recognize key
aspects of the word. He is constrained by
the teaching “the finite cannot contain
the infinite” and by a lack of recognition
of deputized discourse. Worst of all, his
emphasis on the incarnation fails to give
due focus to Christ the crucified.

Highlighting that God is a God who
speaks through deputies, ultimately in the
personal word of God and the Scriptures,
Nafzger offers a modified version of
Barth’s threefold form of the word.
Throughout, the emphasis is clearly on
the personal word and specifically on his
death and resurrection. As such he cen-
ters the understanding of Scriptures and
the proclaimed word of God in the activ-
tity of the Christ, the personal word. This
overarching emphasis on the personal
word then guides his reassessment of
canon, authority, and interpretation, three
areas in which the modern emphasis on
the doctrine of inspiration falls short.

I commend Nafzger’s contribution
to the discussion of the Scriptures’ place
in dogmatic theology. His orientation of
the understanding of the word of God
returns the focus to Christ the crucified.
The initial chapter delineating the limita-
tions of the modern use of the doctrine
of inspiration should be a benefit for
those readers living in areas dominated
by the battle for the Bible or that battle’s
offspring. The book should also encour-
age thought on the power of the ongoing
use of the written word to proclaim the
personal word and his ongoing activity in
the life of the church.

Unfortunately, I do believe that These
Are Written is lacking in one major area.
In emphasizing the threefold form of
the word, the unity of the word seems
to, at best, take a back seat. This neglect
was most vivid to me in the argumenta-
tion against the sufficiency of the anal-
ogy of the word (i.e., the divine and
human nature of Scriptures reflect the
two natures of Christ) as a tool to under-
standing the Scriptures. The first reason
provided to avoid the analogy of the
word in the discussion of Scriptures is
the distinctiveness of the personal word.
If we use the incarnational language to
describe what happens with Scriptures,
we minimize the incarnation of the per-
sonal word. But is the word of God—
proclaimed, written, or personal—not all
the word of God? The continuity in the
working of the Spirit through the word
is evident in the book of Luke. Jesus
continues in the work of the Spirit that
has been present throughout the proph-
ests, teachers, and kings. Yes, the work
is centered in the Christ event, but it is
the same work. Such a connection can
be seen as Jesus teaches the disciples in
the sixth chapter of Luke linking their
activity both to the prophets and to
being called sons of the most high whose
Father is merciful. The connection is
seen in the book of Acts as the book’s
structure accents that the church’s life
reflects the life of Christ. It is also heard
elsewhere in Scriptures as the church is
called the body of Christ and the temple
of the Holy Spirit. To provide such a
rigid delineation between one form of
the word and another seems to suggest
that the personal word of God is not
only central, but wholly other. While the
distinctiveness of the Christ event should
not be minimized, neither should the
mystery of both the spoken and written
word as the word of God, especially as it
goes forth in the life of the church. As a
result, I was disappointed that the unity
of the word was not emphasized along
with the threefold form so as to prevent the perception of such a false trichotomy. Overall the book’s engagement of the discussion of the word of God is appreciated, beneficial, and worthwhile. It helps us think of issues such as canon, authority, and interpretation in the way of the cross; it encourages us to shape all our understanding of Scripture with a Christ-centered understanding of the word of God. In so doing, it succeeds in its desire to continue the conversation. For that I am grateful and encourage the reader to let Nafzger’s presentation stimulate his consideration of this important issue.

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Bart Ehrman’s scholarly program is well known. His popular books rarely lack a provocative title. Over the previous decades he has championed a view of the historical Jesus as a “pure and simple human,” an apocalyptic preacher and would-be messiah. Jesus’s life and sayings were passed on through an unruly game of telephone until anonymous evangelists finally put the thoroughly embellished tales into writings, the manuscript copies of which were themselves further embellished and corrupted by willful and stupid scribes. In this highly skeptical context, the real surprise in his latest book, How Jesus Became God, is not what Ehrman denies but what he is compelled to affirm.

In the earliest years, perhaps the earliest months, some followers of Jesus believed he had not only been raised from the dead but exalted to a place of unprecedented authority and power. More compelling still, already in these earliest circles Jesus was included in the worship of the God of Israel by first-century Jewish monotheists. Unfortunately, the full force of these findings does not come through. In the midst of the myriad of Jewish professions that there is one Creator and Sovereign who is worthy of worship, the early extension of cultic devotion to Jesus is downright shocking. However, set in the context of Ehrman’s opening chapters on Greco-Roman and Jewish religion the impression is quite different. The Creator-Creature distinction receives mention, is scrutinized, and finally connects earthen feet and God’s throne in one great continuum.

The issue here is not that Ehrman was wrong to catalog Jewish parallels with apotheosis and the exaltation of great men in the Greco-Roman world. These are well-known aspects of the ongoing debate about how properly to characterize first-century Jewish monotheism. The key is to avoid letting the analogies steamroll the critical differences. This is what goes wrong in the opening chapters of How Jesus Became God. More attention is due to the actual religious life of the relevant practitioners in everyday life. The Greco-Roman world of this period was littered with altars, rites, prayers and invocations to many or most of the pagan examples offered by Ehrman. However, we would be hard pressed to find a single uncontroversial example of a religious cult being offered.