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REVIEWS

Stevens, Daniel. *Songs of the Son: Reading the Psalms with the Author of Hebrews*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2025. 176 pp., $19.99 Paperback.

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What would it be like to sit under an inspired teacher—not just an inspiring one, but one through whom the Holy Spirit actually speaks? How exhilarating it would be to take a course in hermeneutics from Paul, or a seminar on Christian love from John, or a class on biblical history from Dr. Luke. In *Songs of the Son: Reading the Psalms with the Author of Hebrews*, Daniel Stevens ushers his readers into the classroom of the preacher behind this great epistle to study a course in the Christology of the Psalms. By studying under the author of Hebrews, Christians can learn to become better interpreters of the Psalms, especially in understanding how many of them speak intentionally about Christ.

Stevens (PhD, University of Cambridge), an alumnus of the Master of Divinity program at The Master's Seminary and current assistant professor of New Testament interpretation at Boyce College (Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY), brings a combination of exegetical expertise and pastoral sensitivity in *Songs of the Son*. Undergirded by his doctoral work in the book of Hebrews,[1] Stevens illuminates the function of the Psalms in Hebrews, employing an easy-to-read, devotional style. While the book is written largely for a lay-level audience, Stevens' explanations and conclusions also well-serve pastors and scholars, who may imitate Stevens' example of boiling down complex issues in a very understandable way. As will be elaborated below, this contribution to the study of the Christology of the Psalms and the use of the Psalms in the New Testament is overall very helpful, while it could be sharpened still more by greater hermeneutical clarity regarding precisely what it means to see Christ in the Psalms.

To provide an idea of the flavor and content of *Songs of the Son*, this review will summarize the book's general purpose, highlight some key principles for interpreting the Psalms that emerge from the book, and finally give an assessment of the book's strengths and a couple minor critiques.

The purpose of this book is to help the reader better interpret and understand the psalms that are quoted in the book of Hebrews—psalms which that epistle claims teach directly about Jesus, the Son of God. Thus, Stevens includes in this book each

[1] Stevens' PhD work has recently been published as the monograph, *The Theme of Promise in the Epistle to the Hebrews: A Promise Remains* (London: T&T Clark, 2025).

Psalm quoted in the book of Hebrews to teach something about Jesus (Pss 2, 8, 22, 40, 45, 95, 102, 110, 118).[2] In studying how the Psalms are interpreted in Hebrews, Stevens seeks to provide the reader with a practical example of how to use Scripture to interpret Scripture. Thus, in Hebrews, Stevens finds a model for rightly reading the Psalms, seeking to answer to the question, "How are we, as Christians, to read the Psalms? Or to put it another way, what does it mean to read the Psalms (or the whole Old Testament) as Christian Scripture?" (149).

The book's nine chapters are organized around the nine psalms that the author of Hebrews cites with direct reference to Christ. Because the book is primarily about the Psalms with insight from the book of Hebrews, its chapters follow the order of the Psalms as they appear in the OT, not the order in which they appear in Hebrews. For each chapter, Stevens adopts a pattern of covering each psalm twice. First, he analyzes the psalm in its original context in the OT, asking questions and leading the reader to conclusions regarding its intended teaching in its original context. Then, he walks through the psalm's use in Hebrews and how it contributes to the argument of that epistle, pointing out how the Messiah was always meant to be seen in the psalm. Then, equipped with the insights from an inspired interpreter, Stevens turns back to the psalm itself to summarize what it teaches believers today about Christ's person and work. Each chapter closes with several discussion questions to help readers assess whether they have grasped the main emphases of each chapter.

Songs of the Son may be characterized by drawing out four principles Stevens teaches his readers about the Psalms: (1) the Psalms ought to be read according to their original context and intent, (2) the Psalms intend to teach rich theology, including messianic theology, (3) the Psalms often contain intra-Trinitarian dialogue, and (4) the Psalms may be interpreted by identifying tensions and asking good questions for how those tensions can be understood.

First, Stevens teaches his readers by his example in this book that there is a correct way to read and interpret the book of Psalms, and that is to interpret them the way the psalmists intended their work to be read in their original context. The reader ought to pursue the original author's intent. It is encouraging to see this affirmation, especially in a book that covers the use of the Psalms in Hebrews. The NT use of the OT is an oft-debated topic, and many scholars hold that OT passages are reinterpreted or assigned a new or fuller meaning (*sensus plenior*) in the NT. Yet Stevens maintains a consistent hermeneutic between the Old and New Testaments, emphasizing authorial intent and demonstrating that the author of Hebrews read the Psalms the way their authors intended them to be read, rather than reinterpreting them for his own purposes. Additionally, Stevens points out that because the author of Hebrews is writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Christians can be confident the author is interpreting OT Scripture rightly. By following the example set in Hebrews, believers can become better readers and interpreters of Scripture themselves. Stevens explains,

> As we strive to see what the author of Hebrews saw in the short selections of psalms that he references, we will learn how those psalms, how the whole

[2] While Psalm 104 is also quoted in Hebrews (1:7), Stevens relegates a brief discussion of this psalm to an appendix, as the psalm references angels, not Christ.

> Psalter, can be read. We must not miss these lessons. Only at these times can we see infallible interpretation. Only in these moments of inspired exegesis can we precisely know how God would have us read his words. Only by reading Scripture with Scripture can we be perfectly taught how to read Scripture. (8)

Thus, the author of Hebrews is not foisting his own meaning onto the ancient psalms. Rather he interprets them according to their original context and intent, so that as believers follow his example, "we will learn to read the Psalms for what they truly are" (8). And Hebrews holds some particularly exciting examples, as the psalms in this epistle intentionally speak beforehand about the Lord Jesus. Stevens elaborates on the benefit of reading them with the author of Hebrews, explaining that "Their meaning will unfold as we see precisely how they witness to Christ: not only as predictions to be fulfilled but also as a testimony to the very voice of God—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit" (8).

The latter part of this quotation leads to the second principle Stevens teaches his readers about the Psalms. In addition to providing comfort to those under trial and models of true prayer and praise for every believer, the Psalms contain profound theology about the triune God. They are not only for comfort and praise; the Psalms especially intend to teach sound doctrine. As Stevens puts it, "the New Testament authors find a rich theology of God in the Psalter" (3). This is why the Psalms so frequently find a place in the NT as the apostles instruct believers about their God, His Messiah, and His great plan of redemption. Psalm 2, for example, is packed with theological instruction about what kind of Messiah lost sinners need. As Stevens explains, it reveals that "God's solution for human wickedness is a human king" (13) and goes on to indicate that this king must also be God's anointed, David's heir, and even God's Son. Additionally, the vivid description of suffering and death in Psalm 22, as Stevens explains, "is not a crucifixion prophecy shoehorned into an otherwise unrelated psalm. Rather, it tells the whole story of Christ's suffering, his death, his resurrection, and the proclamation of his gospel" (49).

Stevens similarly sees Psalm 40 as "a gospel psalm," noting that "The shifting pattern of speakers, the change from salvation to an ongoing need for deliverance, and the intrusion of one who obeys and proclaims God's will" teach the reality of a people in need of salvation and a Messiah who will accomplish that salvation through real, human obedience (63). This psalm therefore reveals the necessity of the divine Messiah's incarnation.

Then in Psalm 45, the psalmist portrays "a man who is God, who also exists in relationship *to* God. That is, God has a God who rewards him for the wonderful things he does as a man" (70, emphasis original). Stevens further comments that the statements in Psalm 45 "fit Scripture's story of the Son of God who, though possessing every divine prerogative, emptied himself by adding humanity, lived perfectly, died for his people, rose from the dead, and ascended to heaven in the highest glory" (74). These examples demonstrate the rich messianic theology taught in many psalms, which Stevens recaps in his conclusion:

> Through the psalms we have studied, we have seen a man who is both human and God, whose rule determines the fate of nations, who sits at God's right

> hand as king and priest, who offers his body in the place of all Levitical sacrifices, who occupies the position over creation that humanity was meant to inhabit, who created the world and will make it anew, and who is our help and only offer of eternal rest with God. (148)

In addition to teaching believers to read the Psalms per their original intended meaning and demonstrating that the Psalter contains rich theology, a third principle Stevens would have his readers learn is that the Psalms contain not just the human psalmists' words, but God's own speech. This is not simply to affirm that the doctrine of inspiration, which is of course crucial to affirm in all Scripture. But what Stevens would like Christians to see is that while the Psalms were written in their ancient context, the psalmists were not restricted to their ancient context. They could write about themselves in the present, but they could also write intentionally about the Messiah in the future. Indeed, Peter affirms that David, the quintessential psalmist, did this as a prophet (Acts 2:30). Thus, while the psalmists certainly often spoke of their own human troubles and joys, many times they intended to directly record God Himself as the speaker.

This notion is one of Stevens' favorite and oft-repeated insights in *Songs of the Son*. He explains, "when we read the Psalms sometimes Jesus directly speaks to us—not only in the sense that he inspired them but also that the psalmist speaks in the person of Christ" (17). Thus, "Psalm 2 is not only about Jesus; it also contains his words" (17), and as for Psalm 22, "the whole psalm contains Jesus's words" such that David's words in the psalm "are not simply typological but are the words of Christ speaking through him (Heb. 2:11–12)" (47). The Father also speaks directly in the Psalms. Based on its use in Hebrews 1, Stevens argues that in Psalm 102, "the Father proclaims to us the Son's true divinity" (108). In Psalm 110, David "overhears a conversation between the Lord God and his Lord" (114). In pointing these things out, Stevens directs his readers to see the Psalms not just as the words of their human authors, but in many cases as the words of God Himself, whether to believers directly, the Father to the Son, or the Son to the Father.

A fourth principle Stevens brings out in his book is this: to be a good interpreter of the Psalms, one must ask good questions of them to solve difficult tensions. Many psalms easily become confusing if the reader only has the psalmist in mind as the subject. Yet this is not always the case as explained above. Helpfully, Stevens demonstrates what it looks like to ask questions of the psalm in such cases, ultimately to answer the same query of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts, "Of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?" (8:34).

In the Psalms, the reader will often find that the Messiah Himself is the only one who can truly match the descriptions in the text. For example, in Psalm 45 a king is described in glorious and glowing terms as he goes forth to meet his bride. Stevens asks, "Why use the language of extravagant praise—language elsewhere in the Scriptures reserved for God alone—to describe this man who rides out to claim his bride?" (66), then making the observation, "This king stands above all others" (67). Another puzzling element is that at one point, the psalmist is speaking to God and yet makes reference to "Your God" (vv. 6–7). It becomes apparent, as Stevens observes, that "God has a God" (69). Rather than skipping over these difficulties, Stevens models what it looks like to ask honest questions that lead inevitably to

unavoidable conclusions. In the case of Psalm 45, the human king described in glorious terms must somehow be God Himself, and the presence of two subjects called "God," reconciled with the truth that "God is one" (Gal 3:20; Jas 2:19; cf. Deut 6:4) requires multiple persons subsisting in one essence. While the depths of this trinitarian truth will be further plumbed in the NT, Psalm 45 is setting up for that further elaboration, teaching marvelous theology about the nature of God and His divine Messiah.

Thus, rather than seeking to explain away difficulties and tensions in the Psalms, "refusing" as some do "to accept that the psalm means exactly what it says" (69), believers should recognize the tensions, ask good questions, and reason through what the psalm must be saying about God. Because this can be a daunting task for imperfect interpreters, Stevens points out in every chapter of his book the advantage of following an inspired reader—the author to the Hebrews. In sum, Stevens models in this book the four principles of reading the Psalms in their original context, recognizing that the Psalms intentionally teach rich theology about the Messiah, realizing that God the Father and the Son often speak directly in the Psalms, and reasoning through difficult tensions by asking thoughtful questions. These principles helpfully exemplify to the believer how one can become a better interpreter of the Psalms and understand how and where they intentionally speak directly about Jesus.

To summarize the foregoing analysis, *Songs of the Son* is a helpful contribution, as Stephens demonstrates a consistent hermeneutic, affirms that the Psalms should be read according to their original authors' intent, and shows a depth of thought and careful exegesis to carefully and correctly interpret the Psalms. For believers in general, the book is an insightful and exegetically sound investigation of the messianic psalms quoted in the book of Hebrews. For pastors and teachers of Scripture, *Songs of the Son* also provides an exemplary model of clearly expressing the truth to others with a sense of joyful devotion and pastoral encouragement in the truth. Stevens' ease of explanation shows a depth of careful, exegetical study in the background, and he also regularly pauses to express the wonder of what God teaches believers through the Psalms in a way that is truly Christ-exalting. Thus, there is much to appreciate in this book.

There are, however, a couple of critiques to offer as suggestions for how this book may have been even more helpful. These critiques come mainly as a request for greater precision and clarity regarding how believers should use Scripture to interpret Scripture.

First, a more precise explanation could be requested regarding exactly what it means to interpret OT passages on their own terms while at the same time relying upon an inspired interpreter in the NT. While Stevens demonstrates a consistent hermeneutic in this book, his approach seems to betray a semblance of NT priority in interpretation. To be sure, Stevens arrives at the correct conclusion that the NT writers read OT Scripture according to its originally intended meaning, but some of his statements in the book seem to imply that (some?) OT Scriptures can only fully and rightly be comprehended by looking at NT quotations and interpretations of it. For example, Stevens seems to argue that believers can only fully understand Psalm 110 when looking at it through a NT lens: "[O]nce we know the story of the Son of God who became a man, who sat down at the right hand of God until his enemies are made his footstool, our perspective shifts and Psalm 110 falls into focus. *We had the*

pieces all along; we simply did not know how to read them rightly until Jesus came" (126, emphasis added).

The issue here is that if the NT and all it reveals about Jesus are necessary to rightly understand the psalms written about Jesus, the believer is hopeless to understand a messianic psalm that is not quoted in the NT. And if one would argue that the psalm need not be quoted, the believer need only take his knowledge about Jesus from the NT into the OT psalm, the implication is that the OT saints could never have rightly understood messianic psalms for what they really were. As a hopefully edifying suggestion, it would be better to phrase things specifically in terms of using New Testament *principles* of interpretation to read the OT Scriptures, rather than requiring the NT conclusions themselves for given passages. The author of Hebrews helps believers to rightly read the Psalms not by simply providing an interpretive conclusion (giving believers a fish), but by demonstrating the principle of reading the Psalms the way the inspired psalmists intended (teaching believers to fish). The Psalms themselves contain all the pieces needed, and while the NT provides the interpretive answer key for many of them, for others, the reader may correctly ascertain the original meaning through diligent labor in study, seeking with the illuminating Spirit's help to understand the author's intent.

Finally, a request could be made for greater precision in explaining how the author of Hebrews teaches believers "how the whole Psalter can be read" (8). On the one hand, Stevens would not argue that every psalm is directly about Jesus, nor even every part of some messianic psalms (e.g., Ps 40, see pg. 61), yet on the other, he states that "the Psalter is a book where Jesus is present and is near to us. On every page, he is spoken of, spoken to, or himself speaks" (152), and again, "The Psalms are about him. They are his songs" (152). Such statements seem to lead the reader to find some way to read Jesus into every psalm, or that the psalmist's intent is always to say something about God's Son even when that is not at all clear in the original context.

Of course, every psalm is about Christ in the sense that every psalm is inspired by His Spirit and fits into His story of redemption, but it would be helpful to clarify more precisely how believers ought to carefully study the Psalms according to their original intent without consciously or unconsciously making them say something they did not intend. Again, it is more helpful to point the reader to the hermeneutical method of the author of Hebrews than merely to his conclusions. This way, believers will rightly see Christ in all His glory in those psalms in which He is intentionally portrayed, while simultaneously avoiding the pitfalls of eisegesis in psalms that allude to Christ more indirectly as they contribute to the overall storyline of Scripture.

To conclude, *Songs of the Son* is an edifying and exemplary coverage of the psalms that are quoted in the book of Hebrews. Stevens provides both encouragement and instruction for any believer as well as a model of faithful exegesis, evident devotion, and clear explanation every pastor and teacher of Scripture would do well to emulate. Readers would only be better served with a bit more clarity and precision on what it means to read all the Psalms in relation to Christ and how to do this legitimately according to authorial intent. Overall, Christ is rightfully honored in this work as Stevens explains why the Psalms are truly *Songs of the Son*.

Varner, William. *The Preacher and the Song: A Fresh Look at Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs*. Dallas, TX: Fontes Press, 2023. 132 pp., $13.95 Paperback.

Reviewed by James Seth Adcock, Post-Doctoral Researcher, University of Zurich.

Professor William Varner, who teaches at The Master's University and pastors at Grace Baptist Church in Santa Clarita (California), has authored various books in the realms of biblical, Christological, theological, Jewish, Christian, and/or Patristic studies. Prof. Varner is both a biblical professor/pastor and something of a modern, Christian renaissance man. Dr. Varner has a great variety of interests and areas of expertise that one might observe throughout his professional career. For example, Prof. Varner has personally guided, over his long tenure of teaching, many Christians on tours in Israel and in other biblically-related places for believers in the Scriptures. He always gives his reader an interesting read and his recent book, *The Preacher and the Song*, is no exception to this rule.

With *The Preacher and the Song*, Prof. William Varner sets out to present an "introduction to Solomon's life and writings, with original translations of Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon, and a novel reading strategy for both" (cf. the book's webpage at Fontes Press).[1] The book's table of contents reveals the following main sections, all of which must be read to fully appreciate the arguments and themes of Varner's contribution: "Preface, 1. Overview of Solomon's Life, 2. But What about Proverbs?, 3. The Challenge of the Song of Songs, 4. A Translation of the Song of Songs, 5. Ecclesiastes or the Kohelet, 6. Tracing the Goads and Nails, 7. The Preacher and the Song." After reading the preface, I got the real impression that *The Preacher and the Song* resulted from a personal journal that taught Varner to view Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs in the way that he describes in the book. Moreover, this "personal touch" of Varner's can be seen throughout the book as he relates various life experiences and bibliographic resources that have taught him personally how to approach the difficult-to-interpret books of Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes.

For example, Varner personally learned his positive approach to Ecclesiastes and his "three-character view" (xiii) of Song of Songs from a Bob Jones University professor named "Dr. Fred Afman" (xiii, 26, 111), yet, as Varner relates, Afman's book is unpublished and might be difficult to obtain. However, it seems that Afman's "three-character view" is faithfully reflected in Varner's argumentation throughout the book. Varner does not provide any footnotes, or any endnote bibliography, or an annotated bibliography in the book's backmatter, or even any type of index such as a glossary of Scripture references. However, despites these substantial absences in the book's contents, Varner does offer an excellent, broad overview and practical approach to the two books for serious students or researchers of these two very-difficult-to-understand books of the Bible. The book, as Varner explicitly states in the preface (xv) is not written for biblical scholars or serious academics, but rather, is intended for the serious church layman who wishes to read the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes in a better light than they are often read, either among believers in the church or even critically among biblical scholars.

[1] https://www.fontespress.com/product/the-preacher-and-the-song/

In general, I agree with Varner's admirable approach to the books of the Song of Songs and of Ecclesiastes (i.e., the Kohelet), although one can quibble with him, as with any commentator, on the details of his interpretation at times. Personally, I learned much from Varner's "Dramatic" approach to the book of Song of Songs (31–36), which sees the Song of Songs as portraying three main characters of King Solomon, the Shulamite woman (e.g. Song 1:5–7), and an unnamed and otherwise unknown "Shepherd" figure (not to mention a fourth personified group of the "Daughters" that speak in frequent refrains, e.g., Song 1:2–4). For me personally, Varner's book was my first exposure to an increasingly popular (primarily Protestant) interpretation of the Song of Songs, which argues that the book portrays a drama between these four groups or characters, with 8:14 being the Shulamite maiden's answer to her beloved Shepherd's call in 8:13. Likewise, I heartily agree with Varner's "positive" approach to Ecclesiastes, which makes sense of the important refrains of wise instruction from the "Preacher," as well as the stunning conclusion of Ecclesiastes 12:8–14's apparent repentance by King Solomon (103–105). All in all, Varner does quite the admirable job of relating the books of Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs to each other in the life of King Solomon, as well as to our current, modern audience of Christian believers who earnestly desire to understand properly the original context and meaning of these two often neglected books of the Old Testament. I will now briefly relate the structure and sections of the book.

Following the important and necessary "Preface" (xiii–xv), Varner gives an excellent "Overview of Solomon's Life" in the first chapter (1–14), providing a proper foundation for his analysis of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs as books written by the historical person commonly named "King Solomon." In his second chapter "But What about Proverbs?" (15–24), Varner relates the book of Proverbs to King Solomon's life, including his authorship of the two books of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs. Varner postulates that Solomon lived roughly sixty years (7, 23), writing Ecclesiastes at the end of his life, but writing the Song of Songs probably closer to the middle of his life, nearer to the possible time he also wrote Proverbs, early in his kingly reign at Jerusalem.

In Varner's third chapter "The Challenge of the Song of Songs" (25–36), Varner lays out his over-arching perspective and thematic arguments for his perspective of the Song of Songs. He also gives a brief overview of scholarship (35–36). In the fourth chapter "A Translation of the Song of Songs" (37–59), Varner provides a schematic layout of the verses in the Song of Songs, along with a slightly-modified text form of the "Legacy Standard Bible" translation. Next, in Varner's fifth chapter labeled "Ecclesiastes or the Kohelet" (61–73), Varner lays out his over-arching approach and thematic outline for his interpretive framework that he utilizes to interpret Ecclesiastes, or the book of "Kohelet" (61). Then, in the sixth chapter entitled "Tracing the Goads and Nails" (75–111), Varner utilizes Richard De Haan's thematic outline published in *The Art of Staying off Dead-End Streets* (see Varner's book on page 73 and pages 110–111)[2] to interpret and expound the entire book of Ecclesiastes by utilizing a modified text form of the "Legacy Standard Bible." Lastly,

[2] See also the outline of Ecclesiastes published by Martin Wyngaarden of Calvin Seminary under the article title of: Martin Wyngaarden, "The Interpretation of Ecclesiastes" *The Calvin Forum* 20, no. 8: (March 1955): 57–60. (See also Varner's book on page 111).

in the seventh and final chapter called "The Preacher and the Song" (113–14), Varner hammers home twelve points or principles that he has earlier explained from the books of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs.

Essentially, Varner has made two rarely-read and rarely-understood books, which are both ascribed to the famous King Solomon, much easier to grasp and apply in a comprehensible manner. He has unfolded the so-called "enigmas" of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs for a modern audience that wishes to revere the two books' respective messages. Often Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes are compared to riddles wrapped in enigmas. However, Varner convincingly assists his readers to untangle the enigmatic riddles of Solomon's two books. Avoiding a risqué view of the Song of Songs and a pessimistically existential take from Ecclesiastes, Varner provides his readers two interpretive "keys" from their final chapters (i.e., chapter 8 in Song of Songs and chapter 12 in Ecclesiastes). This is to say, Varner advocates viewing the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes through an interpretive key found at the back door of each one of these two books. Varner's reading approach "from the back door" provides the modern reader with a means to understand the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes through a very natural way to read the end of each book (i.e., at chapter 8 of Song of Songs and chapter 12 of Ecclesiastes).

Varner's take on Ecclesiastes and on the Song of Songs rang with quite a unique sound in this reviewer's reading. Even though Varner does not intend the book to be a scholarly work, I wish biblical scholars would read it. I think serious and critical interpreters of the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes will find much to avoid a simply risqué view or the former and an overly pessimistic interpretation of the latter. Varner's approach in this book is to give the big pictures of Ecclesiastes and of the Song of Songs, so that one should not expect an in-depth, verse-by-verse commentary of both books, although I hope future authors will utilize Varner's simple introduction to write lengthier commentaries. Hence, I would argue that Varner's "three-character view" of the Song of Songs and the "positive take" on Ecclesiastes should be a starting point for future, serious scholarship on both books. For example, the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs simply does not work exegetically. King Solomon simply does not function as any type of Christ or godly example in the book of the Song of Songs. Nor does the Song of Songs work as simply a series of love poems exalting the praiseworthy nature of sexual love between a Shepherd figure and a woman among King Solomon's harem. Song of Songs simply demands a higher message throughout the various contexts and background descriptions provided in the poetry. While one can disagree with Varner's take on certain verses, such as his explanation or perspective on dramatic personas speaking the passages in the Song of Songs, I think that it is quite clear that Varner is essentially correct in his primary points of interpretation concerning Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs as presented in his book *The Preacher and the Song*.

In conclusion, I would utilize Varner's book *The Preacher and the Song* when teaching in an academic setting to provide a helpful corrective or guidance to the critical commentaries which one must often incorporate when instructing academic courses on the Bible. It is difficult to find commentaries on Ecclesiastes or on the Song of Songs that give Varner's same needed, common-sense approach toward these two biblical books while also relating them to the life of their traditional author – King Solomon. Moreover, it is nearly impossible today to find commentaries that

would still uphold Solomonic authorship of these two difficult-to-interpret books as well. Varner's *The Preacher and the Song* is a welcome addition to any minister's or serious Bible student's library, although one should not expect any annotated bibliography or explanatory citations of earlier bibliographic sources that would support views like Varner's! Yet, even though Varner's book does not attempt to be a serious academic or scholarly resource on Ecclesiastes or the Song of Songs, I still enthusiastically give it my highest recommendation and praise for those who want a great introduction and a practical guide for these two often-neglected books that are ascribed to King Solomon's authorship!

Cole, Graham A. *Theological Method: An Introduction*. Short Studies in Systematic Theology. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2025. 128 pp., $16.99 Paperback.

Reviewed by Daniel Clouthier, Assistant to the Executive Director at the John MacArthur Publishing Group.

Graham A. Cole (ThD, Australian College of Theology) serves as the Emeritus dean and professor of biblical and systematic theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. In his work *Theological Method: An Introduction*, from the *Short Studies in Systematic Theology* series, Cole sets out to equip not only the academic, but also pastors, theological students, and interested laypeople with an understanding of the "why" and "how" of doing theology. Because right ideas about God stem from right methods, Cole lays out five elements that are foundational to a proper method. It is these which form the basis of this book.

This brief manual begins in chapter 1 with the self-revelation of God. Chapter 2 moves into the witness of Christian thought and practice in Church history. The third chapter recognizes that Christians do theology "outside of Eden," taking into consideration the noetic effect of sin and other various threats to our theology. In light of that, the fourth chapter calls for an understanding of the role of wisdom in doing theology in such a context. And lastly, to bring it all together, the practicing theologian does this as an act of worship to God.

The strength of this book is found in its succinct and logically fluent nature. Cole does a commendable job of introducing the reader to theological method as he sees it. While not sacrificing theological profundity, he easily leads both the trained and the layperson through his approach. Equally commendable is his front-loading of the place of Scripture in doing theology, which the first chapter addresses.

Chapter 1 begins with a powerful personal anecdote highlighting the importance of proper theological training. This story concerns a previous classmate of Cole's from his undergraduate work who likewise went on to theological studies, though at a much different college. Having compared their training, Cole revealed how he was pressed to always base his theological claims in Scripture. For his former classmate though, the Bible was never opened in his studies. The necessity of Scriptural evidence for doctrine was thrust upon Cole effectively, lest, as his teacher stated, one would have "a textless doctrine" unbecoming of such a title as doctrine (20).

Cole goes on to highlight the prime position of Scripture in theology. First, it is Spirit-inspired, inerrant, and infallible. Contrasted with liberal theology, Scripture is

to be understood as the highest revelation from God to man. Therefore, it is the definitive *norma normans* (norming norms). He also gives attention to hermeneutics, making the case that Scripture is to interpret Scripture, making use of genre and biblical theology. Given the high place of Scripture, Cole argues that the theologian has other authorities that he is to take into consideration as well, pointing to Christian tradition, which he covers in the next chapter. Though he elevates Christian tradition, he makes clear that Scripture is the final word. This chapter serves the reader well giving them the right foundation for study, while also recognizing the place of tradition, seeing it as a derived authority sitting under the Word of revelation.

Having laid the groundwork, chapter 2 addresses more fully the use of Christian thought and practice in history. The faith once for all handed down to the saints is mediated by tradition. Therefore, as Cole argues, tradition cannot be escaped, and the practicing theologian does well to learn from the past. Rightly so is Christian tradition contrasted with the Word of God in that the latter is a norming norm while the former is a normed norm (*norma normata*). While upholding the principle of *sola Scriptura,* he rejects the notion that Scripture should be stripped of its interpretive context in the Church. With such a rich history and theological victories like those of Nicaea, the theologian should not neglect the past.

Moving from the past to the present, in chapter 3, Cole deals with the context in which the theologian does his work today. Life outside of Eden confronts one with the noetic effects of sin, a groaning creation, and an enemy of the soul engaged in spiritual warfare. In light of such a daunting environment, Cole highlights the need for humility and the guardrails of doing theology in fellowship with other believers. Given the believer's propensity to err, among other challenges, this chapter serves the reader well, knowing that knowledge still puffs up.

So far, Cole has showcased the primacy of Scripture, the need for past generations, and the predicament of the present. With these three considerations before the reader, he introduces the work of wisdom in utilizing this data for proper theologizing. Grounded in the fear of God, wisdom protects one from wrong ways of doing theology. Calling upon the use of the believer's capacity to reason, Cole urges readers to take up the right tools for the job. Employing such concepts as dogmatic rank (distinguishing between level 1 and level 2 convictions, as he refers to them), control beliefs (theological boundaries), and biblical theology. In sum, this is a helpful chapter that highlights the nuances of utilizing wisdom in one's theology.

Bringing it all together, Cole seeks to show how this is done in practice with an aim towards worship. Not content with merely affecting the mind, faithful theology, Cole argues, must impact one's life. With a practical application of the methods spelled out in this book, this chapter is a fitting capstone to this work.

Prior to this book's close, Cole points out the logical flow found within his theological method (start with God's Word, move to Christian thought, consider our broken world, in light of that utilize wisdom, and do all this as an act of worship). This, he states, is the "essential order" (104). He goes on to caution though that one should avoid holding too rigidly to method. For example, theological reflection may be initiated in us as result of some reality in our broken world. Ultimately though, the questions that arise from this are to direct us back to God's self-revelation as the final authority and the testimony of Christian thought and so on. In line with that, he gives a current example having to do with the question of gender fluidity. In this, his

proposed order for theological reflection places the contemplation of the witness of Christian thought and practice prior to that of Scripture. Such a change in order might leave the reader asking the question, "Why?" Having done so well to highlight the prime place of Scripture over tradition, it is unclear as to why that would change the order for this given issue (or any for that matter). Perhaps maintaining some rigidity of method would best serve the theologian. Always going first to Scripture regardless of how theological reflection arises ensures that Scripture remains primary.

All in all, this work is readily recommended to the reader. It provides the student of Scripture a firm foundation as they embark on the work of doing theology well, and doing it all for the glory of God.

Morell, Caleb. *A Light on the Hill: The Surprising Story of How a Local Church in the Nation's Capital Influenced Evangelicalism*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2025. 352 pp., $24.99 Hardcover.

Reviewed by Karl Walker, Associate Editor, The Master's Seminary.

A Light on the Hill: The Surprising Story of How a Local Church in the Nation's Capital Influence Evangelicalism narrates the history of Capitol Hill Baptist Church (hereafter CHBC) in Washington, D.C. The author, Caleb Morell (PhD [in progress], Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary), possesses a background in history from the University of Georgetown and serves at CHBC as an assistant pastor. Morell's narrative is a collection of characters, pastors and parishioners alike, in recounting the contours of CHBC's history. As Morell puts it, "this book probes the factors and conditions that contribute to gospel faithfulness … tell[ing] the story of how Capitol Hill Baptist Church has navigated the past century and a half as an evangelical witness in Washington" (3–4). The almost 150 years of faithful gospel proclamation testifies to the truth of Christ's statement that the gates of hell will not prevail against His church (Matt 16:18).

The book begins with CHBC's origin as the fruit of a prayer gathering begun by Celestia Ferris (ch. 1). This faithful woman, along with her husband Abraham, began hosting prayer meetings in her home in 1867 with the desire "for a Baptist church to be established on Capitol Hill" (22). That prayer was answered in the formation of an assembly whose first pastor was Joseph W. Parker (ch. 2). Though Parker laid the ecclesial groundwork of the then named Metropolitan Baptist Church, its next steps were mired by controversy regarding the church's financials and proposed building plan (ch. 3). Yet Morell traces the providential guiding of God through the midst of difficult times, noting the gracious response of Metropolitan's members to those who separated and formed their own church (62–64).

The next few eras take the reader from the instability after this church split to the eventful period during World War I, with the fiery evangelist Billy Sunday and the Spanish Flu of 1918 (chs. 4–7). More times of faithfulness, courage, and discernment, though not absent from difficulty, continued in the post-war period, the next segment of the church's history (chs. 8–10). Personalities like Agnes Shankle shine at

potential turning points for the congregation such as the decision of a new pastor. The arrival of Carl F. Henry eventually resulted in the calling of Mark Dever as the current pastor of the church. And in between Dever's installation as pastor (1994) and Henry's arrival as a member (1956) is no shortage of intriguing historical threads such as the shifting demographics of the neighborhood of the church (ch. 11) or the fall of a renowned pastor (ch. 12). Finally, the book concludes by describing the motto of Dever in coming to CHBC: "Preach, Pray, Love, and Stay" (ch. 13), and the elders' approach to CHBC's size problem—"Doing Nothing and Church Planting," interspersed with brief accounts of the creation of 9Marks and T4G (ch. 14).

Several reflections on this book might be worth consideration in recommending *A Light on the Hill* to potential readers. First, Morell's effort to write a 'biography' of a church, though not unique, remains compelling. Studying the larger view of a church raises questions in a historical context that may not be generated if study were isolated to single individuals. For example, what should a church do when its membership relocates geographically? Should the church cater to the geographically distanced members? Should it address the motivations behind moving? Should it adapt to reflect the presence of new neighbors? How would these decisions affect future generations in the same assembly? The socio-demographic shifts of 1950–1970 in Washington, D.C. that affected the membership of CHBC occur in many other cities today. How should a church respond when such circumstances happen? These questions are the fruit of a well-constructed narrative by Morell that allows for appropriate reflection.

Second, the lay person will be stimulated by the impact a single faithful church member might make in his or her local body. The bold, faithful examples set by women like Celestia Ferris, Agnes Shankle, or Margaret S. Roy evidence the blessing of godly members to their local churches. And for the elder or aspiring pastor, the contrast between the ministry of Walter Pegg and K. Owen White prompts one to meditate on the nature of pastoral faithfulness, the importance of practiced church membership, and other questions of ecclesiology. These examples are strengthened by being placed in the context of a church's existence for nearly 150 years.

Third, the historian may at times be frustrated by the approach Morell adopts in narrating CHBC's history (a point the author acknowledges).[1] Rather than avoiding providentialist interpretation, Morell makes an intentional effort to observe the hand of God in beginning, preserving, and guiding CHBC to its place of gospel ministry today. Yet that being observed, there are places in which this approach of historiography may prove distracting. Each chapter concludes with an applicational section in which the author notes "here is what the reader learns from…" At times, this becomes too much of a restatement of the chapter for the astute reader. Is there a way to write history such that the conclusions become evident to the reader without having to say "here is what to look for—"?

[1] For reference to the author's perspective on the chosen method of historiography, listen here: https://www.9marks.org/episode/on-a-light-on-the-hill/.

Another historical issue, though perhaps a triviality, is the choice of subtitle—"The Surprising Story of How a Local Church in the Nation's Capital Influenced Evangelicalism." This title is somewhat anachronistic, in that for 75 years of CHBC's history, the church's influence on 'evangelicalism' was limited. The influence of Capitol Hill Baptist Church beyond Washington, D.C. appears to be minimal prior to the arrival of Carl F. Henry in the mid-20th century. In seeking fairness to the author, this review recognizes the publisher's role in such decisions as the subtitle, in that it did not appear as if the book's primary argument was to connect the history of CHBC to evangelicalism as a movement. The same might be said of the reflection and application section at the end of each chapter. Yet, regardless of these two minor historiographical preferences, the work as a whole is a thought-provoking account of God's grace in the midst of an ordinary church. It comes well-recommended by the reviewer in the hopes of generating further reflection on what enables a local church to shine as a light in the world, whether in a rural city or on Capitol Hill.