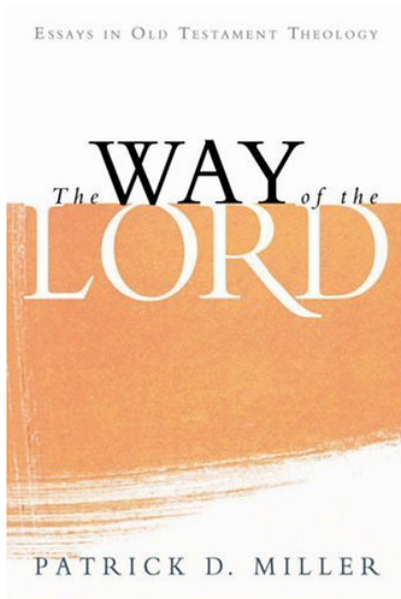


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**Miller, Patrick D.**

***The Way of the Lord: Essays in Old Testament Theology***

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The requirement of good Old Testament scholarship is to move between the hard demand of critical work in history, archaeology, and linguistics and the imaginative, hermeneutical work of theological interpretation. Most scholars, by training and by inclination, fall out in one or another of these two directions. More than any other Old Testament scholar whom I can identify, Patrick Miller manages to negotiate the spectrum of critical and interpretive work with finesse and grace-filled persuasiveness. The outcome of his work is thoroughly grounded critical study, but criticism that is constantly and increasingly in the service of the church as he acts out his vocation as a theologian of the church. It may be the outcome of the maturing (aging?) process that Miller's more recent work has become intensely theological, but without ever leaving behind historical-critical grounding. This volume, by my count the third volume of his collected journal articles, brings together the best of his interpretive work; even though it draws together journal articles from a variety of sources that are not readily available for many readers, there is an amazing coherence to the sum of the articles, all of which concern "the way," the practice of glad, sustained obedience that constitutes the work of faith in the world.

In more recent time Miller's work has been preoccupied with the tradition of Deuteronomy—with particular reference to the Decalogue—and the book of Psalms. His

presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature explored the deep interrelatedness of Deuteronomy and Psalms, arguing that the Psalms are Israel's lyrical articulation of the covenantal theology of Deuteronomy. Thus it is not surprising that in the present volume the two major groups of journal articles concern "The Commandments" and "The Psalms." The juxtaposition of these two sections of the book shows the way in which Miller takes a large view of "Old Testament Theology." That to which Israel had answered at Sinai (and again at the Jordan) is the core material of Israel's singing and worship.

Miller offers nine articles on the commandments. In this section the range of his theological sensibility about the commandments is remarkable, most especially concerning the "Third Use" of the law in his Calvinist perspective. Miller is at work tracing the commandments through the several books of the Old Testament and here explores the first commandment in the books of Exodus and Joshua. Three matters on the commandments seem to me of signal interest. First, his essay on "The Sufficiency and Insufficiency" of the commandments pays attention to the dynamic requirement of ongoing interpretation in order that the commandments may be received in any particular instance as pertinent and applicable. In good Calvinist fashion, Miller circles back to finish with an accent on "sufficiency." Second, his essay on commands in "Reformed Perspective" reflects Miller's skill as a church theologian and, in sync with the Heidelberg Catechism, marks "thankfulness" as the proper venue for obedience. Third, Miller considers the way in which the commandments may serve "the common good," modeling the way textual work is available for a "public theologian," showing how the commandments offer a "moral framework" for public life. As I read Miller I was also reading *Consumed* by Benjamin Barber, who explores the way in which the ideology of consumerism is destroying the human fabric of our society. Miller's theological perspective offers a stunning contrast to the self-indulgent, entitled autonomy of our society and the way in which the commandments provide ground for a healthy alternative.

In the second section of the book, on the Psalter, Miller continues his splendid theological interpretation. He offers close and rich readings of specific psalms. I find especially telling in this section of seven essays two of special interest. First he discusses, as we eventually must in the Psalter, the psalms of imprecation, articulations of vengeance and hatred. Miller works hard to take these psalms seriously but contains them very well within the scope of church teaching. He makes the argument in another essay that laments are for personal and intimate usage, not for public voicing. This is a point at which I have had long wonderment at Miller's argument, though his test case of Hannah's lament is, in its own context, completely compelling. I am not sure Miller has fully thought about those prayers as liturgical resources, so that perhaps more remains to be done on this question.

In two remarkable chapters he traces out, from the Psalter, anthropology of “the sinful, trusting creature.”

There is a third section of five essays of a more general nature concerning “Old Testament Theology.” Of these I comment on two articles in particular. In “What the Scriptures Principally Teach,” Miller addresses the continually vexed issue of homosexuality in the church. After he considers the familiar texts, including Lev 18 and 20, he moves to “The Rules of Faith and Love.” He appeals to the Scots Confession and concludes:

The Scots Confession says: “We dare not receive or admit any interpretation which is contrary to any principal point of our faith, or to any other plain text of scripture, or to the rule of love” (chapter 18). It is the phrase “any other plain text of scripture,” that appears to give us undebatable clarity on how we judge homosexuality, but the other criteria of the Scots Confession may take us in other directions. We are not, in fact, dealing with “any principal point of our faith” in this regard, and we may be in significant conflict with the rule of love as a guide to how we read and respond to the scriptures. That rule of love reminds us that our interpretation of scripture stands under the divine command to love God and neighbor. (293)

In the end Miller, in a characteristically bold and thoughtful way, allows that lived experience in itself may be a means through which the church is led by the Spirit to new obedience. He appeals to the “new learning” that the church in “the southern United States” had with reference to segregation. On that basis he leaves open the prospect of new learning experience, led by the Spirit, concerning homosexuality. This essay reflects Miller’s deep sensibility and his enormous authority as a teacher of the church, a capacity to ponder the text and to submit even the text to the power and guidance of the living Spirit.

The other most compelling essay in this section, by my lights, is his essay on God’s wrath, “Slow to Anger.” Miller draws two conclusions from his careful study: (1) divine wrath contains “nothing capricious at all” but is deep divine anger commensurate with sin and disobedience; (2) divine anger is never the last word but is judgment that serves to renew those upon whom God impinges. These two conclusions offer sound, coherent church faith. For myself, I am more than a little uneasy about such judgments, both from the text and from lived experience. My own work would not draw such a reassuring conclusion on either point, but this argument exhibits exactly the deep confessional rootage from which Miller works.

This volume is a rich offer from a magisterial teacher of the church exhibiting his most interpretive maturity. There are two reasons for paying careful attention to Miller's welcome work. First, his essays make a substantive contribution to our theological learning. He delivers interpretations that serve the faith and life of the church, moving as he always does, between imaginative-liturgical and ethical-public dimensions of faith. Second, beyond that, one can learn perspective and method from Miller about how to do our own interpretive work. The recovery of the Bible as a lively resource and guide in the church is urgent, and Miller shows us how to engage in that recovery with confidence and attentiveness.