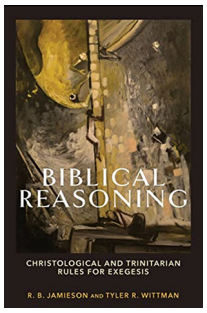
Book Review



R.B. Jamieson and Tyler Wittman.
Biblical Reasoning: Christological and Trinitarian Rules for Exegesis
Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022 ISBN 1540964671 pp 320.

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R.B. Jamieson and Tyler Wittman's book is a timely contribution to evangelical scholarship. A growing body of literature is engaging in the task of theological retrieval to reclaim classical theism for contemporary theology. Classical theism conceives God as the greatest being, thus possessing absolute attributes such as divine simplicity, omniscience, omnipotence, immutability, and impassibility. Classical theists apply this perspective to the doctrine of the Trinity and to Christology in particular, arguing that the persons of the Trinity are perfectly united in the one absolute being of God, meaning each person fully possesses all the divine attributes without being three separate Gods. Classical theists also explain how Jesus has two natures united in his one person, the divine nature possessing absolute divine attributes and the human nature not possessing those absolute attributes. To revive this tradition, scholars such as Matthew Barrett, Craig Carter, and Gavin Ortlund, among many others, currently write and teach on the subject of theological retrieval, which is the process of reading and appropriating the consistent witness of patristic, medieval, and Reformation theologians, particularly in theology proper and Christology. The conflict that arises, however, is that three potentially competing lines of inquiry are involved: systematic theology, historical theology, and exegesis/biblical studies. Some scholars, including Bruce Ware and Wayne Grudem, have previously raised this question: to what extent should the classical tradition govern our reading of Scripture? Put differently, how do we reconcile these three lines to maintain a consistent, biblical, and theologically robust witness?

Jamieson and Wittman effectively tie these three lines together to produce a sound exegetical "rule-kit." The introduction sets forth the methodology of the book: creating a framework that sets exegesis and theology in a mutually informing relationship by critically retrieving and appropriating fourth-century principles of biblical interpretation.

The book is divided into two parts which develop seven principles of biblical interpretation. Part 1, which includes Chapters 1-3, focuses on the authors' first three principles: Scripture directs Christians towards eternal life in the vision of Christ's glory (p. 4), God uses all of Scripture to teach finite and fallen creatures (p. 24), and Christ presents himself to his people in inspired Scripture (p. 43). Based on these principles, readers should look at Scripture as a unified witness in order to understand its unified theological vision.

In Part 2, which includes Chapters 4-10, the authors develop their last four

principles to demonstrate how the Trinity and the doctrine of Christ inform the task of hermeneutics. The fourth principle sets forth a qualitative distinction between creatures and the Creator: God created all things ex nihilo and thus transcends his creation (p. 74). This means readers should interpret Scripture in a "God-befitting" manner, making sure not to undermine God's transcendence in their interpretation (p. 77). The fifth principle affirms basic trinitarianism, that God is one nature in three distinct persons (p. 91). Based on this principle, readers should discern in Scripture what qualities are common in the divine nature and what qualities are proper to the distinct persons. For example, omnipotence is common to all persons of the Trinity, but the term "begotten" is only properly applied to God the Son. Because the three persons hold the divine nature in common, the external operations of the Trinity are inseparable. Readers should be careful to maintain the unity of the persons in their works and to understand their common properties even when a passage applies a common divine property to a single person of the Trinity (p. 91). The sixth principle affirms the unconfused union of two natures in the Son's person, meaning he is truly human and truly God (p. 126). From this principle, readers should recognize that only one divine subject acts in the two natures. This is true even though Scripture sometimes ascribes to one nature what belongs to the other, which is known as the *communicatio idiomatum* (p. 127). Because of this unity of natures in one person, the authors commend partitive exegesis, or "two-nature exegesis," which aims to distinguish between what Scripture says about Christ according to his humanity versus what Scripture says about Christ according to his divinity (p. 154). The seventh and final principle explains the eternal relations of origin within the Trinity: the Father eternally generates the Son and the Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and Son (p. 179). This principle helps readers to understand how Scripture uses these ordered personal relations to explain how the persons relate to each other and how they work together in their particular order (p. 179). In Chapter 10, the authors apply these seven principles to John 5:17-30 to model exegesis that is biblically sound and theologically informed (p. 213). The Conclusion closes the book with a reflection on how proper exegesis leads us to behold God's glory.

A couple of the book's weaknesses warrant note here. First, although the rule-kit itself is helpful, the way the authors develop the framework is inconsistent with how they describe the relationship between exegesis and theology. The authors argue that exegetical reasoning epistemologically precedes theological reasoning (p. xvii, 56), but then they develop theological principles in Chapters 1 and 2 without first establishing an initial method of exegetical reasoning. In other words, they acknowledge that exegesis precedes theology, but then they explain their theology before their exegetical method. The usual hermeneutical considerations such as language, grammar, history, and literary context are not listed until Chapter 3, after the authors have already arguably employed some undefined exegetical method to develop their first two theological principles. This is in some ways intentional, as they admit that they

"cannot justify every exegetical decision" as they could in a biblical studies volume (p. xx). They also clarify that they aim to derive rules for exegesis from principles of theology (p. xxii). Failing to explain their initial exegetical method, however, strengthens the criticism from the field of biblical studies that these kinds of books place doctrine before exegesis. This failure also undermines the authors' claim that exegetical reasoning epistemologically precedes theological reasoning. They could resolve this problem by taking the elements of exegesis mentioned in the section entitled "The Practice of Biblical Reasoning" in Chapter 3, previewing those elements in the introduction of the book, and then explicitly referencing those elements as they develop their initial theological principles. Doing so would allow them to remain consistent with their claim that exegesis epistemologically precedes theology.

A second weakness of the book is that it is ambiguous about what counts as "creaturely" when applying their "God-befitting" rule, particularly when referring to the Son's relationship to the Father. In describing the personal missions of the Father and Son (i.e., sending and being sent, respectively), the authors argue, "the God-fittingness rule reminds us that divine missions are not like creaturely missions. They imply no temporal sequence, local commute, or chain of command…The Son therefore obeys *because* he is sent, not in his sending" (p. 205, authors' emphasis). In doing so, they deny that the divine Son is "subordinate" to the Father or that he "obeys" in his sending. Why? "Because commanding belongs to a superior, and obeying belongs to an inferior" (p. 202). For Jamieson and Wittman, affirming the divine Son's obedience in his being sent carries creaturely connotations that deny the Son's equality with the Father. While it might be true in human relationships that obedience implies inequality, it is not clear why commanding and obeying must always have these creaturely connotations, especially if the Son's generation does not carry the creaturely connotations of human generation. This problem is heightened in footnote 29 of Chapter 10, where the authors affirm that the word "dependence" is acceptable as opposed to "subordination," "provided the term is properly unpacked" (p. 234). It is unclear, however, why "dependence" or "generation" can be properly unpacked, but "subordinate" cannot be. Why is it inconsistent with the God-befitting rule to safeguard "obedience" and "subordinate" in a similar way? It would be helpful for them to demonstrate why these terms necessarily carry a creaturely connotation that cannot be unpacked to be God-befitting, like "dependent" or "begotten." Doing so would clarify the details of the God-befitting rule. As a result, it would also strengthen the process of partitive exegesis by indicating how the reader can discern what is categorically and irrefutably "creaturely," and thus what cannot be ascribed to the divine nature.

This confusion is particularly clear in their exegesis of John 6:38, where Jesus says, "For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me." The authors argue that the Son's submission in this passage is only human because "it is soteriologically necessary

that the will the Son submits to the Father is human" (p. 203). The problem with this exegesis is that it confines submission to the incarnation when Jesus explicitly does not confine that to the incarnation. In Jesus' statement, the "I" who came down from heaven, which refers to his pre-incarnate state, is the same one who is not doing "my own will but the will of him who sent me." Based on the text, it seems that Jesus' purpose in coming down from heaven was to submit his will to the Father's, which would in turn indicate a continuity of will and submission from his pre-incarnate state to his incarnation. In order to strengthen their argument to the contrary, the authors would have to demonstrate exegetically that Jesus refers to two different natures in sequence in this statement rather than one person coming down to submit his will to the Father's.

Jamieson and Wittman's book is a great exegetical resource that ties systematic theology, historical theology, and biblical studies together to produce a sound guide for biblical interpretation. This book serves as a great introduction to hermeneutics and theologically informed exegesis, whether for the new seminarian or the layperson looking to read their Bible more effectively. It also fills a gap in the burgeoning field of theological retrieval by contributing a detailed exegetical framework informed by theological retrieval, thus helping to bridge the divide between biblical studies and theological inquiry.