

Deification by Life

Abide and Go: Missional Theosis in the Gospel of John,
by Michael J. Gorman. Cascade Books, 2018.

Biblical scholars interested in the doctrine of deification have generally neglected the writings of John. This lamentable lacuna is thankfully being filled. In 2016 Andrew Byers published the first book-length study of Johannine deification in the English language (reviewed in the Fall 2017 issue of this journal). In the same year Michael J. Gorman delivered the prestigious Didsbury Lectures on the topic “Missional Theosis in the Gospel of John.” Gorman holds the Raymond E. Brown Chair in Biblical Studies and Theology at St. Mary’s Seminary and University in Baltimore, Maryland, and has written numerous books on theosis in Paul. In *Abide and Go: Missional Theosis in the Gospel of John* (hereafter, *Abide*), he offers his revised and expanded Didsbury Lectures to further the conversation on theosis in John.

Because the lectures that became *Abide* were delivered in the same year that Byers’s book was published, Gorman’s book, by his own admission, lacks substantial engagement with it (189). There is thus significant overlap between the two books, but the two also differ substantially in their general focus. While Byers focuses on the relationship between deification and ecclesiology, Gorman focuses on the relationship between deification and mission.

Deification and Mission

At the beginning, end, and middle of the book, Gorman offers the following as the central thesis of *Abide*:

Johannine spirituality fundamentally consists in the *mutual indwelling* of the Triune God (Father, Son, and Spirit) and Jesus’ disciples such that disciples *participate* in the divine love and life, and therefore in the life-giving mission of God, thereby both *demonstrating their likeness to God as God’s children* and *becoming more and more like God as they become like his Son by the work of the Spirit*. This spirituality can be summarized in the phrase “abide and go,” based on John 15. (8)

As his title suggests, Gorman’s principal aim is to show that theosis is by no means retreatist or isolationist. Many biblical scholars have recognized the profound mystical texture of the Gospel of John, and some have argued that

Johannine mysticism engenders an insalubrious Johannine sectarianism (30-31). Theosis, in other words, is often taken to entail an unhealthy disengagement from and hostile attitude toward the world outside. *Abide* argues that this clearly cannot be the case. If the believers become God in God’s salvation, they participate in the divine attributes, among which is God’s all-encompassing love, which embraces even enemies:

If the “mission” of the Fourth Gospel, and of the God to whom it bears witness, is to engender children of God who resemble their Father (John 1:12), sharing the divine DNA, then it would seem inevitable that such children will share the fundamental divine character trait of love for the world, which means also love for enemies. (162)

As Gorman later puts it, “the sending Father shares both his DNA and the family business (so to speak) with the children, who have the privilege of manifesting that divine DNA by participating in that divine business” (186). Gorman is arguing that it is logically inconsistent to claim that theosis is retreatist or isolationist. The believer who participates in the God who is love will inevitably love not only God and fellow believers but also the whole world, which God loves. Theosis, then, is not isolationist by definition, as is often claimed; much to the contrary, theosis is “missional” by definition.

Establishing the “missional” character of Johannine theosis is the primary aim of *Abide*. The core of the book consists in a reading of the whole Gospel of John through this lens. Gorman draws on a wealth of scholarship to make the point that theosis and mission are integral and complementary motifs in the Gospel of John. Each of the chapters in *Abide* is worthy of careful consideration, but rather than addressing them one by one, the remainder of this review will focus on some key contributions that *Abide* makes to the field of deification studies as a whole. Modern Protestant accounts of deification are growing bolder by the year, and Gorman moves the conversation forward in a number of helpful ways.

Deification and Life

Abide’s frequent allusion to the “divine DNA” represents one of its most important contributions to deification studies. The Christian tradition embraces a wide variety of perspectives on the means of deification. It speaks of deification by divine energy, by divine light, by divine

love, and by divine knowledge. What it generally lacks is a view of deification by the divine life itself. This is not to say that any of the great teachers of the Christian church would deny that we are deified by the divine life. Much to the contrary, affirmative passages to this effect are readily available throughout the tradition. But it does seem to be the case that no one in the Christian tradition has offered an account of deification that takes the divine life as its central theme (Watchman Nee and Witness Lee being exceptions). Byers's important work on Johannine deification touches lightly on the theme of the divine life in the Gospel of John, but *Abide*, in a commendable way, makes it central to its discussion of Johannine deification.

Gorman argues that “in one way or another all of the various Johannine motifs relate to the over-arching theme of Jesus' singular work of bringing *zōē*, ‘life,’ which the Gospel also calls ‘eternal’ life (e.g., 17:2-3) and ‘abundant’ life (10:10b), or life ‘to the full’” (44). Gorman is not the first to note the prominence of life in the Gospel of John, but many of the scholars who have written on life in John have been hesitant to describe the believer's participation in this life as deification. Gorman suffers no such misgivings: “This ‘participation’ [in the divine life] should also be understood in John as filiation (becoming children of God), and filiation in turn as deification (becoming like God)” (46). Gorman thus rejects any reductionist reading of the language of sonship in the Gospel of John. The believers becoming children of God is not metaphorical speech. “Becoming children of God is a participatory reality—beginning to share in the sonship of the Father's Son” (56-57).

As recipients of the divine life, the believers are not only sonized and deified; they also participate in God's economy to dispense this life to the world:

The glorified Jesus will baptize and infuse them with the Spirit, such that the Spirit will both surround and indwell the disciples. Having received the Spirit, the disciples will also be conduits of the divine life as it flows through (or, less likely, from) them. The gift of the Spirit will be life-giving both for the disciples and also for others. (60)

The believers' sonship, in other words, is missional. The believers not only receive the life of God but minister it to others.

Gorman's substantial treatment of the theme of the divine life in the Gospel of John and his identification of this theme as the core of Johannine deification are significant contributions to the current discussion, one which he and others will hopefully continue to explore and develop. The theme of deification by the divine life is, after all, not exclusively Johannine. Paul's writings are pervaded by references to the divine life (Rom. 5:10, 17-18; 8:6, 10-11), and life is not an unfamiliar theme in Peter (1 Pet. 1:3, 23;

2:4-5). There is thus ground to say that life is a primary motif not only of the Gospel of John but of the New Testament as a whole, which should come as no surprise given that the God revealed in it is Himself a God of life—Father (John 5:26), Son (1:4), and Spirit (Rom. 8:2).

Deification Causing Change in Virtue

Modern accounts of deification are often ambiguous as to whether the change in a believer's living explains the language of deification or whether deification explains the change. In recent years a significant number of Protestant accounts of deification have tended to place the emphasis on the former. In this reading, our being like God is reducible to our acting like God: God loves the world, so as we endeavor to love the world, we are being “deified.” Gorman helpfully distinguishes between these two views and unambiguously endorses the latter view. For Gorman, deification is not reducible to our acting like God; instead, deification is what enables us to act like God.

To make the point that we are first deified and then act like God, Gorman distinguishes between “imitation” and “participation,” consistently arguing that deification is not reducible to mere imitation:

The best language to describe this Christlikeness must bring together the strong sense of similarity to Jesus (imitation, or mimesis) and the equally strong sense of the need for enabling (dependence, empowerment). This makes the word ‘participation’ especially appropriate. (138-139)

The believers do imitate Christ, living and serving as Jesus did, but Gorman contends that such imitation is, itself, made possible by a participation in God. Comparing the “theological grammar” of the Dead Sea Scrolls to that of the Gospel of John, Gorman says,

In the Dead Sea Scrolls, we find an explicit exhortation to hate enemies. Its theological grammar is “Hate your enemies, and you will be like God.” The well-known theological grammar of Matthew and Luke is “If you love your enemies, you will become like your (perfect/merciful) heavenly Father” (see Matt 5:43-48/Luke 6:27-36). We have discovered that the theological grammar of John is “If you are children of God, enlivened with his Spirit, you will love as your heavenly Father does and as Jesus the Son did, which means loving enemies.” (178)

Whether what Gorman describes as the “well-known theological grammar of Matthew and Luke” is adequately representative of those Gospels is debatable, but Gorman clearly sees the need to get the order of explanation right and insists that, at least in the case of the Gospel of John, it is undoubtedly our deification that explains our change

in behavior rather than the other way around. This is a helpful contribution to the conversation because it is often assumed that deification requires (or, perhaps, consists of) strenuous ascetic practice. We are deified, in this view, as we endeavor with hard labor to replace vices with virtues. If we take the language of divine life seriously, however, we are presented with a very different picture of the believers' deification. If the believers really are begotten of God with the divine life through their regeneration, as Gorman clearly affirms, this life has the capacity, under the proper conditions, to spontaneously manifest the divine attributes in and through the humanity into which it has been dispensed and imparted. Once the order of explanation between "imitation" and "participation" is rightly grasped, we can shift our attention from doing to receiving. To use the Johannine language to which Gorman repeatedly refers, the Lord charged His disciples to "abide" before He charged them to "go" (John 15:5, 16). Indeed, the Lord told us that apart from Him we can do nothing (v. 5). One of the more insightful portions of *Abide's* treatment of John 15 is its reflection on "the theme of 'doing nothing'" in the Gospel of John (148-149). Just as the Lord repeatedly testified that "the Son can do nothing from Himself except what He sees the Father doing" (5:19, 30; 8:28), so He instructed the disciples, "Apart from Me you can do nothing" (15:5). "The imitation Jesus requires in chapter 13 is, implicitly, made a function of the mutual indwelling described in chapter 15" (89).

Deification Causing Us to Work Together with God

Finally, *Abide* helpfully moves the discussion forward by pointing out that deification does not simply entail a real transformation of the believer, a transformation that produces a real change in the believer's living and service. In Gorman's reading of the Gospel of John, deification does not simply enable us to act like God; deification equips us to live and to serve together with God: "To be sent as Jesus was sent is to be in a relationship of mutual indwelling with the Sender such that the works one does are the works of the indwelling one" (131). *Abide* repeatedly appeals to John 14:12, where the Lord said that the disciples will do greater works than He Himself did. The works that Jesus did were the works of the Son, the embodiment of the Triune God, with the Father by the Spirit, in Jesus Christ; and the works that the disciples would do are the works of the Spirit, the consummation of the Triune God, as the Son with the Father in the church:

Just as Jesus said, "The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works" (14:10; cf. 14:24; 17:14), so also the disciples' successful witness-bearing is participatory, a function of the indwelling Christ in the person of the speaking, witness-bearing Spirit (16:7-15). The disciples' word is really *Jesus'* word, which is really *the Father's* word, as we have

repeatedly heard already in this prayer (17:6, 8, 14, 17), which is also really *the Spirit's* word. (122)

Any reader of this journal will recognize, here, what Kerry S. Robichaux (following Witness Lee) describes as incorporation, a combination of mutual indwelling and conjoint operation, initiated in the incarnate person of Christ and continued in the individual and corporate life and service of the apostles and the believers (see his twelve related articles spanning the April 2004 through Spring 2014 issues of this journal). This is a remarkably underdeveloped aspect of deification studies in the academy, and Gorman's contribution is an encouraging and healthy sign. Much scholarly work has been done on divine agency and action and on the relationship between divine operation and human operation in the incarnate person of Christ. Not much has been done on the relationship between divine operation and human operation in the believers, despite the fact that the incarnate Christ Himself promised the divine-human incorporation that He initiated on the earth would continue in the believers.

Conclusion

All things considered, *Abide* is a healthy sign that deification studies are far from stagnant. The steady stream over the past few decades of articles and books on deification has made it impossible to reasonably claim that deification is foreign to the Christian tradition. A full-scale reevaluation of this truth is underway in some of the Christian traditions that have more typically eschewed such language. Some in the academy are attempting to reduce such language to more familiar categories. Some are attempting to dismiss it as a remaining "Catholic" element in the Protestant tradition that needs to be finally excised altogether. Others, thankfully, have taken the opportunity to rethink their whole conception of the economy of salvation, and Gorman has shown here, as often before, that he falls squarely in the third camp.

by Mitchell Kennard

Not Seeing God's Intention in His Creation of Man

Choosing the Extraordinary Life: God's 7 Secrets for Success and Significance, by Robert Jeffress. Baker Books, 2018.

In *Choosing the Extraordinary Life: God's 7 Secrets for Success and Significance* (hereafter, *Choosing*), megachurch pastor and radio host Robert Jeffress gleams from

the account of Elijah's dealing with Ahab's and Israel's idolatry seven lessons for living a successful and significant Christian life. *Choosing* teaches that these seven secrets characterize Elijah's significance and should motivate us to experience the extraordinary life that God desires for us. Despite the biblical context of 1 Kings 17 through 19, the call for prayers, and references to God, *Choosing's* message can be distilled to that of living a human life of doing good works that change society. This is clearly exhibited in both the interpretation of Elijah's experience and the anecdotes throughout the book.

Choosing's regard for outward success and significance and ethical righteousness shows that Jeffress's view falls glaringly short of God's intended purpose for created humanity and His complete salvation of fallen humanity in His economy. By His creation and through His salvation, God's central work is to work Himself as everything into His redeemed and regenerated children so that they, as the many God-men and sons of God, would express Him in their living and work for the fulfillment of His eternal purpose. This central work and its issue are exemplified foremost not by the person and living of Elijah but by that of the apostle Paul.

Living an Extraordinary Life

Choosing's first secret to an extraordinary life is for believers to discover their unique purpose. *Choosing* prefaces this secret by indicating the connection of each believer's unique story to the universal story of God's "overarching purpose"—"man's chief end is to glorify God, and enjoy him forever" (32). In interpreting Genesis 1:27, *Choosing* shows that man, being made in the divine image, was intended to glorify God, that is, to present God as substantial through making Him the center of his life. Man's general purpose includes enjoying God, which the book understands to be savoring the pleasures, sweetness, and delight of God's blessings and character. However, *Choosing* shows that a life of significance requires the discovery of one's unique purpose, which is accomplished through five means.

First, we need to understand that our unique story begins with the Scriptures. The Bible equips every believer with lessons and instructions, training us to "mature in our faith" and to "develop the skills, knowledge, and insight necessary to identify and fulfill our purpose" (47). Second, we are encouraged to talk to wise and experienced believers for guidance and confirmation of our unique purpose. Third, we should obey our passions. *Choosing* indicates that our heart may already contain the desire placed there by God. Then it argues that while an unbeliever's heart is deceitful, a believer's desire, or passion, is the issue of transformation and the

molding of his desires to conform to God's desire through a "growing and intimate relationship with God" (51). Fourth, accompanying our God-given passions are our God-endowed gifts and abilities to fulfill our purpose. Thus, recognizing one's gifts and abilities is a necessary means to discovering and conveying the story that we were uniquely created to tell. The final means is to yield to the leading of the Spirit by "surrendering [our] life to the control of God's Holy Spirit" (55). In short, every believer must learn to listen to the Spirit's speaking and obey His call.

According to *Choosing*, once we have discovered our unique purpose, we must recognize our potential influence upon our environment. Thus, the second secret to living a life of success and significance is to determine to influence our culture, which is defined as the communities and relationships within our "sphere of influence" (63). The book argues that "God has placed us in our decaying culture to cultivate moral and spiritual goodness" (60-61). It claims that the desire to exert influence is derived from an awareness of and care for the degraded culture surrounding us and that God has created us as His "poieme," His masterpiece, for others to "read" when they come into contact with us (61). A Christian who influences and cultivates the culture in his personal environment will not fall into either of the two categories of compromise—"silo saints" and "spiritual sellouts" (63).

Silo saints isolate themselves from ungodly culture, preferring to shelter themselves from the world's encroaching secularism rather than imposing sacred Christian values upon its institutions. Spiritual sellouts compromise their beliefs by "surrendering to the moral temptations of our culture" and sell out their faith to "political correctness" (67). *Choosing* asserts that the former's isolation is a "greater threat" to being able to positively influence culture than the latter's absorption by and identification with secular values (69). A turn from isolationism, according to *Choosing*, entails the embrace of three convictions "that can transform us into spiritual giants who can transform our world" (71). First, we as Christians must have the conviction that God is "alive and active in the affairs of men and women" (73). Second, we must have the conviction that as God's ambassadors, we are His representatives in the sinful world; we are called to "articulate and represent God's views to those within God's kingdom and those living outside of it" (73). Third, we should hold the conviction that it is ultimately God who influences culture through our cooperation. Our responsibility is to maintain our saltiness as the salt of the earth and our brightness as luminaries by trusting in the power of God's word, practicing the power of prayer, and depending on the power of the Spirit. *Choosing* is correct to point out that the empowerment of the Holy Spirit in

the Old Testament was outward and that in the New Testament the Holy Spirit works through Christians by taking up “permanent residence in the life of every believer” (80-81).

Choosing's third secret to an extraordinary and significant life is to wait on God's timing. Christians must learn the value of waiting on God's timing, for “it is during these divine downtimes that God is at work transforming our lives” (87). The book indicates that God makes us, His servants, wait in order to remind us of our need for Him, in order to allow us to “recharge our physical, emotional, and spiritual batteries” (89), and to prepare us for a greater work to come. *Choosing* draws this secret from its interpretation of Elijah's experience at Cherith and Zarephath in 1 Kings 17. After confronting Ahab and declaring the drought, Elijah was instructed by God to hide himself by the brook Cherith (v. 3). *Choosing* interprets this as a waiting and training period for Elijah, one that would prepare him for the intense confrontation with Ahab and Jezebel's Baal priests. At Cherith Elijah, who drank from the brook and ate food brought by ravens, was taught to walk with God daily, to obey Him completely, and to trust in Him absolutely while waiting for the next assignment. While Elijah's faith was tested in Cherith, it was refined at Zarephath. According to *Choosing*, his experience of staying with the poor widow and praying for her only son to be raised from the dead refined Elijah's humility, contentment, and gentleness, which are essential qualities of the extraordinary life.

The fourth secret of choosing the extraordinary life is to follow God completely, that is, to follow God faithfully and to obey Him fearlessly, in order to “burn the ships” of retreat and ambivalence (127). *Choosing* presents Elijah as one who followed God absolutely—a pattern that is in contrast to that of Obadiah, who was faithful to God yet also fearful of Ahab, and to that of the people of Israel, who were both faithless and fearful. Elijah challenged Israel to not hesitate between two options: “If Jehovah is God, follow Him; but if Baal is, follow him” (18:21). *Choosing* argues that Elijah was challenging the people to “burn their ships of double-mindedness and double-heartedness” and to once for all decide whether they would follow God or Baal (127). According to *Choosing*, the New Testament call to follow Christ absolutely is no less radical a commitment; for us to be true disciples who follow Christ requires total commitment in four aspects of our lives: The first is to prioritize Christ as first and above everything else. The second is to cast away all the prejudices of our political views, intellectual capability, and skin color. The third is to “align our desires with God's desires,” to “submit to His power over our lives” (135). Finally, we are to be proper stewards of our earthly possessions and wealth, not giving in to the

temptation to accumulate them, not being under their control, but, rather, giving God the complete control over our life.

The fifth secret to living an extraordinary life is perhaps the most important of the seven—the call to “unleash the power of prayer” (139). In chapter 5 *Choosing* extracts a vital lesson from Elijah's contest on Mount Carmel with the eight hundred fifty prophets of Baal and the Asherah in 1 Kings 18. Rather than emphasizing the victorious miracle of calling fire to descend from God and to consume the burnt offering, *Choosing* insightfully highlights the principles of Elijah's prayer for fire and then for rain. *Choosing* offers three prerequisites to unleashing effective prayers. *Choosing* first demonstrates that Elijah was a righteous man and was in a right relationship with God. The book then explains that through “judicial righteousness,” the right standing before God, by faith in Christ, we enter into a new relationship with God, becoming His children and receiving all the rights and privileges that accompany our new status. Based on this right standing, we can make our requests to our heavenly Father. It follows that we should also have ethical righteousness—“right acting before God”—which is the second prerequisite of powerful prayer (149). By “ethical righteousness,” *Choosing* means “how we obey God after we become part of His family” (149). The third prerequisite of powerful prayer is an unshakable faith, which *Choosing* defines as “believing God will do what He has promised to do” (151), not presuming that He will simply do what we want Him to do. *Choosing* then goes on to show that Elijah's prayer on Mount Carmel before the Israelites and the pagan prophets exhibited three principles of powerful prayer—he approached God with confidence, prayed according to God's will, and focused on glorifying God, the last of which is to declare and demonstrate God's holiness to the world. Finally, *Choosing* expounds how Elijah's prayer for rain reveals “four practical principles for praying effectively and powerfully” (158)—praying privately, honestly, specifically, and persistently.

The portrait of Elijah painted in 1 Kings 19 is in stark contrast to that in chapter 18. After his victory over the eight hundred fifty pagan prophets, Jezebel threatened Elijah's life. The prophet then fled in fear into the wilderness and eventually lodged in a cave on Mount Horeb (vv. 2-4, 8-9). In the process Elijah's despondency grew so great that he requested for his life to be taken (v. 4). Concerning such a period of discouragement, restlessness, and even foolishness, *Choosing* speaks of the secret of learning how to handle our bad days. It indicates that we may expect bad days if we do not heed the warning signs of physical and emotional exhaustion, if we focus on our challenging circumstances rather than on the powerful God, if we hold to unrealistic expectations, and

if we believe that we are indispensable—all the weaknesses that Elijah exhibited in 1 Kings 19. *Choosing* says that the way to handle bad days is to expect them and then to refresh ourselves physically, strengthen ourselves spiritually, and encourage ourselves emotionally.

These seven secrets to living a truly extraordinary and significant life spring from a consideration of the kind of legacy that we desire to one day leave behind. With that thought, *Choosing* charges us to live life with the end in view. To do so, *Choosing* shows that we must embrace the right perspective of the long view of life, value the right principle of faithfulness, and focus on people as the right priority.

The God-man Living in the Divine and Mystical Realm

Choosing establishes its main thesis on a solid foundation by stating that our chief purpose is to glorify and enjoy God. *Choosing* references Genesis 1:27, which says that humanity was made in God's image, that is, that humanity was made to express God. Certainly, living a life that fulfills God's intention in His creation is the most meaningful and significant way in which we can live. However, after laying this foundation, *Choosing* attempts to build upon it by proffering a broad array of spiritual advice, recommending practices, and encouraging good works, none of which are patently objectionable but all of which, in isolation, do not advance the fulfillment of God's eternal purpose. For example, there is no denying that we should follow God faithfully and pray according to God's will. Nevertheless, God's overarching purpose cannot be fully accomplished by a person living only in this way.

The divine revelation in the Bible shows that God desires more than just "Elijah-like men and women walking the earth, standing for His truth, and upholding His glory" (25). To be sure, Elijah was a genuine prophet of God, one who was used by Him to represent Him before Ahab and to deal with the pagan prophets, but Elijah cannot be regarded as a complete and balanced exemplar of the humanity that is fully according to God's intention when He created humankind for the fulfillment of His eternal purpose. Although Elijah was empowered by the Spirit of Jehovah, his miracles and successes were chiefly accomplished in the physical realm. Moreover, his hasty reaction to the threat on his life and his descent into despair and discouragement immediately following his victory on Mount Carmel exposed not only a grave spiritual poverty but also a desperate need of the transformation of his soul. Featuring Elijah as a model of living an extraordinary life of success and significance shows an incomplete understanding God's intention in creating humanity and the extent of God's salvation of fallen humanity.

Choosing's notion that God ultimately seeks a man with "ethical righteousness" misses the depths of the divine revelation concerning God's complete salvation, which involves both judicial redemption and organic salvation, the latter of which involves our being saved in the divine life through regeneration, sanctification, renewing, transformation, conformation, and, eventually, the glorification of our bodies (Rom. 5:10; 6:19; Titus 3:5; 2 Cor. 3:18; Rom. 8:23, 29-30). The issue of such a thorough salvation is not merely a good, ethical man but a God-man, one who is both human and divine and who expresses the divine attributes in his human virtues. God's complete salvation produces a God-man, not a good man. The first God-man is the Lord Jesus Himself, who is the complete God and the perfect man. God wants His Son, who was incarnated, lived a human life, was crucified, and was resurrected, to be the prototype in life and nature for all who believe into Christ. Upon believing into Christ, we were not only forgiven and cleansed of all our iniquities by His blood poured out on the cross but also regenerated by the divine life that was released through His death and dispensed into us in His resurrection (John 19:34; Heb. 9:22; Eph. 1:7; 1 Pet. 1:3). In our regeneration the divine life was sown as a living seed into our deadened human spirit (1 John 3:9; 1 Pet. 1:23). Within this seed of the divine life are all the communicable attributes of God—including His love, light, righteousness, and holiness—and the unsearchable riches of Christ, which include all that He accomplished, attained, and obtained by His passing through the processes of incarnation, human living, death, and resurrection (Eph. 3:8).

The growth and spread of the divine life from our mingled spirit, which is the union and mingling of the divine Spirit with our human spirit, into our soul equals the transformation of our soul with its faculties of the mind, emotion, and will (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18). In Romans 12:2 Paul says, "Do not be fashioned according to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and well pleasing and perfect." The lifelong process of transformation in us as believers is what takes place between our regeneration and the glorification of our bodies. Thus, transformation is the major factor of our becoming the reproduction of the first God-man, Jesus Christ, who fully satisfies God's intention in His creation of humanity. Transformation may be defined as

the inward, metabolic process in which God works to spread His divine life and nature throughout every part of our being, particularly our soul, bringing Christ and His riches into our being as our new element and causing our old, natural element to be gradually discharged. (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 2, note 3)

The gradual transformation of our soul is carried out by

the dispensing of the divine life from our mingled spirit into our mind to make it the mind of Christ, into our emotion so that we would love and hate as Christ would, and into our will in order that we would decide and choose as He would. Concurrently, the process of transformation metabolically discharges the thoughts, feelings, and intentions of our old man and natural man. The result of transformation is our conformation to the image of the firstborn Son of God (8:29). Through conformation the many sons of God, having both humanity and divinity, become the reproduction of the firstborn Son in life, nature, and expression but not in the Godhead. This corporate sonship is for God's ultimate and eternal expression and glory in the universe. *Choosing* is correct to point out that God's "overarching purpose," corresponding to man's chief end, is to be glorified by man (32), but this book falls short in its presentation of what glorification means and entails and in its understanding of the corporate nature of God's glorification.¹

According to Genesis 1:26-27, the man whom God created is not an individual man but a corporate man—"Let Us make *man*...; and let *them* have dominion...He created *him*...He created *them*" (emphasis added). In verse 28 God said to the man whom He created, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it." God's desire for a corporate man to express Him counters a subtle precept of *Choosing*—that Christians should venture to find their unique purpose of success and significance as God intended for them personally. Nowhere in this book does it discuss the church, as the Body of Christ and the one new man, being the focus and goal of God's purpose. Individual Christians can never fully express God, no matter how extraordinary their life may be. This is because God desires a group of redeemed, regenerated people, who are the church as the Body of Christ and the universal new man, to be His corporate expression. This corporate man is God's masterpiece, which is produced by His being mingled with His redeemed, regenerated, transformed, and glorified people and His constituting of Himself into them (Eph. 2:10). As Christians, we are called to live in and for the Body of Christ as members of His Body by functioning according to our measure of faith and gift (Rom. 12:3-6). Indeed, the degree of our transformation largely corresponds to the extent that we see the Body and function according to our measure. After speaking of transformation and the will of God in Romans 12:2, Paul connects God's will to the Body of Christ in verses 4 and 5: "Just as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we who are many are one Body in Christ, and individually members one of another."

It is not a coincidence that the apostle who unveiled God's organic salvation, transformation, and the Body of

Christ is the best pattern to the believers of having a God-man living that satisfies God's purpose for humanity. Elijah was a useful and obedient servant of God, but Paul was a God-man who had been saved in life, especially through the transformation of his soul. Much more than merely exhibiting ethical righteousness, Paul was a God-constituted and God-expressing man. He was also no stranger to threats on his life and to numerous sufferings in carrying out his ministry (2 Cor. 11:23-28). In 2 Corinthians, the Epistle that may be regarded as his autobiography, Paul says,

We do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of our affliction which befell us in Asia, that we were excessively burdened, beyond our power, so that we despaired even of living. Indeed we ourselves had the response of death in ourselves, that we should not base our confidence on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. (1:8-9)

Unlike Elijah, who virtually gave up his life when threatened with death, perhaps forgetting God's provisions for him at Cherith and Zarephath, Paul based his confidence on the God of resurrection amidst his dire outward circumstances.

Paul's transformation from persecutor to pursuer, minister, and ambassador of Christ began at his conversion but continued daily throughout his Christian life. In 3:18 he says, "We all with unveiled face, beholding and reflecting like a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord Spirit." The phrase *being transformed* indicates that transformation is a gradual process that brings the believers from one degree of glory to another degree of glory, that is, progressively from one degree of the saturation of their soul with the divine life and nature for divine expression to a higher degree of such a saturation. Transformation proceeds "from the Lord Spirit," revealing that this process occurs in the divine and mystical realm of the Spirit instead of the physical realm of outward correction and self-improvement (vv. 3, 6, 8, 17-18). By daily beholding the glory of the Lord, thereby being infused with the very elements of Christ as the life-giving Spirit, Paul was inwardly and metabolically changed into the image of the resurrected and glorified Christ, whom he then reflected in his living and ministry. Thus, by the end of his life and work, Paul even reigned in the divine life (Rom. 5:17). Not only was Paul undaunted by every circumstance and suffering, but he also expressed and magnified in the midst of his trials the Christ living and constituted within him. In his exposition of Acts 27 and 28, which chronicles Paul's imprisonment-journey to Rome, Witness Lee says,

All during the apostle's long and unfortunate imprisonment-voyage, the Lord kept the apostle in His ascendancy

and enabled him to live a life far beyond the realm of anxiety. This life was fully dignified, with the highest standard of human virtues expressing the most excellent divine attributes, a life that resembled the one that the Lord Himself had lived on the earth years before. This was Jesus living again on the earth in His divinely enriched humanity! This was the wonderful, excellent, and mysterious God-man, who lived in the Gospels, continuing to live in the Acts through one of His many members! This was a living witness of the incarnated, crucified, resurrected, and God-exalted Christ! Paul in his voyage lived and magnified Christ (Phil. 1:20-21). It is no wonder that the people honored him and his companions with many honors (v. 10), that is, with the greatest respect and highest regard! An ambassador sent by God should be treated by men with such respect and regard. (Recovery Version, 28:9, note 1)

Whereas *Choosing* says, “As far as God is concerned, there can never be enough Elijah-like men and women walking the earth, standing for His truth, and upholding His glory” (25), God’s sentiment, when viewed from the entirety of the divine revelation and seen in these chapters in Acts, is that there can never be enough Paul-like members of the Body of Christ who live a divine yet human life on the earth, who minister Christ as life out of their God-constituted being, and who express the God of glory in their living and work.

Conclusion

Choosing may be commended for extracting principles and lessons from 1 Kings 17 through 19. Several of the “secrets” are useful lessons that accord with teachings in the New Testament. However, *Choosing* falls short by featuring Elijah as the model of what God intended in His creation of man. Elijah was a good man, but Paul was a God-man. Elijah performed miracles, but Paul was constituted a minister of Christ. *Choosing* considers Elijah’s work—mainly his individual accomplishments—to be what constitutes an extraordinary life. Such work, however, pales in comparison to Paul’s precious pattern of living and ministering as a member of the Body of Christ for the building up of the Body. In the midst of human history that is replete with successful and accomplished individuals who do not express God fully according to His intention in the creation of humanity, it is Paul and those who live a God-man life who are extraordinary.

by Kin Leong Seong

Note

¹For a more thorough discussion of transformation, see Ed Marks, “The Spiritual Experience of the Divine Truth of Transformation,” *Affirmation & Critique* 6.2 (2001): 20-34.

Work Cited

Lee, Witness. Footnotes. Recovery Version of the Bible, Living Stream Ministry, 2003.

Imagining Heaven

Heaven: An Inkling of What’s to Come, by Myk Habets. Cascade Books, 2018.

Myk Habet’s *Heaven: An Inkling of What’s to Come* (hereafter, *Heaven*) is an attempt to adjust the common understanding of heaven and of what to expect in regard to “life after life after death” (14-15). *Heaven* suggests that even though many positions in relation to the truth concerning heaven have been advanced, only an understanding rooted in the Scriptures is worthy of the believers’ attention. Thus, *Heaven* seeks to present heaven in a way that is faithful to the Scriptures and profitable for the present life (8). *Heaven* makes insightful deductions regarding the bodily resurrection of the believers and rightfully identifies the various judgments pertaining to the believers and the unbelievers prior to the new heaven and the new earth. However, it fails to present the truth in the Scriptures concerning the New Jerusalem with the new heaven and the new earth and leads the believers astray as to the goal of God’s intention with man.

A Christian Imagination of Heaven

Heaven comprises six chapters: an introduction, four main chapters, each addressing a question concerning heaven, and a conclusion. The four main chapters are each composed of four sections: “Let’s Listen,” “Let’s Talk,” “Let’s Play,” and “Summary.” The first section of each chapter introduces a subject matter based on a question concerning heaven and presents what the Bible says about the matter; the second attempts to interpret the contents of the first section and make deductions relevant to the subject matter; the third delves into the realm of imagination concerning what could be—based on and limited by the interpretation in the previous section—and also suggests ways that the reader could enter into further discussion and imagination with others; and the final section summarizes the central points of presentation in the first three sections (9-10).

In its introductory chapter, *Heaven* laments the lack of a “genuinely Christian imagination” in many of the stories

that were told about forty years ago concerning heaven (2). *Heaven* then speaks of the current resurgence of interest in heaven, as seen in the popularity of “heavenly tourism” books, which need to be read through the critical lens of the Scriptures (2-3). In the context of explaining parental priesthood as the function of Christian parents to “represent their children until they come to saving faith in Jesus” and to name “God’s presence for [their] children when [the children] are not able to do this for themselves” (4)—to make God tangible in the children’s experience and understanding—*Heaven* reminds the believers to use the Bible in making God applicable to others (6). It argues that “God invites his followers into a creative, dynamic, and even imaginative future when he offers us in Scripture glimpses into the future life we will enjoy” (6). It explains that even though there is no exhaustive presentation of the afterlife in the Scriptures, what is available is sufficient to generate a “wild hope,” faith, and love in the believers and to set our Christian, or “baptized,” imaginations on fire (6-7); and it points out that “a Christian imagination is one in which the truths of the Scripture fuel further thoughts after God and his revelation” (7).

In chapter 2, “The Best of All Possible Worlds (What Is Heaven Like?),” *Heaven* argues primarily that, based on John 14:2 and Revelation 21—22, heaven is a physical place. It explains that heaven is “technically Paradise,” a place where the believers will be after death, and rightly notes that this Paradise is not the final destination of the believers (13). Habets explains that the final destination of the believers will be the new heaven and the new earth but that, “for the sake of convenience,” he would often (though, confusingly, not always) call the new heaven and new earth “Heaven” (15). After this brief definitional adjustment, *Heaven* explains from Acts 1 that we know heaven is a place because “at Jesus’ ascension he went somewhere and he wanted his disciples...to know where he was going,” and because in John 14 Jesus said definitively that He was going to prepare a place for us before He departed the earth (16). *Heaven* goes on to say that although passages such as Ephesians 2:6 suggest that heaven begins now, others like 2 Corinthians 5:8, John 14:2-3, Hebrews 11:10, and Revelation 21:23-26 indicate that “it is literally correct to say that Heaven is a place we go to after death (and the new heavens and the new earth after the great resurrection)” (16). *Heaven* explains that the New Jerusalem as the city of God, our new environment in the new heavens and new earth, will have many mansions for those who love the Lord and have served Him during their lifetime (17). In its interpretation of what it regards as the biblical presentation of heaven as it relates to the new heavens and new earth, *Heaven* explores what it means for the new earth to be a renewed, rather than a replaced, earth (26). *Heaven* goes on to quote a portion from C. S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles*

of Narnia: The Last Battle and to recommend Lewis’s *Perelandra* in order to inspire discussion around the allure of heaven (30-32).

In chapter 3, “Raised Immortal (What Will We Be Like in the Resurrection?),” *Heaven* affirms from 1 Corinthians 15 that there will be a bodily resurrection and from Matthew 8 that in the resurrection the personal identities of the believers will remain (37-41). It explains that in the resurrection the believers will be raised to receive renewed bodies—bodies that are after the pattern of Christ’s resurrected body, bodies characterized by “immortality and imperishability” (38). *Heaven* argues that these resurrected bodies will exhibit both continuity and discontinuity from the believers’ present bodies (39). It notes that, on the one hand, the resurrected body will be physical, but on the other hand, it will be spiritual. Regarding personal identities, *Heaven* notes that the fact that the Lord in Matthew 8:11 identified distinct people at the great feast indicates that personality will remain (40). In the subsequent sections of the chapter, *Heaven* explores various aspects of the bodily resurrection, including how old we will be in resurrection. It proposes that, based on the fact that Isaiah 11:6-9 and Isaiah 65:20 speak of persons of various ages being in the millennium, “we shall be resurrected at the same age at which we died, and we will then continue to grow, mature, and even age, as long as we understand that aging in eternity will not be the same as aging now” (45). In *Heaven*’s consideration, age will indicate and imply mainly unlimited maturity, development, accomplishment, capacity, and wisdom (46). Regarding sickness, it argues that sickness and all its effects, being a result of the fall, will be eradicated (44). In addition, *Heaven* suggests that since our identities will continue in the resurrection, our relationships will also continue, although not in the same way as in the present age. Connected to this, it argues that there will be a social aspect to dwelling in the New Jerusalem and speculates on a means to recognize both those whom we know in this age and those whom we do not (47-49).

In chapter 4, “An Endless Adventure (What Will We Do in the New Jerusalem?),” *Heaven* develops its understanding of continued growth that was introduced in the previous chapter. Here *Heaven* suggests that two images dominate the Bible’s teaching concerning the believers’ state in eternity: rest and work (59). It explains that, ultimately, rest in Scripture as it relates to eternity does not mean cessation from all activity but rest from “the spiritual warfare of the believer here on earth” (60). *Heaven* posits that regular worship of God will fill much of the believers’ time in heaven and explains that worship is rendered not only through verbal and emotional praise but also in whatever we do for God’s glory and fame (60). Such worship, it asserts, can

be described in a beatific vision where we participate in God's life and nature and thus find ourselves eternally happy (61). *Heaven* observes that the believers will also participate in divine judgment and "will be involved in...other activity,...including...eating, drinking, resting, working, exploring, playing, learning, growing, maturing, hosting, and visiting" (65). It notes that in all these activities in eternity, God will be the center (66). *Heaven* then examines the significance of feasting as a social activity on the new earth and also how the multitude of activities that bring in a sense of progress, growth, and achievement will stay any boredom in the new heaven and new earth (67, 72).

In chapter 5, "A Great Cloud of Witnesses (Who Will Be in Zion?)," *Heaven* addresses the question of who will be in heaven. It asserts that various kinds of angels, all the believers, and animals will be there (82-87). It explains also that unbelievers will be in hell, eternally separated from the presence of God (86). Noting the destiny of the unbelievers, *Heaven* attempts to resolve how believers will deal with unbelieving loved ones not being present with them. It speculates that "in the presence of God we will see the nature of evil with sufficient clarity that we will be at peace with the reality that some of our loved ones have unfortunately chosen Hell over Heaven" (89). *Heaven* concludes the chapter by arguing, based on Isaiah 11 and 65, that animals will be in the new heaven and new earth and by engaging in further speculation in regards to the possibility of pets making an appearance in the new heaven and new earth for the sake of humans (90-91, 96).

In chapter 6, "Conclusion: On Eating Pie in the Sky," *Heaven* attempts to make a case for the usefulness of knowledge concerning heaven and to identify how much the future heaven begins on the present earth (99). *Heaven* explains that although believers do experience heaven now by being children of God, heaven is still yet to come (99-100). It suggests that when we have the proper imagination of what is to come, we are inspired to carry out good works no matter what trials we may face today (100). Moreover, it implies that a proper understanding of what is to come will set us on a course of "active anticipation," in which we anticipate the future heaven amidst the travail of this world (102). In this active anticipation we are not reliant on human effort alone to redeem this world, but neither are we pessimistic concerning the future of the world (102). *Heaven* then quotes lyrics from contemporary rock songs that try to make sense of hope and hopelessness in the face of loss (103-106) and contrasts them to the psalms and other Christian writings to show that knowing about heaven is useful because it causes us to have hope and assurance, which enable us to live well today (103, 106-111).

Interpreting the New Jerusalem as a Physical City

In its attempt to imagine an embodied existence for the believers in the resurrection, *Heaven* advances the errant teaching that the New Jerusalem is a physical city based on John 14:2 and Revelation 21 and 22. It states that "one way of describing our new environment is as the New Jerusalem, the city of God on earth...[where] there will be many mansions, prepared for those who love the Lord" (17) and asserts that the language of Revelation 22:1 suggests the physical nature of the New Jerusalem (19). The usage of these portions of the Scriptures to prove that the New Jerusalem is a physical city neglects the context of these verses and is ultimately misguided.

John 14:2 and 3 say, "In My Father's house are many abodes...I go to prepare a place for you...I am coming again and will receive you to Myself, so that where I am you also may be." These verses show that the purpose of the Lord's preparing a place is for the believers to be where He is. John 14 also makes clear that the Lord Jesus is in the Father (vv. 10-11, 20). Thus, to be where the Lord is, is to be in the Father, not in a physical city. This thought is reinforced twice in this chapter. In verse 3 the Lord said that He would receive the believers to Himself, a person, not to a physical city, and in verse 23 He said that He would come with the Father to make an abode, or dwelling place, with those who love Him and keep His word. According to John 14, there is no basis for interpreting the Father's house or the abodes in this chapter as a city with mansions. Rather, the Father's house refers to a corporate composition of God and redeemed humanity mutually indwelling one another to be the consummate fulfillment of the rebuilding of the temple of Jesus' body, which replaced the physical temple in Jerusalem, as the Father's house (2:16, 19, 21).

Heaven similarly misinterprets the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21—22 as a physical city. Revelation 21:2 says, "I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." Even when citing this verse as part of the introduction to its discussion of the New Jerusalem (22), *Heaven* neglects the last part of this verse, which states that the city is "prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." A bride must be the same in nature as her bridegroom, for a man cannot marry a beast or vice versa. Since the Bridegroom, Christ, is not a physical city, neither can His bride be a physical city. To properly interpret the New Jerusalem, we need to see that it is a sign, a symbol with spiritual significance. The entire book of Revelation is replete with signs that denote spiritual realities; thus, the New Jerusalem should be interpreted in this manner—as a sign. Indeed, it is the consummate sign, speaking of the eternal coinhering existence of the redeeming God and redeemed humanity, which has been

built up in the golden, divine nature of the Father, the accomplished work of the Son as the Lamb, and the transforming flow of the Spirit. In this sense, the New Jerusalem describes the enlargement of the Triune God within redeemed humanity, who were created in His image and according to His likeness; it is not a physical city. The city described in Revelation 21 and 22 is a symbolic representation of God's chosen people who have been produced as His bride through His work on them over the ages (Eph. 5:25-27). Revelation 21:9 and 10 repeat the same thought, saying, "One of the seven angels... came and spoke with me, saying, Come here; I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb. And he...showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God." Here the correlation is more emphatic than in verse 2, for if we regard the Lamb in these verses to be a symbolic representation of the Lord Jesus Christ, then we must also regard the New Jerusalem, the city with its description, to be a symbolic representation of God's Old and New Testament people, those who have been perfected to be the wife of Christ.

Perhaps the greater problem with interpreting the New Jerusalem as a physical city is that it runs contrary to God's work revealed in the New Testament. God's intention as revealed in the Bible is to dwell in man and to have man dwell in Him, and John's Gospel in particular reveals that there is a deep intention within God to not merely dwell among men but have a mutual indwelling with them—He in them and them in Him (Psa. 90:1; John 14:20, 23; 15:4-9; 17:21, 23; Col. 1:27; 2:6). The first four chapters of this Gospel reveal that God's house, the temple, in the New Testament is no longer a dwelling built by hands but the resurrected Christ with His regenerated and transformed believers, who have been constituted with God (cf. Acts 7:47-49; Isa. 66:1-2). John 1:14 introduces the incarnated Jesus as the real tabernacle; 2:19 through 21 reveals that through His death and resurrection the individual Jesus as the temple of God would become the corporate Christ, Christ with all His believers as His members to be the enlarged temple of God; and 4:24 affirms that the location of worship is no longer a physical place but the regenerated human spirit of the believers. For this reason the apostle Paul speaks of the believers' bodies being members of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:15, 19), of the believers growing into a holy temple in the Lord (Eph. 2:21), of the believers being built together into a dwelling place of God in spirit (v. 22), of Christ making His home in the believers' hearts (3:17), and of the Body of Christ, which is God's building and the church of the living God, being the house of God (1:22-23; 4:12; 1 Tim. 3:15). The apostle Peter also tells the believers that they are being built up as a spiritual house (1 Pet. 2:5). This house of God, the church, is consummately signified as the New Jerusalem, the fully glorified bride of Christ (Eph.

5:25-27; Rev. 21:2, 9-11). The New Jerusalem is not a physical city in which the believers will dwell but the believers themselves being indwelt by God and dwelling in God as the consummation of God's work in and on man. To interpret the New Jerusalem as a physical city is to nullify the New Testament revelation concerning God's desire as it relates to man.

An Incomplete Presentation of the Judgment Seat of Christ

In its development of its understanding that what we do on earth will have bearing on what we will do in the New Jerusalem, *Heaven* presents an incomplete view of the judgment seat of Christ (62-65, 90). Even though it cites Paul's word in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 and 2 Corinthians 5:10, it mentions only the believers receiving rewards (62-64); it never mentions the matter of discipline during the millennial kingdom for the perfecting of the believers. Thus, the implication of *Heaven's* teaching is that the judgment seat of Christ is related only to receiving rewards in heaven. This implication is confirmed by the fact that *Heaven* equates "outer darkness," a disciplinary measure for the believers, with "eternal punishment," the issue of the judgment of the unbelievers (86).

Such a view ignores the truth that the judgment of each believer at the judgment seat of Christ is to determine whether that believer will rule and reign with Christ in the millennial kingdom as a reward or suffer disciplinary punishment in outer darkness so that he may be perfected (Rev. 20:4-6; Matt. 13:42). According to the New Testament, after Christ's return, but before the millennial kingdom, He will judge all the resurrected and raptured believers at His judgment seat to determine whether their life and living qualify them for participating in the millennial kingdom. This judgment will take into account the living and work of the believers, and those who are approved, the overcoming believers, will reign with Christ in the millennial kingdom, whereas those who are disapproved will suffer loss and punishment (Matt. 7:21-23; 8:12; 25:30).

Conclusion

Even though *Heaven* makes a point to link its arguments to scriptural texts, its interpretation of these Scriptures in some of its core arguments is misguided. The primary goal of *Heaven* is to help readers delve into the realm of imagination concerning heaven, claiming that such an imagination brings hope; however, such imaginary endeavors will only lead believers away from the goal of God's economy—Christ in us, living, growing, and being corporately expressed—which is the real basis for hope (Col. 1:27).

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