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Robert Wall, the honoree of this Festschrift, is Paul T. Walls Professor of Scripture and Wesleyan Studies at Seattle Pacific University, where he has taught since 1978. To mark forty years of his professing of scripture, three of his SPU colleagues have combined to edit this engaging and thoroughly worthwhile collection of essays from former students, colleagues, and friends.

Wall is well known for his canonical approach to New Testament interpretation and also in various recent writings on the Pastoral Epistles for advocating “the usefulness of scripture” as a key doctrinal-hermeneutical point. As editor Daniel Castelo puts it in his contribution here, the emphasis is on “the performances of every Scripture as divinely inspired—that is, as indispensable for wisdom making…. One should not talk about Scripture’s nature or ontology apart from Scripture’s role or teleology” (77, the first part citing Wall himself). I do indeed wonder whether usefulness might be a more profitable characteristic of scripture to ponder than some more freighted terms, including, of course, the term found in the same verse of 2 Tim 3, “inspired.” If the present book is any evidence, then working with a useful scripture leads to interesting and stimulating interpretive and theological reflection. It is almost de rigueur for reviewers to say that any collection of essays is uneven, but this is one of the more persistently rewarding collections that I have read.

Respect for Wall and appreciation for his work come through strongly. The book opens with seven pages of “accolades” from fellow scholars, a warm four-page introduction from David
Nienhuis, then a full seventeen-page bibliography of the honoree’s publications. So we are more or less forty pages in before the first essay arrives, leading off the five papers that make up part 1, “Essays on Theology and Methodology.”

But what an essay it is! Frank Anthony Spina’s “Israel as a Figure for the Church: The Radical Nature of a Canonical Approach to Christian Scripture” (3–23) is a tour de force. Spina rehabilitates canonical Israel as a figure for the church, tracing how this got lost amidst concerns that it represented a sort of supersessionism. Spina shows elegantly how “the church’s being figured by Israel does not preclude Judaism’s also being figured by Israel” (11)—indeed, both Christianity and Judaism have their own “new testaments” (in the latter case the Oral Torah, a point that has been made by several Jewish scholars). Further, he argues that the canonical Israel is not defined in purely ethnic terms, since (as his own work has shown elsewhere¹) there is an openness to the outsider woven into the stories. This clears the way to let the church be one of the realities figured by the canonical Israel, and Spina attends to how this works out in matters of election, judgment (considering judgment upon anti-Judaism and racism as two examples), the ongoing significance of the law, and polity. This last concern leads to a neatly stated argument for the baptism of children of faith, since conversion is for outsiders. I can imagine Spina’s piece making excellent reading for students wondering (1) about what a canonical approach really delivers and (2) how to handle supersessionism, at least in canonical terms. I hope it gets a wide reading.

The remaining essays of part 1 work through a range of issues. Andrew Knapp gives us “The Role of Historical Criticism in Wesleyan Biblical Hermeneutics,” (24–46) which adds to the usual discussion of theological interpretation and historical criticism by pondering what role Wesleyan distinctives might play (whether concerns with holiness or with Scripture’s soteriological and sermonic use). He reads Ps 29 as an example. Shannon Nicole Smythe’s “Reconsidering Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Barth and Goldingay in Conversation” (47–68) takes up some comments towards the end of John Goldingay’s Do We Need the New Testament? Letting the Old Testament Speak for Itself (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), which asserted that Old Testament interpretation should not be Christ-centered or constrained by the rule of faith. She finds Barth offering various reasons for nuancing and/or dissenting Goldingay’s points. It feels a little like an unfair fight: bringing the weight of Barth’s combined works to bear on one (polemical?) chapter in a single book. One anticipates the conclusion almost immediately, although the case is patiently and well made in detail. Daniel Castelo’s “Inspiration as Providence” (69–81) takes up Wall’s work to emphasize that inspiration is not just a past event but that God continues to “breathe out” scripture (see 75 especially). This leads to an interesting proposal to see providence as the key doctrinal rubric for thinking through inspiration. Finally,
Anthony B. Robinson, a cowriter with Wall on the Pastorals, offers “But As for You: Pastoral Leadership in a Postinstitutional Time” (82-94), which argues from the Pastorals that church leaders should attend to core things well and not try to do everything.


Canonical intertexts are brought helpfully to the fore in several of these pieces. Koenig offers a lucid review of the widely divergent canonical portraits of Balaam, then rehearses five hermeneutical strategies for handling this complexity. Each comes at a price, although she moves toward preferring musical analogies that allow dissonant perspectives some (possibly limited) degree of resolution. This piece does not resolve the Balaam issue but offers an excellent guide to it. Also using musical ideas of harmony (without harmonizing) is Holmes’s reading of Martha and Mary, which shows interestingly what difference it makes to read the Lukan account before the Johannine or vice versa. A similar intensifying of the reading occurs in Fowl’s reflections on greed as idolatry in Ephesians and Colossians—not allowing one new reading to win out but letting different texts have their say. For this reviewer, the pick of the essays in this half of the volume is Levison’s reading of the Spirit. Framed by a fascinating reflection on his experience of reading N. T. Wright as a maker of big claims, he launches out to make a big claim about the Spirit: “The spirit is, in brief, the ultimate political realist” and has little or nothing to do “with personal fulfillment.” (152). This is the result of letting the canonical shape of the portrait of the Spirit have its say. The claim is familiar from Levison’s wider work but is made in a modestly “big” way here; again, this is a view that could with profit be heard by many.

All in all this is a collection of theologically rich, exegetically sensitive, and interpretatively wise essays. It is a suitable tribute to a scholar whose work has developed in all those ways over many years. I commend it to readers who would like to see good examples of a canonical approach in practice, both on a conceptual level and in the handling of specific texts.