

THE MAJESTY OF GOD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT: A GUIDE FOR PREACHING AND TEACHING

A Book Review

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by

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Introduction

At the time *The Majesty of God in the Old Testament* was written, Walter C. Kaiser was president emeritus and professor of Old Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. He formerly taught Old Testament at Wheaton College and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He lives in Wisconsin and writes and speaks extensively.¹

Summary

Kaiser's thesis is revealed in the Introduction: In our preaching we need "a whole new appreciation for the majesty and greatness of our God as presented in the Scriptures. Unfortunately, one of the best (only 'one of the best'?!) sources for this teaching—the Old Testament—is all too often neglected in our teaching and preaching. In this book, I wish to give God's people new insight into this avenue of thinking and believing by reviewing ten outstanding Old Testament texts that set forth the majesty of our Lord. . . . The center of our emphasis will be on the magnificence and majesty of our God" (9).

H. G. M. Williamson concurs with Kaiser as he writes about God's glory and majesty in comments concerning the Book of Isaiah:

It starts with a vision of God in all his royal majesty . . . and in the first verse (of Isaiah chapter six) the words "high and lifted up" appear. . . . From this opening statement, a number of other characteristic phrases and words may be seen to take their natural place. The distinctive title "The Holy One of Israel" . . . fits in well at this point, for instance, as does the use of the holiness word group more generally in relation to God. "Glory" is

another favorite term in the book, and it takes its place alongside "holy" as early as 6:3 in the praise of the seraphim. . . . Another characteristic title for God is "the Lord of hosts" . . . the "hosts" in this context being almost certainly the heavenly armies of the divine king. This too adds to the impression of all-powerful and completely dominating divine power.

Appreciation of this exalted majesty of God was undoubtedly a dominating consideration for Isaiah in his theological worldview. He has a strong sense of hierarchy and a consequent appreciation that it is important for each part of the created order to know its place. . . . Anything else which claims a "high and lifted up" position is doomed to destruction because it manifests hubris by comparison with the only truly exalted one who is God himself. . . .

The majesty of God . . . is here shown not to make him necessarily more remote. . . . Rather, when his majesty encounters people of a suitably contrasting disposition he is said to dwell with them quite as much as in the high and holy place. The same sentiment exactly is echoed in (Isaiah) 66:1-2, which concludes, "But this is the man to whom I will look, he that is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word" (R. S. V.).²

Williamson was alluding to Isaiah 57:15 in the above quote: "For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: 'I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.'"³

The glory of God is more, however, than His awesome magnificence and majesty, though it is certainly and primarily that. The glory of God is also the goal, the end, the purpose for which the child of God does whatever he or she does. The glory of God is the goal of all of our activities. Whether we eat or drink, whatever we do is to be done for the glory of God (First Corinthians 10:31). Martin Luther understood this when he said, "housekeepers, farmers, and businessmen, if they do their work to the glory of God, are more pleasing to God than monks and nuns."⁴

Williamson's starting point of a *vision* of the glory of God is echoed by Charles Spurgeon in a sermon preached at New Park Street Chapel, Southwark, published on November 26th, 1908:

That was a large request to make. He could not have asked for more: "I beseech thee, show me thy glory" (Exodus 33:18). Why, it is the greatest petition that man ever asked of God. It seems to me the greatest stretch of faith that I have either heard or read of. It was great faith which made Abraham go into the plain to offer up intercession for a guilty city like Sodom. It was vast faith which enabled Jacob to grasp the angel; it was mighty faith which enabled Elijah to rend the heavens and fetch down rain from skies which had been like brass before; but it appears to me that this prayer contains a greater amount of faith than all the others put together. It is the greatest request that man could make to God: "I beseech thee, show me thy glory." Had he requested a fiery chariot to whirl him up to heaven; had he asked to cleave the water-floods and drown the chivalry of a nation; had he prayed the Almighty to send fire from heaven to consume whole armies, I could have found a parallel to his prayer; but when he offers this petition, "I beseech thee, show me thy glory," he stands alone, a giant among giants; a Colossus even in those days of mighty men. His request surpasses that of any other man: "I beseech thee, show me thy glory."⁵

Critical Evaluation

The author observes, ". . . much of our teaching and preaching suffers from a mediocre view of God's majesty. We are too much like those chided in Psalm 50:21, who 'thought (God) was altogether like (one of them).' As presenters of the Word of God, we desire to soar to the heights of the heavenlies and to lift the sights and hopes of our listeners to the very portals of the throne room of God himself; yet, more often than not, we feel frustrated and vacuous in the final results, both in our private study of the Word of God and in our listening habits on Sunday. Therefore, we, and the people we serve, starve for the awesomeness, greatness, and sheer majesty of the King of kings and Lord of lords" (10).

At our best moments it is as Kaiser describes above, that "we desire to soar to the heights of the heavenlies. . . ." But, as he says, "we feel frustrated and vacuous in the final results." Often we are so busy and so hurried in our sermon preparation that we lose that necessary desire and we prayerlessly, heartlessly, mechanically slog through the process just to get the sermon done. Getting the sermon done, then, can become the goal, and soaring those heights gets lost in "the process."

The preacher's view of God's glory and majesty, for better or worse, is seen and heard in how he preaches. One's view of God's glory, however, is even detected (or not) in how the Scriptures are not only preached but also *read* during worship on the Lord's Day. S. S. Curry said,

The reading of the Scriptures must never be perfunctory or merely formal. It should not be a mere authoritative presentation of facts or proclamation of words . . . The reader must live his ideas at the time of utterance. . . . He can manifest to others the impressions made on his own being. . . . [For] when one soul is made to feel that another soul is hearing a message from the King of kings, he too bows his head and hears the voice of the infinite speaking in his own breast.⁶

Jonathan Sides, when he was a Ph. D. student at Duke University, pleaded "for the expository reading of Scripture. We need to read Scripture with the passion it demands. Sometimes . . . we make the mistake of not taking what is in the text and bringing it out in our reading. We need to read the Scripture with proper humility; putting away pride."⁷

Albert Mohler quotes J. Alec Motyer who defines holiness as "God's total and unique moral majesty." Then, commenting on a quote by Roger Scruton, Mohler writes,

. . . if you want to know what a people really believe about God, don't spend time reading their theologians. Watch them worship. Listen to what they sing and to how they pray (how they read the Scriptures?). Then you will know what they believe about this God whom they worship. I am haunted by the thought that is the average evangelical church, the God of the Bible would never be known by watching us worship.⁸

Though it may seem that I am making too much of this point, I believe that how we read the Scriptures (and how we preach)—with what unction of the Holy Spirit, with what zeal, with what energy, with what urgency, with what appropriate expression—is a direct indication of our view of the glory and majesty of God. Poor reading says we serve a poor God who does not deserve a better effort. Rich reading, as described above, says we serve a rich, majestic God!

Kaiser goes on to speak of the overwhelming, face-down reaction that the majesty of God invites and requires: "It is simply impossible for a person to comprehend the divine majesty of the Godhead. Instead, one must fall down before him in worship and prayer, as Calvin advised. For the theologians of the Reformation, the majesty of God provided the guidelines and boundaries for setting forth the doctrine of God" (12).⁹ If Kaiser and Calvin are right about this, as I believe they are, then most of us who are not thus falling down before God are falling short of the glory of God—and sinning against the majestic God in the process (see Romans 3:23). Do we not fear God (see Luke 23:40)? The author is right: God's majesty gives boundaries to our doctrine of God. But God's majesty also gives boundaries to our posture in worship. Far from falling down before God, most of us in the Baptist tradition (almost) never even *kneel* in worship. If our postmodern world will not listen to us, at least they are watching. We must show them how glorious our glorious and majestic God is by our posture before Him, and by our love for them.

Conclusion

As was clear in the above content, *The Majesty of God in the Old Testament* was extremely practical for me. The glory and majesty of God informs how I posture myself in worship, how I preach God's word, how I read God's word, even how I treat my postmodern neighbors. Kaiser accomplished his purpose of helping me along in the process of gaining "a whole new appreciation for the majesty and greatness of our God as presented in the Scriptures" (9). God used this sermon-in-a-book to remind me that, concerning the majesty of God, "Obviously, there is nothing comparable. That is why we must be taught, or teach ourselves all over again, the biblical texts that call us to magnify the majestic and awesome name of our God" (14)! Amen!

¹<http://www.walterckaiserjr.com/aboutkaiser.html>. Accessed on July 7, 2012.

² Grenville J. R. Kent, Paul J. Kissling, Laurence A. Turner, eds., *Reclaiming the Old Testament for Christian Preaching*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 152, 153.

³ WordSearch Bible Explorer 4 CD-ROM, citing *The English Standard Version*.

⁴<http://www.reformationusa.org/articles/Luther.htm>. Accessed on July 7, 2012.

⁵<http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/3120.htm>. Accessed on July 8, 2012.

⁶<http://expositorythoughts.wordpress.com/2011/02/09/public-reading-of-scripture/>. Accessed on July 8, 2012.

⁷<http://ironforgeblog.blogspot.com/2008/03/expository-reading-of-scripture.html>. Accessed on July 8, 2012.

⁸R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *He is Not Silent: Preaching in a Post-Modern World* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 30, 31.

⁹Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca 1725*, vol. 3, *The Divine Essence and Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 540.