

"Am I Able to Say Just Anything?"

Learning Faithful Exegesis from Balaam

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With considerable struggle, Balaam learns what it means to engage in faithful exegesis. It means shedding the human tendency to interpret in service to our own interests, and it means exegeting in the context of God's overarching purposes for Israel and for the world.

In a recent address, the general secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Setri Nyomi, recounted the visit of church leaders, during a WARC meeting, to a historic Reformed church in Ghana. The visitors were aghast to learn that for centuries the worship of God had been taking place directly over a holding pen where slaves were being held before their transport to the Americas. Nyomi asks what it was in these worshippers' reading of Scripture that "did not equip them to deal with the injustices taking place seven feet below them?"¹ To pose the question closer to home, what kind of exegetical practices led to the forced construction of the exquisite churches of Charleston, South Carolina, and elsewhere by enslaved Africans? What makes for faithful, and unfaithful, exegesis?

In a class on the Old Testament not long ago, some students and I were reflecting on the question of whether the garden story in Genesis 2–3 reinforces or undermines the oppression of women. Several sharply divergent scholarly interpretations were being discussed with some passion, and considerable disagreement, when a student blurted out with a mixture of contempt and exasperation, "It's all just spin anyway. You can spin the text any way you want." With a baffling array of interpretations of Scripture available, and the location of the authority to interpret Scripture dislocated and disappearing, what indeed equips

¹Setri Nyomi, from an address on the theme, "Faith in the Third Millennium: Reading Scripture Together," given at the inaugural of Iain Torrance as president of Princeton Theological Seminary, March 10, 2005.

us to interpret Scripture faithfully? How does exegesis become more than just “spin”? How can exegesis become an act of ministry? Or to put it even more pointedly, as Setri Nyomi does, “how do we become God’s instrument as an exegete?”

Of course, scholars and pastors know that the texts themselves offer criteria by which interpretations should be judged. The historical critical method, although under much strain from mounting criticism of late, has bequeathed this crucial feature of biblical interpretation.² The exegete must always ask whether the textual details support her interpretation. When confronted with competing interpretations, it is imperative to ask which interpretation *better* accounts for the features of the biblical text? Which features are *not* accounted for in a particular interpretation?

Yet even the relative clarity of a well-defined, guild-sanctioned method, as important as it is, does not solve the problem of adjudicating between competing interpretations that present themselves, at least initially, as equally compelling. This problem was acutely demonstrated by an incident that took place at a conference of Reformed biblical scholars and theologians in South Africa in 2001. Ted Hiebert, professor of Old Testament at McCormick Seminary, a highly multicultural context, presented an interpretation of Gen 11 (“The Tower of Babel”) that affirms God’s will for cultural diversity on the earth.³ Yet several of the South African hosts observed that a very similar interpretation of that text was one of the central biblical foundations for apartheid. On the pro-apartheid reading, Gen 11 teaches that God does not want different cultural and linguistic groups to live together. A stunned silence accompanied the realization that these two interpretations bear such striking similarities. How might one adjudicate between these readings? The ethical consequences of interpretation could not be more weighty, and yet the criteria one might employ to discern between these readings were not immediately obvious. Hiebert concludes that the interpreter’s cultural context (American concern for diversity; South African concern for unity) is crucial for making interpretive judgments.⁴

Certainly the explanatory power of a particular interpretation of Scripture (how well does it account for the text’s features?) and the interpreter’s cultural context are important in adjudicating among competing interpretations. Yet even this configuration of the interpretive method fails to acknowledge the role of specifically theological discernment.⁵ How

²The literature on this topic is now quite extensive, but for a brief, helpful essay see Rowan Williams, “Historical Criticism and Sacred Text,” in *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom: Scripture and Theology* (David F. Ford and Graham Stanton, eds.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 217–28.

³The paper, together with reflection on the discussion in South Africa appears in Theodore Hiebert, “Babel: Babble or Blueprint? Calvin, Cultural Diversity, and the Interpretation of Genesis 11:1–9” in *Reformed Theology and the Reading of Scripture* (ed. Michael Welker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming). Hiebert observes that he follows Bernhard Anderson and Ellen van Wolde in seeing Gen 11 as affirming cultural diversity. See Bernhard A. Anderson, “The Tower of Babel: Unity and Diversity in God’s Creation,” in *From Creation to New Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994 [original pub. 1978]), 165–78; Ellen van Wolde, “The Tower of Babel as Lookout over Genesis 1–11,” in *Words Become Worlds: Semantic Studies of Genesis 1–11* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 84–109.

⁴Hiebert further observes that the pro-apartheid reading assumes that it is God’s will for the distinct cultural and linguistic groups of Gen 11 to be forever separated from each other.

⁵Patrick Keifert and the late Donald Juel have worked extensively on the problem of interpreting the Bible theologically in the context of the modern inheritance. See Patrick Keifert, “The Bible and Theological Education: A Report and Reflections on a Journey,” in *The Ending of Mark and the Ends of God: Essays in Memory of Donald Harrisville Juel* (Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Patrick D. Miller, eds.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 165–82.

might specifically theological reflection help the exegete to interpret Scripture better? For a hermeneutical clue as to how theological convictions might play a role in turning exegesis into ministry, let us turn briefly to the story of Balaam and his difficulties in exegeting God's will.

LEARNING FROM THE DONKEY

Balaam is hired by Balak, the king of Moab, to curse Israel.⁶ As is well known in this delightful tale, Balaam is prevented from cursing Israel by his astute donkey, who alone perceives the angel of Yhwh blocking the path "as an adversary" (*sātān*, the same word used to describe the adversary in the first chapter of Job). Balaam three times beats the donkey for her recalcitrance before she remonstrates with him by means of unexpected (for a donkey) speech.

The story emphasizes that Balak hires Balaam to curse Israel for his own purposes. "Now go, curse *for me* this people for they are stronger *than me*. Perhaps *I* will be able to smite them and *I* will be able to drive them from the land, for *I* know that whomever you bless will be blessed and whomever you curse will be cursed" (Num 22:6).⁷ The repetition of first person pronouns and verbs underscores Balak's motivation: he wants Balaam to exegete the divine will for his own purposes in order to consolidate his power. Furthermore, Balak explicitly hires Balaam to practice divination (22:7), an illicit practice according to much of the Old Testament.⁸

Balaam tells the messengers that he will speak what Yhwh tells him, which may strike us as unusual since he is not an Israelite, but his apparent connection to Yhwh is confirmed in the next verse when we learn that God forbids Balaam to curse Israel "for they are blessed" (22:12). But Balak presses his case, urging Balaam to meet with him and promising him wealth and whatever else he wants (v. 17), if only Balaam will curse Israel for him. Balaam replies, however, that he cannot do this, even if he would profit enormously from doing so.

At first blush Balaam's selfless devotion to the integrity of the exegetical task he has been given appears quite commendable. But on closer examination Balaam's protestation reveals a rhetorically deft effort to negotiate his price. As Carolyn Sharp argues, Balaam could have told Balak from the beginning that the entire project is doomed, but instead he covertly ups the negotiating price for the exegetical work required: "*Even if Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of Yhwh my God . . .*" (v. 18). In the rhetorically complex world of business negotiation, Balaam mentions the house full of silver and gold to suggest to Balak, ironically, that he may well have a price for this act of interpretation, and it is pretty high. R. W. L. Moberly observes: ". . . the

⁶For an extended treatment of Balaam in the history of interpretation, see John T. Greene, *Balaam and His Interpreters: A Hermeneutical History of the Balaam Traditions* (Brown Judaic Studies 244; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992).

⁷Translations are the author's unless otherwise noted. Balak echoes Pharaoh's fear that the Israelites are so numerous and therefore so strong that they pose a threat (Exod 1:9–10).

⁸Much of the Old Testament condemns the practice of magic (including divination), but it appears to have been widely practiced in ancient Israel and is not always evaluated negatively. Balaam himself is later slain for a variety of offenses (Num 31:8, 16; Josh 13:22). On the mixed reception of Balaam in ancient traditions, see Michael L. Barré, "The Portrait of Balaam in Numbers 22–24," *Int* 51 (2003): 254–66.

fact that Balaam goes again to consult God suggests that he does not mean what he says in v. 18. Balaam is acceding to Balak's construal of his earlier refusal, that it was not a genuine refusal but a negotiating ploy."⁹

Of interest to our understanding of exegesis as a form of ministry is the idea that God sets the boundaries on interpreting God's will to the people, and the human tendency as represented by Balaam is to give the *appearance* of adherence to those boundaries while working covertly (perhaps unconsciously?) to make the task of interpretation serve his own interests.¹⁰ Although Balak is the more egregious exemplar, both Balak and Balaam share a common interest in exegesis in the service of self. That a subtle form of price negotiation has been taking place is further suggested by Balak's comment to Balaam when he finally arrives after the donkey incident: "When I first sent to invite you, why didn't you come to me? *Am I really unable to reward you?*" (v. 37). Balak is amazed that Balaam has not immediately responded to his summons, because in his moral universe the profit motive is the currency of the land. Balaam replies, more forcefully this time, that he can only speak the word that God puts in his mouth.

But let us return to the donkey for a moment. God tells Balaam to go with Balak's emissaries, and to do only what Yhwh tells him to do (v. 20), yet God is incensed at his going only two verses later.¹¹ The scene is thus set for the confrontation between Balaam and the messenger of Yhwh who blocks his path and the ancillary confrontation between Balaam, blind to the messenger's presence, and his donkey who sees and refuses to go forward.¹² Finally, Yhwh "opened the eyes of Balaam" and told him that the adversary had been sent because Balaam's "way" is "perverse" before God (v. 32).¹³ A major Hebrew lexicon tentatively proposes that the word describes Balaam's way as a "slippery slope" before God. However we decide to translate the word in this context, the general meaning is clear: Cursing Israel is not God's will, but a perverse and disastrous course of action. God has in mind another "way."

The scales drop from Balaam's eyes. His initial response is to acknowledge his own sinfulness and his ignorance ("I have sinned; I did not know that you were stationed to meet

⁹"On Learning to Be a True Prophet: The Story of Balaam and His Ass," in *New Heaven and New Earth-Prophesy and the Millennium: Essays in Honour of Anthony Gelston* (eds. P. J. Harland and C. T. R. Hayward; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 7. See also Carolyn Sharp, "Impotent Divine Word? Balaam and the Irony of Blessing," unpublished paper. Sharp sees Balaam as an entirely unreliable character and the narrator as presenting the entire account ironically.

¹⁰Katharine Doob Sakenfeld offers a related discussion of the tensions surrounding paid ministry emerging from this text (*Journeying With God: A Commentary on the Book of Numbers* [ITC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995], 129–30).

¹¹On this encounter in the context of other mysterious divine-human encounters, see Dennis T. Olson, *Numbers* (IBC; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 143–44. Many have taken the apparent contradiction as a redactional "seam." See Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers = [Ba-midbar]: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia; New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 468.

¹²On the ironies of sight and blindness, see G. Savran, "Beastly Speech: Intertextuality, Balaam's Ass and the Garden of Eden," *JSOT* 64 (1994): 33–55, esp. 45–48.

¹³See *yārat* in HALOT. The word is a *hapax legomenon* and so difficult to translate, although see the discussion in Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 21–36: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 4A; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 159. The versions are helpful in understanding the parameters of what is meant here. The Greek has "your way is not beautiful before me"; the Vulgate, "your way is perverse." The NIPS translation offers "your way is obnoxious to me" (see Milgrom, *Numbers*, 192, 320). BHS recommends reading along the lines the Samaritan Pentateuch proposes, "your way is evil."

me on the way" [v. 34]). As readers we might well understand Balaam's ignorance—he does not know what we know of God's love for Israel, for the biblical story has only just begun—though he knew enough to reject Balak's offer back in v. 18. But let us not pass over too quickly Balaam's immediate confession of sin. How rare is it now to confess that one has sinned against God and God's people in our efforts to understand the divine will and enact it? It is possible to read Balaam's confession as a reflection of his genuine ignorance, but it seems more likely that Balaam is admitting that he did not realize the depth or intensity of the divine resistance to the cursing project. As Dennis Olson observes, "Lest Balaam have any thought that he can make an end run around God, the angel teaches Balaam that he must lay down his own initiative in cursing or blessing Israel and allow God to use him as God sees fit."¹⁴ He learns only as he goes along that he cannot both fulfill the divine will and serve as the Moabites' professional exegete.

Whatever his prior ideas, Balaam begins to understand that God is serious about not cursing Israel. His eyes have literally been opened (v. 31). Balak's hiring of Balaam to curse Israel boomerangs back onto the Moabites as curses upon them. We must put aside for the moment the thorny problem posed by the fact that blessing for Israel is constituted by the cursing of others. In this context, God's fierce protection of Israel is understood as the defeat of those in the area who seek its harm. Of special interest here is the allusion to God's prior history with Israel: as elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, the connection of present action with past action is made explicit. "Yhwh their God is with them . . ." says Balaam in the second oracle, "God who freed them from Egypt is for them like the horns of the wild ox" (23:21–22; cf. 24:8). God's present blessing is consonant with that prior act of deliverance.

Yet Balaam only slowly understands the totality and finality of God's plan to bless Israel, otherwise why would he continually need to have his eyes opened to that reality? In 24:1 at the beginning of the third oracle, the narrator observes that "when Balaam saw that it pleased Yhwh to bless Israel, he did not go as before to seek omens." As Sharp observes, "what, then, had Balaam been aiming for before? Had it not been clear before that the LORD would only bless Israel?"¹⁵ Balaam seems to grasp only fitfully and gradually that exegesis in the service of God does not coincide very well with exegesis that profits him.

In his final conversation with Balaam, Balak laments Balaam's refusal to curse Israel: "I was going to reward you richly, but Yhwh has denied you the reward" (24:11). In Balaam's earlier failure to communicate to Balak the certainty of the divine opposition to his plan, Balaam appears to have held out the hope that he might yet work the situation to his

¹⁴Olson, *Numbers*, 145. Sakenfeld likewise comments, "Balaam may secretly have been hoping that God's mind had changed . . ." (*Journeying With God*, 126).

¹⁵Sharp, "Impotent Divine Word?"

advantage, perhaps giving the appearance of faithfulness to Yhwh while still taking his fee from Balak. But he has finally grasped the impossibility of this aspiration. Balaam repeats his earlier assertion (22:18) that he could not accept even a house full of silver and gold if it meant countering Yhwh's command "to do a large or a small (thing)." The wording is similar, but this time Balaam says, "I cannot go beyond the command of Yhwh to do either good or ill *from my (own) heart*" (24:13). In contrast to the earlier verse, Balaam is no longer in a posture of negotiation—too much has happened to convince him that God will not allow for self-serving exegesis. Instead, the slight change in wording gestures toward the change in Balaam's perception of his interpretive task. He explicitly observes that he cannot act based on his own desires; rather, his exegetical work must be shaped by the will of God. Balaam's earlier rhetorical question, "Am I able to say just anything?" (22:38), is definitively answered.

EXEGESIS AS MINISTRY

The Balaam story evokes at least two observations about the exegetical task. The first concerns the dangers of our exegesis becoming self-serving. Balaam's initial idea was to carry out the task God assigns him, while figuring a way to feather his own nest. Only when God literally stands in his way and a donkey talks to him does he finally realize that he cannot exegete for God and line his pockets at the same time. Balaam may seem like an egregious example, a non-Israelite after all, who bears no resemblance to pious Christian folk who earnestly seek God's will in their reading of Scripture. But the Reformed worshippers in Ghana and the pro-slavery Christians I mentioned at the beginning of this article also exegeted in a way that profited themselves socially, politically, and economically.

And what of us? If our exegesis is to be faithful and so an act of ministry, we too must exercise enormous self-awareness on the occasions where our interpretation leads to our material gain, even when, perhaps especially when, the interpretive moves are subtle. The Scriptures themselves can aid us in this if we attend to them carefully. By no means are all instances of self-interested exegesis as egregious or obvious as the pro-slavery examples mentioned at the beginning of this essay. Special attention is required for those moments when our self-serving exegesis is so subtle that it in fact *appears* to serve the needs of others. Yet the example of slavery is instructive. In his account of the ways missionaries sometimes unwittingly abetted the antislavery cause in the Caribbean, Adam Hoschschild observes: ". . . despite the care the missionaries took to avoid challenging slavery directly, you could hear them preach that all men and women, black and white, slave and free, were equal in the sight of God. 'It was easy most unintentionally to err,' wrote Reverend Hope Waddell, a

young Presbyterian who arrived in Jamaica in 1829, “. . . and to say things in a slave congregation fit only for a free one.”¹⁶ The Bible has a power that will ultimately resist all attempts to make it serve our own selfish interests, and as Mr. Waddell discovered, it will show forth in our exegesis of it.

The second exegetical principle emerging from Balaam’s story concerns the necessity of having a larger framework in view for interpreting a passage of Scripture. Balaam had a number of disturbing experiences before he fully grasped that his interpretive work must take place in the context of God’s prior relationship with, and future plans for, Israel. God’s way for Israel is a way of blessing, blessing that is played out in the larger story of God’s love for Israel as recounted in the Hebrew Scriptures. The story of Balaam embodies the “rule of faith” in its scriptural, narrative form—that is, we exegete and interpret always in the context of God’s ultimate care for Israel, and for Christian readers of Scripture, that blessing extends to the church and the world.¹⁷ The promise of care for the world begins implicitly in Gen 1 but is made explicit in Gen 12:3 with the call of Abraham: “in you [Abraham] all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” That wider context of concern continues throughout the Old and New Testaments as particularity (Israel, Jesus Christ) finds its purpose and fulfillment in universal blessing. Language that tries to domesticate God for particularist purposes (e.g., “God Bless America”) is therefore unbiblical and in fact, counterbiblical.¹⁸

The story of Balaam helps us see that our exegetical work must always be done in light of God’s larger story. If we hear that blessing enough, interpreted through faithful teaching and preaching, it has the power to shape us and transform us. Balaam interprets the blessing four times in the story, each time differently. Faithful exegesis is an on-going activity that both reiterates the core truths of Scripture and allows the form of those truths to be shaped by their particular context. To answer Setri Nyomi’s question posed at the beginning of this essay, we become God’s instruments as exegetes by interpreting every passage of Scripture in light of the larger story of God’s love for us and for the world. As the theologian David Ford put it in a recent address, we need to read Scripture “for the sake of God and God’s purposes.”¹⁹

The possibility of sliding into a weak, ill-defined “God is Love” theology is always a risk. To exegete Scripture within the context of God’s desire that all might have fullness of

¹⁶Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire’s Slaves* (Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 338.

¹⁷For helpful modern reflections on the ancient Christian idea of the “rule of faith” in reading Scripture, see Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), who argues that Christians should always read Scripture with the specific convictions and ends of Christian life in mind. Charles Cosgrove moves in a similar direction when he suggests a four-fold rule of faith for Christian exegesis. The four considerations are as follows: theological (making faith explicit), moral (love seeking justice, i.e., “emancipatory vision of God’s love in Christ”), correlational (depth and relevance), and ecumenical (hermeneutic of qualified pluralism and limited ecumenical synthesis). See Charles H. Cosgrove, “Toward a Postmodern *Hermeneutica Sacra*: Guiding Considerations in Choosing Between Competing Plausible Interpretations of Scripture,” in *The Meanings We Choose: Hermeneutical Ethics, Indeterminacy and the Conflict of Interpretations* (ed. Charles H. Cosgrove; London, New York; T & T Clark, 2004), 39–61.

¹⁸For more on the problem of religious language in the current cultural and political milieu, see Jim Wallis, *God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 3–40.

¹⁹From an address on the theme, “Faith in the Third Millennium: Reading Scripture Together,” given at the inaugural of Iain Torrance as president of Princeton Theological Seminary, March 10, 2005.

life is not an excuse to avoid conflict or opt for the easy way out.²⁰ The temptation to embrace a form of cheap grace is one that the biblical story explicitly warns against. Balaam repeatedly blesses Israel in Num 22–24, but in the next chapter the people are egregiously unfaithful and, in a move not wholly without precedent in these narratives, God endorses the slaughter of the guilty. Living in the light of God is no warrant for living unfaithfully. Figuring out what “fullness of life” looks like for all people and how to achieve it for all people is disconcertingly complex. The way of blessing must therefore be continuously discerned through hard exegetical work that is in collegial conversation with both other Christians and persons of other traditions.

The research that Patrick Keifert, Donald Juel, and others conducted on the place of the Bible in the church and in public conversations points to an exegetical void at the heart of church life. A significant problem lies in the nature of how pastors are taught. Pastors reported that their theological education “had helped them to see what the Bible was *not* good for, but it had not helped them see what it was good for.”²¹ Considerable evidence suggests that the teachers, preachers, and theological educators of and for the church must do better to understand exegetical practices as *ministry* that transforms persons and congregations in conformity to God’s will.

One disturbing example of exegetical failure and two examples of exegesis faithful to the exegetical principles emerging from the Balaam story (self-criticism and interpreting within the context of divine care) will illustrate the point.

At a recent convention of clergy and laypersons of a mainline denomination in the Northeast, a resolution to condemn the use of torture by the U.S. government was debated. The resolution sought to condemn U.S.-sponsored prisoner abuse and death squads, whether taking place in the U.S. or abroad. The measure failed after a number of persons objected that the current “war on terror” makes an outright rejection of torture unrealistic. The rejection of this proposal might be analyzed a number of different ways, but among other things, it appears to reflect a widespread failure in the ministry of exegesis, of preaching and teaching. Persons who endorse the use of torture are more influenced by the pervasive atmosphere of fear that presently reigns over our political and cultural life than they are by the gospel of God’s love for us and for all people attested in the Old and New Testaments.

One difficulty that afflicts some of us in the mainline denominations is our silence, our refusal to counter-exegete poor exegesis. In recent decades, the response of thoughtful Christians to bad exegesis of the Bible has been to say nothing, to abandon the Bible to

²⁰Keifert observes that the problem is a common one during times of congregational conflict (“The Bible and Theological Education,” 167).

²¹Keifert, “The Bible and Theological Education,” 168.

those who would exegete poorly in the apparent belief that the Bible itself offers few resources to counter such interpretation. Jim Wallis' recent book, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* has had such a significant impact in the media in part because it offers a rare counter-exegesis to the Christian right's aggressive interpretation of the Bible. It has taken the evangelical Wallis to articulate a counter-exegesis of the Christian Scriptures, an exegesis that forcefully argues against a Christian defense of pre-emptive war, and against the Christian defense of policies that crush the poor and enrich the wealthy. But more importantly, Wallis offers constructive exegesis of the Scriptures as offering a vision of blessing for all people.

Another recent example of the ministry of exegesis comes to mind in the form of a sermon I heard not long ago. The pastor of a local Presbyterian congregation, David Davis, preached on the second coming of Christ as part of a series of sermons on the Apostles' Creed. In contrast to a popular and widespread exegesis of Jesus' second coming that envisions Christ as coming to rapture *me* for eternal glory, with the ethical correlate that I should trample others around me in order to better position myself for such glory, Davis exegeted the Scriptures and proclaimed that the Jesus who is coming a second time is the same Jesus we meet in the gospels—the one who loves all of us, not just some. The task of the church when contemplating Jesus' return is thus *to be the church*.²² There is nothing extraordinary about such preaching—it is consonant with both Reformed belief and Scripture—yet Reverend Davis observed, confessed really, that in his nearly two decades of parish ministry, this marked the first time he had preached on the second coming of Christ. Such exegetical work is ministry not only because it is rigorous, but also because it understands that Scripture is powerful, and that the ultimate end of exegesis is blessing.

Discerning in Balaam's story the need for self-critical reflection on our exegetical practice and the need for interpreting Scripture in the context of divine love is no panacea that leads to E-Z Exegesis, but if we consider the exegetical battles over slavery, and the quieter, more recent dispute over the interpretation of Gen 11 mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the usefulness of these principles in discerning between competing interpretations of Scripture is apparent. Exegesis requires certain learned skills—how to attend to historical, social, and literary facets of text—but it also requires a disciplined imagination and something even more important—faith that God's word has power to speak to us and for us, and especially faith that it speaks to and for those who are far removed from the prosperity we enjoy.²³ What might be called a "sacred hermeneutics" of Scripture means always striving to be transformed by our reading so that our love for God and one another might be strength-

²²David Davis, "Coming," preached on March 13, 2005 in Nassau Presbyterian Church, Princeton, NJ. Available at <http://www.nassauchurch.org/worship/sermons/20050313.htm>.

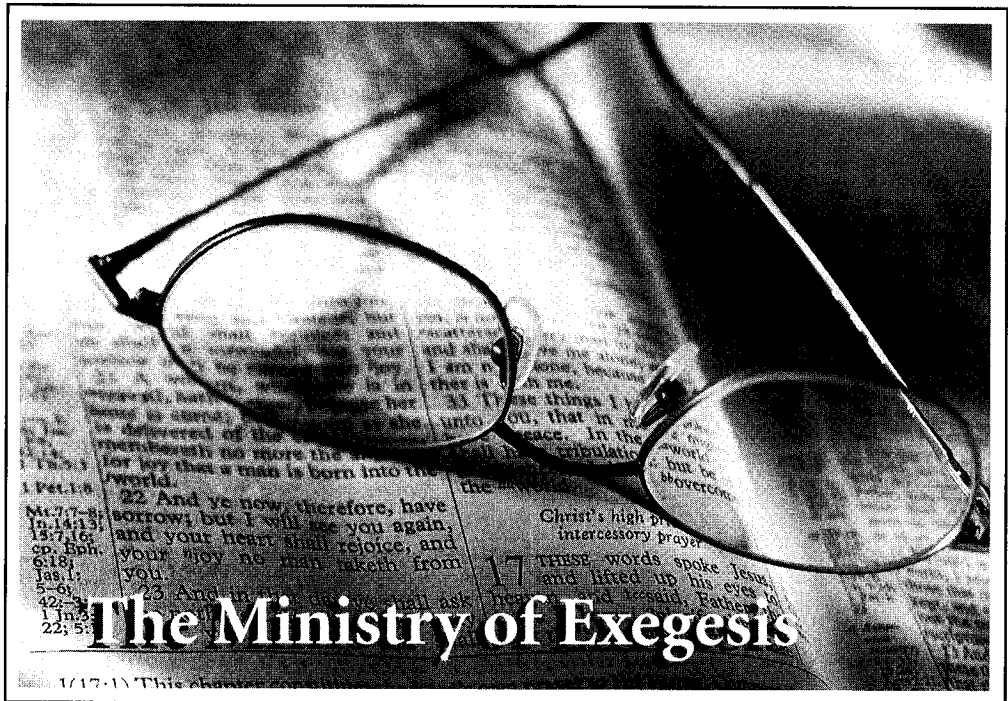
²³Ellen Davis lists three willingnesses she sees as indispensable for reading the Old Testament (which might also apply to the New): a willingness to risk being "taken in," a willingness to change, and a willingness to deal with the extreme difficulty of the text ("Losing a Friend: The Loss of the Old Testament to the Church," in *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures* [ed. Alice Ogden Bellis and Joel S. Kaminsky; Symposium Series vol. 8; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000], 85).

ened.²⁴ A vital and viable “sacred hermeneutics” does not abandon critical tools or reflection, but rather incorporates them in service to the point of reading Scripture: to be transformed by the love of God so that all may have fullness of life.²⁵

We ride with Balaam on the donkey, and so we learn as we go along how to shed our recurrent collective tendency to interpret the Bible, whether consciously or unconsciously, to serve our own narrow interests, and how instead to think more expansively in terms of God’s overarching love for Israel, for the church, and for the world.

²⁴The phrase “sacred hermeneutics” is Aref Nayed’s from a lecture delivered on the topic of “Faith in the Third Millennium: Reading Scripture Together,” at the inaugural of Iain Torrance as president of Princeton Theological Seminary, March 10, 2005.

²⁵See Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 179–90.



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