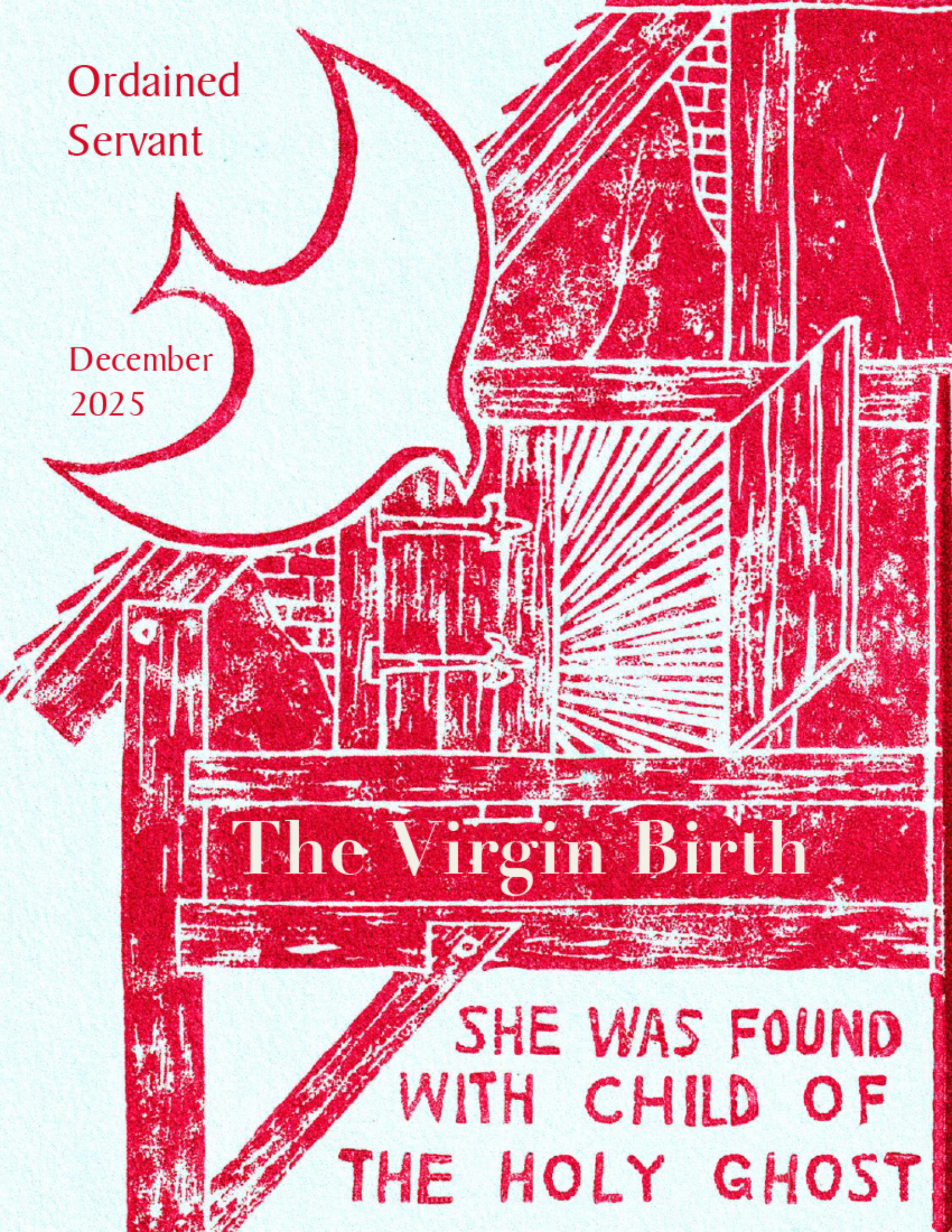




Ordained  
Servant

December  
2025

# The Virgin Birth

SHE WAS FOUND  
WITH CHILD OF  
THE HOLY GHOST



# Ordained Servant Online

## *A Journal for Church Officers*

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### **CURRENT ISSUE: THE VIRGIN BIRTH**

**December 2025**

### *From the Editor*

The virgin birth is the first miracle of the New Testament. When Thomas Jefferson sought to extricate all mention of the supernatural from the Bible, he ended up with a very small book. The goal of *The Jefferson Bible* (ca. 1820) was an impossible task because the entire point of the Bible is to reveal the supernatural triune God who created all things, controls history, and sent his Son to save his people from sin and death. The virgin birth is a direct challenge to the instrumental materialism of modernity, which the biblical scholars of J. Gresham Machen's day adopted, as if to continue Jefferson's project. But because the Spirit of the risen Christ is enlightening the minds of the elect, unbelieving propaganda cannot stop our Savior from building his kingdom, the church.

Justin McLendon and Darryl Hart reflect on Machen's masterpiece. McLendon's "A Confessional Certainty: Machen's Defense of the Virgin Birth in a Shifting World" and Hart's review article, "Machen's Best Book: *The Virgin Birth of Christ*," explore the genius of Machen's believing scholarship.

The many forces of our technological society have grossly underestimated the superiority of human intelligence and the importance of personal presence. In light of the burgeoning commercial and personal presence of AI, I have been exploring this topic in "Going Peopleless Underestimates the Unique Superiority of Human Intelligence." In March I gave a brief introduction to artificial intelligence with a brief history and a comparison with human intelligence. In April I considered the unique superiority of human intelligence and personal presence, exploring what King David meant when he declared that he was "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Ps. 139:14). Now in part 3 I will conclude with the application of parts 1 and 2 in terms of benefits and liabilities.

Danny Olinger continues the series "Jesus, Stab Me in the Heart! Flannery O'Connor at 100" with an analysis of the O'Connor novel, "*Wise Blood*, Part 2". Each month Olinger has been reflecting on a sample of O'Connor's fiction (I recommend *O'Connor: Collected Works*, The Library of America, 1988). This concludes this insightful look at O'Connor's unique contribution to American fiction.

*Order in the Offices*, a homegrown publication edited by Pastor Mark Brown, was reviewed by Sherman Isbell in 1995 in *Ordained Servant* (October), <https://opc.org/OS/html/V4/4g.html>. The new expanded second edition was published by Reformed Forum last year. Now in hardcover, an excellent article by Dr. Alan Strange has been added. Brad Isbell reviews the book from a two-office perspective,

“*Order in the Offices* from a Two-office Perspective.” Pastor Archibald Allison reviews the book from a three-office perspective, “Historic Presbyterian Polity.”

Notice in our archives three important articles. Former editor of *Ordained Servant*, G. I. Williamson, changed his mind on this issue, “The Two- and Three-Office Issue Reconsidered” (January 2003). Mark Brown, the editor of *Order in the Offices*, in January 1995 wrote “Why I Came to a Three-Office View.” Also, in January 2003, General Secretary of the Committee on Christian Education, Larry Wilson, published “A Reader Asks: ‘Was it Appropriate for *New Horizons* to Advocate the Three-Office View?’” Guess which position I hold. But this is the place for cordial brotherly discussions on topics on which we disagree.

Andrew Miller reviews a fascinating new book of biblical theology, *Figuring Resurrection: Joseph as a Death and Resurrection Figure in the Old Testament and Second Temple Judaism*, by Jeffrey Pulse. Miller demonstrates its strengths and weaknesses in an informational review.

Finally, our poem is by Christina Rossetti. She is the famous Pre-Raphaelite author of “None Other Lamb” and “In the Bleak Midwinter.” Her clear commitment to historic Christianity and her lyrical gifts have given us a poetic treasure unique in the Romantic era.

Blessings in the Lamb,  
Gregory Edward Reynolds

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*Ordained Servant* exists to help encourage, inform, and equip church officers for faithful, effective, and God-glorifying ministry in the visible church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Its primary audience is ministers, elders, and deacons of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, as well as interested officers from other Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Through high-quality editorials, articles, and book reviews, we will endeavor to stimulate clear thinking and the consistent practice of historic, confessional Presbyterianism.

# Servant Thoughts

## Elf on the Shelf or Christ on the Cross?

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By Gregory Edward Reynolds

I sat in the living room near the Christmas tree, back when I was a young. I thought of Santa Claus knowing whether I was naughty or nice. I never received coal in my stocking, but I knew I should have. Therefore, I thought well of Santa, because he overlooked my naughtiness, so it must be OK—but I still knew better. At the time I knew nothing about sin or the gospel.

Christmas has become the classic exemplar of the covenant of works. A cartoon recently showed a little girl standing before Santa Claus asking, “Isn’t there something in between naughty and nice?” The Elf on the Shelf, of recent commercial vintage, has become Santa’s spy, designed to get children to obey their parents. Christ may still be in the word Christmas, but Santa or the Elf have eclipsed him.

Wikipedia describes the Elf’s origin:

*The Elf on the Shelf: A Christmas Tradition* is a 2005 American picture book for children, written by Carol Aebersold and her daughter Chanda Bell and illustrated by Coë Steinwart. The book tells a Christmas-themed story, written in rhyme, that explains how Santa Claus knows who is naughty and nice. It describes elves visiting children from Thanksgiving to Christmas Eve, after which they return to the North Pole until the next holiday season.<sup>1</sup>

The bestselling Elf is not without his critics. Kate Tuttle in her *Atlantic* article “You’re a Creepy One, Elf on the Shelf” calls this “a marketing juggernaut dressed up as a tradition,” whose purpose is “to spy on kids.” She argues that one should not “bully [one’s] child into thinking that good behavior equals gifts.”<sup>2</sup>

David Kyle Johnston in *Psychology Today* calls it a “dangerous parental crutch,” commensurate with what he terms the “Santa lie.” Children are taught that “The elf is actually alive and moves around when you’re not looking. He’s watching you and you never know where he will turn up next. And if he sees you doing something wrong he reports directly back to Santa.”<sup>3</sup> Johnston is most concerned about the perception by children that if there is no Santa or Elf, it will undermine trust in parents and raise doubts about what they teach about God.

Remember the lyrics to “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town”:

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia’s “The Elf on the Shelf” entry, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Elf\\_on\\_the\\_Shelf](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Elf_on_the_Shelf), accessed November 19, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in “The Elf on the Shelf,” Wikipedia.

<sup>3</sup> David Kyle Johnston, “Let’s Bench the Elf on the Shelf,” *Psychology Today* (December 19, 2012).

You better watch out  
You better not cry  
Better not pout  
I'm telling you why  
Santa Claus is comin' to town, gather 'round

He's making a list  
And checking it twice;  
He's gonna find out who's naughty and nice  
Santa Claus is comin' to town

He sees you when you're sleeping  
He knows when you're awake  
He knows if you've been bad or good  
So be good for goodness sake!

This is not good news for sinners, especially little ones.

More than this, Santa and the Elf undermine two important attributes of God: his omniscience and his mercy. The Devil will do everything in his power to undermine the sovereign holiness of God and the Good News of Jesus Christ, the free and sovereign grace that saves us from sin and death. He uses what is apparently good to do so. That guilt will make kids be nice and kind. It leaves them with hopeless hypocrisy.

Our God is omniscient, Santa is a fictional imitation: “He who planted the ear, does he not hear? He who formed the eye, does he not see?” (Ps. 94:9). “And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Heb. 4:13). The guilt this brings is what makes the gospel so glorious. In the incarnation we celebrate

the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works. (Tit. 2:13–14)

We perform good works, not out of guilt, but as a response to the forgiveness of God based on the righteousness of Jesus Christ and his guilt defeating sacrifice. What a message for the Christmas season! The cross alone engenders true kindness and giving. This is the covenant of grace.

Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in

his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.  
(Phil. 3:8–11)

While I am not a fan of the Elf, neither am I a fan of the Grinch. Each Christian has the liberty to celebrate Christmas or not. The way I have found most compatible with my Christianity is to enjoy the festivity, during the cold and dark season, with family and friends. I seek to make opportunities to discuss, and for me as a minister, to preach about the incarnation. I also read “The Night before Christmas,” not as the truth, but as a delightful poem. The fictional gift giver is not Santa Clause, but St. Nicholas. He was the Greek bishop of Myra (now Turkey), who obeyed Jesus’s words to “sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Matt. 19:21). Nicholas used his whole inheritance to assist the needy, the sick, and the suffering. He dedicated his life to serving God. He became known throughout the land for his generosity to those in need, his love for children, and his concern for sailors and ships. This is the fruit of the cross, the cross of Christ instead of the Elf on the Shelf.

**Gregory E. Reynolds** *is pastor emeritus of Amoskeag Presbyterian Church (OPC) in Manchester, New Hampshire, and is the editor of Ordained Servant.*

# ServantLiterature

## Wise Blood, Part Two

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by Danny Olinger

### **Jesus, Stab Me in the Heart! Flannery O'Connor at 100**

Readers should read part one of this article first:  
[https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=1215](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=1215).

In his crusade to increase the membership of the Church Without Christ, Hazel Motes stands every night on his Essex preaching, but he can only garner one follower and that had been a mistake. A teenager wanted to go to a house of ill repute, but he did not want to go without a person of experience and invites Hazel to join him. Afterwards, Hazel inquires if the boy wants to be a member, or even an apostle, of the Church Without Christ. The boy says that he is sorry that he can't be a member of Hazel's church because he is a lapsed Catholic. He adds that what they did is a mortal sin and that if they die unrepentant of it, they will suffer eternal punishment and never see God. Haze shouts at the boy that there is no such thing as sin or judgment, but the boy only shakes his head in disagreement and asks Haze if he would like to go again the next night.

Two nights after the encounter with the boy, Haze notices a plumpish man with a big face smiling at him in the crowd. "He was not handsome but under his smile, there was an honest look that fitted his face like a set of false teeth."<sup>1</sup> When the crowd starts to leave, he grabs Haze's pantlegs, gives him a wink, and cries out, "Come on back heah, you folks. I want to tell you about *me*." He smiles at a lady as if spellbound with her good looks and announces that he wishes that he had his "gittarr" with him, because when you talk about Jesus you need a little music. He introduces himself as Onnie Jay Holy and invites the people to join the Holy Church of Christ Without Christ and its new Jesus.

Haze tells all that the man is not true, that he has never seen him before that night, and that the name of the church isn't the Holy Church of Christ Without Christ! Onnie Jay ignores Haze's outburst and tells the crowd that it would just cost a dollar to join. Haze shouts that it does not cost any money to know the truth and attempts to drive away. Onnie Jay jumps on the running board of the Essex, Haze knocks him off, but Onnie Jay gets back on. He tells Haze his idea has great potential, but it needs promotion, the key being a new Jesus. Haze replies that there is no such thing as a new Jesus, that it is only a way to say something.

Suddenly, the man's demeanor changes, and he announces that his name is Hoover Shoats and that he knew from the first time he saw Haze that he was nothing but a crackpot. He also announces that Haze will have some competition the next time he goes out preaching.

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<sup>1</sup> Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989), 148.



When Haze returns to his rented room that night, he picks the lock to Asa Hawk's room and lights a match close to the sleeping man's face. The man opens his eyes, and the two sets of eyes looked at each other as long as the match lasted. "Now you can get out," Hawks said in a short thick voice, "now you can leave me alone."<sup>2</sup>

The following night Onnie Jay Holy/Hoover Shoats<sup>3</sup> announces the True Prophet, Solace Layfield. Preaching from the top of a rat-colored car, Solace looks so much like Haze that the woman next to Haze asks, "Him and you twins?" Haze answers, "If you don't hunt it down and kill it, it'll hunt you down and kill you." Confused, the lady answers, "Huh? Who?"<sup>4</sup>

That night Haze returns home and finds Sabbath Lily in his bed. She tells him that after he lit the match in Asa's face, he ran her off and she has no place to go. When Haze doesn't react, Sabbath Lily changes her tone and tells Haze that she knew from the start that she had to have him.

### **Enoch and the Shriveled Man**

The next day, Enoch slips past the sleeping guard at the museum. He breaks the glass case with a wrench, puts the little shriveled man in his backpack, and escapes past the still sleeping guard. When Enoch returns to his home, he wonders why he had done it. As far as he is concerned, one Jesus is as bad as another.

He flees out into the rain and stumbles across a line of children at the movie house. They were there to meet GONGA, the gorilla star of the matinee that day. Enoch gets in line, and when he shakes the gorilla's hand, it is the first hand that has been extended to Enoch since he came to the city. He hurriedly tells the gorilla his life story—that his name is Enoch Emery, that he went to the Rodemill Boys' Bible Academy, that he works for the city, and that he has seen two of his movies. "You go to hell," a surely voice inside the ape-suit says and jerks his hand away.<sup>5</sup>

Enoch's humiliation is so painful that he runs directly to Hazel's house to get rid of the new Jesus and never see it again. Sabbath Lily takes the wet bundle into another room and unwraps it. She holds the new Jesus in her arms as if he is her child.

Hazel, however, determines that he is going to make a new start in a new city preaching the Church Without Christ. He packs his stuff in his duffel without touching the Bible that was at the bottom of it like a rock. When he finds his mother's glasses in the duffel, he puts them on. Wearing the little silver-rimmed spectacles, he snatches the little shriveled body away from Sabbath Lily, throws it against a wall, and then throws it

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<sup>2</sup> O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, 162. According to R. Giannone, the only precise date that O'Connor gives in her fiction is Asa Hawks's deception of blinding himself on October 4, which is the date of the death of Francis of Assisi in 1226. Giannone argues that the identification is deliberate. Francis gains God's blessing by giving up earthly wealth to live by the will of God. Hawks makes God a commodity that he markets for personal gain, and he is transformed negatively. Richard Giannone, *Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Love* (Fordham University Press, 1999), 7–8.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Whitt writes, "In the choice of the name 'Onnie Jay Holy' for the former radio preacher, O'Connor employs a form of pig Latin, suggesting Holy John, the one who would come before and announce the Messiah. One of his functions in the novel is to introduce the 'True Prophet' after Haze rejects Holy's scheme for money." Margaret Whitt, *Understanding Flannery O'Connor* (University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 19.

<sup>4</sup> O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, 168.

<sup>5</sup> O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, 182.

out. Furious, Sabbath Lily pronounces that she knew that he was mean and evil, that he “wouldn’t let nobody have nothing. . . . I seen you were mean enough to slam a baby against a wall. I see you wouldn’t have no fun or let anybody else because you didn’t want nothing but Jesus!”<sup>6</sup>

Hazel shouts that he only wants the truth and heads for his car, but is stopped by a cough so fierce that it sounded like a cry for help at the bottom of a canyon. He throws his mother’s glasses out the door and decrees that he will leave after he gets some sleep.

The next day, Enoch holds out hope that the new Jesus is going to do something for him in return for his services. He returns to the theater and sneaks into the back of the truck that he sees Gonga enter. The drone of the motor drowns out the thumping noises, and Enoch departs out the back once the truck slows. He then buries his clothes, knowing that he would not need them anymore. Growling and beating his chest, no gorilla in existence was happier than this one, whose god had finally rewarded it.

### Hazel’s Blinding

Solace Layfield never thought that being the True Prophet of the Holy Church of Christ Without Christ would be a dangerous thing, but driving home to his wife and children, an Essex kept slamming into his car until it ditches. Haze approaches the wrecked car and orders Solace to take off his hat. He demands to know why he gets on his car to say things that he does not believe in. Solace answers that a man has to look out for himself. Haze replies, “You ain’t true . . . you believe in Jesus.” Haze then orders Solace to take off his suit. As Solace does so, Haze runs him over with the Essex. The dying man tries to confess his sins, “Jesus hep me,” but Haze gives him a hard slap and Solace becomes quiet. Before Haze departs, he takes a rag and washes away the man’s blood from the bumper.<sup>7</sup>

The next morning at the gas station, Haze tells the boy servicing the car that it is okay to believe in something as long as you could hold it in your hands or test it with your teeth. The boy replies that the Essex had a leak in the gas tank, two in the radiator, and a bad rear tire. Haze disagrees and proclaims that the car is only beginning its life.

On the road, however, Haze senses that he is not gaining any ground. A patrolman motions for him to pull over to the side of the road and asks to see Haze’s license. Haze answers that he does not have one. The patrolman responds, “I don’t reckon *you* need one.”<sup>8</sup> He then instructs Haze to drive to the top of the next hill and get out of the car. Once Haze is out of the car, the patrolman pushes the Essex over an embankment, the car galloping across a field before hitting a tree.

Hazel stares blankly at what has just happened before walking back to the city. The destruction of his idol, the Essex, has snared him in the nets of grace. He once proclaimed that “nobody with a good car needs to be justified.”<sup>9</sup> He now believes that he needs to be justified.<sup>10</sup> When he reaches the rented house, he fills a bucket with water and pours lime

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<sup>6</sup> O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, 188.

<sup>7</sup> O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, 203–205.

<sup>8</sup> O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, 209.

<sup>9</sup> O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, 113.

<sup>10</sup> Ralph Wood, “The Catholic Faith of Flannery O’Connor’s Protestant Characters,” *Flannery O’Connor Bulletin*, vol. 13 (Autumn 1984): 22.

into it. His landlady, Mrs. Flood, asks him what he is going to do. “Blind myself,” he says. She reasons that perhaps Mr. Motes was only being ugly, for what possible reason could any sane person want to blind himself.

### **Mrs. Flood**

In the days that follow, Mrs. Flood finds herself staring into the blind man’s face as if to see something that she has not seen before. His face “had a peculiar pushing look *as if* it were going forward after something it could just distinguish in the distance.”<sup>11</sup> She enjoys sitting on the porch with him, although anyone who saw them from the sidewalk might think she was being courted by a corpse. Thin, coughing, walking with a limp, Hazel’s routine is such that Mrs. Flood thinks that he might as well have been a monk.

She wonders what is going on in his mind and imagines that it is like walking in a tunnel and all you see is a pinpoint of light. “She saw it as some kind of star, like the star on Christmas cards. She saw him going backwards to Bethlehem and she had to laugh.”<sup>12</sup> One day she asks him why he does not preach anymore. She tells him that being blind would be something different that people would come to hear.

“For myself,” she continued, “I don’t have that streak. I believe that what’s right today is wrong tomorrow and that the time to enjoy yourself is now so long as you let others do the same. I’m as good, Mr. Motes,” she said, “not believing in Jesus as a many a one that does.”

“You’re better,” he said, leaning forward suddenly. “If you believed in Jesus, you wouldn’t be so good.”

He had never paid her a compliment before! “Why Mr. Motes,” she said, “I expect you’re a fine preacher! You certainly ought to start it again.”<sup>13</sup>

He tells her that he cannot preach anymore and gingerly walks away as if she had reminded him of some urgent business. She discovers later why he limped. His shoes were filled with rocks and broken glass. She asks why he has to walk on rocks, and he replies that he has to pay. She objects that what he’s doing is not normal, that it is something that people have quit doing—like boiling in oil or being a saint or walling up cats. He replies, “They ain’t quit doing it as long as I’m doing it.”<sup>14</sup> He further tells her that he does what he does because he is not clean. She responds that she knows that he is not clean because he has blood on his night shirt and on the bed. “That’s not the kind of clean,” he tells her. She answers, “There is only one kind of clean, Mr. Motes.”<sup>15</sup>

Mrs. Flood determines the best thing to do is to marry him and keep him. “‘If we don’t help each other, Mr. Motes, there’s nobody to help us,’ she said. ‘Nobody. The world is an empty place.’”<sup>16</sup> She announces that she is willing to give him a permanent home with her so that he no longer would have to worry. As he walks past her out the door, she cries

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<sup>11</sup> O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, 214 (emphasis added).

<sup>12</sup> O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, 218.

<sup>13</sup> O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, 221.

<sup>14</sup> O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, 224.

<sup>15</sup> O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, 224.

<sup>16</sup> O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, 227.



out, "Maybe you were planning to go to some other city!" "That's not where I am going," he said. "There's no other house nor no other city."<sup>17</sup> She informs him that since he does not value this place, the door would not be open to him when he returns.

Still, when he does not return, Mrs. Flood calls the police. Two policemen find him lying by a ditch. "I want to go on where I'm going," the blind man says. They return him into the house and, not realizing that he has died, lay him on Mrs. Flood's bed. She welcomes him home, but then notices his face. She had never seen it more composed. She grabs his hand, holds it to her heart, and shuts her eyes. She sees a pinpoint of light, but so far away that she could not hold it steady in her mind. Continuing to stare at him with her eyes shut, she sees him moving further away in the darkness, until he was the pinpoint of light.

## Reviews

The reviews that followed for *Wise Blood* were for the most part severe. An anonymous reviewer in *New Republic* believed that the book was marked by insanity.<sup>18</sup> Oliver LaFarge in his review, "Manic Gloom," in the *Saturday Review* thought that Hazel Motes was so repulsive that no reader could become interested in him.<sup>19</sup> William Goyen in his *New York Times Book Review* review, "Unending Vengeance," believed the characters to be so bizarre that they did not seem to belong to the human race.<sup>20</sup>

Publisher Robert Giroux tried to combat the poor reviews by reaching out to *Brideshead Revisited* author Evelyn Waugh to obtain a positive statement about *Wise Blood*. Waugh read the book and wrote Giroux: "You want a favorable opinion to quote. The best I can say is: 'If this is really the unaided work of a young lady, it is a remarkable product.' End quote. It isn't the kind of book I like much, but it is good of its kind. It is lively and more imaginative than most modern books."<sup>21</sup>

Ten years later in 1962, Giroux was eager to republish *Wise Blood*. O'Connor's reputation as a master of the short story alongside Poe and Hawthorne in American literary lore was steadily being secured and the opportunity for a reassessment of *Wise Blood* was ripe. Giroux realized, though, that there was still the problem of O'Connor's point in the book being misunderstood. Consequently, he prevailed upon O'Connor to write "Author's Note to the Second Edition." She wrote,

*Wise Blood* has reached the age of ten and is still alive. My critical powers are just sufficient to determine this, and I am gratified to be able to say it. The book was written with zest and, if possible, it should be read that way. It is a comic novel about a Christian *malgre lui*

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<sup>17</sup> Francis Asals argues that "however one responds to Haze's final otherworldliness, the novel dramatizes no acceptable alternative in this world, nor does the narrative imply any other source of value." There is immersion in the repellent world of matter or the grotesque search for God. Francis Asals, *Flannery O'Connor, The Extremity of Imagination* (University of Georgia, 1982), 57.

<sup>18</sup> "To Win by Default," *New Republic* (July 7, 1952): 19.

<sup>19</sup> Oliver LaFarge, "Manic Gloom," *Saturday Review* (May 24, 1952): 22.

<sup>20</sup> William Goyen, "Unending Vengeance," *New York Times Book Review* (May 18, 1952): 4.

<sup>21</sup> Brad Gooch, *Flannery* (Little, Brown & Company, 2009), 212. Caroline Gordon also did her part in trying to promote *Wise Blood* by asking J. F. Powers if he could lend some esteem to the book by reviewing it. He admired the book and started a review with the memorable working title *Hell on Wheels*, but he did not finish it. See, Sally Fitzgerald, "The Owl and the Nightingale," *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*, vol. 13 (Autumn 1984): 47.

[French, in spite of himself], and as such, very serious, for all comic novels that are any good must be about matters of life and death. *Wise Blood* was written by an author congenitally innocent of theory, but one with certain preoccupations. That belief in Christ is to some a matter of life and death has been a stumbling block to readers who prefer to think it a matter of no great consequence. For them Hazel's Motes' integrity lies in his trying with such vigor to get rid of the ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind. For the author Hazel's integrity lies in his not being able to. Does one's integrity ever live in what he is not able to do? I think that usually it does, for free will does not mean one will, but many wills conflicting in one man. Freedom cannot be conceived simply. It is a mystery and one which a novel, even a comic novel, can only be asked to deepen.<sup>22</sup>

## The Essex

Brian Regan points out that in *Wise Blood* the Essex serves for Hazel as the embodiment of freedom, freedom from the past and freedom from responsibilities, including the stain of original sin and the need for a savior. When Hazel's freedom is threatened by Jesus as savior, Hazel protests that he is clean, that he does not need any redeemer, and that his car will take him anywhere he wants to go. This becomes the content of his preaching, there was no Fall into sin, and therefore there is no need for Jesus and redemption. Since Jesus come as God in the flesh is not necessary for salvation, Hazel turns to a Jesus who is all man with no God in him.<sup>23</sup>

## Nihilism

Ralph Wood maintains that in O'Connor's writings Hazel Motes is the single character in whom O'Connor's Augustinian theology is most fully realized. Despite his solitary conversion to nihilism, Hazel is restless. Since anything worth believing is also worth evangelizing, he feels the need to convert others to the good news of nothingness. But made in the image of God, Hazel cannot escape God's divine imprint upon his heart, a homing instinct for God that makes his heart restless, until he is reconciled and at peace with God.<sup>24</sup>

## T. S. Eliot

Sally Fitzgerald makes the case that T. S. Eliot served as a primary inspiration to O'Connor in the writing of *Wise Blood*. Hazel's skull under his skin matches Eliot's "skull beneath the skin" in his "Whispers of Immortality"; Enoch's shriveled man parallels Eliot's Phlebas the Phoenician in Eliot's "Wasteland"; and Enoch in his gorilla suit is another Apeneck Sweeney from Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes*. She further maintained lines about the tortured and driven Orestes in Eliot's *Choephoroi* could serve as an epigraph for *Wise Blood*. Orestes says of his Furies: "You don't see them you don't—but I see them: they are hunting me down, I must move on." Fitzgerald believed that

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<sup>22</sup> O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, "Author's Note to Second Edition."

<sup>23</sup> Brian A. Regan, *A Wreck on the Road to Damascus* (Loyola University Press, 1989), 108–109.

<sup>24</sup> See Ralph Wood's *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* (Eerdmans, 2005), 5, and "The Catholic Faith of Flannery O'Connor's Protestant Characters," *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*, vol. 13 (Autumn 1984), 22.

O'Connor had replaced the vengeful Furies with the unvengeful but inescapable figure of Christ, "a wild, ragged figure moving from tree to tree in the back of Hazel's mind." Hazel must move on from Christ, either getting away from or destroying him.<sup>25</sup>

### **John Huston's *Wise Blood***

In the late 1970s, Michael Fitzgerald, son of O'Connor's literary co-executors Robert and Sally Fitzgerald, convinced academy award winning director John Huston to film *Wise Blood*. Huston, however, struggled in understanding what *Wise Blood* was about. He said, "From page one, you don't know whether to laugh or to be appalled."<sup>26</sup> According to actor Brad Dourif, who portrayed Hazel Motes, a difference of opinion developed once filming began between Huston and Fitzgerald over the book's meaning. Huston thought it was a comedy about how ridiculous Christianity was; Fitzgerald believed the book was a tragedy about redemption, that contained comic elements.

The conflict was resolved with the filming of the conclusion of the movie. Confused about Huston's direction, Dourif asked him, "If I don't revert to Christianity, what does happen?" Huston told him, "Oh . . . I think that's just some kind of existential rebellion." Dourif challenged Huston's answer, noting in the script that Hazel mutters, "My Christ" and kneels down. Dourif recalled that Huston went "white," thumbed through the script, and said that was a mistake. Dourif countered that he thought the whole movie was leading up to that point. Huston went off to confer with Michael and Benedict Fitzgerald. When Huston returned, he sat down in his director's chair and said to Dourif, "The end of the film, Jesus wins."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Fitzgerald, "The Owl and the Nightingale," 54.

<sup>26</sup> Lawrence Grobel, *The Hustons* (Scribner's, 1989), Kindle.

<sup>27</sup> Grobel, *The Hustons*, Kindle location 13653. *Wise Blood* premiered at the Cannes Film Festival to a standing ovation, and Vincent Camby in the *New York Times* gave it a rave review. Camby wrote, "*Wise Blood*, based on Flannery O'Connor's 1952 novel about an inside-out religious fanatic of the rural South, is one of John Huston's most original, most stunning movies. It is so eccentric, so funny, so surprising and so haunting that it is difficult to believe it is not the first film of some enfant terrible instead of the thirty-third feature by a man who is now in his seventies and whose career has had more highs and lows than a decade of weather maps." Vincent Camby, *New York Times* (September 29, 1979).

# ServantClassics

## Machen's Best Book: *The Virgin Birth of Christ* A Review Article

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by Darryl G. Hart

*The Virgin Birth of Christ*, by J. Gresham Machen (Harper and Brothers, 1930).

Most Christians who know about J. Gresham Machen, associate him with his most popular book, *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923). Even in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and extending outward to communions in NAPARC, Reformed Christians know Machen mostly through the book he wrote at the peak of the fundamentalist controversy, the one in which he argued plausibly and provocatively that liberal Protestantism was a different religion from Christianity. Controversy generates publicity, and Machen's fame started and grew from his initial intervention into the church controversies of the 1920s and 1930s.

Yet, Machen himself considered *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, published in 1930 by Harper & Brothers, his magnum opus. The book's title and the name of the publisher underscore the ambiguity of Machen himself, the gentleman scholar who took the side of populist and sometimes crass Protestantism. On the one hand, the virgin birth was one of the doctrines that fundamentalists insisted was essential to Christianity. Machen's book, consequently, would seem to solidify his identification with those Protestants who sought to rid churches of theological liberalism. On the other hand, Harper & Brothers was a trade (not a religious or academic) press that published American authors from a wide variety of backgrounds. In other words, fundamentalists typically would have published with Fleming H. Revell, a New York religious publisher who originally brought to print the writings of Dwight L. Moody. Harper's imprimatur indicated that despite the title, Machen's *Virgin Birth* was not designed for the controversy in the churches, even if it was related. His purpose was mainly academic. This was a scholarly book that did little to help fundamentalists who wanted a quick and easy read before heading to the next meeting to strategize on defeating modernists. Weighing in at close to four hundred pages, *Virgin Birth* was neither a quick nor an easy read.

One reason for Machen's own claim about the importance of the book was that the subject had followed him since he was a student at Princeton Theological Seminary. During his final year at Princeton (1904–1905), he wrote a long paper on the virgin birth for the New Testament fellowship prize. Machen's essay not only finished first in the competition, but it also came with a scholarship that Machen used for his studies in Germany the next year. The research paper, divided in two, became Machen's first publications, both under the title "The New Testament Account of the Birth of Jesus." The first was published in 1905, the second a year later. Even though Machen's work as a lecturer at Princeton after his return from Germany took him more in the direction of the



apostle Paul (which led to *The Origins of Paul's Religion*, 1921), he kept a hand in the scholarly literature on the virgin birth. One indication of this ongoing curiosity was his 1912 article, "The Hymns of the First Chapter of Luke," in *Princeton Theological Review*.

After almost two decades away from the subject, in *The Virgin Birth of Christ* Machen followed the approach he had taken in his book on Paul (which he then used for some of his points in *Christianity and Liberalism*). Machen defended the supernatural character of Christianity through a close reading of the New Testament. He did so for the theological reason that salvation from sin depended on a direct (supernatural) intervention by God into human affairs. Nothing within a fallen world was capable of lifting men and women out of their guilt and restoring them to a loving relationship with a holy God. Machen's emphasis on the supernatural followed from his academic purpose of taking the New Testament on its own terms. Rather than explaining away the miraculous as liberal Protestants did, Machen insisted that an honest reading of the Bible left no other conclusion but that God was from first to last the author of salvation.

As a lover of ancient Greek and Roman authors, for example, Machen was also well aware that the pagan religions were littered with supernatural events, figures, and significance. And yet, the New Testament narratives were completely different from the miraculous stories in Greek and Roman mythology. For instance, the Bible was silent on the amorous relations between gods and women that prevailed in ancient myths. In the gospels' account of Christ's birth, Machen wrote,

the lofty Old Testament monotheism is abated not a whit; the awful transcendence of God, the awful separateness of God from the world, is never lost from view. Where in the New Testament story is there found any hint of a love of God for the maid of Nazareth, which could be analogous to the love of a husband for his wife? The question can scarcely even be asked, by any man of literary taste—to say nothing of any devout Christian—without a shudder. (338)

Machen added that in the pagan literature that inspired many of the ancient authors he esteemed, "the love of the gods for mortal women" was the "very point" of the stories—"the thing without which they could not possibly exist." But to conceive of this kind of relationship in connection with the virgin Mary was to "do violence" to the biblical material (325).

Machen used a similar approach to explain the early church's reference to Jesus as "the Son of God." Many Gentile Christians would have come to faith in Christ after having believed that Zeus was father of gods and men. The Greek king of the gods, according to the ancient myths, begot children by human mothers. This was also true of stories about the births of figures like Alexander the Great, Plato, and the Roman emperor Augustus. "These great men were 'sons of gods'" (335). Gentile converts to Christianity may well have read the New Testament in a similar light. But in the pagan literature, Machen argued, polytheism was pronounced, if not "the centre and core of the whole complex of ideas" (338). For Matthew and Luke, God's love for the virgin Mary had no hint of the sexual attraction a husband has for his wife. The New Testament accounts were completely chaste compared to the "the pagan stories of the loves and hates of the gods" (339).

Just as with his book on the apostle Paul, in *The Virgin Birth* Machen recovered the supernatural character of Scripture and salvation but without letting the New Testament stories become just one more instance of the alien ideas that ancient people had before the rise of modern science. Machen was a scholar steeped in the world of ancient learning and myths. Unlike his modernist Protestant opponents, he did not pit the backwardness of the ancient world against the “progress” of modern society, the rationale for adapting Christianity to modern educated people. The supernatural aspects of the Bible did not offend Machen, if only because his mental universe included a world, pagan and Christian, where deity intervened regularly in human affairs. But Machen’s defense of the supernatural (and the virgin birth) was not a simplistic or wooden defense like that proposed by some fundamentalists. Machen understood Christ’s birth in the context of both the Bible’s plan of salvation and the ancient world inhabited by the apostles and early church.

Machen’s sensitivity to the oddness of the virgin birth was also evident when he discussed the difficulties that modern Christians might have with the origins of Christ’s human existence. Here, Machen did not use the doctrine as a cudgel by which to shame theological liberals. Instead, he argued that the virgin birth aligned best with humanity’s need for a savior whose entrance into the world was unlike any other leader or great man. Not only did the virgin birth mean that Jesus was born without sin—unlike the rest of humanity descended from Adam and Eve—but the virgin birth fixed the time when the incarnation began. “Did the Son of God unite with the man Jesus at the baptism as Gnostics supposed?” Machen asked hypothetically. “Was the man Jesus received up gradually into union with the eternal Son?” Such questions invited “erroneous answers” without the virgin birth as an answer. “Without the story of the virgin birth we should be living constantly in a region of surmises like the errors of the heresiarchs in the ancient Church,” he warned (394).

What still lingered at the end of the book was a question of pastoral concern—how much doctrine, including the virgin birth, was necessary to believe to be a Christian. “Some knowledge is certainly required,” Machen wrote, “but exactly how much is required we cannot say.” He acknowledged that in troubled times like the 1920s, many of little faith were unsure what to believe about the virgin birth. For that reason, Machen saw wisdom in not drawing a line in the sand that made salvation depend on belief in “the stupendous miracle narrated in the first chapters of Matthew and Luke” (395). Such a concession did not mean the virgin birth was a matter of indifference. He added that “even if the belief in the virgin birth is not necessary to every Christian, it is certainly necessary to Christianity” (396). Someone could possibly believe in the resurrection but not in the virgin birth. This was a “halfway” conviction unlikely to endure. In the end, the New Testament “account” of Jesus was most convincing when taken as a whole, namely “that Jesus did not come into the world by ordinary generation but was conceived in the womb of the virgin by the Holy Ghost” (397).

As impressive as Machen’s book may have been, from its mastery of the relevant scholarship to the sensitive questions of apologetics and doubt, *The Virgin Birth* was published in what was likely the busiest and most discouraging time of Machen’s life. He had just lost two years of debates about the legality of reorganization of Princeton Seminary, in which he was often the target of personal attacks. He had only a year before the book appeared, led in founding Westminster Seminary, a herculean effort that left

little time for anything but logistics and correspondence. And yet, in the midst of that tumult in his professional and personal life, Machen brought to completion his life-long inquiry into the New Testament's birth narratives. If *The Virgin Birth* did not appeal to readers, then or now, the way *Christianity and Liberalism* has, the reasons have little to do with the quality of the 1930 book. *The Virgin Birth* is three times longer and much more scholarly than *Christianity and Liberalism*. Yet, Machen's "magnum opus" has all the strengths of his most popular book—a defense of Christianity as a religion of redemption, based on the Bible's testimony, and resolutely a supernatural work of God.

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# ServantReading

## *Order in the Offices* from a Two-office Perspective A Review Article

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by Brad Isbell

*Order in the Offices: Essays Defining the Roles of Church Officers*, 2nd edition, Mark R. Brown, general editor. Reformed Forum, 2024, xiii + 278 pages, \$34.99.

An old military saw asserts that generals and politicians always prepare to fight the *last* war, meaning not the final conflict, but the *previous* one. Like churches, armies have traditions, doctrine, and—above all—a defined order. Critical to order are the officers, ranks, roles, and hierarchies of authority. Of course, a church is like an army but is also very different from any earthly military force, being a spiritual body, both visible and invisible, at once voluntary and involuntary, and having a Warrior-King leader who is mysteriously both absent and present. Some ancient armies consisted of little more than the older boys and men of a tribe armed with sticks, blades, and stones, and the tribe itself was essentially a large family. Modern armies are national bureaucracies staffed by professionals, albeit professionals with weapons of terrifying power, accuracy, and cost.

Military forces have changed dramatically. The church, having existed since the time of the first family, ought to have changed but little, especially since Christ’s ascension, when he gave gifts to men, followed so soon by the coming of the Holy Spirit in covenantal fullness and more slowly by the inspired New Testament witness. The King’s gifts to the church and the Spirit-enabled understanding of the biblical witness should produce a stable, recognizable, agreed order in the Church. We confess, after all, that the “whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for . . . faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture” (Westminster Confession of Faith, WCF 1.6). All “things necessary for . . . faith and life” must include our doctrine of the church. Because God has spoken to us even about his church and her order, it is no surprise that *Order in the Offices* has been so valued by the officers of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church for the last three decades and why the new edition has been greeted so warmly. OPC people love their church, and this work, edited by Mark R. Brown. It is beautifully bound and printed, seeks to bolster and explain some of the most important aspects of the church’s ministry and organization.

Of the fifteen chapters in the work, only one is new; six predate the first edition’s 1993 publication date; the remaining eight were written for this collection. *Order in the Offices* will succeed at confirming convinced holders of the three-office view, but because of the dismissive view which some of the chapters have of the two-office position, and because of certain anachronisms in the authors’ catalog of opponents from *previous wars*, it will fail to convince principled holders of the two-office position. (Full

disclosure, as a ruling elder since 2009 in the Presbyterian Church in America, serving with a teaching elder who is arguably the foremost living authority on Southern Presbyterian ecclesiology and history, I may hold the two-office view as firmly and advisedly as most current OPC ministers hold the three-office view.)

The book will dispel any impression that the issue of the number and nature of the offices is a minor one between the OPC and the PCA; it is decidedly not “two ways of describing the same thing,” at least for thoughtful and principled holders of the two positions, of which, we trust, there are many. To slightly modify one of J. Gresham Machen’s famous lines, *the really important things are the things about which men will controvert!*<sup>1</sup> And this controversy may be argued on biblical, historical, and practical grounds.

We learn right off the bat that the disagreement is biblical: “The precise exegetical question here is, what is the nature of the office to which Paul refers in 1 Timothy 3:1? Once this question is settled, all else falls into place” (21). The three-office interpretation usually admits that *episkopos* (ἐπίσκοπος, bishop/overseer)—which only in this passage clearly refers to a perpetual New Testament office—is more or less interchangeable with *presbyteros* (πρεσβυτερος, elder) elsewhere. The qualifications, for whatever office this may be, are followed immediately by qualifications for the altogether separate office of deacon. A simple PCA ruling elder, armed only with a Greek lexicon and concordance has to ask where the qualifications for ruling elders are in this passage and whether “apt to teach” applies only to preachers. Indeed, in the first chapter of Titus, *episkopos* (overseer) is used interchangeably with *presbyteros* (elder), so a simple ruling elder asks if there are any biblical qualifications for him at all in either passage. The answer given is that the overseer (pastor/minister) “in his one office . . . includes all the lower offices, the qualifications for him are also those that apply to the lower office (elders who rule)—except for any qualification that belongs exclusively to his office” (29). The argument is more about context than about words, and I would not downplay the importance of context. The nuanced arguments are capably and carefully made in several of the book’s chapters, but they remain complex and sometimes fly in the face of a plain reading. Those ordained to the “lower office” may have to take the arguments on faith!

Of course, two-office advocates are loath to speak of a “lower office” even as they hold to the high, essential, indispensable role of that “superadded” *class* of elders who “especially . . . labor in preaching and teaching.” Three-office advocates may deny that 1 Timothy 5:17 depicts one office of elder with two classes, but the argument is not to be dismissed out of hand. It is reasonable, but does it hold up historically?

Just as the many chapters chosen for *Order in the Offices* make careful scriptural arguments for three offices, so do they make an impressive and accurate case for its historical pedigree, though the case might have been made even stronger. Many wrongly assume that the “Southern” two-office scheme formally, constitutionally obtained in the old Southern church before the 1973 formation of the PCA, yet it did not. Two-office was merely an argued-for, controverted issue<sup>2</sup> until 1980 when a 1979 Book of Church Order

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<sup>1</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1923), 1–2. “In the sphere of religion, as in other spheres, the things about which men are agreed are apt to be the things that are least worth holding; the really important things are the things about which men will fight.”

<sup>2</sup>The view was strenuously promoted without success by J. Henley Thornwell and R. L. Dabney in the nineteenth century. Iain Murray deals with much of this history in chapter 8.



amendment was ratified—the fact of the Southern two-office church is even more recent than is widely known!<sup>3</sup>

But the relatively recent character of the enshrined two-office view only rules it out if we adopt a view of ecclesiology that we would never countenance regarding doctrine, namely, that more light and greater development in understanding of biblical doctrine is impossible. The chapters of this work often appeal to Calvin and Hodge—two men who would never assert that the doctrine of church government had been finally settled, least of all by them. A long list of doctrines, including union with Christ and covenant theology, could be cited to demonstrate that Presbyterians *do* change, and they do so out of concern for being faithful to the Scriptures.

Having an inconveniently recent relation to significant changes may make us uncomfortable but should not cause us to dismiss such changes out of hand. Nor should every development bring new complexity or even addition. Two-office Presbyterianism is blessedly simple and dear to many who hold it. For this reason, the scant, harsh, and disputable mention of the PCA in the book's bibliography is disappointing: "The PCA's Form of Government was later amended to reflect two-office views. However, much of the PCA's polity remains three-office in principle and practice. The result is an unstable and ambiguous mixture of systems" (266).

History seeks to acquaint us with the practicalities and experiences of churchmen in earlier ages. Applying these to the present time is necessarily speculative, but considering history and practicalities bolsters the argument for two-office Presbyterianism, in my view, first with regard to declension in Presbyterian denominations. It may be that my following statement and questions will not be appreciated, but there are several assertions in *Order in the Offices* that are, if anything, more speculative, more a matter of opinion, and more insupportable.<sup>4</sup>

History suggests that ruling elders were not held in high esteem in the Northern church by the early twentieth century, Woodrow Wilson and Robert E. Speer, notwithstanding. Could this have been because they were held to be bearers of a "lower office." Might ruling elders have done more to arrest the decline of the PCUSA if their office had been construed as more than mere jurists? It is reasonable to ask what might have been if more of the PCUSA's ruling elders had been like those who requested J. Gresham Machen's late 1921 address in Wayne, PA, which ultimately became *Christianity and Liberalism*. Were disengaged ruling elders responsible (at least in part) for the small number of churches willing to join Machen's exodus in 1936? Of course, we will never know, but this we can know: Ruling elders were critically important to the formation of the PCA in 1973, a generation or two after the OPC was formed. Machen's

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<sup>3</sup> Since 1980, PCA BCO 7–2 has read the following: "The ordinary and perpetual classes of office in the Church are elders and deacons. Within the class of elder are the two orders of teaching elders and ruling elders. The elders jointly have the government and spiritual oversight of the Church, including teaching. Only those elders who are specially gifted, called and trained by God to preach may serve as teaching elders. The office of deacon is not one of rule, but rather of service both to the physical and spiritual needs of the people. In accord with Scripture, these offices are open to men only."

<sup>4</sup> Witness, "the two-office view falls prey to this (egalitarian) instinct by obliterating the distinction between ruler and pastor" (213); and "a further irony lies in the fact that where the two-office view prevails, the plurality of elders in a congregation tends to diminish the importance and therefore quality of the teaching office. . . . The logic of the two-office position is bound ultimately to do away with any distinction between the pastor and the ruling elder" (214). Note well, the only place to find two-office view today is the PCA, so there can be little doubt which pastors are in view.

work and the OPC's faithfulness certainly aided the founders of the PCA, and it may be that the Southern church's generally higher regard for ruling elders contributed to the PCA's initial success, with larger numbers, more churches, and greater energy than the OPC could muster. Former PCA stated clerk Roy Taylor has contended that the PCA is the only denomination started primarily through the work of ruling elders.<sup>5</sup> And I would contend that the PCA's recent course corrections, like her early successes, were due in no small measure to ruling elder involvement.

Maybe the OPC inherited a slighter regard for ruling elders from their wayward mother church, maybe not. Times were hard, and the OPC's founders were fighting a life-and-death battle for the supernatural faith, not the finer points of ecclesiology. Machen, so far as we know, spoke little of office, though female deacons and ruling elders were present in some PCUSA churches by 1936. Even so, the OPC deserves tremendous credit for establishing a church order with only male officers. If they had not done so, it might have been much more difficult for the PCA to do so thirty-seven years later.

Finally, there is the question of anachronism. Some of *Order in the Offices'* arguments are with movements or tendencies that no longer exist (at least in the OPC), though there are some contemporary parallels elsewhere. The invectives against egalitarianism and chaotic worship leadership likely had the New Life movement in view. Most of those churches had departed for the PCA before this work's first edition was published, though maybe not before some of these chapters were written. The book's opening chapter suggests that the very function of the ministers of the Word was under attack—that a “new consensus opinion, forming across denominational lines . . . questions whether” the minister's work, historically understood, was even necessary (11). It seems likely that this was an overstatement. Many in the PCA, then and now, adhere to the regulative principle and highly value the ministry of the Word. Today, many PCA churches that worship and order themselves much like OPC churches self-identify as “Ordinary Means of Grace” churches. Granted, the existence of such a term implies that there is still considerable diversity and disagreement about worship within the PCA.<sup>6</sup> The first chapter seems to connect the degradation of worship and the ministry of the Word to two-office tendencies, which may just be shorthand for the PCA or for the kinds of churches then departing the OPC for the PCA. But did churches have ruling elders clamoring to preach, administer sacraments, and run worship in those days? That seems unlikely and is certainly not the case today.

Later chapters connect (with, in this reviewer's opinion, little evidence) the two-office position with egalitarianism. To be sure, there are currently PCA churches with egalitarian tendencies, and these tendencies are apparent in office<sup>7</sup> and in worship. Again, ruling elders are not running roughshod over worship. PCA churches often have unordained members leading nearly every part of worship, including the call to worship,

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<sup>5</sup> A notable PCA academic has often said that “Thornwell lost the battle but won the war.” The war in question being his respectful conflict over ecclesiology with Charles Hodge. Thornwell's views on office, as mentioned above, did not become the law of any church until almost 120 years after his death.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that the recently concluded Fifty-Second PCA General Assembly voted to form a study committee to consider giving more constitutional force to the PCA's mostly non-binding directory for worship.

<sup>7</sup> Some PCA churches have female quasi-officers or decline to ordain male deacons so that an unauthorized, unordained unisex “diaconate” or “mercy team” can be maintained.

Scripture readings, confessions, and prayers—pretty much everything, in rare cases, except the sermon and benediction. It is the ruling elders who are marginalized in the interest of diversity and “representation up front.” Something is going on, but it’s not about ruling elders stepping out of their lanes. Pastors at such churches (often church plants without local sessions or only recently particularized) lead the way in this innovation. The PCA’s preference for rapid growth and creativity, in this writer’s opinion, is better at building crowds than developing principled Presbyterian ruling elders. The fault does not lie with the number of offices, but with the convictions of the officers.

With appreciation for this book’s passionate concern to protect the ministry of the Word, let me close with a few words of hearty agreement with the OPC’s worship directory:

When the session deems it fitting, ruling elders may lead the congregation in prayer, read the Scriptures to the congregation, lead unison or antiphonal readings of Scripture by the congregation, lead congregational singing, or, on occasion, exhort the congregation as part of public worship. They may not, however, pronounce the salutation or the benediction or administer the sacraments.

This is a surprising find in the OPC directory, given the way *Order in the Offices* often portrays the two-office view as injurious to the prerogatives and position of the pastor. The PCA does not have such an explicit endorsement on ruling elder worship leadership! I would argue for the regular, limited involvement of ruling elders in public worship, including all elements up to the sermon text reading when a visiting minister or licentiate is present. In normal circumstances, it seems appropriate for ruling elders to lead the call to worship, offer a prayer, or other portions, such as a confession of faith or sin. There are several benefits of regular ruling elder involvement, including increased confidence in ruling elders’ competency to teach and lead, increased ruling elder “buy-in” and understanding of the liturgy, and preparation for those instances when a ruling elder must step in to lead worship. Church members need to see that ruling elders are more than judicial officials or functionaries. Ruling elders are pastors/shepherds in some important senses. Seeing them assist in the church’s most important weekly work can only strengthen their hands in the work of counseling, visitation, and teaching members in other settings. Order is necessary, but so is the confidence of the sheep that the entire session is leading their local churches, which Christ so greatly loves and for whom he so abundantly provides. It may be, in God’s mercy, that two-office and three-office Presbyterians can learn and benefit from each other.

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# ServantReading

## Historic Presbyterian Polity

### A Review Article

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by Archibald A. Allison

*Order in the Offices: Essays Defining the Roles of Church Officers*, 2nd edition, Mark R. Brown, general editor. Reformed Forum, 2024, xiii + 278 pages, \$34.99.

The coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in human flesh is one of the monumental events in God's great plan of redemption. We confess in the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) 7.6:

Under the gospel, when Christ the substance was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper: which, though fewer in number, and administered with more simplicity, and less outward glory, yet, in them, it is held forth in more fullness, evidence, and spiritual efficacy, to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles; and is called the new testament.

These changes under the gospel have led to different views and disagreement in the church regarding the types and shadows of the Old Testament, the administration of the sacraments, the right form and proper exercise of church government, as well as the offices in the church.

The early church learned that the Old Testament special offices of prophet, priest, king, and Levite were replaced in the New Testament with the extraordinary and temporary special offices of apostle and prophet followed by the ordinary and perpetual special offices of minister, ruling elder, and deacon.

These ordinary and perpetual special offices in the church became confused in the first few centuries of the Christian church as the church government hierarchy developed in the Roman Catholic Church. The early church recognized a difference between the minister and ruling elder, but by the late second century, with the rise of the diocesan bishop, the supremacy of the bishop was established. By the middle of the third century, presbyter had come to mean the parish priest, who was under the diocesan bishop, and the deacon was a first step in attaining priestly office. For example, Athanasius was a deacon and assistant to Bishop Alexander of Alexandria during the First Council of Nicaea from May–August 325, and three years later he succeeded Alexander as Bishop of Alexandria.

John Calvin, John Knox, and other Reformers sought to reform the government of the church from the errors of Rome. The Reformers argued for parity of office between the parish priest and the diocesan bishop, rejecting the distinction between higher and lower clergy. They recovered the biblical office of ruling elder, or church governor, and argued for parity of rule between the minister and the ruling elder.

They were also zealous to maintain a high view of the biblical office of minister of Word and sacrament. It was particularly the preached Word that the Spirit of God used to reform the church. The Reformers taught that the Spirit of God makes the reading, “but especially the preaching of the Word, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves and drawing them unto Christ; of conforming them to his image and subduing them to his will” (WLC 155).

The view that the minister and ruling elder hold the same office is an innovation that arose in Scotland and America in the nineteenth century and continues in the church today, confounding the titles, qualifications, and duties of the minister and the ruling elder and blurring the distinctions between the offices.

With the encouragement of Charles Dennison, Mark Brown published the paperback *Order in the Offices* himself in 1993, a collection of historical and contemporary essays defending the view of special office in the church, a view recovered in the Reformation and followed in the reformed churches. Although no Christian publisher in 1993 was willing to publish the book, within a few years, several thousand copies of the book in three printings were completely sold out. Thirty years later, Reformed Forum has published a beautiful hardbound second edition of the book with a few additions, including a forward by Danny Olinger, a preface to the second edition by Mark Brown, and a new essay by Alan Strange.

All fifteen essays in this anthology seek to set forth historic Presbyterian polity, in which there is the sacred office of those whom the king and head of the church calls to give their lives to preaching his Word as heralds of the gospel, proclaiming the unsearchable riches of Jesus Christ. The minister is not an elder who teaches, but a preacher who also governs and usually pastors a congregation.

The Westminster Confession of Faith clearly speaks of this holy office of the minister:

Repentance unto life is an evangelical grace, the doctrine whereof is to be preached by every minister of the gospel, as well as that of faith in Jesus Christ. (WCF 15.1)

There be only two sacraments ordained by Christ our Lord in the gospel; that is to say, baptism, and the Supper of the Lord: neither of which may be dispensed by any, but by a minister of the Word lawfully ordained. (WCF 27.4)

We confess concerning the Lord’s Supper:

The Lord Jesus hath, in this ordinance, appointed his ministers to declare his word of institution to the people; to pray, and bless the elements of bread and wine, and thereby to set them apart from a common to a holy use; and to take and break the bread, to take the cup, and (they communicating also themselves) to give both to the communicants. (WCF 29.3)

In the Larger Catechism we confess:

Christ is exalted in his sitting at the right hand of God, . . . and doth gather and defend his church, and subdue their enemies; furnisheth his ministers and people with gifts and graces, and maketh intercession for them. (WLC 54)

Christ hath appointed the ministers of his Word, in the administration of this sacrament of the Lord's Supper, to set apart the bread and wine from common use, by the word of institution, thanksgiving, and prayer; to take and break the bread, and to give both the bread and the wine to the communicants. (WLC 169)

The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper agree, in that the author of both is God; the spiritual part of both is Christ and his benefits; both are seals of the same covenant, are to be dispensed by ministers of the gospel, and by none other; and to be continued in the church of Christ until his second coming. (WLC 176)

Historic Presbyterian polity also underlies Larger Catechism 155–160. A few examples are the following:

Q. 156. *Is the Word of God to be read by all?*

A. Although all are not to be permitted to read the Word publicly to the congregation, yet all sorts of people are bound to read it apart by themselves, and with their families: to which end, the Holy Scriptures are to be translated out of the original into vulgar languages.

Q. 158. *By whom is the Word of God to be preached?*

A. The Word of God is to be preached only by such as are sufficiently gifted, and also duly approved and called to that office.

Q. 159. *How is the Word of God to be preached by those that are called thereunto?*

A. They that are called to labor in the ministry of the Word, are to preach sound doctrine, diligently, in season and out of season; plainly, not in the enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit, and of power; faithfully, making known the whole counsel of God; wisely, applying themselves to the necessities and capacities of the hearers; zealously, with fervent love to God and the souls of his people; sincerely, aiming at his glory, and their conversion, edification, and salvation.

In historic Presbyterian polity there is also the special office of ruling elder, or church governor, which the essays in this anthology also discuss. The office of ruling elder is a valuable office in the church, next in order to the ministry of the Word and sacraments. Historic Presbyterian polity preserves this office of government in the church. When the office of ruling elder is confounded with the office of minister, it is always the ruling elder who loses his office. In this case every elder must be a sort of minister, apt to teach and even preach.

The Westminster divines set forth the special offices in historic Presbyterian polity so clearly in The Form of Presbyterial Church-Government, which agrees with the Church Order of Dort (1618):

#### *Of the Officers of the Church*

The officers which Christ hath appointed for the edification of his church, and the perfecting of the saints, are, some extraordinary, as apostles, evangelists, and prophets, which are ceased.

Others ordinary and perpetual, as pastors, teachers, and other church-governors, and deacons.



### *Pastors*

The pastor is an ordinary and perpetual officer in the church, prophesying of the time of the gospel.

First, it belongs to his office,

To pray for and with his flock, as the mouth of the people unto God, Acts vi. 2, 3, 4, and xx. 36, where preaching and prayer are joined as several parts of the same office. The office of the elder (that is, the pastor) is to pray for the sick, even in private, to which a blessing is especially promised; much more therefore ought he to perform this in the publick execution of his office, as a part thereof.

To read the Scriptures publickly; for the proof of which,

1. That the priests and Levites in the Jewish church were trusted with the publick reading of the word is proved.

2. That the ministers of the gospel have as ample a charge and commission to dispense the word, as well as other ordinances, as the priests and Levites had under the law, proved, Isa. lxvi. 21, Matt. xxiii. 34, where our Saviour entitleth the officers of the New Testament, whom he will send forth, by the same names of the teachers of the Old.

Which propositions prove, that therefore (the duty being of a moral nature) it followeth by just consequence, that the publick reading of the scriptures belongeth to the pastor's office.

To feed the flock, by preaching of the word, according to which he is to teach, convince, reprove, exhort, and comfort.

To catechise, which is a plain laying down the first principles of the oracles of God, or of the doctrine of Christ, and is a part of preaching.

To dispense other divine mysteries.

To administer the sacraments.

To bless the people from God, Numb. vi. 23, 24, 25, 26. Compared with Rev. i.4, 5, (where the same blessings, and persons from whom they come, are expressly mentioned), Isa. lxvi. 21, where, under the names of Priests and Levites to be continued under the gospel, are meant evangelical pastors, who therefore are by office to bless the people.

To take care of the poor.

And he hath also a ruling power over the flock as a pastor.

### *Teacher or Doctor*

The scripture doth hold out the name and title of teacher, as well as of the pastor.

Who is also a minister of the word, as well as the pastor, and hath power of administration of the sacraments.

The Lord having given different gifts, and divers exercises according to these gifts, in the ministry of the word; though these different gifts may meet in, and accordingly be exercised by, one and the same minister; yet, where be several ministers in the same congregation, they may be designed to several employments, according to the different gifts in which each of them doth most excel. And he that doth more excel in exposition of scripture, in teaching sound doctrine, and in convincing gainsayers, than he doth in application, and is accordingly employed therein, may be called a teacher, or doctor, (the places alleged by the notation of the word do prove the proposition). Nevertheless, where is but one minister in a particular congregation, he is to perform, as far as he is able, the whole work of the ministry.

A teacher, or doctor, is of most excellent use in schools and universities; as of old in the schools of the prophets, and at Jerusalem, where Gamaliel and others taught as doctors.

#### *Other Church-Governors*

As there were in the Jewish church elders of the people joined with the priests and Levites in the government of the church; so Christ, who hath instituted government, and governors ecclesiastical in the church, hath furnished some in his church, beside the ministers of the word, with gifts for government, and with commission to execute the same when called thereunto, who are to join with the minister in the government of the church. Which officers reformed churches commonly call Elders.

The Form of Government of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church sets forth the special office of ruling elder in chapter 10.1:

Christ who has instituted government in his church has furnished some men, beside the ministers of the Word, with gifts for government, and with commission to execute the same when called thereto. Such officers, chosen by the people from among their number, are to join with the ministers in the government of the church, and are properly called ruling elders.

*Order in the Offices* begins with an essay on the New Testament warrant for the minister of the Word, followed by three essays on church governors or ruling elders. The general editor, Mark Brown, contributed an important essay on the forgotten Thomas Smyth (1808–1873), pastor at Second Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, until his death at age sixty-five, which discusses his two key principles of polity. The first key principle is that the biblical presbyter is a minister of the Word, not a ruling elder or church governor. The second key principle is the necessity of distinguishing between the offices of minister and ruling elder for the sake of peace and order in the church.

After chapter 6, excerpts from Smyth's *Ecclesiastical Catechism of the Presbyterian Church* (1843), "Ecclesiastical Catechism: Officers of the Church," there is an essay on Calvin's view of the distinction between minister and ruling elder, followed by eight more essays, a valuable annotated bibliography of books on church government and officers, and two indexes.

This anthology has two practical goals. The first is to help young men in our churches understand and consider the distinctive calling, training, and functions of the holy office of the gospel ministry. The second is to assist local church leaders and members in developing a clear understanding of the functions and distinctives of the biblical officers in our Presbyterian heritage.

Every man aspiring to the highest and greatest and most glorious calling to which anyone can ever be called, preaching God's Word in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, should study this important subject. The essays in *Order in the Offices* provide sound biblical exegesis and a right understanding of historical theology and are an excellent place to begin.

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# ServantReading

## Figuring Resurrection: Joseph as a Death and Resurrection Figure in the Old Testament and Second Temple Judaism, *by Jeffrey Pulse*

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by Andrew J. Miller

*Figuring Resurrection: Joseph as a Death and Resurrection Figure in the Old Testament and Second Temple Judaism*, by Jeffrey Pulse. Lexham, 2021, ix + 309 pages, \$29.95, paper.

Today's biblical studies academic guild largely downplays the presence of resurrection hope in the Hebrew Bible (OT), considering it a later development in Israel's history. Jeffrey Pulse's *Figuring Resurrection: Joseph as a Death and Resurrection Figure in the Old Testament and Second Temple Judaism* challenges this consensus by arguing that Genesis 37–50 in its final form contains various “dying and rising” motifs, such that “Joseph may properly be understood as a death-and-resurrection figure. Such a view carries with it the implication that scholars might need to change their focus somewhat, not only with regard to Joseph, but also with respect to understanding Hebrew thinking on the afterlife more generally” (279–80). Pulse, professor of exegetical theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, goes so far as to state that “Israel always had a basic understanding of the afterlife and a sense of the resurrection of the dead, which the attentive reader of the Joseph narratives could discern” (259, cf. 7).

This assumes a strong unity in the text with a consistent theological message (3, 5, 61). Professor of Comparative Literature at Cornell University, C. M. Carmichael, once observed that source critics are “like alchemists who attempt to make gold out of disparate elements without suspecting that they stand beside a gold mine.”<sup>1</sup> Pulse sees a gold mine in these texts and argues, “Biblical motifs (themes) provide evidence of a unified theology present within each page of the text” (51). Pulse's perspective is not completely novel; he utilizes aspects of Jon Levenson's *Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (Yale University Press, 1995). Levenson suggested that “the story of Joseph in Genesis 37–50 is not only the longest and most intricate exemplar of the narrative of the death and resurrection of the beloved son, but also the most explicit” (*Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, 65).

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<sup>1</sup> C. M. Carmichael, *The Sacrificial Laws of Leviticus and the Joseph Story* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 7.

The layout of *Figuring Resurrection* may lead readers to love it or hate it; the book has three main chapters, chapters 3–5, wherein each Pulse covers the same biblical material from different angles. Chapter 3, “The Masoretic Text of the Joseph Narratives,” is lengthy (pages 65–146) and goes through each chapter of Genesis 38–50 sequentially. This chapter provides an overview of each chapter, touching on motifs that link them together. Chapter 4, “Joseph and His Character: Perceived Problems and Difficulties,” goes through the same material from a moral standpoint, evaluating the mixed and flawed heroics of these chapters. In chapter 5, Pulse particularly draws attention to twelve manifestations of a “death-and-resurrection motif” in the fourteen chapters under examination (164–5). He examines each in turn, arguing that “they intersect with and build on one another” (165).

While I do not find this layout the most helpful, it sets the work apart from a commentary, and the author’s engagement with the text propels the book forward. Pulse makes a compelling case for textual unity throughout his analysis of the Joseph chapters. Genesis 37, for example, figures death and resurrection through Joseph being literally thrown into a pit and then brought up again (78). This chapter also features the OT’s first use of the word *sheol* (79, שְׁאוֹל). Despite Genesis 38’s seeming change of subject, Pulse points out various similarities between Judah and Joseph, even suggesting that “the Joseph narratives appear to be the tale of two brothers” (83, 81). Citing Levenson’s observation in *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* (Yale Univiversity Press, 2006), that a barren womb having a child is like a tomb being opened, Pulse sees Tamar’s pregnancy as fitting that pattern (173).

Among the unifying motifs present in these chapters is the garment motif, which harkens back to Gen. 3:7, and the provision of a garment (Gen. 3:21) requiring “the shedding of blood” (53). Garments link Genesis 37 to 38, for “in Genesis 37, Joseph’s garment was used to deceive his father, and now a garment is used to deceive one of the deceivers” (86; see Gen. 38:14). Further, a garment is used by Potiphar’s wife to “reinforce her lie” in Genesis 39 (92). Pulse also highlights the irony of deception throughout these chapters of “Israel being tricked time and time again—by his sons and now by Joseph—when one considers the deeds of his younger years” (109). *Figuring Resurrection* fits well in Lexham’s Studies in Scripture and Biblical Theology series, as Pulse provides a miniature biblical theology of the clothing motif throughout Scripture (53–56; 192–194).

The Joseph narratives are unique, even in Genesis, through the literary device of “doubling,” repetition (e.g. of dreams) (144). Here “Joseph is portrayed as a death-and-resurrection figure,” for “the life of Joseph, with all its ups and downs, is an account interwoven with example after example of death and resurrection” (144–145). Of course, this does not mean Joseph is a flawless character; he is portrayed as a spy bringing a bad report to his father (148; see Gen. 37:2). This will be echoed as he calls them spies in Egypt (149; see Gen. 42:9, 14, 16, 30–31, 34). Pulse explains, “Jacob is guilty of playing favorites and spoiling his son Joseph, and the result appears to be an arrogant attitude on the part of Joseph” (150). Further, Pulse follows Harvard professor James Kugel,<sup>2</sup> at least so far as to leave open the question about Joseph’s motives in going back to Potiphar’s house in Gen. 39:11 (154–155). Pulse also follows Targum Pseudo Jonathan and asserts

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<sup>2</sup> James Kugel, *In Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* (Harvard University Press, 1994).

that Joseph's words to the cupbearer in 40:14 display self-reliance, "an attempt to orchestrate his own release from prison" (156, 183). Then there is Joseph's assimilation into Egyptian life, including his marriage to "the daughter of a pagan priest," Egyptian name, and references to a "cup of divination," all of which may have led to his father's arm crossing blessing in Genesis 48 (157–158, 102–103; see Gen. 41:45, 44:4–5, 15; 48:14). Genesis is not equivocal about deception's dire consequences, Joseph tests and tests his brothers, even making them swear to bring his bones to Canaan: "There is no climate of trust in this family" (161). Yet, I would note, Joseph's character has improved by the end of the narrative to the point where, as will later be echoed in Daniel, another figure associated with resurrection hope, he can be called "a man in whom is the spirit of God" (see 100).

The weight of Pulse's argument falls on Chapter 5, wherein he notes twelve resurrection motifs:

separation and reunion . . . three-day/three-stage separation and restoration . . . the barren womb and the opening of the womb . . . being cast into a pit/Sheol and being raised up/lifted up . . . going down to Egypt and up to Canaan/the promised land . . . slavery and freedom . . . thrown into prison and released from prison, famine and deliverance (drought and rain/dew) . . . seeds/planting and growth/fertility/fruitfulness . . . going down into the water/being drowned and being brought up out of the water/new life . . . exile and return from exile [and] . . . stripped and clothed (garment motif). (165)

Readers may find some of these more compelling than others, and at times I felt the argument could be improved by more "showing the work." The treatment of each motif is uneven, perhaps following the density of presence in the biblical text, with, for example, the "going down into the water" section only straddling two pages. But *Figuring Resurrection's* argument is cumulative, and together these motifs lend significant weight to Pulse's claim that "Joseph was chosen to portray the early Hebrew understanding of the afterlife" without explicit statements of resurrection hope (195).

Though they feel like appendices, *Figuring Resurrection* concludes with five more chapters that address the text of the Septuagint, Targum Onqelos, and how the Joseph stories were later used and interpreted. Kugel noted the revived popularity of Joseph's story during the Second Temple Period (254–55), and Pulse argues that "Joseph became a focal point for renewed theological reflection on the theme of new life springing forth out of the old; of a glorious revival of things that had seemed to be finished, dead beyond recall" (260).

Although *Figuring Resurrection* has its weaknesses, such as an overreliance on Levenson's work and more than a few underdeveloped points, I recommend this work as a helpful exegetical and biblical-theological study of Gen. 38–50. Pulse has furthered the conversation about resurrection motifs in the Joseph narratives, argued for the unity of the text, and bolstered arguments for resurrection themes in Genesis. However, I suspect more thorough argumentation will be needed to make scholars rethink their stance on ancient resurrection hope.

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# ServantPoetry

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Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830–1894)

## Advent

This Advent moon shines cold and clear,  
These Advent nights are long;  
Our lamps have burned year after year  
And still their flame is strong.  
“Watchman, what of the night?” we cry,  
Heart-sick with hope deferred:  
“No speaking signs are in the sky,”  
Is still the watchman’s word.

The Porter watches at the gate,  
The servants watch within;  
The watch is long betimes and late,  
The prize is slow to win.  
“Watchman, what of the night?” But still  
His answer sounds the same:  
“No daybreak tops the utmost hill,  
Nor pale our lamps of flame.”

One to another hear them speak  
The patient virgins wise:  
“Surely He is not far to seek”—  
“All night we watch and rise.”  
“The days are evil looking back,  
The coming days are dim;  
Yet count we not His promise slack,  
But watch and wait for Him.”



One with another, soul with soul,  
They kindle fire from fire:  
“Friends watch us who have touched the goal.”  
“They urge us, come up higher.”  
“With them shall rest our waysore feet,  
With them is built our home,  
With Christ.”—“They sweet, but He most sweet,  
Sweeter than honeycomb.”

There no more parting, no more pain,  
The distant ones brought near,  
The lost so long are found again,  
Long lost but longer dear:  
Eye hath not seen, ear hath not heard,  
Nor heart conceived that rest,  
With them our good things long deferred,  
With Jesus Christ our Best.

We weep because the night is long,  
We laugh for day shall rise,  
We sing a slow contented song  
And knock at Paradise.  
Weeping we hold Him fast, Who wept  
For us, we hold Him fast;  
And will not let Him go except  
He bless us first or last.

Weeping we hold Him fast to-night;  
We will not let Him go  
Till daybreak smite our wearied sight  
And summer smite the snow:  
Then figs shall bud, and dove with dove  
Shall coo the livelong day;  
Then He shall say, “Arise, My love,  
My fair one, come away.”