

## Brownian Motion in Biblical Interpretation

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*The Moving Text: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on David Brown and the Bible.* Edited by Garrick V. Allen, Christopher R. Brewer, and Dennis F. Kinlaw III. London: SCM Press, 2018. xx + 273 pp. \$40.70 (pb).

David Brown may be the best-known, most-honored, but under-appreciated theologian in recent history. He has published numerous books, held several prestigious academic appointments, is a Fellow of both the British Academy and the Royal Society of Edinburgh, and has been the subject of two previous collections of essays interacting with his work.<sup>1</sup> This third compilation of essays devoted to Brown's theology focuses particular attention on his theological aesthetics in relation to the Bible, to the visual arts, and to literature. The volume concludes with a response from Brown, as well as four of his sermons, selected by the editors to illustrate his sense of the theological import of "the moving text of Scripture" (p. 233). The book begins with editor Christopher Brewer's introduction to Brown's theology of Scripture, and more particularly of "the moving text." Brown stands apart from traditional models of revelation, tradition, and the Bible as Scripture, while at the same time distancing himself from contemporary theologies that restrict the Bible's significance to its meaning in its historical setting. Rather, Brown adopts an approach that he associates with incarnational theology: as participation in fully human life entails subjection to cognitive, cultural, communicative, and

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<sup>1</sup> Robert MacSwain and Taylor Worley, eds., *Theology, Aesthetics, and Culture: Responses to the Work of David Brown* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), and Christopher R. Brewer, ed., *Christian Theology and the Transformation of Natural Religion: From Incarnation to Sacramentality—Essays in Honour of David Brown* (Leuven: Peeters, 2018).

corporeal constraints, so Scripture shares characteristics of fallibility, historic conditioning, and experiential limitations. This doctrine of Scripture—markedly “lower” according to many popular definitions—seems more correct and more promising to Brown, as it is consistent with Jesus’s own humanity, and as it constitutes revelation as an ongoing interaction between the human and the divine. This open, critical, living perspective on Scripture (and tradition) makes room for doctrinal development, correction of past errors, and the accommodation of circumstances that the first generations of Christian teachers could not have foreseen. As such, Brown’s understanding of Scripture and doctrine welcome intervention from critical study of the Bible, from interpreters who work in nonverbal media, and from the world of literary fiction, all of which stand to correct and extend biblical articulations of Christian faith.

The first section applies Brown’s theology to the discipline of biblical studies. Garrick Allen represents the field of textual criticism, where he notes that one strong contemporary school foregrounds not a search for one, primal, authoritative “original” text, but rather observes closely the patterns of textual difference—the changes that transmission effects over time, an illustration (at a very basic level) of Brown’s “moving text.” Ian Boxall engages the growing field of reception history to make the case that traditions surrounding Pilate’s wife in Matthew 27:19 enrich the scant reference to this unnamed witness to Jesus’s innocence. Stephen Barton takes up the generative role of memory in both recollection and transmission, drawing on the Gospel of John’s version of the temple incident, which specifies that the disciples reconstructed the event and its significance in retrospect. Robert MacSwain takes up neuroscience, hermeneutics, the problem of human suffering, and the contrasting ways that Brown and philosopher Eleonore Stump treat an array of biblical characters. The second section of the book, devoted to the visual arts, begins with Taylor Worley’s description and analysis of Kelly James Marshall’s and Chris Ofili’s revisionary paintings of the Eden of human origins. These are instances of Brown’s open canon, wherein Afrocentric art supplements and transforms the whiteness of European readings of Genesis 2. Turning from racial and cultural revision to interfaith interrogations of the Christian canon, Aaron Rosen takes Brown’s interpretation of the Akedah, and extends it with a recounting of the representations of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac in Christian, Jewish, and Muslim

tradition and art. Christopher Brewer explores how representations of Jacob's ladder, with particular emphasis on sculpture and art installation, lead viewers out of their everyday awareness into a confrontation with transcendence more effectively than the story from Genesis does alone. Natasha O'Hear challenges Brown's treatment of the book of Revelation—both his dismissive deprecation of its literary text, and his dissatisfaction with “overly literal” treatments of John's Apocalypse in the visual arts—showing instead that a strong current of artistic representation of the Revelation highlights greater ambiguity than the dry binarism that Brown decries. Finally, William Hyland describes the stained glass windows of Steinfeld Abbey, showing their capacity to connect the resident monks with the Bible's narrative cosmology via typological windows in the style of the *Biblia Pauperum*, the legacy of the Praemonstratensian Order, and the Abbey itself: a true, translucent moving text. The third section of the book examines the relation of theology and literature in Brown's works. Thomas Rist reads Brown's Mariology in the light of poems selected from post-Reformation Catholic (or crypto-Catholic) English poetry, displaying depictions of Mary that deepen Brown's assessment of her role in cultivating Christian discipleship. Jon Greenaway elicits fresh insights from Genesis by leveraging Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* with Milton's *Paradise Lost*; Shelley provides a Gothic subtext that darkens (better than “illuminates,” in this context) the Bible's account of the relation of Creator to creature. Responding to the supposed deliquescence of the “novel of belief,” Rist counterposes David Foster Wallace to the familiar novelists of the death, absence, or irrelevance of God. Wallace, he argues, exhibits the “more oblique forms of faith” (p. 201) that persist in postmodern fiction. David Brown himself then offers the last word in this volume, first with a helpful reply to his interlocutors, then with four sermons chosen to show Brown's theological imagination at work.

The essays are generally very strong, and few readers will already be well acquainted with all the instances of interpretive art to which the authors point. Even *Frankenstein*, with which every reader is likely to be at least vaguely familiar, takes on a different cast when intertwined with Genesis, by way of Milton. Not all the essays engage substantively with Brown's own interpretive theology, which is disappointing, but most demonstrate the generative potential of the paradigm that Brown's extensive writings on theology and culture have

set out. The more pointed question concerns whether readers will share an appreciation for Brown's approach itself (or for the specific ways the contributors put it to work). Emerging from the dialectical opposites of traditionalism on one hand and modernity on the other, Brown and his adherents seem often to have struck a course rather closer in spirit to the moderns than to any alternatives. Some readers will welcome this, as (one might say) modern theology, only with more imagination and verve; others will sense that the freedom to correct a fallible Bible, a fallible tradition, and a fallible church gives too much license to interpretive theology in a Brownian key. The first set of readers will find this volume a welcome collection that demonstrates the power of Brown's insight and imagination; the second should take these essays as a challenge to show stronger, more illuminating interdisciplinary essays in theological, artistic, and literary interpretation of Scripture.