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SHALOM AS WHOLENESS: EMBRACING THE BROAD BIBLICAL MESSAGE

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As an Old Testament professor, I find it gratifying that a Hebrew word has passed into Christian currency. “Shalom” basically means wholeness or completeness. An important extended meaning is “peace,” which is also the meaning people generally attribute to the word. But the cognate adjective, *shalem*, is used of whole, uncut stones used for building an altar in Joshua 8:31. It is also used to describe commercial stone weights of the correct size, not reduced to cheat customers, in Deuteronomy 25:15. A *shalem* heart refers to an undivided attitude of wholeheartedness, for example in 2 Kings 20:3. This sense of wholeness throws light on that daunting command Jesus gave in Matthew 5:48: “Be perfect,” as God is perfect.¹ The Greek adjective *teleios* employed there is used in the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament to render *shalem* and its Hebrew synonyms *tam* and *tamim*. Moreover, in the Hebrew Bible they and a related verb are sometimes followed by the preposition “with” to indicate an inclusive relationship, such as in Deuteronomy 18:13 and 1 Chronicles 19:19. Inclusiveness is the very point being made in the Gospel passage for which this command is the climax. We have to include bad people as well as good ones in our loving, just as God does in sending sunshine and rain on both. That is why the New Jerusalem Bible renders “You must therefore set no bounds to your love,” while the Revised English Bible (REB) states, “There must be no limit to your goodness.” Wholeness of a certain kind is in view.

“Shalom” can be used generally to describe the well-being of persons or communities, and “peace” is a particular and common development of that sense. There is “a time for war, and a time for peace [shalom],” Ecclesiastes 3:8 tells us. A related meaning is physical health: in Isaiah 53:5 it is used in this sense as a metaphor. So the REB translates: “The

chastisement he bore restored us to health.” Matthew 8:17 takes literally the previous verse, 53:4, about “our infirmities” and “our diseases,” and applies it to the healing ministry of Jesus. In Hebrew narratives there is a colloquial question one asks a newcomer: *Hashalom?* At 2 Kings 9:11 the King James Version (KJV) renders this “Is all well?” Updating a little, the New Revised Standard Version and New International Version (NIV)² both translate it as “Is everything all right?” A type of unimpaired completeness belongs to the idiom here. What I want to do in this article is to apply the idea of wholeness to aspects of the Bible. The Bible has its own shalom, a wideness we ignore to our peril if we try to cut it back.

OLD TESTAMENT/NEW TESTAMENT

On Fridays I volunteer at a local hospital as a chaplain. If patients would like a Bible, I give them a copy of the New Testament and Psalms, donated by the Gideons. That is hospital policy. If patients ask for it they may have a complete Bible, which the hospital has had to buy. Nearly everybody is content with the first option. So do many pastors appear to be, in their overwhelming use of New Testament texts for their sermons, while at the start of worship the Psalms provide beautiful calls to praise. Accordingly my own career category, in the field of Old Testament, may appear surprising. It certainly came about by a circuitous route.

At school I was put in the Classics stream, studying Greek and Latin literature. The church where I worshiped happened to be pastorless by choice, believing that church members had various ministry gifts that needed to be cultivated. At 16, since I could read New Testament Greek and potentially commentaries on the Greek text, I was put under a training elder for two years of

instruction and practice in preaching and conducting services. When I went on to Cambridge University, I was recognized as a lay preacher by churches of the same persuasion in the area. Yet I soon ran into a problem. I felt at home in the New Testament, set in a Hellenistic culture, whereas the Old Testament, quite different in culture and language, remained a closed book. I could only preach on the New Testament! A solution presented itself. Instead of a three-year degree the university offered the option of two half-degree programs, each taking two years. So after two years I switched to Hebrew and Aramaic studies, and eventually was allowed to complete that particular degree program in a fifth year. My vision was to be a lay preacher, preaching the whole Bible, while to make ends meet I would get some “tent-making” job, as Paul did, following the practice of Jewish rabbis. But what and where?

My Hebrew professor wanted me to teach in a secular university, but no position was currently available. Years before he had been in a similar situation, and taught at a seminary in Cairo until a position opened up back home. He urged me to go abroad and promised to be on the lookout for me at home. So I wrote to a theological college in London that trained missionaries as well as pastors, and they in fact needed somebody like me in their Old Testament department. The college encouraged its faculty to enroll for a part-time PhD degree at London University. When I was halfway through the program, the anticipated letter from my professor arrived. I felt I had to say no, for two reasons. First but not foremost, it would mean giving up my part-time study, which was not permissible for British university teachers, and I was finding its rigorous intellectual demands invaluable to equip me for teaching. Second and more important, by now I saw teaching at a secular university as

a poor alternative to seminary-type teaching that prepared students already committed in principle to Christian service. So I stayed where I was, until I crossed sea and land to teach at Fuller as an Old Testament professor.

My tent-making job turned into Christian service as a sort of evangelist for the Old Testament, in fact as an anti-Marcionite. Marcion was a Christian heretic in the second century AD who disowned the Old Testament, believing that the New had utterly superseded it. He considered the God of the Old a different deity from that of the New, the one that Christians should worship. I suspect that many Christians and even pastors have implicit Marcionite tendencies, still paying lip service to a whole Bible, but drawn in practice to the easier option of turning to biblical books that from the start were written by Christians for Christians. The other option has not meant cutting myself off from the New Testament. My lecture courses on Old Testament books have contained at the close a relevant New Testament component and along the way New Testament parallels. My overall task is twofold: to explain the Old Testament primarily in its own terms and secondarily as preparation for the New. In both cases I am walking in step with God’s ongoing revelation. In 2012 I was pleased to be invited to teach a course in Fuller’s Korean DMin program with the title “Biblical Theology of the Old Testament for Pastors.” I liked that word “biblical.” It gave me the opportunity to link the Testaments. Later I turned the course into a book.³

ACADEMIC/SPIRITUAL

As a student my role model was one of my denomination’s leading lights, a professor of Bible (both Testaments!) at Manchester University, F. F. Bruce. Coming across his balanced “Answers to Questions” in a monthly

magazine, I became an avid reader of his articles and books to see where he stood on various Christian and biblical issues and why. I later met him and would occasionally write to him, his example stimulating my own thinking. The nature of the Bible as revelation was something I needed to sort out. I read B. B. Warfield and was impressed by the array of self-defining statements from the Bible he amassed to support the straightforward character of its inspiration. Then I read how another evangelical scholar, James Orr, insisted that for a complete picture the phenomena of Scripture should also be taken into account, as a way of understanding those statements properly. I found his wider approach convincing. When Isaiah 40–55 became one of my Hebrew set texts and I reviewed the evidence that it was composed by a prophet living nearly two centuries after the historical Isaiah, I took it in stride and understood that the Holy Spirit had inspired his work for inclusion in the larger work. Later I welcomed in principle Brevard Childs’s “canonical approach” and recognized in him a kindred spirit. For many years I taught a PhD seminar, “Critical Approaches to the Old Testament,” which I always began by comparing the task of a music critic to give appreciative and informed insight into his or her subject. A moderately critical perspective can be a positive way to approach the setting, character, and growth of Old Testament literature and can provide the necessary tools to appreciate its canonical value.

Yet the spiritual side of the Old Testament has never been far from my purview. For some years I taught an elective course on “Spirituality of the Psalms.” At my previous institution, Judaism was part of my teaching load for six years, where my approach was to teach how to think and live like a good Jew. I came to carry this perspective into my

Old Testament classes, teaching students how to think and live like good Israelites. Of the books I have written, my favorite is a commentary on Chronicles in a series for pastors under the general editorship of Lloyd Ogilvie.⁴ One spring quarter I taught a course on the English text of Chronicles. I spent the summer writing the commentary, presenting its narratives as sermons the Chronicler was preaching on spiritual values his postexilic constituency needed to cultivate, values that slipped smoothly into Christian equivalents. Once, after I had presented a paper to a group at a Society of Biblical Literature conference, a seminary professor remarked that my papers were always “preachable.” The academic and spiritual sides of Scripture should not be at loggerheads, but take their proper places within a whole portrayal.

LOVE/WRATH

One of Marcion’s trump cards was that the God of the Old Testament is an outdated God of wrath and war, over against the God of love in the New Testament. If one could count up on a celestial calculator the number of sermons that have been preached on John 3:16, “God so loved the world . . .,” as the essence of the New Testament’s message, one might be inclined to agree. And “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16) has become a Christian mantra that seems to say it all. As for John 3:16, one wonders if preachers have ever read on to the closing verse of the chapter, verse 36: “Whoever rejects the Son . . . God’s wrath remains on them” (NIV). Paul too took God’s wrath very seriously; he had plenty to say about it in his Letter to the Romans. God’s wrath is demonstrated providentially in the political government’s exercise of justice, the government unwittingly acting as “the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer” (Rom 13:4). Divine wrath is part of the bad news about the Last Judgment that

precedes the good news of the gospel (1:18). Even before that judgment, in human experience it is already providentially at work when God abandons wrongdoers to the consequences of their own bad choices (1:24, 26, 28). Christians should “leave room” for that providential wrath to operate, rather than personally retaliate for wrongful treatment (12:19).

The late Thomas Oden tells in his theological biography how he invented the phrase “unconditional love” to describe the forgiving God.⁵ As part of his research into how one could use psychology to communicate theology, he adapted Carl Rogers’s phrase “unconditional acceptance.” Oden’s new phrase caught on. Soon preachers in many church traditions were taking it over; even the pope used it, though he came to regret his neologism. He found the preachers who used it stopped talking about the wrath of God against sinners. “I had drifted,” he wrote, “toward . . . a conversion without repentance.”

John and Paul were building on the broader foundation of the Old Testament in speaking about God’s wrath. Of course, it is by no means silent about divine love. Just to give one instance, Lamentations 3 moves comprehensively from God’s “wrath” to “the abundance of his steadfast love” in verses 1 and 32. Divine wrath and love are not parallel terms. Love is a regular attribute of God, whereas wrath is a moral reaction to human wrongdoing in the name of justice. Without human provocation there would be no wrath, only love. God’s wrath validates the passionate zeal of the Christian champion of human rights. In a creedal statement at Exodus 34:6 God is said to be “slow to anger,” reluctant to exercise it. It does not come naturally; in fact, it causes God grief, according to Hosea 11:8–9. In Ezekiel 33:11 the Lord God declared,

“I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live.” This text is echoed in 2 Peter 3:9. But, to cite Romans again, Paul warned against trading on this patience rooted in God’s natural inclination and ending up victims of divine wrath (Rom 2:4–5). To be true to the Bible, its double message should not be obscured.

“DO NOT ANSWER FOOLS”/“ANSWER FOOLS”

In 2015 Fuller sent me to China to spend a semester teaching at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary. I told the students how fortunate they were to have in their cultural heritage the concept of yin and yang, which describes two opposite entities operating in tension. Western rationalism, conversely, is tempted to simplify truth into a single entity as logically sensible. So those of us who are Westerners react with consternation to the contradictory advice in Proverbs 26:4–5: “Do not answer fools according to their folly. . . . Answer fools according to their folly.” We cannot give a shoulder-shrugging explanation that it does not matter which course one takes; each policy is backed by a good reason why one should do it. Circumstances alter cases. Both recommendations are true, but not at the same time. The book of Proverbs comes from wisdom teachers, and I like to imagine the anachronistic scene of a wisdom seminar. The teacher has assigned rival policies for two of the students to debate. Under which circumstances would the first apply? Under which the second? Then it would be open to the class to weigh in. Good training for potential wisdom teachers! There are times when there is no automatic right or wrong answer. Life can be complex, with a variable set of factors, and so careful discernment is needed for the right advice to be reached. Sometimes in my preaching I tell the congregation the sermon may not be right

for some of them. If so, they are to put it in a mental attic to dust off for future use when it is relevant, or pass it on to a friend for whom it does apply right now.

CHALLENGE/ASSURANCE

I like to sum up the Bible's message to believers in terms of these two words, and both perspectives are necessary if it is to be defined adequately. This truth hit home in a lesson a Jehovah's Witness once taught me. We were having a lengthy discussion about the Bible and he knew his Scriptures well. On a number of aspects of our respective traditions neither of us could convince the other he was wrong; each came back with counterarguments. At the close I felt it would be courteous to find something we could agree on. "Isn't Romans 8 a wonderful chapter?" I said. He thought for a while and said, "No, I think it's a scary chapter." I wondered how on earth he could say such a thing. I thought of so many verses in chapter 8 that spoke to me in an assuring way, verses I had often heard preached on in evangelical circles. We parted without further discussion.

Afterwards I looked the chapter up to find out what he meant. Part of verse 13 leaped out at me, though others could have done so too: "If you live according to the flesh, you will die." I cannot remember hearing a sermon on that text. My sparring partner and I were both half right and half wrong. He heard the threat of death and I heard the promise of life. I heard the assurance and he heard the challenge. Has the choice something to say about our two religious traditions? The lesson is that both aspects must find a firm place in Christian preaching if it is to be true to the Bible. Paul in his goodbye sermon to the elders from Ephesus summed up his three years of ministering to their church like this: "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God" (Acts 20:27). The Greek has "all," as the KJV translates. I like "whole," which modern translations use.

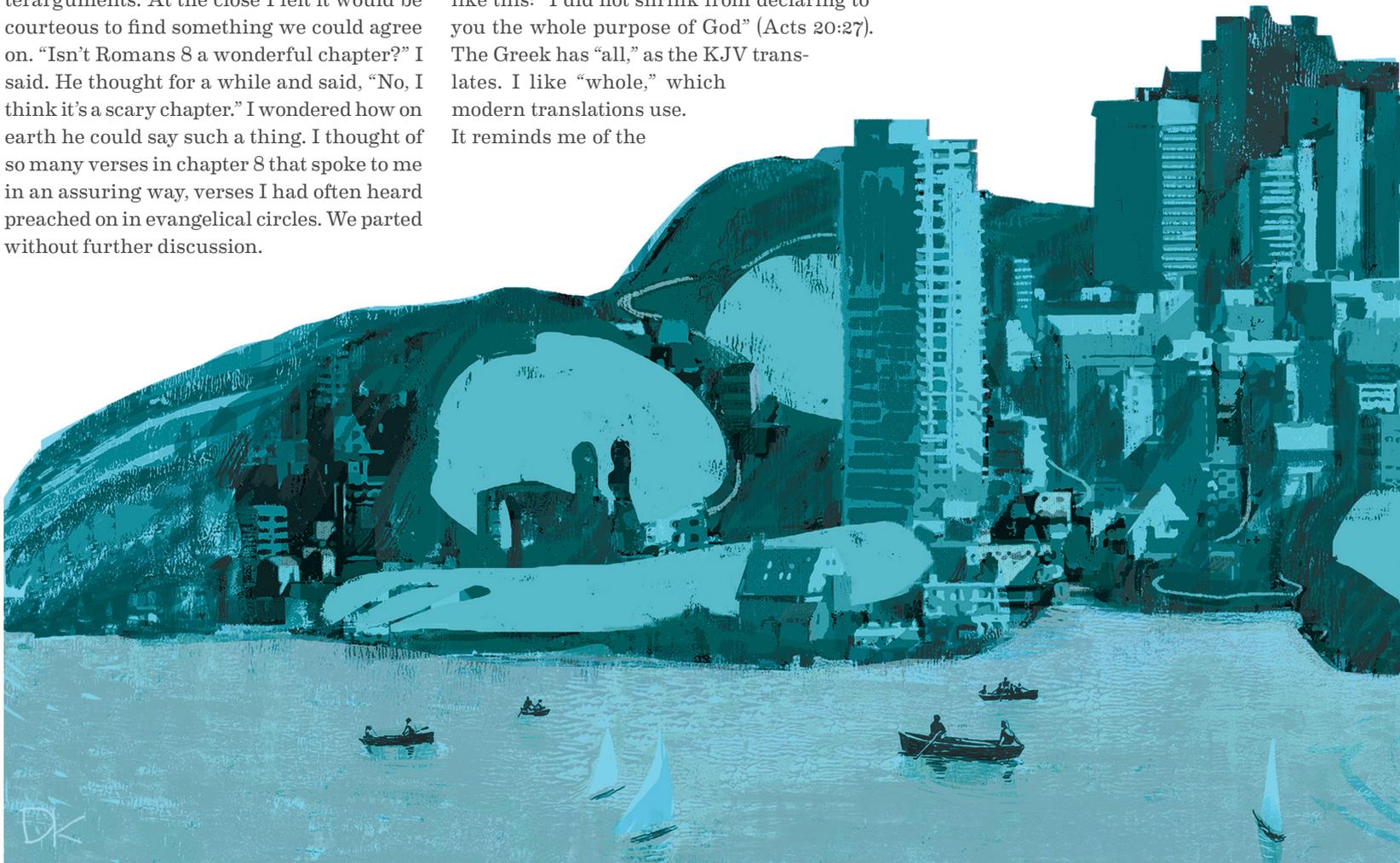
It reminds me of the

basic meaning of shalom and its importance for the Bible.



ENDNOTES

1. Unattributed translations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.
2. NIV quotations are taken from the 2011 edition.
3. Leslie Allen, *A Theological Approach to the Old Testament: Major Themes and New Testament Connections* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014).
4. Leslie Allen, *1, 2 Chronicles*, The Communicator's Commentary 10 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987). In 1993 it was republished by Nelson in a series named "The Preacher's Commentary."
5. Thomas Oden, *A Change of Heart: A Personal and Theological Memoir* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 89–90.



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