

Jordan Wessling. *Love Divine: A Systematic Account of God's Love for Humanity*. Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. xi+266 pp. \$90.00 (hbk).

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The Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology series aims at publishing innovative works by scholars who engage in cutting-edge research as they apply the tools and methods of analytic philosophy to think through issues related to traditional Christian beliefs. Jordan Wessling accomplishes this objective in an impressive fashion as he assesses the doctrine of God's love in his well-written and forcefully argued book, *Love Divine: A Systematic Account of God's Love for Humanity*. In keeping with the best of the analytic philosophical tradition, Wessling combines rigorous thinking with a meticulous attention to detail while consistently exemplifying an impressive command of the vast theological and philosophical literature that is relevant to his topic. A review as brief as this one can't begin to do justice to the sophistication, nuances, and complexity of the arguments that permeate *Love Divine*. For the purposes of this review, it must suffice to provide a broad chapter-by-chapter overview of Wessling's argument followed by a discussion of two closely-related areas where I think Wessling's thesis could use a bit more work.

Wessling's first chapter ("Approaching the Doctrine of Divine Love," 9-38) is devoted to methodological issues. Wessling first defends "the Similarity Thesis" which simply stipulates that our conception of "ideal human love is pertinently similar to God's love" (11, see 12-20). From this Wessling derives his "Methodological Thesis," which stipulates that "the theologian is justified in adopting the practice of drawing conclusions about God's love by examining ideal human love" (11, see 20-28). Were this much not true, Wessling cogently argues, all talk of "God's love" would be meaningless. Nor could we make any sense of the New Testament's (NT's) commands for disciples *to imitate* God's love (21, see Eph 5:1-2).

In contrast to most advocates of "perfect being theology," however, Wessling does not believe our intuitions about love should lead the way in our conceptualization of God (9-10). Wessling rather suggests that a Christian should "begin with the concept of God that is given to her, at least in its broad contours, by Scripture and/or tradition, and then use her intuitions about value and greatness to flesh out that conception in certain respects" (10). The goal of this more dialectical approach to Scripture, tradition, and intuition is to provide "an integrated paradigm for thinking about God's love for humanity as attested by the Christian faith" (4).

In chapter two ("The Value Account of God's Love," 39-75), Wessling critically engages J. David Velleman, Graham Oddie, and a number of other theorists of love as

he develops and forcefully defends a “value account of love.” According to this theory, “to love someone is to respond to the perception of that person’s intrinsic worth (dignity, when a human) by valuing her existence and flourishing, and by valuing union with her” (54, cf. 47-53). In this light, humans can be said to love God when they experience “an appreciative response” to “God’s maximal worth,” which is, “no doubt, only partially perceived” (67). So too, God can be said to love humans when God perfectly appreciates the irreplaceable inherent worth of every individual God created (72). Wessling argues that the value account of love is superior to alternative accounts because it best satisfies the two criteria that every Christian theory of love must meet: namely, it must be independently plausible—viz. it must be simple, coherent, and align with our deepest ideals about love (64-67)—and it must conform to “*a wide scope of biblical teaching*” (42, italics original).

In the remainder of *Love Divine*, Wessling applies the value account of love to four traditional Christian beliefs about God. In chapter 3 (“Creation out of Love,” 76-113), Wessling addresses the traditional view that God created the world “for his own glory”—a view Wessling labels “glorificationism.” Drawing on an array of NT scholars, Wessling argues that the NT presents the cross as our “window into...the nature of [God’s] Love,” revealing the truth that God’s very triune nature is characterized by other-oriented, self-giving, cruciform love (101, see 99-113). We must therefore conceive of “the Triune God [as] one that gives to the other within Himself” (112). And if God’s very nature is other-oriented love, we must understand all of God’s actions—including God speaking the cosmos into being—to be expressions of this same other-oriented love. Hence, Wessling argues, God was not “self-focused” when God created the world, as the glorificationist doctrine suggests. God rather created the world to pour himself out for others and to invite others to participate in this love. And, in keeping with the value account of love, it was for this reason that God created a race of people who were intrinsically worth God pouring himself out for.

Wessling next takes on one of the most fundamental and controversial doctrines of the classical theological tradition: namely, the conviction that God’s perfection entails God’s impassibility (ch.4, “God’s Affective Love,” 114-145). In this tradition, God’s perfection is interpreted as ruling out the possibility that anything could negatively affect God. Against this, Wessling makes a carefully nuanced case that the capacity to experience both positive *and negative* affective dimensions of love—as when one suffers out of compassion for another—is an intrinsic good that a perfectly loving God must possess (121-145). According to Wessling, “suffering-compassion is a way in which God identifies with His creatures deeply, a manner of identification that is valuable in itself, notwithstanding the negativity of the suffering involved” (115).

Wessling then turns his attention to the scope of God’s love (ch.5, “The Scope of God’s Love,” 146-83). Against all who deny that God’s love is extended to all humans equally or who think God’s love is restricted in any other way, Wessling argues that “God, as a maximally perfect and loving being, loves each human supremely” (170). In keeping with the value account of love, this entails that God always responds to the irreplaceable worth of every individual by doing all God can do to promote their well-being and to unite himself with them.

In the following chapter (Ch.5, "Punitive Love," 184-218) Wessling grapples with the notoriously thorny issue of "the relationship between God's love and punitive wrath" (184). While theologians working with a *divergent* paradigm believe that God sometimes "punishes persons in a manner that is contrary to the demands of love" (184), Wessling rather proposes a *unitary* paradigm in which "any observed conflict between the relevant attributes [is] merely apparent" (184). In this view, "divine punishment is motivated by love for the wrongdoer (as well as by love for the victim)" (184-85). "God's just wrath is a facet of His love," argues Wessling. Hence, "God's punishment of sinners, even in hell, is an expression of His relentless love" (4). That last statement may sound strongly counter-intuitive to some, but Wessling marshals a surprisingly strong case for its plausibility, resulting in a "hopeful" (but not dogmatic) "universalism" (217-18).

In his final chapter (ch.7, "Trinity, Deification, and Atonement," 219-46), Wessling applies the value account of God's love to the Christian conception of the Trinity, of salvation and of the atonement. The result is a fresh and compelling Eastern-orthodox-tending account of how the Incarnation and Crucifixion enable God to invite fallen humans to participate in God's own triune love and of how this participation transforms us into Christ's likeness.

As impressive as *Love Divine* is, however, it is not entirely free of shortcomings. In the remainder of this review, I will discuss the two that I felt were the most significant. First, given that God's optimal love for every individual person entails that God desires to maximize each person's well-being and to minimize their suffering (176-77), we naturally wonder why the all-powerful God can't do more than God seems to be currently doing. Curiously, Wessling points out that there already exists a number of plausible theodicies that are compatible with his conception of divine love and that this "alleviates [him] from the responsibility of diving into the relevant deep waters within this work" (6). Perhaps Wessling is right; no book can do everything. Still, I personally felt that *Love Divine* would have been stronger had Wessling given readers some indication of how one retains faith in God's perfect love in the face of the horrendous suffering that ravages our world.

Second, and closely related to this, I earlier noted that one of the central criteria that any proposed Christian theory of love must be able to satisfy, according to Wessling, is that it must be able to "*explain a wide scope of biblical teaching*" (42, italics original). This is a fine criterion, so far as it goes, but I don't believe it goes far enough. For one of the foundational convictions of the Christian faith, going back to the NT itself, is that "*all Scripture is inspired by God*" (2 Tim 3:16, emphasis added). Hence, I submit that any proposed Christian theory of love should be able to be made compatible with *all Scripture*, and given Wessling's canonical approach to Scripture (11, 13-14, 25), I suspect he would agree.

The problem is that, while Scripture contains many beautiful, Christ-like, "cruciform" depictions of God that cohere with the "all-loving God" Wessling so competently defends, it also contains a significant number of depictions of God that seem to blatantly contradict this "all-loving" conception. The dozens of depictions of Yahweh commanding the Israelites to mercilessly slaughter "anything that breathes" in certain regions within Canaan are a case in point (e.g. Deut 20:16-17). Beyond suggesting that death might be redemptive (214-15), and that it lies outside the

parameters of his work to tackle these issues (8, 16), Wessling's only response to ghoulish canonical divine portraits such as these is to argue that, while the "Similarity Thesis" stipulates that God's love is analogous in significant respects to human love, "this does not mean that we can predict how God will always behave" (27). Given God's transcendence, Wessling argues, "it is nearly obvious that God's love would sometimes lead Him to act in ways that utterly baffle us, even if divine and human love share the same essential core" (27; cf. 18, 186, 205).

I find Wessling's response to be too dismissive, especially in light of the strong emphasis throughout *Love Divine* on the commonality of God's love with our own as well as his "unitary account" of "God's wrath" which stipulates that this wrath is actually an expression of other-oriented "cruciform" love. Indeed, since God's "optimal supreme love" (163) entails that God works to maximize the "flourishing" and "well-being" of every individual and to minimize their suffering (55, cf. 167, 176), I don't think it unreasonable to expect Wessling to provide us with some account of how Yahweh's purported command to mercilessly slaughter entire populations in certain regions of Canaan might actually express God's loving concern to maximize these peoples "flourishing" and "well-being" and to minimize their suffering.

To make the same point from a different direction, since Wessling holds up the crucified Christ as our "window into...the nature of [God's] love" which is expressed in all God's actions, including God's judgments, we might well wonder how the merciless extermination of entire populations express the same loving God demonstrated when God allowed himself to be crucified out of love for lost humanity? Interesting enough, Wessling several times advocates interpreting Scripture through the lens of Jesus' life and ministry, which culminates in his self-sacrificial death on the cross (e.g. 101, 161, 204). I would encourage Wessling to explore the implications of this hermeneutical commitment more deeply, for I have elsewhere argued that if there is a compelling answer to the question I just raised, it lies in a consistent and thorough application of a cross-centered hermeneutic.¹

In my opinion, *Love Divine* would have been stronger had Wessling addressed these two issues. Yet, these shortcomings do not alter the fact that, so far as it goes, *Love Divine* is a first-rate philosophical and theological defense of a beautiful, all-loving, conception of God.

¹ Gregory Boyd, *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament's Violent Portraits of God in Light of the Cross*, 2 Volumes (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018).