

**Brad East. *The Church's Book: Theology of Scripture in Ecclesial Context*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022. ix+379 pp. \$00.00 (hbk); \$49.99 (hbk).**

Caleb Lindgren  
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Two areas of theological consideration that are under perennial scrutiny, at least for Christian theologians, are Scripture and the church; the one because it is the basis of our faith and the other because it is the context within which, by and large, that faith is experienced. Plenty of ink has been spilled wrangling over these topics, but interestingly the relationship between how one thinks about Scripture and how one thinks about the church is discussed much less frequently. Enter Brad East's insightful volume, *The Church's Book*, the aim of which is to illustrate just how intertwined the loci of Bible and church are in theology. His goal in this book is to make the case that it is actually how one thinks about the church that determines how one thinks about Scripture.

Before exploring East's argument in detail it is necessary to acknowledge that this is not a work of analytic theology, strictly speaking. The style and substance of East's argument would not clear the bar of Michael Rea's five prescriptions from the original volume, *Analytic Theology* (Rea 2009). Nevertheless, East's project is certainly intending to bring further clarity, coherence, and precision to the relationship between bibliology and ecclesiology through the use of careful analysis to build evidence for the interconnectedness of these doctrines. This requires East to paraphrase, simplify, and clarify much of the metaphorical language and tropes of the three authors that form the centerpiece of his analysis, reframing them in terms of more familiar and simple concepts for the sake of his comparative analysis. So, while not analytic theology in a strict sense, East's work nevertheless bears some kinship to analytic theology. Furthermore, both of the doctrines that East is exploring and the relationship between them seem to me to be ripe for deeper engagement by analytic theologians and so the purpose of this review is to propose just such engagement to those invested in the project of analytic theology.

East's goal of establishing and clarifying the connection between ecclesiology and bibliology proceeds essentially in two parts (though I have combined the first two of East's original three-part arrangement): descriptive analysis in part one and comparative analysis in part two. In the descriptive portion of the work, East looks in detail at the work of three theologians who, for him, represent the three major streams of orthodox Christian theology: John Webster representing "reformed" theology, Robert Jenson representing "catholic" theology, and John Howard Yoder representing "baptist" theology. The descriptors are in scare quotes above because, while I believe East's typology is largely accurate and helpful, his terminology can be misleading. By "reformed" East means the mainstream Protestant tradition; "catholic" encompasses not just Roman Catholic but also Eastern Orthodoxy and Anglicanism/Episcopalianism; and "baptist" (the most misleading of the three, in the opinion

**Journal of Analytic Theology, Vol. 11, Summer 2023**

10.12978/jat.2023-11.020001110813

© 2023 Caleb Lindgren • © 2023 Journal of Analytic Theology

of this reviewer) denotes descendants of the Radical Reformation (Baptists, Mennonites, etc.) as well as Pentecostals and charismatic groups. To avoid confusion and misunderstanding it seems to me that more neutral descriptors may have been more helpful: perhaps “hierarchical,” “congregational,” and “free church” or even “traditional,” “reformational” and “radical”?

As East explains in his introductory chapter, Webster, Jenson, and Yoder are selected for comparison, in part, because they share the common denominator of being notable students or interpreters of Swiss theologian Karl Barth. More particularly, East argues in Chapter 2 that it is Barth’s theology of Scripture that is most influential in the work of each theologian. East lays out ten common Barthian themes regarding Scripture: “(1) the centrality of Christ, (2) the priority of divine revelation, (3) ‘witness’ as a governing category applied to the Bible, (4) the practice of theology beyond modernity’s presuppositions, (5) exegesis as the method and purpose of dogmatics, (6) the church as hermeneutically definitive for the canon, (7) the restricted utility of historical criticism, (8) narrative as the overarching genre for Holy Scripture, (9) the importance of Israel and its sacred texts, and (10) the value of premodern theology and interpretation” (253).

East aims to show in the following three chapters how Webster, Jenson, and Yoder each adopt and adapt this influence in their own ways. Because his objective is to show how ecclesiology informs bibliology, their Barthian heritage provides an effective “control group” against which East can compare each theologian against the others. By doing so, he is able to demonstrate that even though all three share much of Barth’s approach to Scripture in their work, their theologies of Scripture diverge precisely on the basis of their ecclesiologies. As effective as this analysis is, I think East misses an opportunity for clarity and precision here by not returning to his ten themes in detail in his explication of each theologian’s work. Showing how each theme plays out in the thought of all three theologians separately seems to me to be the obvious structure for an ordered analysis and comparison of their work for the purposes of making his case vis-à-vis the relationship between ecclesiology and bibliology. My assumption is that East choose not to do this so as to describe each theologian on their own terms instead of potentially shoehorning them each into a foreign mold, thereby distorting their theology. While this may in fact be true, if East is correct that each thinker shares a Barthian view of Scripture at some level, why not make more use of the ten themes he has identified for the sake of conceptual clarity and deeper analysis?

One of the most commendable aspects of East’s volume is his explication of the interior logic of each theologian’s work and thought. East gives a veritable tour de force in charitable reading. The book is valuable for the individual studies of Webster, Jenson, and Yoder alone, apart from his larger argument. East does not shy away from criticism either. He is incisive in his assessment that Webster’s theology of Scripture is abstract to the point of unhelpful vagueness and that he creates an unhelpful competition between divine and human agency with regard to Scripture’s origin and production. Likewise, he takes on the sordid history of Yoder’s sexual abuse in a free-standing excursus that is the best essay I have read on the question of whether one can separate a theologian’s life from his or her theology. He furthermore points up the ways in which Yoder’s unexpectedly “high” ecclesiology and pacifistic ethics provide no check against precisely the sort of abuse which he himself perpetrated. But East nevertheless finds value in aspects of Yoder’s thought as well—particularly viewing Scripture as actively speaking in the present which generates an ethics and not merely propositional truths—and so East laudably resists the temptation to the throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. On my reading, East is the least critical when it comes to Jenson and so, while he does not articulate his own position in this volume (for that see

East 2021), it seems clear that his sympathies lie with Jenson and the “catholic” perspective. Nevertheless, he does fault Jenson for not having an adequate “hermeneutics of sin,” a weakness for which East thinks Webster provides a helpful corrective (270).

The second part of East’s volume is dedicated to comparative analysis. Chapter 6 focuses on comparing the theologies of Webster, Jenson, and Yoder to draw out how their differing ecclesiologies directly influence their bibliologies. East identifies thirteen “background commitments” about Scripture shared by all three theologians—drawn from their common Barthian roots—but proceeds to show how their understandings of the church lead those commitments to play out in vastly different ways (257).

In the case of Webster, East argues that Scripture stands over the community as its objective norm, this is because the church, according to Webster, is the community that is gathered and formed by Scripture; it is the community that hears and proclaims the word. This account of the church leads to a picture of the Bible as wholly objective and external to the church, standing in critical judgment over and against the church. Weaknesses of this view, for East, include a tendency toward abstraction, a competitive view of human and divine action, and a complete lack of a missiology. Jenson, by contrast, views the church as the producers of Scripture, through the power of the Spirit. While Scripture still norms the church, the church is also the only authoritative interpreter of Scripture. So the church is the authorized delegate of God’s word, uniquely empowered to interpret it for the purpose of mission. The weakness of this account, according to East, is that it underestimates the church’s fallibility as regards to interpretation. Finally, on Yoder’s understanding, Scripture is what animates and motivates the church. It is the product of the missionary community and is its missionary guidebook. The church for Yoder is the community galvanized by Scripture and whose mission is summed up in Scripture. East identifies the weaknesses of this account as a tendency to reduce theology to ethics and an anti-metaphysical bent.

Having compared Webster, Jenson, and Yoder, East attempts a “constructive theology” of Scripture in the final section of Chapter 6 by showing how the weaknesses of each theologian’s account may be addressed by the corresponding strengths of the others. He employs a schema of five “relationships” for crafting his constructive account: “(1) divine and human action; (2) the theological and the historical; (3) the metaphysical and the moral; (4) scriptural and ecclesial authority; and (5) determinate and open-ended meaning” (272). Using resources from each theologian, East builds a theology of Scripture in which divine and human action are non-competitive (Jenson, Yoder), the theological and historical aspects of the Bible are balanced (Jenson and Yoder), the bible expresses both metaphysical and moral truth (Webster and Jenson), Scripture’s ultimate authority is coupled with the interpretive authority of the church (Webster and Jenson), and the undeniably determinate meanings of biblical passages do not close off the open-ended applications to the missionary context of the church (Webster and Yoder). These five “relationships,” as East terms them, seem to me to be a ripe ground for deeper analytical engagement, both as to their accuracy and suitability but also to the production of models that may be useful for further theological development and consideration (cf. Crisp 2021). Specifically, I think these “relationships” can actually be understood as continua upon which various theologies may be located, allowing for greater conceptual clarity in mapping the relationship between ecclesiology and bibliology, and the creation of models and typologies therefrom. East hints at this and I believe it is a fruitful avenue for further development.

East’s final chapter ties together many of the threads which he has been pulling on throughout the work in the attempt to establish his case that ecclesiological considerations have a controlling stake in a theologian’s bibliology. East argues that this explains why

agreement on what the bible *is* does not resolve denominational disagreements regarding Scripture and, if anything, often serves only to highlight them. To underline the argument he has been making throughout the book, East returns to Webster, Jenson, and Yoder's view of the relationship between Scripture and church and describes how each views the church vis-à-vis Scripture. As mentioned above, Webster, representing the "reformed" perspective, views the church as the "beneficiary" of Scripture, bound and beholden to a norm to which it is the heir and over which it holds no authority, but from which it receives great riches and privileges (308-311). Jenson, as the "catholic" representative, sees the church as the "deputy" of Scripture, granted full authority to interpret it and promulgate its statutes and worldview. This authority is ultimately granted by God and operates independently of Scripture—and in some cases over Scripture (304-308). Lastly, Yoder represents the "baptist" perspective and understands the church as the "vanguard" of Scripture who carries its revolutionary message and vision to the "frontlines" (East is cognizant of the irony of using martial imagery to describe a pacifist perspective) of the missionary endeavor. That vision will be interpreted and enacted differently by the different "units," given the exigencies of their various contexts, but the motivating impetus of the gospel is common between them (311-316). The final move for East is to broaden his discussion to include more contemporary figures—such as N. T. Wright, Kevin Vanhoozer, Richard B. Hays, Joseph Ratzinger, Ephraim Radner, etc.—to see how his analysis might be applied to their work. He identifies in particular four controversies that arise repeatedly in contemporary debates about Scripture as loci for considering the work of contemporary thinkers: canonization, authorship, Scripture's attributes, and Scripture's purpose. East's discussion here is necessarily brief, but it does effectively illustrate the viability of applying his analysis to these types of discussions and the pregnant possibilities of doing so. Such possibilities are what motivated me to review this book, precisely because the methodology of analytic theology would helpfully supplement and improve on the course East suggests in this final chapter.

This leads me to some concluding remarks regarding East's project overall. I think he has insightfully identified the hitherto underexplored relationship between ecclesiology and bibliology and successfully demonstrates that the relationship between these two doctrines within a given theology is often decisive. Where East falls short, in my opinion, is in illuminating just how this relationship proves to be decisive. That it is decisive is, to me, less interesting than why it is decisive, and I would like to see further work done here. Likewise, he develops no clear criteria for determining the extent of this relationship and what force it is exerting in a given theological system of structure, or in which direction (church to Scripture or Scripture to church). Furthermore, his argument is that, against common assumptions, ecclesiology is determinative for bibliology and not the other way around, but the common Barthian heritage of the three theologians he selects (*vis-à-vis* Scripture) indicates that, at the very least, some important qualifications must be included in that claim. In the estimation of this reviewer, the resources of analytic theology are particularly fitting for teasing out some of the details of East's case, for assessing its accuracy, and furthermore for determining its viability for future theological work in the fields of ecclesiology or bibliology. These fields are ripe for further analytical engagement. Consequently, I heartily recommend Brad East's stimulating book, both on its own considerable merits and for the exciting avenues for future study it suggests.

## References

- Crisp, Oliver D. 2021. "The Importance of Model Building in Theology." In *T&T Clark Handbook of Analytic Theology*, 9-19, edited by James M. Arcadi and James T. Turner Jr. T&T Clark.
- East, Brad. 2021. *The Doctrine of Scripture*. Cascade.
- Rea, Michael C. 2009. "Introduction." In *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, 1-32, edited by Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea. Oxford University Press.