

From Eden to New Jerusalem: Book Reflection

For those of us who grew up with a faith background, we have probably developed an image of the sacred garden in which Adam and Eve called home. We attempt to imagine the divine nature that would surround us and the joy that would come from living a life without shame. Yet, we know that the fall has left us living in a reality that is far from the divine residence God intended for us. As a result, we find ourselves looking to the hope of Jesus' return and the creation of a new heaven and earth. In T.Desmond Alexander's book, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology*, he eloquently communicates the biblical 'meta-story' of God's redemptive works traced through Genesis to Revelation. He closes the gap between the Garden of Eden and the New Jerusalem by revealing Scriptural evidence where God is actively redeeming His land and His people.

Alexander is an author of a variety of books and a professor at Union Theological College. His primary focus of studies is the Pentatuch and much of His works focuses on seeing God's work throughout the Old Testament¹. Within this book, he highlights the themes and patterns throughout the text that affirm the narrative that God's intentions have always been for His holy people to reside in a holy temple-city in close relationship with Him. He expands on the presence of God, sovereignty of God, source of evil, redemption of creation, transformation of God's people, and foundations of communal living within this book. Alexander makes a point to not only identify these areas as key biblical values, but traces them throughout the text to reveal they are significant themes amongst the larger narrative of the Bible. The purpose of examining

¹ Alexander, T. Desmond, and T. Desmond Alexander. "T. Desmond Alexander." InterVarsity Press. Accessed March 17, 2020. <https://www.ivpress.com/t-desmond-alexander>.

these values is to address why the earth exists and the purpose of humanity within the earth².

Furthermore, I believe that this book is a challenge towards believers to recognize that they play a vital role in God's divine redemption of humanity. Our belief in Jesus Christ as Savior is central to our faith, yet we must look beyond the Gospels and recognize that much of God's work throughout the Bible was pointing to Christ's work on the cross. Within this reflection, I will identify some of Alexander's key points, evaluate his perspectives, and reflect on the implications of his content in this book.

Alexander approaches biblical theology by focusing on themes and patterns throughout Scripture. Within his analysis, he unpacks the symbolism in the following images: garden, temple, throne, lamb, tree, and wall. The garden represents God's divine presence, the throne His authority, the lamb is Jesus' sacrifice, the tree represents a source of life, and the wall represents a foundation and structure for God's people. Within each of these themes, he provides significant biblical evidence that these themes are traced throughout Scripture from the garden to New Jerusalem. Furthermore, he argues that it has always been God's intention to reveal his greater purpose through the small details in the Bible that reinforce the big redemptive picture. The themes that stuck out the most to me from Alexander's writings were his focus on the garden, throne, and tree of life. Below will provide an analysis for the theological, cultural, and ministerial implications for the insights provided on these themes.

Within Alexander's writing, each chapter provides a roadmap beginning with a starting location and ending with the final destination. In chapter 2, he begins with God's sacred garden in Genesis and ends with the Holy City described in Revelation. This chapter communicates that

2 T. Desmond, Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2008), 9.

“...God’s presence on the earth is especially significant for understanding the biblical meta-story”³. For those familiar with the Old Testament, they might say that the temple that contains God’s presence began with Solomon who helped in leading it to be built. However, Alexander points back to the Garden of Eden as the original dwelling of God’s presence. Furthermore, he makes the point that since the fall God has been active in creating spaces to dwell with His people, but ultimately is pointing them towards dwelling in eternity with Him. He summarizes that “...the theme of divine presence reveals a fascinating and coherent progression from Eden to tabernacle to Jerusalem temple to church to New Jerusalem”⁴. This statement affirms the narrative that God is committed to redeeming what has been undone and ensuring us the opportunity to dwell in close relationship with Him. The implications of this is that Christians must not only believe deeply in the indwelling of God’s presence in us, but look towards New Jerusalem as an expansion of the Holy of Holies. The cultural and ministerial implications for this are that we must continue to equip believers that their faith is far beyond the here and now.

Alexander then expanded on the divine throne that is spoken of in Revelation 22:1-3. He utilizes this passage as the central image of God’s sovereignty and reign over Satan. Again, Alexander starts in the beginning where the serpent lures humanity into betraying God and submitting to the serpent. Though God gave Adam and Eve authority they “fail to exercise their God-given dominion over this crafty animal”⁵. We know that there are consequences to these choices, yet Alexander highlights God’s actions to reestablish His authority and redeem what the serpent attempted to take away. He does this by establishing Israel as the ruler over all nations.

³ Alexander, 15.

⁴ Alexander, 73.

⁵ Alexander, 78.

Through Israel's authority, Jesus ultimately comes into the picture to establish His kingdom and reign. Once again, humanity must play a role in this narrative by claiming Jesus as Lord and submitting to His authority⁶. Why is this important for the modern day believer? Because we must be disciples who not only claim Jesus as Lord, but also live under the submission of His kingship. Furthermore, we must continue to reach out to those that are submitting themselves to the authority of things/people other than Jesus. In contrast to Alexander's points, John Goldingay identifies Satan's demonic work throughout the New Testament in one chapter in his book *Biblical Theology: The God of the Christian Scriptures*. He identifies it as a major barrier and attempt for Satan to gain authority. However, Goldingay identifies Jesus' ministry of casting out demons as an example of Him reestablishing His reign. The exorcisms are symbolic victories in Jesus' conquest of the powers that assert themselves against God. They indicate that 'God's reign is among you' (Lk 17:21). God's reign means God putting down everything that conflicts with it, including Satanic power and the pain and sorrow that issue from it"⁷. Though I believe Alexander did a thorough job in communicating God's actions towards establishing His reign, I agree with Goldingay's insights on the demonic. As believers, I think it's vital to recognize that as Jesus displayed reign and authority through casting out demons, this is something we engage in. As we engage in claiming our authority through the power of Jesus, we step up to the authority that was given away in the garden when the serpent tempted Adam and Eve.

As I reflect on Alexander's points, I find myself reflecting on my faith upbringing. I grew up in a charismatic/pentecostal church that had a high focus on the gifts of the Spirit and the

6 Matthew 7:21-23

7 John Goldingay, *Biblical Theology: the God of the Christian Scriptures*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 233.

return of Jesus. I don't feel that I was well equipped in knowing Scripture, but I do remember *many* sermons out of the book of Revelation. It seemed that our church was always seeking the heavenly and anticipating New Jerusalem to come. As a kid, I felt as though God was distant and only in the future New Jerusalem we were anticipating. I wonder how this perspective would have changed for me if I was provided with the biblical evidence that God has been establishing his presence and redeeming creation since the beginning. It would have allowed me to seek what is to come, yet recognize the redemptive work that was already occurring around me. As Alexander states, "While Christians are to be active here and now in promoting the kingdom of God, ultimately God's throne will be set up only on an earth an earth devoid of everything evil"⁸. It is important to look towards New Jerusalem, but not at the cost of ignoring God's work on earth now.

From my perspective, Alexander's primary points were (1) the Bible contains significant details that reveal God's redemptive plan and (2) it is vital Christians recognize this, immerse themselves in the Word, and allow it to impact their lives and ministry. Though this may seem like a simple insight, I believe that it shouldn't be taken lightly. Much of Alexander's content impacted me, yet I wonder what the *praxis* of this information looks like. As he states, "Good theology always has pastoral implications"⁹. Though content may be beneficial to increase ones knowledge, it is meaningless when it isn't applied to faith or daily life. What are the personal implications of a deeper understanding of God's biblical meta-story? How might these insights affect my lifestyle and ministry?

The practical application is both personal and missional. As Christians, we must stop and

⁸ Alexander, 192.

⁹ Alexander, 11.

ask ourselves if we are interacting with Scripture with a lens to evaluate the patterns and themes within the text. If we cannot recognize the patterns and themes within the Bible, we are missing out on the fullness of Scripture. My personal conviction is that it is vital that I continue to develop my understanding of biblical theology. As a result, I must immerse myself in God's Word. Furthermore, I think back to my time as a pastor. Though I know my preaching was rooted in Scripture, I am not sure I properly equipped my students in how to engage in biblical theology. As I think of discipling students in the future, I want to teach them how to engage in a slow read that allows them to see the themes throughout Scripture. Often we challenge students to read an entire book or chapter of the Bible. What would happen if we challenged them to identify all of the passages that speak of water or trees? I could see this being an exciting change up for some of the students' I have led in the past, and ultimately it may provide further depth for their Scripture reading.

Overall, I am not sure I have been able to truly intake all the points that Alexander made in his book *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology*. It feels as though I can continue to read this book over the years and gain further insight. It is my desire to continue to lean into seeing the meta-story throughout Scripture and communicating it those around me.

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