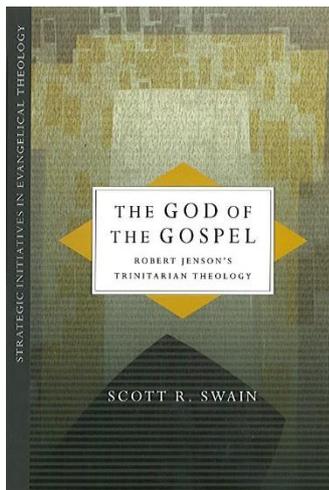


Scott R. Swain, *The God of the Gospel: Robert Jenson's Trinitarian Theology*. Strategic Initiatives in Evangelical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013). Pp. 258.



A quiet chorus of voices have begun to sing of the importance of American Lutheran theologian, Robert W. Jenson. The latest voice to be added to the choir is that of Scott Swain of Reformed Theological Seminary. Swain's book makes an impressive addition to the small but growing shelf of volumes dedicated to parsing Jenson's work.

It is regrettable to observe that Jenson is relatively unknown in Australia, save through some of his co-edited works with Carl Braaten. Jenson's theology contains a unique blend of sources, owing largely to his formation. He studied in the scholastic Lutheran tradition in the USA before completing his doctorate at Heidelberg under the supervision of Peter Brunner and the informal oversight of Karl Barth, whose doctrine of election was the object of his study. Jenson's early writings from the 60s and 70s are marked by apocalyptic radicalism. Through the influence of his wife he made two discoveries: the challenge that the ecumenical movement poses to entrenched denominationalism is entirely worthwhile, and the riches of the theology of Jonathan Edwards. After spending a year reading nothing but the Church Fathers, Jenson authored his most influential book, *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (Fortress, 1982), which contained some unique theological proposals about the doctrine of the Trinity that Jenson would continue to develop for the rest of his career. His two-volume *Systematic Theology* (OUP, 1997-99) brought his work to the attention of the broader academic community. In the last decade he has mostly dedicated himself to the intersection of theology and biblical studies, producing two biblical commentaries (*Ezekiel* and *Song of Songs*) and two books on scripture and theology. In his career he has co-founded two journals (*Dialog* and *Pro Ecclesia*) and co-founded the Centre for Catholic and Evangelical Theology. He is living out his retirement in Princeton with his wife, Blanche, where he was a senior scholar for research at the Center of Theological Inquiry.

At the heart of Jenson's theology is the attempt to identify correctly the God of the Christian gospel. Jenson rejects the notion that Christians are a subset of a larger group of religiously generic humans called "theists". His book on ecumenical theology, *Unbaptized God*, proposed that insufficiently Christian conceptions of God lay behind the basic disagreements occurring in ecumenical dialogues. The world presents us with a pantheon of putative deities, how are we to identify the God of the Christian gospel? This is the question that Scott Swain picks up in his new book on trinitarian theology.

Swain's book is an extensively revised form of his doctoral thesis completed under Kevin Vanhoozer at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in 2002. The book is divided into two parts. In the first, he presents a reading of Jenson's theology with particular attention to the trinitarian identification of the Christian God. In this section Swain depicts Jenson sympathetically as a fellow-seeker of an evangelical understanding of God, but worries that Jenson is a little too revisionist. The implication is that Jenson is involved in a purportedly Hegelian project of historicising the being of God. In the second section, Swain highlights his disagreements with Jenson and argues that while Jenson's central question is

important, an approach of *ressourcement* would be more fruitful than Jenson's own revisionary endeavours. Of particular concern to Swain is the priority of the immanent Trinity over the economic Trinity. In the final chapter of the second section Swain introduces the work of Bruce McCormack to offer a Reformed alternative to Jenson. The material claims of Swain's counter-proposal are that a strong doctrine of divine simplicity coupled with the teaching of divine aseity fund a more robustly "evangelical" doctrine of God.

Throughout Part One, Swain reveals himself to be a capable interpreter of Jenson. He wrestles back some popular misreadings of Jenson, such as the tendency to classify him with the so-called "Yale School" of theology (p. 68). Swain maps Jenson's use of narrative as a theological category, but he does not conflate Jenson with postliberalism. Jenson notices a pattern of divine identification in scripture. To the question, "Who is God", scripture does not answer with a list of attributes, but a narrative: "God is whoever raised Jesus from the dead, having before raised Israel from Egypt" (Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 1:63). Swain investigates the metaphysical implications of this claim and finds this approach to the doctrine of God equally appealing and troubling. Jenson firmly grounds his doctrine of God in the revelation given through evangelical history, but Jenson also seems to be claiming that God is identified first in history as the liberator of humanity rather than in timeless perfection. Swain worries that Jenson ties the being of God just a little too close to these historical events. The great spectre lying behind Swain's concern is Hegel's *Geist*. Greatly influenced by Lewis Ayres' damning indictment of modern "Hegelian" theology, Swain is numbered among those who see Jenson as the perfect Hegelian theologian (pp. 63ff). In Swain's view, Jenson has collapsed God's being into history. God is not only identified with these particular evangelical events, but with all the events of history so that Jenson must now answer how God's being relates to "the atrocities of sin and suffering" (p. 91).

In Part Two, Swain offers his correction to Jenson's supposed Hegelian theology. Swain proposes that a return to catholic doctrines of aseity, simplicity, and the analogy of being would allow us to retain Jenson's evangelical insights without threatening God's timeless perfection. These arguments are fine so far as they go, but they all suppose that Jenson has collapsed divine being into history. This contention is disputable, and is not conclusively proven by Swain. Despite his identification of God with the events of evangelical history, Jenson has often asserted that God could of course be the triune God without creation, but that we nevertheless have nothing to say about such a possibility. Swain picks up on these statements, but disagrees that we have nothing to say about God without the world: "If, as Jenson suggests, the triune God *would* be the same God apart from the world, then he *is* the same God apart from creation" (p.155). Neither Swain nor Jenson deny that God would be God without the world, but of the two only Swain believes that it is possible to construct a positive theology of God's identity without the world. The heart of the disagreement is the sisyphian dispute between Reformed and Lutheran theologians over the *communicatio idiomatum*. Jenson has one strict epistemological rule that guides his theological discourse: no idolatry. This means that theological discourse is limited to God's own self-introduction through the act of revelation. Jenson refuses to speculate about the Son's independence of Jesus of Nazareth, and has little time for discussions of incommunicable attributes. Jenson fears that opening up an ontological space between God-as-revealed-to-us and God-in-Godself only creates room for idolatrous projections and the final vindication of Feuerbach. According to Jenson, any attempt to find a "hidden" God by founding our theology on something "behind" the death and resurrection of Jesus "can only either create a God who is indeed all too plainly only *our* God or dash us against the true God where he is not ours" (Jenson, *The Triune Identity*, 28). Jenson describes this epistemological rule as metaphysical, noting that Aristotle's first moment of metaphysics involved establishing rules of grammar. However, Swain takes it as an ontological move, and so believes that Jenson makes God's being somehow dependent upon creation. Swain gives little attention to Jenson's well-developed thoughts on idolatry and theology.

There are regrettable moments of incautious scholarship in the book, which Swain uses to uphold this critical reading of Jenson. To take one instance, he claims that Jenson avoids treating God's relation to the world as one of mere "externality", implying that for Jenson the world is somehow "internal" to the being of God. But the page in Jenson's writing that Swain cites actually claims that it is the relation of *the Son and the Spirit* to the being of God that cannot be one of mere "externality" (p. 151). For, Jenson goes on to say on the cited page, it would be wrong for "God's identity [to] be determined extrinsically by creatures" (*Systematic Theology*, 1:75). Many of the footnotes prove to be similarly disappointing and Swain occasionally cites Jenson's critics rather than Jenson to establish significant points (e.g., p. 154). Greater attention to the second volume of Jenson's *Systematic Theology* might have given Swain some pause in his critiques throughout the book. In the second volume, Jenson offers an extensive defence of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, which would be entirely nonsensical if Jenson thought that God was ontologically dependent upon creation.

The final chapter of the book introduces another figure, Bruce McCormack, to offer a Reformed perspective on the relation of God's being to the events of evangelical history. Swain provides a fair summary of McCormack's developing theology as it stood at the time of publication. However, the inclusion of this chapter is slightly puzzling following the extensive discussion of Jenson. There is a certain theological affinity between Jenson and McCormack, but concluding with McCormack in a book whose titular topic is the theology of Robert Jenson seems unnecessary.

Despite some reservations regarding Swain's critique of Jenson, the book is clearly the finest monograph on Jenson's work to appear so far. Jenson is indeed an ally in the quest for an evangelical doctrine of God. However, Swain's book is best read by those already conversant with Jenson's theological programme. Many of Swain's constructive proposals are best thought of not as alternatives to Jenson (that is, as Swain presents them), but as elucidations of Jenson's own core commitment to the self-sufficiency and perfect harmony of triune being and the pure contingency of creation.

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