

BOOK CRITIQUE: *THE PENTATEUCH AS NARRATIVE*

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A Paper

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by

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Sailhamer, John H. *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992, 522pp.

In *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, John H. Sailhamer attempted to rediscover the manner in which the Jewish audience would have viewed and read the first five books of the Old Testament. Sailhamer argued for readers to regard the Pentateuch as one volume rather than five separate isolated books (1). Citing various references from the Old and New Testament, Sailhamer demonstrated that this concept was the manner in which the biblical witness perceived the Pentateuch. The idea of the Pentateuch as a singular work implied that it belonged to an author. Moreover, Sailhamer posited that if a work had an author, then one must seek to appreciate and understand his literary form and technique in order to establish a just meaning (3). Therefore, according to Sailhamer's appropriation of the Pentateuch as a single literary work, reading these individual books in the context of the biblical canon as a coherent composition will cause the modern audience of Scripture to align with the Jewish audience of the O.T. for proper engagement in theological activity.

The purpose of this paper is to critique and discuss Sailhamer's accomplishment of theological interpretation in *The Pentateuch as Narrative* in light of divine authorial discourse. In addition, this paper will evaluate the manner in which Sailhamer's theological presupposition of divine authorial discourse affects his understanding of biblical interpretation with respect to the canon of Scripture and its application to the church. This paper will accomplish this task by investigating the interpretive role of divine authorial discourse in three main areas of Sailhamer's portrayal of the Pentateuch: its authorship, the Pentateuch as text, and the purpose of the Pentateuch.

An appropriation of divine authorial discourse naturally entails divine authorial intention. Thus, theological interpretation may be best understood as the activity of discerning both the human and divine discourse in canonical context.<sup>1</sup> This concept is also known as “double-agency discourse”. In other words, this signifies when “. . . a person performs some illocutionary action by way of another person performing some locutionary or illocutionary action . . .”<sup>2</sup> Through discernment, one seeks to understand the authorial discourse with the aim of comprehending the authorial intent. This strategy considers the discourse of the whole of Scripture to bear the intention of the double agency of its authorship without mutual encroachment concerning meaning. Therefore, one may notice that Sailhamer bases his approach towards interpreting the Pentateuch primarily upon this presupposition.

The notion of divine authorial discourse does not exclude the relevancy and significance of human authorship. In fact, divine authorship enables the human authors to participate in the illocutionary action of the biblical discourse. Sailhamer begins his introduction to *The Pentateuch as Narrative* establishing this concept alluding to the doctrine of divine inspiration (3). Here, Sailhamer displays the influence of a doctrinal presupposition which guides his interpretation of the Pentateuch’s authorship. Without an authoritative viewpoint concerning divine inspiration, the authorial intent and discourse would rest solely upon the work of individual authors without the unity and canonicity of the Scriptures being bonded together by the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup>Stephen E. Fowl A. K. M Adam et al., *Reading Scripture with the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 71.

<sup>2</sup>Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 79.

Sailhamer immediately warns against the misconception of one author overriding or contradicting the intent of another author. Here, he properly cites references in the New Testament such as 2 Tim 3:16 and 1 Pet 1:21 which speak of human authors writing and recording what the Holy Spirit inspired them to say on behalf of God. Thus, human authorship perfectly coincides with divine authorship as the Holy Spirit reveals the intent of God to and in the minds and pens of human writers so that they might in a uniform and inerrant manner communicate the revelation of God (3).

The Pentateuch comes to the reader as an anonymous work. However, Sailhamer assumes Mosaic authorship in support of the traditional Jewish and N. T. perspective (23). Once he establishes the subject of human authorship, Sailhamer lays the groundwork for comprehending the character and content of the divine Word manifested in the Pentateuch. He demonstrates how Moses labored to communicate the revelation of God to the people through the written record of covenants, history, and law (4-6).

At the heart of divine authorial discourse, or any authorial discourse at that, is the goal of determining the meaning fundamental to the text. Thus, the Pentateuch as divine authorial discourse is comprised of the attempt of the reader to discern the meaning God intended to convey by the Holy Spirit in conjunction with the personality, intention, and literary technique of the human author. Inherent in the divine discourse is the merging of dual authorship communicating a cohesive meaning. Furthermore, this method requires the reader to take into account various aspects of the text such as its genre, literary structure, final composition, and tone in order to determine the divine authorial meaning with regard to the human authorial intention from which it arises.<sup>3</sup> For example, to

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<sup>3</sup>Adam, *Reading Scripture with the Church*, 70.

understand what God intends to convey in the Creation account in Gen 1-2, one must discern the meaning of Moses' intention present in the record of these events in the manner in which he has introduced and compiled them.

Sailhamer further demonstrates that he holds to divine authorial discourse in his explanation of the text found in Gen 50:19-20. Within the meaning of this passage, Sailhamer highlights Joseph's forgiveness in retrospect to all of the past events contained in Genesis. Joseph initially forgives his brothers which is a meaning with great significance for the individual reader as well as the corporate church. However, Sailhamer attributes this scene and its discourse to that of the overall theme thus far in the book, namely the "... unchanging plan of God (239)." Then, he continues to extend the interpretation of this text beyond the immediate setting of the authorial intent of the Pentateuch and its covenant into the realization of the new covenant present in the apostolic witness. Without the theological presupposition of divine authorial discourse, the deliberate connection and unity of Gen 50:20 to past events such as Gen 1:4-31 and the N. T. promise of assurance in Rom 8:28 would not be possible (239). Therefore, for one to interpret the text, he must discern the discourse of Scripture within its canonical context in order to expressly understand the intention not only of the human author, but also the intention of the divine author determined by the Holy Spirit's inspiration.

Next, Sailhamer continues to support his interpretive approach to the Pentateuch within the scope of his understanding of these five books as simply text (9). The Pentateuch is divine discourse, namely God speaking to his people through human discourse. Despite the historical background and events of the text, Sailhamer emphasizes that the reader must focus upon what God is saying through the illocutionary actions

performed in the written document. He indicates that God has used words, language, and grammar to communicate his intentions. Therefore, the interpreter must not neglect the necessity of reading the text in order to discover its meaning. The role of the reader in discerning the divine authorial discourse of the Scripture must be restrained to the text and its limitations. The fact that the written document has an author, its own language, grammar, style, form, and syntax poses the idea of determinacy. Moreover, Sailhamer argues that the reader must respect the nature of the text and only exercise the freedom of theological interpretation within the rights which the author has bestowed (9).

Furthermore, the concept of the Pentateuch as text bears the obvious implication of divine authorial intention wrought by divine authorial discourse. In other words, the text is the manifestation of God speaking his intent. Sailhamer submits that the idea of the Pentateuch as text is interrelated to the implications of its authorship. This aspect of theological interpretation leads the reader into the task of discerning the discourse apparent in the written document within the context of its entire body of work. Therefore, Sailhamer rightly labels the text as “. . . a strategy designed to carry out an author’s intention (10).” He further identifies the form in which the Pentateuch’s author chose to communicate the revelation of God as “historical narrative” (12).

The literary form of a text brings another aspect to divine authorial discourse to the forefront in conjunction with its internal component, double agency discourse. The human authors, especially noted in the biblical narratives, keep the reader in mind. According to Sailhamer, the historical narrative purposely assists the reader in determining the intention of the author (14). The ability to utilize certain literary forms and techniques aids the author in selecting a group of presuppositions in which the reader

may already assume to be necessary for discerning the discourse. Hence, Sailhamer affirms that a reader subjected to various literary forms is able to come to the text with a sense of expectancy (12). The historical narrative in the Pentateuch plays a significant role in interpreting the divine authorial discourse.

Sailhamer denotes two main areas in the usage of historical narratives. First, the narrative functions in presenting the event as a historical account or retelling. Second, the narrative becomes the channel in which the author communicates his perspective (25). This approach to historical literature supports the necessary theological presupposition of divine authorial discourse in reading the Pentateuch. Sailhamer proposes that the dualist usage of the historical narrative entails that the reader must understand the event in its setting and determine the intention of the author in his portrayal of it. (25).

Once again, certain doctrinal presuppositions make up the framework of divine authorial discourse such as the doctrine of divine revelation. Sailhamer addresses this issue with clarity and conciseness. He describes revelation in the sense that God reveals himself by historical events in documented Scripture. God decided to disclose himself through the mode of discourse recorded in a historical document. Therefore, theological interpretation must delve into the Scriptures in order to know God and discern his specific revelation (17).

Furthermore, divine authorial discourse is a necessary presupposition when dealing with biblical interpretation if one desires to know God as he intended. Here, the reader must again visit the concept that meaning resides in the author's intention which has been distributed into the biblical text. God reveals himself through history and prompts the author to record it in Scripture. Sailhamer entitles this method as a "text-

oriented approach” (17). In this identification, he posits that the theological task must not be assigned to explaining the meaning of a particular event. Rather, the interpreter ought to expound the meaning of the text. According to Sailhamer, “revelation in history” is not to be understood as comprehension of the significance of certain events. Instead, “revelation in history” ought to be understood as the interpretive task of determining why and how the author recounts the event in Scripture (22).

Sailhamer displays this method as he attempts to explain the passage in Ex 17:1-7 concerning how God provided water from the rock. Here, he does not examine the scientific explanations for this event, nor does he attempt to describe the meaning of this account only as an isolated occurrence. Rather, Sailhamer deals directly with the text seeking to understand the intention of its author. At the beginning of his discussion, he sees a connection between this passage and Nu 20:1-13. Not neglecting the notion of rebellion in both of texts, Sailhamer looks at the concept of the water of life present in both situations. He urges the reader to see that the intention of the author is to point out God’s faithfulness to the people in constantly providing for them water in the wilderness. Then, he references Paul in 1 Cor 10:4 giving this text a fuller meaning in Christ. Ultimately, Sailhamer dealt with the event as a part of the textual setting and its placement in the Pentateuch as well as in the canonical context in order to discern the complimentary human and divine intention inherent within the discourse of Scripture (277).

Finally, Sailhamer demonstrates the guidance of divine authorial discourse in his portrayal of the purpose of the Pentateuch. He designates three areas of authorial intention. First, Sailhamer recognizes that the author desires to depict the covenant at

Sinai as God's plan to restore his blessing to creation through his promise to Abraham. Second, he shows that the author intends to demonstrate that the covenant at Sinai failed due to Israel's unbelief and disobedience towards God. Third, Sailhamer perceives that the author aspires to set forth that God promises to restore his blessing to humanity at the time when he gives Israel a new heart capable of exemplifying faith and obedience to him. To come to this conclusion, Sailhamer takes into account the scriptural testimony of the Pentateuch from Gen 12:1-3, Ex 2:24, and Dt 30:1-10 (27). He interprets what the dual authors of Scripture are saying through the text in regard to the Pentateuch and in congruence with the entire biblical canon. Thus, this perspective contains an eschatological nature.

Another example of how Sailhamer uses divine authorial discourse to determine the purpose of the Pentateuch is the theme of the Spirit. He references Dt 30:1-10 displaying the passage's role in the overall purpose of the Pentateuch as Moses proclaims that the people will ultimately fail in their keeping of the law. However, Sailhamer notes that Moses does not leave the people without a hope and a promise for restoration. In this text, Moses prophetically proclaims that a time will come when God will give his people a new, circumcised heart. Immediately, Sailhamer interprets this passage within the context of the greater O.T. canon, specifically in the prophetic literature of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Both of these prophets delivered a similar eschatological promise to the people of God (473). Sailhamer compares the old covenant with the new covenant, and he gleans that that the authorial discourse intended to display the theme of God working his will by the Spirit as a central purpose to the text. Under the guidance of divine authorial discourse, Sailhamer continues to discern the authorial intention of this theme within its

canonical context. He compares the creation setting in Gen 1:2 as a starting point and follows the theme throughout the rest of the Pentateuch referencing Ex 31:1-5 and Nu 11:29. In all three of these passages, God accomplishes his will by means of the Spirit. Next, Sailhamer is further able to draw conclusions about Dt 30:1-10 as he identifies the Spirit in Ezek 36:26-7 as the one whom God will use to give the people a new heart conditioned for love and obedience. Under the presupposition of divine authorial discourse, Sailhamer continues to take liberty in interpreting Rom 8:4, in association with Paul's writings in general, as to supporting the notion that God will use the Spirit to enable his people to keep the law and to love him (32-3).

Divine authorial discourse allows the reader to interpret Dt 30:1-10 significantly within its own historical setting; however, the reader must understand the necessity of theologically interpreting the text with respect to the entire biblical canon since divine authorial discourse upholds the doctrine of divine revelation and inspiration. In conjunction with Sailhamer's development of the theme of the Spirit, one may also notice that God uses the Spirit to function as the divine communicative agent. Therefore, the discourse of Scripture requires the reader to discern what God says through the Spirit in the entire biblical canon. As noted earlier, N. T. references such as 2 Tim 3:16 and 1 Pet 1:21 permits the reader to understand the meaning of what the human and divine author says in a passage's immediate context while theologically interpreting the text under the premise of divine authorship and intention in light of the rest of Scripture as a unified, singular work.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Sailhamer's conclusions concerning the purposes of the Pentateuch are only justified by his ability to discern the divine discourse in the all of

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<sup>4</sup>Adam, *Reading Scripture with the Church*, 73.

Scripture. The full intention of the Spirit is manifested by human authorship in the whole canonical context. Divine authorial discourse is the theological presupposition which allows the reader to develop intentionally unified interpretations from the whole of Scripture instead of possessing an assortment of meanings which coincidentally agree.

In conclusion, Sailhamer stood firm upon divine authorial discourse in his approach and interpretation of the text. He constantly refers the reader to come to terms with the intention of the author evidenced in the text. In addition, Sailhamer does not neglect the necessity to interpret the Pentateuch within its canonical context in order to discern all of what God says through the human authors. Therefore, Sailhamer encourages and exhorts the reader to approach biblical interpretation with certain theological presuppositions that he considers necessary for “doing justice”<sup>5</sup> to the historical narrative recounted in the Pentateuch. Furthermore, divine authorial discourse equips the church with the ability to approach the biblical text as a unified work with expectancy towards discerning the determinate intention of both the human and divine authorship of the canon. Without this presupposition, the church’s theological interpretation will err in its ability to develop clear and concise doctrines from the entire canonical context.

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<sup>5</sup>Adam, *Reading Scripture with the Church*, 59-60.

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