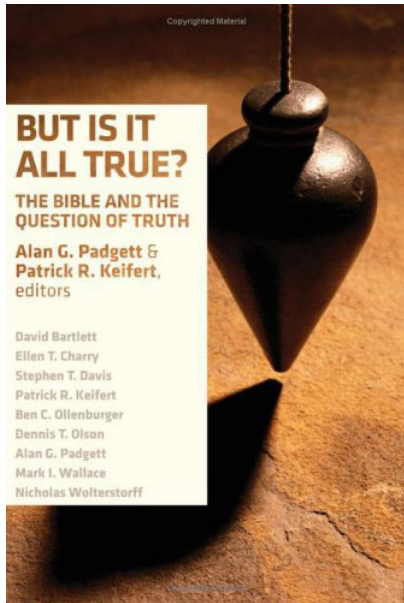


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**Padgett, Alan G., and Patrick R. Keifert, eds.**

***But Is It All True? The Bible and the Question of Truth***

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This book finds its origin in a 1999 colloquium at Luther Seminary. It is dedicated to Donald Juel *in memoriam* (d. 2003), since he helped to organize that colloquium. When he moved to Princeton, the project and the conversation partners “broadened and became more diverse” (12).

The diversity of the book is both its strength and its weakness. The nine contributors include three systematicians, one Old Testament scholar, one professor of biblical theology, two professors of philosophy or philosophical theology, one professor of preaching, and one professor of religion. They lie across a sweep of theological stances as broad as a list of a mere nine essayists allows. The diversity makes for an interesting read if the subject itself is on one’s radar screen, but the flip side is that this volume does not as a whole launch a new program or strike out in a new direction. Readers who are already familiar with many of the other contributions of these writers will not find anything very surprising or particularly innovative here (the blurbs on the back cover notwithstanding). The strength of the book is simply the way it brings together in one slim volume some of the diversity views (that we all know are out there) on how the Bible is “true.”

Dennis T. Olson (“Truth and Torah: Reflections on Rationality and the Pentateuch” [16–33]) surveys the notion of truth in the Pentateuch. Hebrew אמת (*emet*) “signifies both relational trust as well as a more objective testing for truth” (20). This definition, in both its parts, strikes me as odd, focusing as it does on the mental/emotional processes connected with the word rather than on the meaning of the word itself. The word is bound up with reliability or faithfulness, and of course such reliability calls forth “relational trust”—but *emet* surely cannot be said to “signify” relational trust. When what is “reliable” is a report or a prophecy or the like, then surely if it is “reliable” we simply say, in English, that it is true or that it is telling the truth, not that it signifies “a more objective testing for truth.” Inevitably we are warned that human beings in the Pentateuch “are given only partial glimpses of the truth of God’s promises.” Doubtless that statement is true, so true that I know of no one who would question it.

In the shortest contribution of the volume, Nicholas Wolterstorff (“True Words” [34–43]) offers the best opening sentence in the collection: “In the first part of this chapter I will argue that truth is *not* the main issue when we are dealing with Scripture; in the second part I will suggest that truth *is* the main issue” (34). In substance, however, this chapter is very largely a convenient summary of his important book *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections of the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Instead of thinking of the Bible in terms of revelation, Wolterstorff proposes thinking of the Bible in terms of speech, that is, as discourse, with a variety of speech-acts possible, and on the assumption of “double-agency discourse” (36). He acknowledges that this biblical speech includes assertions that are true or false, but because of the complexity and diversity of speech forms in the Bible he argues that we need a new and more complex definition of truth. “I suggest that the root notion of truth is that of something’s measuring up—that is, measuring up in being or excellence” (42). In this sense, he argues, truth is indeed “the fundamental issue to be raised concerning Scripture. Do the words of Scripture measure up?” (43). The standard by which we measure such “measuring up” is not worked out. What is fairly clear, however, is that Wolterstorff loves to reflect on the many instances where “true” is used in Scripture of something *other* than propositions (e.g., “in the New Testament writings ascribed to John” [42]) and offers almost no reflection on the many instances where “true” and cognates are used in Scripture of propositions.

Ben C. Ollenburger (“Pursing the Truth of Scripture: Reflections on Wolterstorff’s *Divine Discourse*” [44–65]) is essentially a critical review. Among Ollenburger’s “puzzlements” (his word) in reading *Divine Discourse* are Wolterstorff’s “almost exclusive attention to sentences” (50) with almost no reflection on discourse or diverse literary genres and his treatment of authorial intentions (Ollenburger follows Meir Sternberg’s distinction between external and internal intentions). Ollenburger has serious reservations about the

relationships between the first and second hermeneutics as Wolterstorff constructs them, and he details how none of Wolterstorff's examples of whether Scripture "measures up" is an assertion.

Mark I. Wallace ("The Rule of Love and the Testimony of the Spirit in Contemporary Hermeneutics" [66–85]) says that rule-governed approaches to biblical exegesis and criticism, such as the criterion of dissimilarity or the criterion of multiple attestation, have a certain limited use in making responsible decisions about what is authentic in the Gospels. (He seems unaware of the very substantial discussion on such criteria that has taken place since the work of Norman Perrin a quarter of a century ago.) But the results from such rule-governed approaches "fall short of actually construing the religious truth of the biblical witness—that is, what the Bible means in its fullness and integrity as a compelling theological witness to life's fundamental questions" (69). He therefore promotes Augustine's hermeneutical principle: the aim must be to construe "the meaning of the biblical texts in a manner consistent with a life of charity and other respects" (71). Following an example from Wolterstorff, Wallace asserts that in the light of Augustine's principle, the imprecatory psalms must be taken as negative examples: they are divine speech-acts only in the sense that they are "vivid (if sadly misguided) expressions of pent-up fury against those who make war against God's people" (71). Wallace wants to make Augustine's thought so absolute that it enables us to take steps Augustine would never dream of, including discounting or marginalizing those parts of Scripture that do not contribute to this principle of love as Wallace understands it. With Stephen Davis (see below), Wallace agrees that the Gospel stories purport "to tell us what happened in the life and ministry of Jesus" (75), but the point is surely not the conclusions drawn by "realist theologians" (75) but the manner in which these accounts do or do not contribute to love. Wallace concludes his chapter with one or two examples of "how the love ideal works in an actual reading of the biblical texts," including homosexuality and violence. Regarding the former, he acknowledges "that the Bible is generally negative toward homosexuality" (78) but argues that the love ideal drives us toward full acceptance.

More or less at the other end of the spectrum, Stephen T. Davis, "What Do We Mean When We Say, 'The Bible is True?'" [86–103]) operates out of a broadly confessional evangelical stance. Answers to the question raised by his title, he says, must accomplish three things: they must recognize that human beings are "verbivores," they must explain why Christians read the Bible as opposed to any other book (whether *The Iliad* or *The Koran* [sic] or *The Critique of Pure Reason*), and they "must explain why Christians take the Bible to be normative and authoritative" (87). So what do we mean when we say that the Bible is true? Part of the answer, he argues, is that we commit ourselves to believe its statements, accepting their propositional content, and as a result "trust" them or "lay ourselves open" to them (89). That is surely right, but still slightly shy of the heart of the

issue for many Christians: they “accept the propositional content” and lay themselves open to it because they think that such content conforms to reality. Davis goes on to offer useful comments on what “inerrancy” might and might not mean and criticizes Wolterstorff at one or two crucial points (including how Wolterstorff handles the canonical Gospels [97]). His criticism of Mark Wallace is more fundamental (96–101): Wallace’s central difficulty is that by elevating an external principle such as Augustine’s to absolute control, he has adopted “what is not a characteristic of the Bible but rather a result of an interaction between the Bible and a reader,” and as a result this hermeneutic “does little to preserve any sense of the Bible’s uniqueness” (97).

Alan G. Padgett (“‘I Am the Truth’: An Understanding of Truth from Christology for Scripture” [104–14]) announces, “This chapter is about a confession, not a definition” (104). Further:

I do not seek a definition of truth, although I will mention some in passing. Rather, I want to stand under the truth and receive (understand) what light it brings. I do not seek to define, encompass, and regulate what truth is. Rather, I seek an understanding of truth that implies or suggests many working definitions, spread across many academic disciplines, in whatever art or science we find ourselves at work for the love of truth. I am forced to use the word “understanding” because I think it may be less confusing than other words; but my use of it here is idiosyncratic. By an “understanding of the truth” I mean something less than a theory of truth, less even than a definition of truth. In my work on epistemology I have come to the conclusion that the differing disciplines of academe serve different interests, arise out of different traditions of inquiry, and have different rationalities. (106)

Although that sounds bracingly expansive and inclusive, I am not quite sure how a word such as “understanding” will prove “less confusing” if Padgett’s use of it is “idiosyncratic.” I would have thought that idiosyncratic usage of a term almost guarantees confusion. Nor am I quite certain why Padgett says he does not seek a definition of truth, when on the next page he proposes his own definition: “To begin with, I will simply propose that we understand truth as *the mediated disclosure of being* (or reality). Sometimes that truth will be mediated through everyday experience, or common sense, sometimes through the specifics of propositions” (106; emphasis original). Padgett says there is a place for “true words”; he has been “impressed by” Alston’s realist conception of truth. “We must not ... wholly ignore true statements” (109). But this “minimalist-realist” conception of truth must fit “into the larger understanding of truth” that he advances in the rest of this chapter, namely, that Christ is the truth and the Bible is the book of Christ. “This implies that the truth of Scripture is about our relationship with Christ, for a personal truth

requires a personal relationship” (111). Thus the Bible is “true when it mediates this personal truth to us” (111). As for “the question of historical reference,” the answer given by theologians as diverse as Ernst Troeltsch and N. T. Wright must be heeded: at least some “‘symbols’ or theological truth disclosed in the text demand a real historical event behind them” (112)—although when the sweep runs from Troeltsch to Wright, I am not sure this is very clarifying. Even Bultmann hung on to his “das.”

David Bartlett (“Preaching the Truth” [115–29]) begins well with a question asked by a character in one of Frederick Buechner’s novels: “There’s just one reason, you know, why I come dragging in there every Sunday. I want to find out if the whole thing’s true. Just *true*.... That’s all. Either it is, or it isn’t, and that’s the one question you avoid like death” (115). The six brief sections that follow offer quasi-independent reflections that circle around the topic but are unlikely to satisfy this Buechner character. For instance, Bartlett tells us that to know truth is to know God, not to know about God (116). Why the disjunction? The next section reminds us that Hans Frei suggests we read Scripture best “as a history-like narrative” (118). Frei might well have believed the extratextual referentiality of this narrative, but “other interpreters of Frei and of Scripture” are happy to disown any extratextual referentiality in this “history-like narrative,” finding it sufficient to rejoice over “its own internal coherence and power without worrying at all about its extratextual referents” (118)—an astonishing elitist and intellectualist position that assumes the Bible tells us we are saved and find fullness of life by entertaining ideas, not by Christ himself. Isn’t another word for a “history-like narrative” without any necessary extratextual referentiality a “novel”? Like Padgett, Bartlett prefers the path of open-endedness about these things: “My sense is that we neither ignore historical-critical issues nor harp on them” (119). How that will help the preacher working on next Sunday’s sermon, I have no idea. The remaining sections include some useful asides, while the eight-hundred-pound gorilla in the room is carefully left unaddressed.

From homiletics to education: Patrick R. Keifert (“Biblical Truth and Theological Education: A Rhetorical Strategy” [130–43]) is the most jargon-filled essay in the volume. A lot of his focus seems to be bound up with the interactions with the Bible that take place in the Christian community. At the heart of Keifert’s essay is this: “My initial answer to the question ‘When we say that the Bible is true, what do we mean?’ is quite simply this: the Bible is true insofar as it makes possible the understanding of God truly” (138). The methods “that appreciate its truthfulness are many. They include ascetic practices such as meditation and contemplation, singing, dancing, practices of social action on behalf of the vulnerable and poor, and the playful interaction of critical human understanding with text and tradition” (138). The last line, of course, as Keifert acknowledges, owes a great deal to Gadamer.

The final essay, by Ellen Charry (“Walking in the Truth: On Knowing God” [144–69]), is perhaps the most creative contribution of the volume. In one sense, it does not belong in a volume with the title of this book, for Charry’s focus is on how Scripture functions rather than on what it is. She begins with an overarching survey of two millennia of church history and its three “epistemological crises”: the first was the West’s recovery of Aristotle in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and the move from sapiential theology to theory, the second was the rise of empiricism in the seventeenth century, and the third is the postmodern turn. Much of the rest of this chapter probes these developments in more detail, with reference to specific thinkers and with thoughtful reflection on the theological changes that have ensued. Something can be said for this schema, I am sure, but the exceptions that thoughtful readers will want to mention are so frequent and so powerful that the antithetical nature of Charry’s exposition cries out to be challenged. Augustine, for instance, lies at the heart of the “sapiential” period in which, allegedly, all the focus was on the moral-psycho-social ends of truth, truth to make us happy and good, and not a matter of technical skills in the method of disputation, not truth versus error. Yet in his famous Letter 84 to Jerome, Augustine carefully lays out the “truthfulness” of Scripture *not* in sapiential/functional terms, but in terms that insist on its freedom from error, unlike the writings of any other, including Jerome (see 84.3–4). The example of Augustine is easily multiplied. Yet what is attractive about Charry’s essay, despite its programmatic oversimplifications, is that because she focuses on what the Bible *can* do in changing people and on its proper functions and transformative power, she exposes the cultural/ecclesiological/spiritual/moral sterility of approaches to the Bible that are never more than intellectually exciting but that have neither divine authority nor the ring of conscience-binding truth. Unfortunately, because she does not tie her analysis to what the Bible *is* and thus to how she would herself address the controlling subject of this volume under review, she offers little guidance for the way ahead.

In short, this is a useful survey of some of the contemporary options. I cannot bring this review to an end without an amusing observation: without exception, these writers are embarrassed, to a greater or lesser degree, by assertions, by propositions. There are many statements of the sort, “Well, of course, we concede that there are some assertions in Scripture that are either true or untrue, but the really important element in Scripture is Christ as the truth (or the personal nature of truth, or the way Scripture functions to disclose the true God, or whatever).” There was not a single statement of the sort, “Well, of course, Christ is presented as the truth in the Gospel of John, but there are many propositions and assertions not only in John but throughout the Bible that must be thought of as true or false. We cannot long argue about what we mean by saying the Bible is ‘true’ unless we wrestle with the Bible’s countless propositions.” In other words, this book abounds in assertions about how unimportant assertions are.