

“A Review of Scot McKnight, *The Blue Parakeet*.” *The Journal for Biblical Manhood & Womanhood*. 14 (2009): 60-67.

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Survey of the Book

The title of Scot McKnight’s new book is intriguing and beckons the reader to its contents. What does a blue parakeet have to do with interpreting the Bible? McKnight tells the story of the surprising arrival of a blue parakeet to his yard, and compares its unexpected presence to texts in the scriptures that confound our conventional explanations of what the Bible says. None of us, says McKnight, really does everything that the Bible says. We are selective in applying the Bible, and so we pick and choose what parts of scripture to practice. For instance, no one, claims McKnight, actually practices the Sabbath as it is set forth in the Old Testament. Most of us don’t practice footwashing even though Jesus explicitly commanded us to do so. Indeed, Jesus commanded his disciples to give up all their possessions, but very few, if any, do this either.

How should we respond to the fact that we don’t do everything the Bible says? McKnight says that we could try to put ourselves back into the world of the Bible and literally do all that it commands. Those who do so are to be commended for their sincerity, but it is impossible for twenty-first century

people to try to live in accord with a first-century culture. Indeed, “it is *undesirable and unbiblical* to retrieve it all” (26). We need to apply the teaching of the scriptures in a fresh and powerful way to our time instead. Others read the Bible in accord with tradition, and McKnight applauds the desire to read the scriptures in accord with “the Great Tradition.” Still, we must beware of “traditionalism,” which hardens the tradition in such a way that a fresh word of scripture can never dent the tradition. McKnight proposes instead that we must read the Bible “*with* the Great Tradition” (34), so that the Bible rather than tradition functions as our final authority, even though we are informed by the tradition. Otherwise, we will fall into the danger of losing the wonder of seeing the blue parakeets in scripture.

So, how should we read the Bible? McKnight emphasizes throughout the book that the Bible must be read as story, as part of a grand narrative. McKnight identifies five wrong ways to read the Bible: (1) reading the Bible as a collection of laws without considering their place in the overall story; (2) isolating texts of scripture so that we take verses out of context and apply the “blessings” promised to ourselves; (3) reading the Bible arbitrarily, so that we see in the Bible what we want to see; (4) putting together the Bible like we put together a puzzle, making all the pieces fit into a system, even though all the pieces don’t fit so neatly. Hence, we claim our Baptist, Lutheran, Wesleyan, etc. version captures

what the scriptures teach. Those who move in this direction mistakenly think that they have mastered the Bible; (5) finding our master or “Maestro” in the Bible, so that we become “Jesus” Christians or “Pauline” Christians and fail to see the variety God intended in scripture.

If we read the Bible as story, according to McKnight, we will be true to its message and apply it rightly in our day. And how do we do this? McKnight affirms that “the secret to reading the Bible” is found in the saying “that was then and this is now” (57). In other words, it is unwise and even unbiblical to try to do everything commanded in scripture. We must recognize the unfolding story found in the scriptures, and so any single passage or command in the Bible must be read in light of that story.

What *is* the story of the Bible? McKnight summarizes it as follows: (1) God created us in his image, so that we would be one with him and others; (2) Human beings sinned, and their union with God and others was sundered; (3) God forms a covenant community to solve this problem in Genesis-Malachi; (4) Christ—who perfectly images God—redeems his people and restores the unity lost; (5) We experience perfect oneness at the consummation of all things. It is this story that holds the Bible together, and the pieces of the Bible must be interpreted within such a context. McKnight particularly emphasizes unity between human beings as the goal of the story. Indeed, he says, “The story of the Bible aims at Galatians

3:28" (75). The ultimate goal of the entire Bible is the unity we enjoy and will enjoy in Christ Jesus. The fundamental purpose of Pentecost is to "create oneness" in "the covenant community" (77). Believers are united with God, but "the focus of this oneness in the Bible is oneness with *others*" (78).

We must read the Bible as story, and we do this well, says McKnight, by listening to what the Bible says. Here is the danger of what McKnight calls an "authority approach" to the Bible, where people say God has told us what to do, and our job is to submit and obey. Such a view is deeply unsatisfying, for it fails to see that we have a relationship with God and that his words are not a duty but a delight. We must remember that God is not the Bible. Instead, he speaks to us in the Bible. We have a serious problem if we emphasize our knowledge of the Bible instead of the God who speaks to us in the Bible. McKnight concludes that those who are truly loving God and delighting in him "*never need to speak of the Bible as their authority nor do they speak of their submission to the Bible*" (93). In the same way, McKnight notes, those who describe the relationship of a husband and wife in terms of authority and hierarchy instead of a relationship of love distort the nature of that relationship. What it means to listen to God in the Bible is to hear his voice, and ultimately to do what he says. Still, we need to beware of a mechanical reading of scripture. We need to read the scriptures with a kind of "missional living."

So, how do we apply the Bible today once we recognize that the Bible is fundamentally a story? Most of us agree that there are many things in the scriptures that are no longer required. Prohibitions against tattoos, wearing garments with two kinds of material, eating meat with blood in it, etc., are not considered normative by most Christians today. Naturally there are disagreements, but the fundamental issue says McKnight is discernment. We discern in many instances that a command is no longer normative for us because “that was then, but this is now” (117). McKnight returns to the issue of how we selectively apply what the Bible says, noting that we do not even do all that Jesus commands. Hence, we must all admit that we decide which parts of the Bible apply to us by discerning in the community of faith what is still normative. Naturally there are different opinions on some issues. When it comes to women preaching and the participation of gays and lesbians (which McKnight puts in “the grey and fuzzy area,” 131) we need to avoid “seeing the Bible as a law book” (131). The situation is messier than that, according to McKnight.

McKnight proceeds to other examples. How do we apply the scriptural teaching on divorce and remarriage? Paul himself had to discern what Jesus taught on divorce in a new situation, and he added an exception not found in the teaching of Jesus. In the same way, the early church had to decide on circumcision. The OT clearly required it, but the church through a “*pattern of*

discernment" (134), as it was led by the Spirit, determined circumcision was no longer demanded. Similarly, very few Christians today follow what Peter and Paul commanded about women not wearing jewelry and expensive clothing. In fact, women today often wear expensive jewelry and dazzling clothing to church. The Bible teaches an earth-centered cosmology, but we now realize through our growth in scientific knowledge that the sun is the center of the solar system.

McKnight also takes up the issues of capital punishment and tongues.

Acknowledging that the former is quite difficult, he inclines to the view that it should no longer be practiced for theological, legal, social, and historical reasons.

There were some periods of church history that suggested that tongues were passé, but now we live in a period where tongues are widely accepted as real.

The remainder of the book takes up women in ministry as a case study. One of the features that makes this book interesting is its autobiographical tone. McKnight regrets that he did not stand up for women in ministry while teaching at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He is clearly a strong advocate now for all ministry roles being open to women. In reading the scriptures we need to recognize, says McKnight, that it was written in a patriarchal world by men, and their perspective shaped what was written, even though it was God's will at that time for men to write the scriptures. Despite the male-centeredness of scripture, Genesis 1–2 teaches the mutuality and equality of men and women. The attempt

to dominate and rule over one another is evident in Gen 3:16, but this text can hardly function as a prescription for today since it reflects the *fall* rather than *creation*. So, McKnight wonders how complementarians can appeal to the fall to support restrictions on women (189) instead of focusing on the new creation inaugurated by Jesus.

According to McKnight, the key texts for discerning whether women should have all ministry roles open to them are those that describe what women actually did in the Old Testament and the New Testament. Since women functioned as prophets, apostles, teachers, and leaders, the texts that appear to prohibit such should not be accepted as timeless advice for today. For instance, Miriam was a prophet and a leader. Deborah functioned as a judge, prophet, and a mother in Israel, so she was a spiritual, military, and political leader. Huldah spoke the word of the Lord as a prophet, and Esther ruled as a queen. The dawning of the new creation in the ministry of Jesus represents a leap forward for women in ministry. In the new age of the Spirit there will be even more female prophets (Acts 2:17). And women did not only function as prophets; they were also apostles, as the example of Junia shows (Rom 16:7). Phoebe occupied the office of deacon (Rom 16:1–2), which likely had leadership dimensions. Priscilla taught Apollos (Acts 18:26), and hence functioned as a teacher and a theologian.

What about texts that limit women in ministry? The requirement that women be silent (1 Cor 14:34–35) is not a word for all time, for elsewhere Paul commends women for speaking. Hence, McKnight thinks the restriction was a temporary measure due to disturbances in the Corinthian church. The prohibition against women teaching in 1 Tim 2:9–15 has a cultural component. Paul likely responds to new Roman women who were arguing for male subordination to women and who dressed in sexually provocative ways. What Paul emphasizes here is that women should learn before teaching, and so the restrictions on women teaching are temporary and are to be lifted once women are educated. The storyline of the Bible as a whole, and the examples of what women did in the scriptures lead McKnight to the conclusion that all ministry roles should be opened to women.

Evaluation of the Argument

I have sketched in McKnight's book in some detail without comment, hoping that thereby I have fairly summarized the book. McKnight is a very fine New Testament scholar, and I have especially enjoyed his books *A Light among the Gentiles* and *A New Vision for Israel*. His article on the warning passages in Hebrews is also outstanding, even if I would not endorse all his conclusions. I have to admit that I have a fond spot for him in my heart because he invited me

to write my first book, and served as my editor. So, my response to him here, though I strongly disagree with him at points, is part of what I hope is a friendly dialogue.

McKnight raises critical hermeneutical questions, and rightly reminds us that there are texts that are uncomfortable for all of us. Our systems can squeeze out what the Lord actually says, so that we domesticate the text to fit with our pre-formed notions. McKnight also articulates a helpful way to consider tradition. The tradition of the church is respected and consulted, but the scriptures, not tradition, constitute the final authority. Nevertheless, McKnight fails to say something very important at this point. Pride of place goes to tradition, so that a novel interpretation must be defended quite convincingly to overcome the tradition. The tradition, if it is virtually unanimous, represents the interpretation of many generations of Christians for 2000 years. We become accustomed to talking to ourselves in our own day and can easily fall into the error of “chronological snobbery” as C. S. Lewis warned. Nevertheless, McKnight rightly warns us about the dangers of traditionalism; the tradition always stands under the scriptures, for they function as the final authority, and hence we must beware of canonizing tradition.

McKnight is also correct in saying that we must interpret the scriptures in light of the entire biblical storyline. Still, McKnight’s own summary of the story,

though it has positive features, is truncated.¹ For instance, it is unconvincing to say that much of the Old Testament (Genesis 12 – Esther) is focused on community. What is striking is how the God- and Christ-centeredness of biblical revelation is muted. For example, isn't the consummation of all of biblical revelation seeing God's face and living in his presence forever (Rev. 21:3–4)? But McKnight's so-called goal statement focuses on the horizontal (Gal. 3:28). Indeed, many of the laws in the Pentateuch were not given fundamentally for the sake of community, but were declared so that God's people would be holy before him. Similarly, the Psalms emphasize that the Lord is to be praised, and Paul stresses that the root sin is the failure to praise and glorify God (Rom 1:21). Such themes could be emphasized more in McKnight's sketch of the biblical storyline.

McKnight also underemphasizes the role of law in the story (cf. most of Exodus 19 to the end of Deuteronomy). Yes, laws must be interpreted in light of the story, but one wonders what role law actually plays in McKnight's hermeneutic. He quotes approvingly F. F. Bruce's statement that we should not turn Paul's letters into law (207). It is difficult to see what practical role moral norms play in McKnight's thinking. He seems to focus almost solely upon discernment (see below) and the Spirit. McKnight believes homosexuality is unbiblical and has taken a stand against it. Still, his claim that the participation of gays and lesbians is in a fuzzy and gray area is confusing, for it could be taken to

mean that gays and lesbians may participate in our churches without repenting of their sin. McKnight assures me that he thinks homosexuality is wrong. Still, his discussion here could give the wrong impression since in the same context he criticizes turning the Bible into a law book (131). It seems that McKnight privileges his story-version of scripture over law, but scripture consists of both stories and laws. Yes, the laws must be interpreted in light of the story, and yet at the same time we must also stress the universality of moral norms. McKnight's appeal to story runs the danger of becoming reductionistic.

McKnight wisely warns against trying to master the Bible by putting all the pieces of the Bible together, as if we are able to shove every piece into place. There is a kind of know-it-all arrogance that is off-putting, and I am sure McKnight ran into it in fundamentalist circles. And even though I did not grow up as a fundamentalist, I have seen the same. And yet McKnight goes too far. Here the Great Tradition is more balanced than McKnight. Systematic theology, historically, is an attempt to capture what scripture as a whole teaches. It should be informed by biblical theology, and it has sometimes ignored the storyline of scripture, but such abuses do not rule out the task of systematic theology as a whole. The Great Tradition comes from scholars who did systematic theology, and we ignore their work to our peril. McKnight gives the impression that if we can't put all the pieces together, then it is wrong to put any pieces into the

puzzle, as if the storyline approach he favors is the only way to do theology. Story and systematics, at the end of the day, should not be played off against each other. They are friends and not enemies. McKnight's book would have more resonance and depth if he drew on the wisdom of those who have done systematic theology. If systematic theology has sometimes gone to extremes, a focus on story may end up committing the same kind of error.

The Bible should be a delight rather than a duty, and here McKnight is fundamentally right. And yet he goes a step too far in saying that people "*never need to speak of the Bible as their authority nor do they speak of their submission to the Bible*" (93). Such a statement does not fit with the repeated phrase "it is written" in the New Testament. The scripture is appealed to as an authority; it is the definitive word in all matters of faith and practice. Naturally obedience should be a delight, and yet obedience is still demanded. Even in Paul, commands play a significant role. See for instance the helpful treatise on this issue by Wolfgang Schrage, *Die konkreten Einzelgebote in paulinischen Paränese: Ein Beitrag zur neutestamentlichen Ethik*. Human beings *should* submit to scripture, even if they do not wish to do so. Of course, such obedience should be a delight and not merely a duty, but it is still a duty. Furthermore, Jesus himself emphasizes in the Gospel of John that he was sent to do the Father's will, that he received a command as to what he should do (John 12:49–50), and that he always obeyed his Father.

Naturally, he *delighted* in obeying the Father (John 15:10–11), but such obedience was also demanded (John 14:31). Along the same lines, McKnight rightly remarks that marriage is about much more than headship and submission, and that too many conservatives become fixated on these themes, so that submission is virtually all they talk about when it comes to marriage. I agree. That happens. Nevertheless, authority and submission are still an important dimension in Christian marriage and should not be written out of the script.

One of the things McKnight does well is to remind us of hard cases in scripture—issues where there isn't a simple answer, whether it is divorce, capital punishment, or the Sabbath. At the same time, his own hermeneutical method is not very helpful. To say “that was then and this is now,” and that we need a pattern of discernment as we are led by the Spirit in community is insufficient. How McKnight's program works out is remarkably vague and amorphous.

McKnight introduces various laws from the Old Testament that we do not follow today (not sowing fields with two kinds of seed, not wearing garments with two different kinds of materials), and circumcision is also brought in as one of his major case studies. What was quite astonishing is that he neglects redemptive history in discussing these examples. In other words, both Paul and the author of Hebrews emphasize the discontinuity between the old covenant and the new. The new age has arrived with the coming of Jesus Christ, and his

death and resurrection. Hence, God's people are no longer under the old dispensation inaugurated under Moses. So too, the issues of food laws and circumcision and the place of the law in Luke–Acts are raised because the kingdom has arrived (already-but not yet) in Jesus Christ. Indeed, it could be argued that a redemptive-historical approach should inform our interpretation of the entirety of the New Testament. The status of the Old Testament law must be assessed in light of the great redemptive events of Jesus' death, resurrection, exaltation, and the pouring out of the Spirit. It is surprising that McKnight, who stresses the storyline of the Bible, says virtually nothing about the flow of redemptive history in assessing how the Bible applies today. Surely the issue of footwashing is harder to assess than whether we should wear garments with two different kinds of material, precisely because of where it is located in the Bible's storyline. And yet we would scarcely know that one is harder than another in reading McKnight. There is no clear recognition that where a command occurs in the biblical story is important. We are left with saying, "that was then and this is now," and then we use discernment. Ironically enough, then, the problem with McKnight's view is an inadequate explanation of the Bible's storyline. He seems to treat every command of the Bible with the same kind of flat-earth hermeneutic, without considering where the command is found in the story—

without considering how the different epochs of the scripture relate to one another.²

McKnight also could be a bit more helpful in thinking through some commands in the Bible. Should we greet one another with a holy kiss? Must we drink wine if we have stomach aches? Obviously no. I am sure McKnight would agree. But is there no instruction for us in these commands? Isn't there a principle in the commands that applies to today? We learn that we should greet one another warmly in ways that fit with our culture. And if we have stomach problems, it is fitting to use medicine. McKnight is correct in saying that we cannot return to the first-century world, and yet he doesn't offer much help in translating the biblical word into the twenty-first century. It is insufficient to simply say about the holy kiss, "That was then, and this is now." More reflection is needed than is offered here.

Let me take up another theme discussed by McKnight. How should we apply Jesus' instructions on riches? Too often we ignore Jesus' words on this matter altogether. Should we give up our wealth as the rich young ruler was called to do? McKnight rightly says that we are not necessarily called upon to practice literally what Jesus said to the rich ruler. But again McKnight could offer us more assistance by considering the biblical theology of riches in Luke–Acts. If we read Luke–Acts as a whole, we see that Jesus' view of wealth must be

assessed from more than one text. For instance, when Zacchaeus was saved, Jesus did not command him to give all his money away. The Lord was pleased that he gave half of his wealth to the poor (Luke 19:1–10). Peter reminded Ananias that he was not required to sell his property, nor was he required to give it to the church. Ananias and Sapphira were punished for lying, not for refusing to give all their wealth to the church (Acts 5:1–11). In Acts 12 the disciples met in the house of John Mark's mother. Presumably she retained her wealth since the church gathered in her residence. Hence, we have some indications in Luke–Acts itself that Jesus' words to the rich ruler should not be applied literally to all. Biblical theology plays an important role in considering how scripture should be applied to today, and a systematic study of all that scripture says about wealth and poverty would be enormously helpful. Naturally, there is much more that could be said on this issue than is possible here. My point is that the hermeneutical process is much more complex and rich than McKnight suggests. We must do biblical theology (and systematic theology as well!) before applying scripture to our contemporary context.

McKnight applies what he says particularly to the women's issue. It should be said up front that McKnight really offers nothing new on the issue. In some instances, his lack of knowledge of the complementarian view mars his case. For instance, McKnight "makes a big deal" of the fact that Gen 3:16 relates

to the fall, not to creation. But no complementarian that I know bases his or her case on this text! Virtually all complementarians see a difference in role between men and women because such is based on the *created order*, and they see indications of differences in role in Genesis 2. Now one could argue that the complementarian exegesis of Genesis 2 is mistaken, but McKnight apparently is unaware that complementarians have defended their case on the basis of creation rather than the fall. Hence, his comments on Gen 3:16 are uninformed and misleading.

The substance of McKnight's argument is his appeal to the actual ministries of women in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. This is familiar ground in the debate that has been rehearsed many times. McKnight does not actually argue from the "that was then and this is now" principle, which we expect him to do from the earlier part of the book. Instead, he appeals to the ministry of women in the Old Testament and the New Testament. Apparently, in this instance his argument is that women always served in all ministry positions, and hence they should continue to do so today. So, strictly speaking, the concluding section of the book does not represent an application of the hermeneutical thesis propounded earlier, and is not a legitimate case-study of what was propounded earlier in the book. In other words, when it comes to women in ministry, McKnight's argument is women "were in ministry then, and

they should be in ministry now.” Therefore, his *actual* argument for women in ministry does not break any new ground since he does not base it on the conclusions drawn earlier in the book.

McKnight is correct in saying that women were involved in ministry, but the question is whether there are any transcultural limitations for women in the scriptures. Women did function as prophets in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Even though women functioned as prophets in the Old Testament, they never served as priests. Yes, women prophesied in the New Testament, but there is no evidence for women who served as pastors, elders, or overseers.³ Similarly, Phoebe, in my judgment, served as a deacon (Rom 16:1-2; cf. 1 Tim 3:11), but the office of deacon must be distinguished from the office of elder. Elders are distinguished from deacons in that they must be able to teach (1 Tim 3:2; 5:17; Titus 1:9) and are required to rule (1 Tim 3:4-5; 5:17). Significantly, Paul insists that women should not engage in teaching men or ruling the church in 1 Tim 2:12. Hence, women serving as deacons does not mean that they should occupy the pastoral office. Certainly women served in a variety of ministries in the New Testament: Romans 16 almost serves as a roll call for such noble women. And we must not forget the evangelistic ministry of Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2). Still, the example of Priscilla does not mean that women can teach men publicly since she and Aquila instructed Apollos in a private setting

(Acts 18:26). The pattern of the New Testament is more complex than the “all or nothing” approach of McKnight. Yes, women may serve in ministry as deacons, prophets, and missionaries, but they are not to serve as pastors/elders/overseers. The example of Junia does not advance McKnight’s thesis (Rom 16:7), for in calling her one of the apostles, Paul is not identifying her as one of the twelve, nor is he putting her on the same level as the apostolic circle. The word “apostles” is used in a non-technical sense here, signifying that Andronicus and Junia served as missionaries. Indeed, it is likely that Junia’s ministry in a patriarchal world was to women (not men). As Ernst Käsemann remarks, “The wife can have access to the women’s areas, which would not be generally accessible to the husband.”⁴ So, McKnight’s examples do not establish that all ministry positions are open for women. Complementarians, on the other hand, must beware of battening down the hatches in such a way that there is no space for a woman to minister among us. At the same time, we are called to be faithful to the instructions of the scripture, and we are hesitant to differ with the “Great Tradition,” especially when the exegetical arguments offered by egalitarians are unconvincing.

Naturally, 1 Tim. 2:9–15 plays a major role in the debate. The claim that the text is addressed to the new Roman women is possible but scarcely proven. Too often in NT studies alleged background material is used to “prove” various interpretations. Anyone who reads in NT studies knows how speculative such reconstructions can be. In reading

such reconstructions I have often wondered why we complain about systematic theologians being speculative! Even if the situation is as McKnight alleges, Paul grounds his command that the women should not teach or rule on a creational difference between men and women (1 Tim 2:13). He does not give a cultural reason! The same appeal to creation surfaces in the argument in 1 Corinthians (1 Cor 11:8-9). Remarkably, the singular role that creation has in applying the scriptural word to today is not discussed in McKnight's hermeneutical scheme. After all, Paul appeals to creation in indicting homosexuality (Rom 1:26-27), in justifying eating foods (1 Cor 10:25-26; 1 Tim 4:3-5), in promoting marriage (1 Tim 4:3-5), and in regard to the role of women. In the same way, Jesus appealed to creation in articulating the permanence of marriage between one man and one woman (Matt 19:4-6). An alleged background to a text must not remove the blue parakeet of 1 Tim 2:11-14 and 1 Cor 11:2-16. Egalitarians leap over what the text actually says to justify their reading, and allege that the women were uneducated, untaught, or promulgating false teaching. But Paul does not say they were uneducated or spreading false teaching. All the false teachers mentioned in the pastorals are men, and 1 Tim 5:13 is scarcely strong support for the notion that women were purveyors of false doctrine. Indeed, it is quite implausible to claim that all the women in Ephesus were untaught, uneducated, or advocates of false teaching. The prohibition is grounded in God's created order. Facts are stubborn things, and the argument of 1 Tim 2:11-14 is like a blue parakeet. McKnight doesn't succeed in explaining the parakeet away, and neither should we.

¹ The brevity of the book does not fully account for the omissions here, for the matters addressed could have been sketched in rather briefly.

² In an email to me McKnight says he holds substantially the same position as I do on salvation-history, and that he believes that there are indications in the book of such a stance. In my view, his discussion needs to be much clearer at this very point.

³ I would argue that the terms *pastor*, *overseer*, and *elder* all refer to the same office.

⁴ Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (trans. and ed. G. W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 413.