Crawford Gribben and John W. Tweeddale eds., *T&T Clark Handbook of John Owen*. New York: T&T Clark, paperback 2024.

Abel, though he died, still speaks (Heb. 11:4). John Owen died in 1683, but he still speaks, more loudly now than ever before. The proliferation of resources by and about John Owen, coupled with a recent shift in Owen scholarship, calls for an up-to-date reference volume. The *T&T Clark Handbook of John Owen* ably answers that call. The *Handbook* is divided into three parts: Owen's contexts, Owen's writings, and Owen today. It includes twenty chapters written by nineteen different contributors. In addition to the chapters, it also contains a chronological list of Owen's works, a forty-page bibliography of his writings, related primary sources, and relevant secondary literature, and a useful index of Owen's works cited within the *Handbook* for easy reference.

Editors Crawford Gribben and John Tweeddale observe that "studies of Owen have begun to shift focus" from concentrating primarily on his theological ideas towards situating Owen and his writings in their historical-theological and social-theological contexts (3–4). As a result, part 1 (almost half of the book) engages ten of these contexts: biographical, theological, intellectual, political, homiletical, educational, ecclesiastical, polemical, scientific, and philosophical. These chapters give readers a sense of the man and his work in their native place and time. They helpfully dispel misconceptions that the "Atlas of Independency" was merely a static or ahistorical incarnation of theological ideas and devotional writings by demonstrating that Owen is best interpreted within the polemical and political webs of seventeenth century England.

Among the many insights in this section of the *Handbook*, Martyn C. Cowan shows the significance of Owen's preaching for understanding his work as a whole. First, "much of his scholarly writing found its origins in his preaching (145)." Second, his sermons were "events," which took place in specific personal, ecclesiastical, and political contexts. By understanding his sermons as events, readers will be led away from a mischaracterization of Owen "as an abstracted academic theologian" and better grasp the intended functions and applications of Owen's theology (118, 145).

Part 2 explores, in chronological order, eight of Owen's best-known works: *A Display of Arminianism*, *The Death of Death*, *Mortification of Sin*, *Exercitations on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, *A Discourse concerning the Holy Spirit*, *The Nature of Apostasie*, *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith*, and *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ*. Of particular note in this section

is John Tweeddale's study of Owen's commentary on Hebrews. While the *Handbook*'s authors are not unanimous as to which of Owen's works is most famous (*Death of Death*, 303; *Mortification of Sin*, 336), Tweeddale argues that the Hebrews commentary was most significant to Owen himself. He contends that "Owen believed his project on Hebrews was central to his overall work as a biblical scholar and theologian…indeed, Owen's 'whole life' revolved around the production of his commentary (373, 383)." It "provided Owen with an exegetical foundation for extended theological reflection on the Christian faith (368, cf. 378, 420f)." The *Hebrews* commentary was the "capstone" of Owen's literary career and the foundation of his theological writings (379). Tweeddale's work "challenges older narratives by arguing that the first volume of *Hebrews* not only establishes the trajectory of his overall project but also recasts Owen as a biblical exegete and scholar (8)."

This mutuality between biblical exegesis and theological writing is not unique to Owen. Bruce Gordon writes that John Calvin,

> [I]nsisted that the *Institutes* were an introduction to scripture to be read by ministers alongside his commentaries. There was a symbiotic relationship between the *Institutes* and the commentaries in that both served the purpose of elucidating scripture, but from different perspectives…to be able to interpret Scripture properly one already had to be versed in doctrine and scripture…Calvin, like the other reformers, understood that scripture could not stand without a framework of interpretation (Gordon, *Calvin*, 108).

The "symbiotic relationship" between theological writing and exegetical commentaries in both Owen and Calvin raises suggestive questions for further research. Is this symbiosis ubiquitous among the early modern Reformed period? If so, how did exegetical works inform and ground the theological writings of Owen's contemporaries? And how has the symbiosis of exegetical and theological writing shaped modern interpretations of early modern theological works?

Part 3 of the *Handbook* contains just one chapter, Kelly M. Kapic's on "Retrieving Owen." In it, Kapic describes the spread and influence of Owen's works among a diverse audience of theologians, pastors, and lay Christians. He shows that "although Owen was certainly read and appreciated during his lifetime, his popularity grew after his death (490)." His popularity among modern audiences is due, in part, to Owen's "overlap of interests" in areas like dogmatics and human psychology (490). Kapic concludes, "Whatever one's current opinion of this Puritan divine, it is clear

that his influence remains broad and that interest in his life and theology seems only to increase (515)."

The *Handbook*'s attention to historical context paints a rich and, at times, complex portrait of Owen and his work across its three sections. One interesting example of this complexity, illustrated in each section, is that Owen changed his beliefs over time. In addition to an early shift away from presbyterian church government towards congregationalism, Owen also changed his positions on politics and the atonement.

Crawford Gribben chronicled Owen's political shifts in his chapter, "Owen and Politics." Owen preached before Parliament the day after Charles I's execution and served as a member of the Protectorate Parliament (83). After the restoration, however, he "valorized Charles II" and participated in a plan to loan £40,000 to the Crown (83). Later still, he "turned against the Caroline court, the sins of which he believed were bringing divine judgment on the nation (83)."[1] The year he died (1683), he was arrested on suspicion of involvement in the failed Rye House plot (84, 115). So, Owen defended republicanism in the 1650s, supported monarchy in the 1660s, and opposed the king's court at the end of his life (85). These political shifts, Gribben argues, show that "Owen was not an idealogue, and…in almost every respect his interventions in politics were pragmatic and defensive of his own position…his long-term goal of ensuring the toleration of Protestant dissenters (85)." The toleration of orthodox Protestants was the thread of "underlying consistency" that ran throughout Owen's "political instability" (116).

Timothy Robert Baylor identifies a second, and perhaps more surprising shift on a subject for which Owen is best known today, namely, the atonement. He observes that in Owen's 1648 *Death of Death*, Owen "thinks it absurd to argue that God's power was constrained by his justice, such that God 'could not have mercy on mankind unless satisfaction were made by his Son' (316)." However, "Owen would eventually reverse his opinion on this in his *Diatriba de justitia divina*," published only five years later 1653 (316). Baylor writes, "Literature on Owen has frequently taken this chapter [*Death of Death*, Book III, Chapter VII] as a definitive statement of his views. This is unfortunate since Owen wrote *The death of death* fairly

1. John Owen appears to call Charles I "our late king, of glorious memory" and his execution one of "the late miscarriages of some professing the Protestant religion" in his 1671 treatise *Animadversions on A Treatise Entitled "Fiat Lux"* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 14:108f.

early in his career, and his thought developed considerably in the years following its publication. His *Diatriba de Justitia divina* (1653) revises central elements of his argument here, and yet these rarely qualify critiques of his atonement theology (322)."

The *T&T Clark Handbook* was preceded by an earlier guide to Owen's life and thought, the 2012 *Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen's Theology*. While the two volumes share numerous themes and contributors, a few differences between them are evident. The T&T Clark is much longer than the Ashgate, with 220 more pages of text. More significantly, and illustrative of scholarship's change in focus, the *T&T Clark Handbook* gives more attention to Owen's contexts. Gribben and Tweeddale accurately write in their introduction to the *Handbook*,

> *The Ashgate research companion*…did more than anything else to underscore Owen's status as a subject of academic enquiry, and, as the title suggests, to emphasize that this enquiry was focused on theological ideas. However…studies of Owen have begun to shift focus…in the direction of the social history of ideas, by considering Owen's life and work in contexts outside the world of Reformed dogmatics (3).

Gribben himself has likely played the most significant role in this shift through his 2016 biography *John Owen and English Puritanism: Experiences in Defeat*. Gribben is cited in all but three of the twenty chapters, often repeatedly.

The *T&T Clark Handbook of John Owen* successfully introduces readers to the content and contexts of a wide range of Owen's works and helpfully summarizes recent trends in scholarship. Academic readers will benefit from engagement with primary and secondary literature as well as trajectories for further research. Any reader could profitably use this *Handbook* as an introduction to specific Owen treatises or to better understand the man, his writings, his significance, and his contexts.

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