

Book Reviews

Ryu, Gilsun. *The Federal Theology of Jonathan Edwards: An Exegetical Perspective*. Studies in Historical and Systematic Theology. Bellingham, Wash.: Lexham Academic, 2021.

The present volume is Gilsun Ryu's PhD dissertation (2020) from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Ryu's work represents a new and important contribution to a little-examined aspect of Jonathan Edwards's exegetical theology, namely, his federal theology—a critical component of Reformed, covenantal orthodoxy.¹ Ryu intends to show that, while Edwards did not publish a volume dedicated to the subject, federal theology “occupies a place of considerable significance in his biblical exegesis.” He notes that Edwards discusses, throughout his exegetical corpus, all three facets of the traditional federal schema: the covenant of redemption, the covenant of works, and the covenant of grace (p. 2). He also underscores Edwards's uniformity with, as well as unique contributions to, traditional Reformed constructions of federal theology. Ryu's central thesis is that “Edwards developed his federal theology using biblical exegesis and his understanding of the doctrinal harmony of the Bible as a framework for interpreting the history of redemption” (p. 16). This proves that, for Edwards, “federal theology is not antithetical to biblical exegesis nor to the Christian life” (p. 18).

1. Regarding definitions, Ryu argues that one best understands “federal theology” within classic Reformed thinking as a “family of approaches rather than a specific set of ideas.” Yet, he asserts, there are still several “unifying factors” among the different approaches to federal theology among Reformed theologians. These unifying factors include the rejection of the “Pelagian view” of the relationship of the Hebrew Bible to the New Testament, an emphasis on the principle of representative headship of the two Adams, and a clear distinction between the covenants of works and grace (pp. 1, 71).

To accomplish his task, Ryu divides his book into four parts. Part 1 (chapter two) provides the historical context for his study. He details several Reformed authors' understanding of redemptive history and its relationship to federal theology, highlighting the continuities and discontinuities of Edwards's thought with his Reformed tradition. While there are many voices within this Reformed tradition, Ryu chooses to focus on Johannes Cocceius, Francis Turretin, Petrus van Mastricht, and Herman Witsius. They had significant influence on Edwards's historical and theological understanding of the Bible, yet there are clear differences between their federal theology and his. From this survey, Ryu concludes that "many aspects of Edwards's approach to federal theology echo those of the Reformed scholastics," yet "his historical approach tends to follow the biblical narratives and is far less systematic" (p. 71).

In Part 2 (chapters three, four, and five) Ryu unfolds the broad structures of Edwards's understanding of the Bible's description of redemptive history and its bearing on his covenant system. He investigates the ways in which Edwards's articulation of federal theology and the covenants of redemption, works, and grace reveal his understanding of the Bible's unfolding historical-redemptive narrative. Ryu underscores that "the redemptive-historical theme plays a crucial role in Edwards's approach to the Bible" (p. 16).

Part 3 (chapters six, seven, and eight) investigates how Edwards interprets Scripture to justify his understanding of the covenants of redemption, works, and grace. Throughout these chapters, Ryu emphasizes that Edwards "seeks to listen to the biblical witness about redemptive history" and "selects texts and exegetical methods that result from his belief that Scripture is harmonious" and shares an "inner unity" (p. 272). Ryu documents how Edwards grounded his federal theology upon an exegetical foundation and held it together with a focus on redemptive history.

Part 4 (chapters nine and ten) draws Ryu's study to a close. He explores how Edwards's historically informed and exegetically founded federal theology shapes his ecclesiology and pastoral concerns for the Christian community. Edwards's concepts of justification, the conditions of the covenants, and the Lord's Supper highlight the practical ways in which his federal theology informed his ecclesiological thinking and practice. "Edwards seeks the essential unity between faith and piety through his ecclesiological perspective on federal theology within his perception of the doctrinal harmony of the Bible" (p. 279). Ryu concludes his work by providing a brief sketch of the interrelationship between Edwards's exegesis and his understanding of

redemptive history and ecclesiology. The purpose is to show how Edwards's view of doctrinal harmony serves as his main interpretive lens for understanding redemptive history.

Ryu's *Federal Theology of Jonathan Edwards* is a splendid volume that makes an important contribution to Edwards studies in three respects. First, it adds to the growing body of literature related to Edwards's exegesis—a subject that had been largely neglected up until the last decade. Second, it shows how Edwards draws from, and contributes to, the Reformed tradition's understanding of federal theology. Ryu helpfully explains how Edwards emphasizes the federal theology and covenant schema of his forebearers without accepting it uncritically. Edwards strengthens his tradition's understanding of the covenant schema by further rooting it in biblical history and exegesis. Third, contrary to Stephen Stein's well-known thesis, it demonstrates that the Bible serves as the “source” and “theological norm” of Edwards's theology—in this case his federal schema.² Ryu documents how Edwards developed his federal theology “from an exegetical perspective” as he tried to understand the text in view of “the biblical authors' intended meaning,” interpreted “in terms of canonicity,” and allowed “Scripture [to] interpret itself” (pp. 271–272). Ryu's volume challenges those who assert that Edwards's theology is “imaginative” or “unconstrained” by the biblical text.

The Federal Theology of Jonathan Edwards makes an important contribution to our understanding of one of the church's most influential theologians, while also contributing to discussions related to the historical development of federal theology.³ For this reason, it deserves a wide readership among scholars, pastors, and students alike.

—Cameron Schweitzer
Independent Scholar

2. Stephen Stein, “The Quest for the Spiritual Sense: The Biblical Hermeneutics of Jonathan Edwards,” *Harvard Theological Review* 70 (January–April 1977): 99–113, 113.

3. For another important work, see Paul J. Hoehner, *The Covenant Theology of Jonathan Edwards: Law, Gospel, and Evangelical Obedience* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications, 2021).