

Peter H. Holtvlüwer, *Foundations: Sermons on Genesis 1-3* (Tintern, ON: LittleANGELS Press, 2010), paper \$15, 163pp. ISBN 978-0-9867274-0-5. Reviewed by John Smith, professor of Old Testament studies at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary.

Several months ago, *Reformed Academic* invited me to submit a review of Rev. Peter Holtvlüwer's publication on the opening chapters of Genesis. I willingly accepted the invitation, though with the *proviso* that my acceptance not be construed as *ipso facto* support for all the views found on this blog; the intent is simply to review a book from a Reformed perspective and at an academic level. Peter H. Holtvlüwer is currently serving as minister of the Word in the Spring Creek Canadian Reformed Church in Tintern, ON. Previously he served the Canadian Reformed Churches in Aldergrove, BC and in Carman (East), MB. My review of his book will focus on the first five of Rev. Holtvlüwer's thirteen sermons, namely those on Genesis 1:1-2:3, due in part to the interests of *Reformed Academic* and in part to my own recent preoccupation with this pericope.

Let me begin by noting that I have not preached on the opening chapters of Genesis. I have during the past semester had opportunity to teach an OT exegesis course on Genesis 1 and 2 at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary. To be sure, there is significant overlap between Rev. Holtvlüwer's enterprise and mine: his sermons are the product of exegetical labour, and our exegesis classes had a homiletical destination. After all, the opening chapters of the Bible are gospel and should therefore be preached. Both enterprises were also conducted within the same confessional parameters. Yet there is also a difference: an exegesis course is preoccupied with methodology, with the process of exegesis, the kitchen-work, as it were, while in Rev. Holtvlüwer's book we have only the final product, distilled for a particular audience. This difference of focus no doubt informs the questions and comments which follow.

By and large, I find myself agreeing with the exegetical conclusions which the author presents, but at some places I have questions about how he got to them, questions which the sermons themselves tend not to answer. As a "listener" I might be satisfied simply to sit back and enjoy the food, but as a fellow preacher and exegete I sometimes wish that this cook had not kept his recipes so close to his chest but had shown more specifically why the text of Scripture impelled him to adopt the exegetical choices he did and to dispense with alternative interpretations.

Rev. Holtvlüwer has given his book an apt title: his sermons are indeed about the *foundations* of our lives. According to the author, "These three chapters serve to highlight the meaning of the name, 'Genesis' which means, 'beginnings,' for one passage after another presents us with a new beginning" (xv). I must point out, however, that "Genesis" does not mean "beginnings" (plural), but "beginning" (singular). The title "Genesis" comes from the Greek translation of the Hebrew word for 'beginning' in Genesis 1:1. One could perhaps associate "Genesis" with "foundations" if one were to take Genesis 1:1 as a summary of what follows, but Rev. Holtvlüwer does not do that; he interprets the first verse as an initial act of creation (4). It follows, then, that the word "beginning" refers to the time of that initial act. One might respond that by virtue of its function as title, "Genesis" has come to refer to more than simply the first verse, but in that case, consistency would seem to require that it be taken to apply not only to the first three chapters but to all fifty. In short, one can indeed approach Genesis 1-3 as chapters that speak to the foundations of our lives, as Rev. Holtvlüwer has done, but the passages themselves do not demand such an approach to the exclusion of others.

The author's focus on "foundations" appears to affect the selection of issues he addresses. There is nothing wrong with that: a minister writes sermons with a particular congregation in mind (xx). But the result is that other audiences might be left with unanswered questions. For

example, in the first sermon, on Genesis 1:1-2, the “Gap Theory” is mentioned but left unexplained; the context suggests that the author disagrees with it, but he does not tell us why (2). Yet the same sermon sets forth at length the role of God in national politics (7-9). Presumably the latter was deemed more relevant for the congregation. But if people “who confess the Name of Christ” hold to the gap theory (2), Rev. Holtvlüwer might have helped them by refuting it from the text of Scripture, as can indeed be done. Briefly stated, the Gap Theory postulates that verse 2 represents a significant time gap between God’s initial act of creation in verse 1 and the creation of light in verse 3, a gap which has, for example, been taken to account for the time of Satan’s fall or for the elapse of untold ages. The theory only works, however, if verse 2 be read as recounting events which took place subsequent to that of verse 1: “and the earth became formless and empty, darkness came over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God hovered over the waters.” Hebrew syntax precludes such a translation, however, because the clauses of verse 2 are not of the consecutive but of the circumstantial type. That is to say, they do not recount actions subsequent to verse one but describe the situation resulting from verse one. To be sure, it might be a challenge to explain all this to a congregation on a Sunday morning, but the point is a significant one nonetheless, and one that arises from the text itself.

Along similar lines, in the second sermon Rev. Holtvlüwer mentions “serious-minded Christians,” “even in Reformed circles,” some of whom “look at Genesis 1 not as a *literal*, historical account, but as a *literary*, poetic account” (15). Again, one gathers that the author disagrees with such Christians, but he might have made the point more effectively and objectively by explaining how Hebrew poetry differs from narrative and why the latter label better accounts for the literary (!) features of Genesis 1.

In the fifth sermon, on the foundation for the Sabbath in Genesis 2:2-3, Rev. Holtvlüwer amasses a considerable array of Scriptural data to support his view that the day of rest has existed since creation. In doing so he targets those, “also some sincere members of Reformed churches,” who believe that the Sabbath “came into existence for the first time in the days of Israel and was basically an Old Testament, Jewish institution” (51). It can scarcely be denied that there is a connection between Genesis 2:1-3 and Exodus 20:11: the similarity in wording is simply too great to be otherwise explained. At issue, however, is the nature of the connection. To put it rather finely, does Genesis 2:3 constitute a command for man to rest on every seventh day subsequent to the one on which God rested? Not all who believe that the Sabbath rest was a Sinai ordinance would describe their position as Rev. Holtvlüwer has done (51), nor will everyone find his counter-arguments persuasive. For example, the fact that Israel is told to “remember” the Sabbath day need not imply that it had “existed for some time and been generally known” (52), for the verb “remember” can also mean “commemorate, observe,” a meaning suggested by the NIV’s “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy,” and corroborated by the parallel passage in Deuteronomy 5:12: “Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you.” Further, the author appeals to Mark 2:27 to make the point that the Sabbath was made not just for the Israelites but for all mankind (53), but that is hardly the point that Jesus was making in this verse, not to mention that a reference to man is precisely what is absent in Genesis 2:2-3.

All this is not to rule out the view that the Sabbath rest was instituted at creation, nor to dismiss the very relevant application that Rev. Holtvlüwer makes in this sermon, nor to call into question the abiding force of the fourth commandment, but only to plead that one’s conclusions be firmly based on what the text actually says. In fact, arguably the most significant cue for linking Genesis 2:2-3 to the fourth commandment is found in phraseology that is repetitive to the point of redundancy: “God had finished the work he had been doing ... he rested from all his work ... from all the work of creating that he had done.” The underlined words represent the same

Hebrew words for “doing work” that are found in the fourth commandment, so the author is clearly at pains to cast all the creative activity of Genesis 1 as belonging to the category of work which Israel was forbidden to do on the Sabbath. Hence it is not only so that Exodus 20:11 recalls the language of Genesis 2:2-3; it is equally true that the writer of Genesis 2:2-3 deliberately used language which would have made his Israelite hearers/readers think immediately of the fourth commandment. Israel hears of a God who himself did exactly what he has commanded them to do.

Rev. Holtvlüwer’s sermons have a sense of direct relevance for his primary audience, a rural Reformed congregation of “second and third generation Dutch Canadians” (xx). Yet what I miss is instruction on the message of Genesis 1-3 for its first recipients, the Old Testament people of Israel. With what ears would they have listened to these stories as they traveled through the wilderness? What gospel did they hear, and how has that gospel become fuller for us who know Christ? Yes, it’s true, as the author writes, that it’s difficult to connect passages about life before the fall to “the *saving* work of Christ centered in His death on the cross,” for “where can the cross be found in a world where there is as yet no sin” (xix)? That difficulty might, however, be lessened when one considers that these passages were written after the fall, for a fallen (and redeemed) people of God. Again, one should consider not only the historicity of these chapters but also their historiography.

The above criticisms are highly selective and should not be taken as a negative judgment on the book as a whole. To the contrary, I have focused on matters of methodology which do not affect the legitimacy or usefulness of Rev. Holtvlüwer’s sermons. As sermons they are what sermons should be: faithful, instructive, engaging, and edifying. Despite my occasional concerns about letting the text of Scripture speak for itself, the book gives evidence of careful reflection on the relevance of Genesis 1-3 for the Christian life. The strength of the sermons lies in their clear message for today, and as such they warrant a listening ear from academics and non-academics alike.