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## Scriptural Reflections on History (Book Review)

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Zeeland or Whitinsville, all of which are cut from the same ethno-religious fabric.

So, ironically, one of the problems I have been talking about in her memoir is an immense attribute: by talking about it, I can't help but feel as if I'm talking behind her back. She prompts guilt by evoking scenes so rich within my own memory that I know it all, chapter-and-verse.

At the bottom of the story, two deep and difficult concerns eventually emerge. First, mental illness. Much of the memoir arises from a story Griffioen didn't grow up with, even though she did, a story of her mother's girlhood horror and humiliation, a story which happened long before Griffioen herself was born.

But the shame her mother suffered—humiliation at the hands of a family and a community that simply repressed the story, locked it up behind locked doors, acted as if it hadn't happened—is the real villainy. What happened to her mother put her mother, her sister, and herself into Pine Rest (and that too is an “in”—into a mental hospital) at different times in their individual lives.

But Griffioen doesn't stop there. Why are there stories that really can't be spoken of in this peculiar tightly knit community? What she wants to answer—and she does—is that we all would rather not mention them, given that we (of the old-line Dutch Reformed cultural and theological ethos) don't want to blame a sovereign God we extol as a great lover and Creator of Heaven and Earth.

Shame, Lewis Smedes says in *Shame and Grace: Healing the Shame We Don't Deserve*, is the dark side

of “family values.” It's the blessed curse of a deeply caring family and community.

Some say Calvinism rests on two significant pillars—the sovereignty of God and the depravity of man. That dynamic duo is at the heart of things in the life and the story of Jane Griffioen. *London Street* is something of a rarity, a memoir that is maybe all about theological doctrine.

Which is not to say she rejects the doctrine or the man who dispenses it. Her father, who, late in life, wanders back into the Protestant Reformed Church of his youth (that's an “in” too), is the source of that overpowering theology, the theology at times you can't help thinking she would like to blame for the tonnage of emotional problems that's there in her own story.

But she can't. There's still something there in him she won't forsake—and, oddly enough, it's love. Speaking of her father, she says, “He might be a prisoner to his theology, but he hadn't locked his heart away.” The source of terrifying dogma that threatens to lock up the family in its own theological icebox is her father, a man who has literally given his life—held down two jobs for as long as she can remember—for the sake of a family he has always loved hugely, and a wife who had a child before he married her.

It would be nice if we could nail down the true villainy in all of this, but Jane Griffioen can't do it, and neither can we, not with the kind of exactness some readers might delight in discovering. Puzzle pieces are missing from this memoir, but then often enough they're missing from our own puzzles too.

That's life. Even for the Dutch Reformed.

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*Scriptural Reflections on History*. K. J. Popma. Translated and edited by Harry Van Dyke. Aalten. The Netherlands: Wordbridge Publishing, 2020. ISBN: 978-90-76660-57-8, x + 142 pp. Reviewed by Keith C. Sewell, Emeritus Professor of History, Dordt University.

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Addressing the American Historical Association in 1951, E. Harris Harbison spoke of the rise of an Augustinian-style interest in the meaning of history. He was right. Beginning in the 1930s, and deepening in the 1940s and early 1950s, a highly diverse range of Christians offered their thoughts on the subject, including Herbert Wood (1934), L. E. Elliott-Binns (1943), Oscar Cullmann (1945), Emil Brunner (1947), Eric Rust (1947), Herbert Butterfield (1948/9), Karl Löwith (1949), Eric Preiss (1949/50), C. S. Lewis (1950), Jean Danielou (1950), and Christopher Dawson (1951). It is hard not to conclude that the deepening crisis of the 1930s, the Second World War, and the coming of the Cold War had a great deal to

do with this development.

*Scriptural Reflections on History*, now published for the first time in English, was part of this movement. It originally appeared as *Calvinistische geschiedenis-beschouwing* in 1945 and was published by Wever of Franeker. Its author was Klaas J. Popma (1903-86), a classical scholar who was among those influenced by the philosophical work of Dirk H. Th. Vollenhoven (1892-1978) and Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977). Many Reformed people in the Netherlands knew of him for his seven-volume work on the Heidelberg Catechism, *Levensbeschouwing* (1958-65), while English-language readers may know his *A Battle for Righteousness: The Message of the Book of Job* (1998).

Popma wrote this book in the earlier 1940s, during the dark and perilous days of the German occupation of the Netherlands. It is therefore hardly surprising that he made no direct reference to contemporary events. He prefers the occasional classical example. Popma's purpose was to explore and describe in outline the message of the Bible as it instructs, deepens, and directs our understanding of human history generally. Accordingly, Popma stays close to the biblical texts. He does not tell us how to interpret, in a Scriptural way, the decline and fall of the Roman Empire or the French Revolution. Rather, he sets forth the biblical foundations for historical research and thinking. To this end, Popma describes a wide arc from creation to new creation. He achieves this purpose with a series of overviews on the unity, structure, and course of history (5-69), then transitions to discussions addressing historical research and our sense of history—including the mighty forces at work in history (71-104)—and concludes with some reflections on time and eternity (105-131).

The entire discussion is grounded in the order of creation. The Scriptures know of chaos only as a falling away from the God-given order. Our calling as human beings is to serve our creator forever. At the same time, the God-given unity of history is fractured, but never actually destroyed, by human sin and its consequences. All humanity and all history are involved; no one stands outside of human history. Moreover, after all the havoc and destruction brought about by sin, the unity of human history is reaffirmed by the gospel. That is apparent in Acts 14 and 17. Where human history-making is misdirected and misshapen by sin, its apparent achievements are subject to withering and eventual collapse. Only that which is in Christ endures forever.

From discussing "historical roots and forces," Popma transitions to his concluding discussion of "time and eternity." Here he repeatedly instructs and clarifies. For example, he addresses the question of the correct understanding of Rev. 10:6, where the KJV translation—"that there should be time no longer"—

is so misleading. He also considers the question of the eventual end of procreation and the character of the "better country" *already* desired by God's covenant people in the present era. Popma stresses the continuities between the present and that which is to come. The eternal life that we have in Christ *has already begun* and orients us, also historically, toward the consummation of all things.

This is a relatively short book, but it will not be an "easy read" for all readers. Popma at times employs an elliptical style, sometimes circling his point for a while before finally making it. Nevertheless, this is a rich and suggestive discussion. Popma's handling of one Bible passage after another drives readers to deepen their understanding of history even as they ponder the relevant texts. This process can be two-way. For example, Popma's discussion of the Book of Ecclesiastes deepens not only our insight into history but also our understanding of the book itself (31-40, 55-8).

This question remains: Why is biblically directed historical understanding so weak among contemporary Christians? Popma provides us with insights with which to answer this question. Among the relevant considerations are the widespread Christian ignorance of the Old Testament (65) and the influence of scholasticism. The latter seeks to formulate a seemingly supra-historical static system. Against such views, Popma insists that "[t]here is probably no fiercer foe of Calvinist thought about history than the scholastic attitude" (68). In the opinion of the reviewer, he is right. Indeed, it may be argued that the outlook of the biblical writers is repeatedly redemptive-historical rather than theo-logical.

With the spirit of revolution sweeping across the United States and the English-speaking world generally, with demands to recast—or even erase—national and socio-economic histories, the time is more than ripe for a renewal of Christian reflection on the meaning of history. The publication of this English language translation is an important and most welcome contribution to this end.