

Christopher R. J. Holmes, *The Lord Is Good: Seeking the God of the Psalter*

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The Lord is Good is a fascinating new volume by Christopher Holmes, who teaches systematic theology at the University of Otago in New Zealand. In this work, Holmes offers a wide-ranging treatment of divine goodness from a Thomistic perspective that draws on the theological resources of the Psalms. He dedicates his book to the late theologian John Webster, and, in my opinion, it bears a striking resemblance to Webster's thought in its commitment to prioritising God's aseity and in its keen interest in articulating the classical divine attributes.

Holmes' project seeks to redress two shortcomings that he finds in modern and contemporary Christian theology. First, he believes that many theologians focus on christology, the acts of God or trinitarian relations, while neglecting the essence of the one God and the divine attributes. For example, in two excurses (pp. 23–7, 86–9), he argues that the theologies of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer are compromised by these tendencies. By contrast, he maintains that theology must unfold what God is (essence), who God is (relations) and what God does (acts) – in that order. More specifically, he argues that God is goodness itself and that this pre-eminent attribute informs God's other attributes, the internal trinitarian relations and the works of God toward the outside world. Second, Holmes thinks that many theologians today carry out their work descriptively without recognising the necessary role of personal devotion in the theological task. The goodness of God is beyond words; yet theologians must still attempt to put it into words. In order to do so faithfully, they must first 'taste and see that the LORD is good' (Ps 34:8). When they do, their theology will sound more like a shout of joy or, to use St. Augustine's colourful phrase, a 'belch of praise' (p. 50). On both counts, I believe, Holmes shows that the Psalter is a crucial theological witness: it offers a thoroughly theocentric vision and speaks in the self-involving idiom of prayer, lament and praise.

When I first saw the subtitle of Holmes's book (*Seeking the God of the Psalter*), I supposed that it was a theology of the Psalter, that is, a work of biblical theology. But, as soon as I started reading it, I realised that it is not a work of biblical theology; it is rather a theology that uses the Psalter. Of course, both are legitimate enterprises, but they are different. I believe that Holmes is truly 'seeking God' and that this God can rightly be described as 'the God of the Psalter', but the subtitle of his book should perhaps be *Seeking a Thomistic Theology in the Psalter*. He begins with an epigraph from the Psalms (Ps 119:68); he structures his book according to this text (see chapters 2, 4, 7); and he makes use of Psalter in every chapter. But his goal is always the development of a Thomistic account of divine goodness, and he consistently follows Thomas' interpretation of the Psalms in question. Indeed, he says that one of his goals is the rehabilitation of Thomas as a biblical exegete (pp. 3–4).

Consider, for example, Psalm 106:1: 'Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!' Holmes is correct to note that God's character ('He is good') precedes his action ('His steadfast love endures forever') and the human response ('Give thanks'). It is worth noting, however, that the confession here is that God is 'good' (*tob*) not 'goodness' (*tub*). Making the Thomistic claim that God is goodness itself requires a theological extension of the literal sense. In addition, the God who is here praised is the LORD, that is, Yahweh, the God who revealed himself to Abraham and his family, and his goodness is expressed in 'steadfast love' (*hesed*), that is, fidelity to his covenant with his people Israel. It requires several additional conceptual steps to reach the Church of Jesus Christ and God's manner of relating to the creation as a whole. Christian theology can and should take these steps, but I wish that Holmes had reflected more carefully and transparently on what is involved in that reasoning process. I also wish that he had offered a more critical evaluation of Thomas's biblical interpretations. St Thomas Aquinas is not merely a good theologian; he is one of the greatest theological minds of the Church, but are all of his readings of scripture perfectly good? Surely not. For no one is good, in that sense, except God alone (Mark 10:18).

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