Paul Blackham 1: Weak Exegetical Links

Andrew S. Malone

In a recent edition of *Churchman*, Andy Saville has furnished a summary of the popular teachings of Paul Blackham, seeking to regain a more apostolic approach to identifying the Trinity in the Old Testament. The summary is representative of Rev. Dr. Blackham's views and will indeed facilitate wider familiarity, stimulate ongoing discussion, and kindle more thorough assessment of such teaching. We are indebted to Rev. Dr. Saville for this.[1]

Saville himself concludes with a call for further investigation, identifying his own inclination:

> Is Blackham right? There has not yet been a substantial assessment of his position. My hope is that this article will serve as a catalyst for further study... My own conclusion is that Dr. Blackham has pointed modern evangelicalism in the right direction to rediscover a truly Christian reading of the Old Testament, and that this renewed reading will serve to strengthen and enrich the church.[2]

Saville recognises that Blackham's ideas 'are not widely shared amongst the current generation of academic evangelicals'.[3] He notes I am engaged in relevant research, thus I offer *Churchman* readers some of the further study and assessment Saville desires. In this first part of two, we explore the breadth and depth of Blackham's use of the Bible.

Three matters of orientation. First, this topic concerns only a limited segment of the church and academy. This is an internal dialogue, amongst those who share an evangelical conviction that something of the Christian gospel pervades the Old Testament, about the methods used in christological readings. Second, the topic is wide-ranging. Any evaluation is prone to lack something, and my contribution here is necessarily superficial in places. The endnotes highlight some of the abundant further reading. Third, my own analysis is that the Trinitarian approach of Paul Blackham ought to be treated with more caution than the optimistic neutrality presented by Andy Saville. Blackham's

ideas are not novel, but largely resuscitate methodologies found at various epochs of church history. Such teaching (in any age) rightly values the entire Bible as Christian Scripture. It seeks to maximise Scripture's witness to our triune God, often to persuade unbelievers. It respects the authority of both Testaments as the inspired revelation of this triune God, and aspires to understand it through careful study of passages in their narrower and wider contexts.

Yet such teaching (in any age) often allows particular doctrinal stances to control exegesis and to validate inferences and claims. In turn, this doctrinally-driven exegesis appears to reinforce that position, making it hard to determine why conclusions appear biblical yet at odds with much of contemporary evangelicalism. As Saville suggests, the apparent freshness of such teaching invites rigorous analysis to determine how much we should embrace as divine truth, and how much we should contest as admirable but misguided zeal.

Such analysis is important in Blackham's case. He and I share a great adoration of the Trinity, of their creative and redemptive actions throughout history, and of their intentional self-revelation throughout the Bible. Yet we also regularly train newer believers not only to hold to orthodox doctrine but to generate it for themselves from the pages of Scripture. My concern is that facets of the Blackham/Saville perspective may mislead younger exegetes and entire churches, modelling the discovery of textual 'facts' which originate from human aspiration rather than from divine inspiration. While I endorse the quest 'to give full exegetical weight to the distinctions between the three Persons made in the [Old Testament] text', I query whether 'the text' yields as many weighty distinctions as claimed.[4]

Blackham's position is like a series of links in a chain. Each link argument must be scrutinised to determine how much weight the entire chain can safely bear. Here we consider Blackham's exegetical arguments, which Saville helpfully classifies under three headings.

Exegetical Arguments 1: the New Testament's use of the Old

The first passages are difficult to analyse succinctly. The complexity of the New Testament's use of the Old is well known and documented.[5] Such passages do, however, efficiently clarify the starting point, the methodology, and the

conclusions of the Blackham/Saville interpretation. The hermeneutics at work here set the agenda for most of the later doctrines and methodologies.

Blackham takes several New Testament passages and insists that what the first-century authors present as interpreted, doctrinal fact in the light of first-century events is also precisely what the Old Testament authors understood and intended. The speakers/authors of the New Testament manifestly demonstrate that 'The gospel can certainly be understood in the Old Testament just as in the New Testament'.[6] If Peter insists David was a prophet, then Psalm 16 must be speaking of, even spoken by, the Messiah (Acts 2:25-31, citing Ps. 16:8-11). If Hebrews 1 expounds the relationship of divine Father and Son, then that is what the original psalmists taught (Heb. 1:5-13, citing e.g. Pss. 2:7; 45:6-7; 110:1).

Many Christian interpreters, past and present, share this approach.[7] Yet we must not accept too simplistic an understanding, or the tacit call to return unthinkingly to pre-critical exegesis. In a prominent paper, Blackham joins others in modelling such a superficial hermeneutic:

> Did Isaiah know Christ? Yes, of course, how else could he have had a visible appearance of the LORD within the temple in Isaiah chapter 6! When John quotes from Isaiah chapter 6 in John 12, John adds, 'Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about Him.' John's conclusion is in no way bizarre or unwarranted. He is simply taking the text of the OT seriously.[8]

This hermeneutic, however, is not applied when Isaiah 6 is cited in Acts 28:25-27. Here Paul attributes the commissioning speech to the Holy Spirit. (Perhaps such multivalent appropriations are why Calvin insists for Isaiah 6 that 'in my judgment, it is wrong to restrict this vision to the person of Christ, since the prophecy refers rather to God without any differentiation').[9]

The same inconsistency arises with an even more foundational christological corpus. Conservative exegesis enthusiastically identifies citations of and allusions to the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, as applied to and by Jesus (e.g. Isa. 42:1-4 in Matt. 12:15-21; Isa. 53:12 in Luke 22:37).[10] The hermeneutic must be robust enough to also allow that Paul and Barnabas see the same texts about

a singular Servant as applying to them and their universal mission (Isa. 49:6 in Acts 13:44-47). We can certainly reconcile multiple 'fulfilments' or applications of the original text.[11] But we cannot presume that a specific New Testament interpretation or application guarantees an identical Old Testament intention.

Indeed, appropriation may not guarantee any corresponding echo in the prior context. This is not to deny there are many links between the two Testaments, or that they hold together as Christian Scripture. However, interpretation is often unidirectional: the New Testament cites or alludes to or develops an Old Testament idea, but the process cannot be reversed to enhance the original content or context. This is well demonstrated by Sidney Greidanus in his pertinent book, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*. Chronicles lists 17 generational links from David to Jeconiah and his captivity (1 Chron. 3:1-17). Matthew famously crafts these into a symbolic 14 generations (Matt. 1:6-11, 17). Matthew clearly provides a theological interpretation of Chronicles, but we cannot learn anything about the Chronicler's theological purposes from Matthew's adaptation. It is a one-way street.[12]

Yes, the New Testament assures us that the gospel message is prefigured in the Old. It is appropriate to highlight texts like Luke 24:25-27, 45-47, where Jesus expects understanding and expounds the events of Easter from the (Hebrew) Scriptures. It is however an additional and separate step to assume Jesus simply read from texts which were transparently christological. Luke repeatedly shows that Jesus must 'explain' the Scriptures to his disciples; he 'opened the Scriptures' in a fresh way and 'opened their minds to understand'; and he took opportunity for extended teaching between Easter and Pentecost (Luke 24:27, 32, 45; Acts 1:3).[13] Luke's language ought be understood along these lines: Jesus 'expounded' (AV, NKJV) or 'interpreted' (RSV, NRSV, ESV, HCSB) for them ideas they could not grasp on their own.[14]

We must thus be cautious about prepositions and the claim that, because Jesus and his apostles preached the gospel '*from* the Old Testament', so we ought be confident that 'The gospel can certainly be understood *in* the Old Testament just as in the New Testament'.[15] This unhelpful and (I would claim) unwarranted harmonisation is one of the weakest links in Blackham's argumentation. Of course Scripture *interprets* Scripture. But Blackham's exegesis does nothing to prove that we must iron out every literary and

chronological difference and discount (what most would accept as) the ensuing theological developments.[16]

Put simply, we are asked to wonder at the wrong marvels of Scripture. We are told that the revelation of the Old Testament writings is as good as—even better than—the message of the New. The harmonisation relies heavily on the clarification of the New Testament, but then pretends that this source (which I would judge to be superior in quantity and quality of Trinitarian revelation) has played no part in the harmonisation! Such 'disavowed harmonisation' is illustrated by a literary example. It is like reading a murder mystery for the second time, spotting some of the obscure clues in the opening pages, rightly deducing their significance for the outcome of the story, *but then insisting that our prior knowledge of the outcome has played no part in our interpretation of those clues*.[17]

The pragmatic limitations of this approach were articulated more than four decades ago by John Bright:

> To put it another way, in the case of almost every text, historical meaning and theological interpretation are telescoped, with the result that it is not always clear to the reader which he is being offered… [W]hat is actually an interpretation of the Old Testament in the light of the New is so presented that it will appear, at least to the unwary reader, to be proposed as an exegesis of the Old Testament text itself.[18]

This foundational aspect of Blackham's position warrants more analysis than offered here. I remain sceptical as to whether the minimisation of progressive revelation, to the point of harmonising and conflating the two Testaments, is methodologically responsible. Its results are undeniably attractive to conservative evangelicals seeking christological value for the Old Testament. Those who would embrace these results ought to be conscious of the steps (shortcuts?) required to reach them. I would counsel caution, especially when the remaining exegetical arguments of Paul Blackham can be shown to be imprecise.

Exegetical Arguments 2: the appearances of God

Saville's second set of passages are those that narrate the appearances of Yahweh in the Old Testament. He is right that I have already responded

elsewhere in greater detail to this issue.[19] Yet he does not engage with my concerns, which I shall briefly reiterate here.

There is no doubt that God was 'seen' by nearly seven dozen individuals in the pages of the Old Testament. I would agree with Blackham's extensive arguments (noted only in passing by Saville) that the ubiquitous Angel of Yahweh is also divine, bringing the number of individual theophany survivors closer to one hundred!

The question, however, is whether we can distinguish that this deity was the Son, rather than the Father or the Spirit or the indistinguishable Trinity. Can we further specify that these myriad theophanies were in fact christophanies? I am far from convinced that any of the arguments—let alone the passages themselves—reveals this degree of clarity. Saville rightly distils Blackham's arguments into two steps:

> First that there is a clear distinction in the Old Testament between the unseen LORD who cannot be seen and the appearing LORD of the theophanies… The second step in this argument is that the LORD who appears was God the Son, and thus the Theophanies are Christophanies.[20]

Firstly, any actual exegetical demonstrations are thin on the ground. In the ten paragraphs Saville cites, only one of Blackham's exegetical arguments surfaces: no theophany can be an appearance of the Father 'as no-one has ever seen the Father at any time (John 1:18).'[21] Blackham regularly asserts that such a verse 'removes all doubt', without offering further scrutiny.[22] I dispute the way this verse is interpreted and employed in this line of argumentation. John's use here of '(not) seeing' is not concerned to delimit the visibility of the Father; rather John summarises how one knows or recognises the transcendent God. To cite but two of the careful studies of the Johannine phrase: '[T]he issue in these passages is not whether the intrinsically invisible God is in some way visible, but whether the God who is completely beyond man's grasp reveals Himself to them.' 'When he says that none has seen God, it is not to be understood of the outward seeing of the physical eye.'[23]

Blackham is familiar with the Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck. Yet he has failed to mention or address Bavinck's own conclusions on this verse. In

carefully balancing the Bible's message of God as both transcendent and immanent, Bavinck resolves that 'God is invisible but is able to make himself visible and to reveal himself to man. "It is not in our power to see him but it is in his power to reveal himself."'[24] As we will see, such a balancing act need not require a Trinitarian solution.

Another exegetical argument is assumed but not explicated in Saville's sample. Blackham regularly relies on the notion and description of God the Father as 'the Unseen LORD'. This language comes as much from the New Testament as from any Old Testament passage: another demonstration of the first category above. The phrase 'the Unseen LORD' is often paralleled with the language of 'the LORD who hides himself in the thick darkness'.

The exegetical origins of these phrases are crucial, because they are the lynchpin of both Blackham's position and his rhetoric. Their centrality is patent in Saville's summary where, on the facing pages which finally exhibit some of Blackham's Old Testament exegesis, he draws heavily on this interpretation of Exodus 33–35. Blackham himself judges Exodus 'the book in which the doctrine of the Trinity receives its most detailed exposition' and this triad of chapters 'perhaps the best part of the Bible to see all Three Persons of the Trinity, and the way they interact with each other and with the Church.'[25]

The language of 'thick darkness' does not come from Exodus 33–35 at all. Rather, just as Blackham harmonises the two Testaments to reconstruct a single history, he conflates several accounts of the Sinai theophany(s). He ignores the earlier witness of Exodus, which warns that the people *could* succeed in breaking through to see God's appearance (19:21), and that seventy-four of them *did* (24:9-11)! Instead, he interpolates Moses' commentary from Deuteronomy 4:

> Throughout Genesis and Exodus up to this point, the LORD appeared to people and He spoke to them in face to face conversations. But, something quite different happens at Mount Sinai (also called Mount Horeb, which means 'mountain of the LORD'). According to Deuteronomy 4:15 **no form of any kind was seen when the LORD spoke out of the fire**. What was happening here? Why this sudden change in the way the LORD interacted with His people?

> In Exodus 33 during the giving of the Law, Moses is at Mount Sinai meeting with the Living God. He would go up to the top of the mountain to meet with a person called the LORD, Yahweh, who was hidden from Moses' sight in thick darkness. As we have previously studied, in Deuteronomy 4:12 Moses recalls that although the voice of this Yahweh-Person was heard, yet 'no form' was seen. That Yahweh-Person in the thick darkness is never seen.[26]

We might query whether harmonising the two accounts is the most accurate form of exegesis. Blackham himself warns against trying to get behind a text.[27] Such a step may not be inappropriate here; Exodus elsewhere narrates the phenomenon of thick darkness (Exod. 20:21; cf. 19:16-25). But favouring the language of Deuteronomy over that of Exodus has led Blackham into error. Deuteronomy insists, as does Exodus, only that the general population saw no form; it makes no claim about Moses. This fact is obscured when Blackham presents Scripture's active verbs as passive ones. Moses attests '*you* saw no form'; Blackham claims more than this when he interprets '*no form* was seen'. The very centrepiece of debate has been obfuscated by a subtle misrepresentation of grammar.[28]

These exegetical arguments simplify Scripture further than is valid, to guard a particular doctrinal commitment. Scripture does not confirm that God was *never* seen. The Old Testament attests that God was not *typically* seen. The New Testament concurs, delighting that the incarnation brought a regularly visible, tangible, immanent experience of the commonly-transcendent God. Saville distilled two steps in Blackham's exegetical arguments. The second step lacks the same rigour as the first. Saville delays his demonstration until his discussion of theological arguments, as will I.

Again, I think Blackham's conclusions are driven by doctrinal assumptions which, while sounding plausible and even attractive, do not quite square with careful exegesis. The same issues persist through the third category of exegetical arguments.

Exegetical Arguments 3: multiple mentions of God

Saville succinctly cites a few texts where two Gods appear to be present.[29] While the briefest of Saville's summaries, this remains one of the crucial,

weight-bearing links in Blackham's argumentation. Such texts are also often listed in major systematic theologies, and gain Trinitarian traction because they mention two Gods in a single sentence.

Rigorous analysis should recognise different linguistic permutations here. Sometimes the narrator is responsible for the apparent plurality: 'Then Yahweh rained down upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from Yahweh in heaven' (Gen. 19:24). Elsewhere it seems to be God himself speaking authoritatively of another God:

> Yahweh said to Moses, 'on the third day Yahweh will descend upon Mount Sinai… [W]arn the people so that they will not force through to Yahweh to look[!] and many of them perish. Even the priests who approach Yahweh must consecrate themselves so that Yahweh will not break out against them' (Exod. 19:10-11, 21-23).

I have recently published research which contributes to such rigour, particularly investigating the latter construction.[30] History is full of examples showing that it is not uncommon—and certainly not incorrect—to refer to oneself in the third person. From Julius Caesar through to modern politicians and sports stars and literary characters, people have referred to themselves by name or by third-person pronoun. So, too, the Bible has hundreds of examples which do not induce personal or Trinitarian plurality. Lamech calls his wives 'wives of Lamech' (Gen. 4:23); Jonathan and Abner swear, 'may God do thus to Jonathan/Abner' (1 Sam. 20:13; 2 Sam. 3:9); Jesus regularly calls himself the Son of Man, and even prays, 'Father…glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you…that they might know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent' (John 17:1-3). There is no second Lamech or Jonathan or Abner. If we pursue Blackham's logic, we must conclude that Jesus himself distinguishes a second Son, another Jesus Christ.[31]

The former construction, particularly Genesis 19:24, is a long-standing point of debate. It formed the very centrepiece of Justin Martyr's apologetics, who exerted demonstrable influence upon ensuing theologians like Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen and Eusebius. Blackham is another echo. There seems a single origin to the idea, rather than multiple attestation from independent exegetes. And the argument has been queried since it was first employed; it has

never been irrefutable nor gone unchallenged. Perhaps the most useful explanation comes from a similar construction in 2 Timothy 1:18. Paul prays, 'May the Lord grant that he [Onesiphorus] will find mercy from the Lord'. While not impossible that Paul is, awkwardly, switching referents and thus referring to two distinct Lords in a single breath, it is more likely he is using a prayer formula ('May the Lord grant') and/or ensuring he does not repeat an ambiguous pronoun ('may he find mercy from him'). Similar rejoinders have long been offered against Justin and his successors.[32]

The permissibility of this kind of repetition is candidly demonstrated from Blackham's own writings. 'Moses speaks to the LORD who hides himself in the thick darkness, and requests that he may see the Most High.'[33] Blackham is virtually constrained to repeat a divine title at the end of the sentence to refer back to the earlier 'LORD'; a simple pronoun would fail to communicate clearly. He offers similar clarification elsewhere (such as repetitions of 'Moses' in the quote at n. 26 above).

The christocentric conclusion is supposedly founded on rigour, so we could dissect Blackham's exegesis for even more exact analysis. He regularly presents the key verse thus: 'Genesis 19:24 is one of the great verses of the whole book—there are two LORDs in the one verse. The LORD on earth rains down burning sulphur from the LORD in the heavens.'[34] The claim is that Genesis itself distinguishes two different LORDs by using two contrasting prepositional phrases. But the latter phrase specifies the origin of the brimstone and fire, not the location of Yahweh: the fiery punishment comes 'from [*min*] the LORD *from* [*min*] the heavens.' No English translation corroborates Blackham's 'in'; all render '*out of* heaven'. And the first prepositional phrase, 'on earth', has no textual warrant whatsoever.[35]

In summary, while Blackham is not alone in finding Old Testament verses which hint at the plurality of God, they are not in themselves convincing proofs. For those who have enjoyed the clarity of further revelation in the New Testament, such earlier hints will (at best) sit consistently alongside the more complete picture. A minor clue to a mystery remains only a clue until it is joined by and coordinated with other, more concrete indicators. And many apparent clues can prove to be red herrings.

Blackham would claim that the 'picture' is more complete much earlier than I would, and that adequate clues abound. Again, the claim is attractive but hardly borne out by exegesis. I judge such exegesis is done rarely and, when it is, is superficial. So it is ironic that Blackham laments 'the theological assumptions that have prevented the depth of exegesis we so desperately need at this time.'[36]

Additional Exegetical Examples

My focus has been precisely the limited quantity and quality of Dr. Blackham's exegesis. Further examples confirm the questionable methods employed and the doctrinal conclusions which, I submit, *drive* these. We can only survey some in passing.

In his zeal to identify the Son (and Spirit) at work in the first books of the Bible, Blackham seizes upon key occurrences of 'the Word of Yahweh'. This forges a link with the New Testament and secures his Trinitarian interpretation—which becomes the overt paradigm for Genesis. Blackham's *Study Guide* introduces his program and a sample of his exegesis:

> The word used for 'God' here is the Hebrew word 'Elohim'. What is so striking about this word is that it is a plural. The God who we meet in Genesis chapter 1 is not a lonely God. ... He is a unity of Three Persons—and we see them all at work in these opening verses. We see the Spirit of God hovering over the water in verse 2, waiting for the Word of God to give direction and focus. Then, in verse 3, God speaks His Word. … In the book of Genesis we are going to meet a Divine Person who has the title 'The Word of God'. We will discover that this Word of God is the central figure, not only in the book of Genesis, but in the whole Bible.[37]

That *Elohim* intentionally communicates plurality is hardly agreed; if anything, its plural *form* is employed by Bible authors with a singular *meaning*.[38] Most languages exhibit *pluralia tantum*: words like 'trousers' which have a plural form, attract plural verbs and adjectives, yet refer only to a singular entity.[39] Indeed, despite its form, *Elohim* almost exclusively attracts *singular* verbs and adjectives. The grammars show this also occurs with other mundane names and labels, like some Hebrew and Greek variants of 'Jerusalem' which are morphologically non-singular but attract singular adjectives and pronouns and verbs. Furthermore, given Blackham's penchant

for ancient interpreters, he should recognise that the earliest translations of *Elohim* (like the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Septuagint) regularly understand a singular referent.

Elsewhere, Blackham claims much from Genesis 15:5; 'The Word of the LORD is a **He**!'[40] Of the possible options, Blackham pursues the least defensible. We must interpolate other passages and doctrinal conclusions to decide that the 'Word' here is a numerically and personally distinct *agent* of Yahweh. Genesis itself, and the rest of the Old Testament, presents this 'Word' merely as an *activity* of Yahweh; and even should we allow a second figure here, we can claim no more for the masculine pronoun than that it refers back to a masculine antecedent (*dabar*). In turn, that masculine noun no more guarantees this 'Word' is a 'he' than the feminine noun *ruach* makes the Spirit a 'she'. We must be especially circumspect about inferring a distinguishable, Trinitarian Person in texts like Genesis 1:3 where no such 'word' is mentioned at all.[41]

Just as Blackham assumes that 'word'/*dabar* must mean the same in Genesis 15 as 'Word'/*logos* in John 1, so he seeks to convince readers that other key terms in Scripture always have a single, unchanging, theological meaning. Thus 'Messiah' means the same thing at every point, Old Testament and New—even though we can trace a number of human referents and a general development in messianic expectation.[42] Similarly, while the usual understanding is that the Greek word *ekklesia* meant a general assembly (e.g. Acts 19:32) which then came to be used of Christian gatherings (i.e. 'church'), Blackham insists that the latter is the connotation always intended for both Testaments. He even insists that the Septuagint translators had theological motives when they 'chose the Greek word "ekklesia" (church) to translate the Hebrew word for the Assembly of Israel'—and even that the NIV translators have retained 'assembly' in Acts 7:38 precisely to educate readers that the Old Testament 'assembly' denoted God's first 'church'.[43]

One of Blackham's preferred titles for Jesus is 'Mediator'. He uses the term frequently, probably because the Reformers did, especially Calvin. Blackham claims biblical authority for the term by citing its occasional use in Scripture, particularly 1 Timothy 2:5.[44] The term is a good English one to describe how the Son communicates on behalf of the Trinity. However, its meaning in the Bible (and even typically in the Reformers) primarily concerns the

reconciliation effected by the Son. This conclusion is reached even in the most accessible Bible dictionaries. Biblical terms offer no support if we redefine them.[45]

In the same vein, Blackham regularly cites pre-critical exegesis. No doubt this is because of his familiarity with the Puritans, but may also be because it affirms his findings. It is, of course, incumbent upon all theologians to consider what our forebears have thought—yet we must not adopt their judgements uncritically. For example, Blackham repeats the standard pre-critical reading of John 5:39, '*Search* the Scriptures…and it is they that bear witness to Me.'[46] The imperative rendering of the KJV/AV ('you *must* search') has been universally abandoned for the indicative ('you *are* searching'; the same Greek spelling) on careful exegetical grounds. Similarly, interpreters of text and context have rarely accepted that Genesis 4:1 has Eve claiming, 'I have brought forth the LORD-man'.[47] Even Blackham's revered John Owen is adamant that the pre-critical reading cannot be supported.[48]

We have seen that Blackham's doctrinal commitments and New Testament knowledge direct his Old Testament exegesis. Perhaps most telling is the way that Old Testament passages supposedly reveal that God is plural *and* that this plurality extends precisely to *three* persons. We must heed warnings like John Frame's that possible hints of plurality do not guarantee Trinity:

> For all the adumbrations of the Trinity in the Old Testament, much therein remains unclear. For example, from the data of the Old Testament alone, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to determine how many divine beings there are. One might well ask if *Word, wisdom, name, glory, angel, Messiah*, and *Spirit* designate seven distinct divine beings, and, if not, what the relationships among them are. Is the triad *Lord, Word, breath* (Ps. 33:6) the same as the triad *Lord, angel, Spirit* (Isa. 63:9-10)?[49]

These exegetical/hermeneutical approaches result in the strangest oddity we are invited to embrace, concerning the revelation of the Trinity in select items of the tabernacle furniture (Exodus 25).[50] Interpolating traditions beyond the text of Exodus, we are told that the ark is not only a throne, but one occupied solely by God the Father. (Why then must the high priest fear the *appearing* of the supposedly-invisible one above the ark; Lev. 16:2, 13? And surely the New

Testament 'identifies' the mercy seat or atonement cover with *Jesus*; Rom. 3:25!)[51] The 'Table of Presence' is granted 'a symbolic association' with the Son, presuming that the 'presence' of God in Exodus 33:14-15 is the angel promised earlier in 23:20-23 *and* that this angel is the Angel of the LORD *and* that that Angel should be identified as the Son. (Why the focus on the table, when it is always the *bread* which is associated with God's presence? Blackham himself concedes the table is only a display stand for the main attraction.) Finally, 'the Lampstand represents the Holy Spirit's love for, and commitment to, the Church.' We are assured of this interpretation because a 'lampstand' and God's 'spirit' coincide in the vision of Zechariah 4:1-6 (though, we might note, no mention of 'love' or 'church'). Further, why do other items of furniture not reveal additional divine persons? And why these three items; surely the altar for burnt sacrifices is a leading christological candidate?

Provisional Conclusions

We have seen that the foundational, exegetical links in Paul Blackham's chain of argument are forged to a standard not widely accepted by thoughtful conservative interpreters. Just as he conflates history and revelation across the Old and New Testaments, so too his approach to language irons out any complexities and variations. He conflates multiple accounts in an unhelpful way (e.g. the Sinai theophany); he disallows the development of words over time (e.g. *Elohim*, Word); he overplays unimportant grammatical features (e.g. gender agreement); and he overlooks grammatical distinctions that are important (e.g. active/passive voice). The impression is that his reading of Old Testament passages is shaped far more by words and ideas from elsewhere, rather than by the words he claims to expound. Moreover, there are simply many places where careful exegetical explanation is altogether unexpressed. We must be mindful of Blackham's own warning: 'It seems wisest to be sensitive to the way each Biblical writer uses language. Forcing a systematic framework onto the Biblical text may seem easier but it will obscure the original meaning of the authors.'[52]

That there are places where Blackham engages in poor exegesis ought not be generalised to imply that his exegesis is always poor or that his every theological conclusion should be shunned. To the contrary, I commend his passion for the Trinity and his respect for Scripture, and his enthusiasm to share these with believers and unbelievers.

As a student and teacher of the Bible, however, I find this enthusiasm—as it has at various points throughout church history—has moved beyond what we can confidently affirm about the Trinity from the actual text of the Old Testament. I have offered a summary of what I judge to be the primary exegetical weaknesses; these can hardly 'enrich the church' as Dr. Saville hopes.

Part 2 of this article will consider more of the methods Dr. Blackham uses to promote these findings, along with some of the theological limitations to his claims. I offer these from a shared concern to see our triune God glorified and his written word valued, such that 'any and every revelation of God is known only from the perspective of His revelation in and through the text of the Bible.'[53]

ANDREW MALONE is engaged in postgraduate research on these issues at Ridley Melbourne Mission & Ministry College, Australia, under the supervision of Dr. Peter Adam.

ENDNOTES

1. Andy Saville, "Paul Blackham: a Trinitarian Reading of the Old Testament," *Churchman* 123.4 (2009): 341-60.
2. Saville, "Paul Blackham," p. 355.
3. Saville, "Paul Blackham," p. 342.
4. Paul Blackham, "The Trinity in the Hebrew Scriptures," in Paul Louis Metzger (ed.), *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), pp. 35-47. I cite here from his conclusion (p. 46).
5. For a taste of the variety see the 1,200 pages of analysis offered in G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (eds.), *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), or the alternatives vigorously debated in Kenneth Berding and Jonathan Lunde (eds.), *Three Views on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).
6. Saville, "Paul Blackham," pp. 343-4. The prominence of such phrases suggests that Saville himself judges the ideas important. The original quotes are from Blackham, "Trinity," p. 36 (emphasis original); and Blackham, "Appendix 1: Frequently Asked Questions," in Steve Levy with Paul Blackham, *Bible Overview* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2008), p. 304. Blackham's influence on Levy's book is palpable at many points; see an example at n. 50 below.
7. Saville rightly notes the many works of Walter C. Kaiser Jr, particularly as

summarised in his contributions to Berding and Lunde, *Three Views*; cf. Kaiser, *The Messiah in the Old Testament* (SOTBT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995). Another prolific author with similar interpretation is Robert L. Reymond, e.g. *Jesus, Divine Messiah: The New and Old Testament Witness* (Fearn: Mentor, 2003). Many other specific examples exist in the literature, such as Scott A. Swanson, "Can We Reproduce the Exegesis of the New Testament? Why Are We Still Asking?" *Trinity Journal* 17.1 (1996): 67-76; Gregory V. Trull, "Peter's Use of Psalm 16 in Acts 2," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 (2004): 194-214, 304-21, 432-48.

8. Paul Blackham, in one of his flagship papers titled "Christ the Object of our Faith," formerly available on his personal website; addressed to Australian gatherings such as the Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Communion and the Church Missionary Society in Sept 2001; reproduced in South Africa as "Faith in Christ in the Old Testament," *Contact OnLine* 7.3 (2003); a version archived at <www.theologian.org.uk>.
9. Calvin, *Comm.* Isa 6:1, *Calvin: Commentaries* (LCC 23; ed. & trans. Joseph Haroutunian; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958), p. 121; cf. *Inst.* I.13.15, 20.
10. e.g. R. T. France, "The Servant of the Lord in the Teaching of Jesus," *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): 26-52. Detailed analyses can be found on individual passages, such as the linguistic parallels for Mark 10:45 explored by Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20* (WBC 34B; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), pp. 119-24.
11. 'Paul is a light of the Gentiles only in virtue of the Christ whom he preaches;' C. K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 1: *Acts I–XIV* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), p. 658; echoed in David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 398-9.
12. Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 189-91. Note the title of this subsection, 'The New Testament Not a Textbook on Biblical Hermeneutics', and the sources cited therein.
13. Peterson, *Acts*, p. 105: 'They were shown how to understand and explain Jesus and his ministry within the light of OT revelation as a whole…; they were being taught how to interpret the Scriptures christologically'.
14. Some claim or imply that *diermēneuō* indicates transparency, such that Jesus merely had to 'show' or 'demonstrate' what was already plainly visible in the OT. Yet the verb (and the wider *hermēneuō* family) is often employed to indicate that meaning is extracted or 'interpreted' from an otherwise unclear source. This is certainly the case with the remainder of the biblical uses of *diermēneuō*, where it means 'to translate' from an unknown language into a known one (Acts 9:36; cf. 2 Macc. 1:36) or 'to interpret' unintelligible tongues (1 Cor. 12:30; 14:5, 13, 27). Because

Luke 24:27 is so crucial, it is often singled out for specialist treatment, yet scholars regularly conclude that the verb here means 'to explain on a more extensive and formal level the meaning of something which is particularly obscure or difficult to comprehend' (Louw & Nida 33.148; cf. BDAG 244). Johannes Behm (*TDNT* 2:665-6) and, slightly less confidently, Anthony Thiselton (*NIDNTT* 1:581) concur that Jesus is introducing new concepts to his disciples rather than explicating the obvious.

15. Blackham, "Frequently Asked Questions," p. 304 (emphasis added); reproduced extensively by Saville, "Paul Blackham," p. 344.
16. The issue of harmonisation is revealed in dialogues parallel to ours. See the claims and resulting exegesis of Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (2nd rev. & updated ed.; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), p. 103: 'Bible students…should strive to harmonize Scripture with Scripture', and modelled most startlingly at pp. 528-37. Reymond's reliance on harmonisation is further recognised in the analysis of Christian Cryder, "Reymond's Rejection of Paradox," *Trinity Journal* 22.1 (2001): 99-112, e.g. p. 99.
17. This illustration is developed from Peter Enns, "Apostolic Hermeneutics and an Evangelical Doctrine of Scripture," *Westminster Theological Journal* 65.2 (2003): 263-87, esp. 276-7. It is easy to understand and sympathise with the rationale for such disavowed harmonisation. In oral contexts (see the sample comment transcribed in Saville, p. 359 n. 76), Blackham explains his fervour to reach Muslims and Jews; he is keen to convey the message of the NT by using the OT which may be better received by his target audiences. We must analyse, then, whether exegesis really supports this utilitarian ethic, or whether the admirable end results in questionable means.
18. John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1967), p. 88.
19. Andrew S. Malone, "The Invisibility of God: A Survey of a Misunderstood Phenomenon," *Evangelical Quarterly* 79.4 (2007): 311-29. The article is noted by Saville, "Paul Blackham," p. 356 n. 9, rightly flagging the online version at <www.theologian.org.uk>.
20. Saville, "Paul Blackham," pp. 346-7. These two steps delineate a fraction more formality than Blackham himself employs; he typically pursues both steps simultaneously.
21. Paul Blackham, *A Study Guide to the Book of Genesis* (Carlisle: Authentic Lifestyle, 2003), pp. 14-15, promoted by Saville, "Paul Blackham," p. 346. (Saville's two references to *Exodus* in his note, p. 357 n. 33, ought both be to *Genesis*.) The same

verse is regularly repeated by Blackham, e.g. *Genesis*, pp. 30, 35 (the first noted by Saville, p. 357 n. 35); Blackham, *A Study Guide to the Book of Galatians* (Carlisle: Authentic Lifestyle, 2003), p. 28.

22. Blackham, e.g. *Genesis*, pp. 28 (whence quote), 30 (this latter noted by Saville, p. 357 n. 33). This is one of the rarer occasions when Blackham uses Col. 1:15 rather than (or in addition to) John 1:18.
23. Respectively, Wilhelm Michaelis, "ὁράω, κτλ.," *TDNT* 5:365; and John Calvin, *Comm.* John 1:18, *The Gospel according to St. John 1–10* (trans. T. H. L. Parker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), p. 25. I cite these in "The Invisibility of God," pp. 318-19; see pp. 312-15 for a survey of some who have failed to investigate John's intent thoroughly.
24. Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), p. 181. Bavinck is citing Ambrose, *Exp. Luc.* 1.26 (CSEL 32.4.27). I cite a range of others who share this conclusion in :The Invisibility of God," pp.328-9.
25. Paul Blackham, *A Study Guide to the Book of Exodus* (Carlisle: Authentic Lifestyle, 2003), pp. 1-2, 39. Saville's heavy reliance on Exod 33-35 is demonstrated in his summary of "Paul Blackham," pp. 346-7, where he cites Blackham, *Trinity*, p. 39, and *Exodus*, p. 38.
26. Blackham, *Exodus*, pp. 31, 37 (emphasis original). The reliance on Deut 4 is not apparent in Saville's summary at p. 347.
27. Paul Blackham, "Evangelicals and the Bible," in Iain Taylor (ed.), *Not Evangelical Enough! The gospel at the centre* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), pp. 99-100: 'He [Luther] observes that the mind of the author can only be grasped in what they have actually written. Any attempt to access the mind of the author in some other way—such as from historical reconstruction—is unfruitful.' Blackham's conclusion (p. 112) hints that he is rejecting speculation about a narrative's evolution, rather than any reconstructing of the history itself…but we are constrained to work with what Blackham himself has expressly said. See also "Frequently Asked Questions," pp. 287-8, with the overt personal insistence that 'all we can deal with is the actual words that I have written.'
28. Similar grammatical misrepresentations can be found elsewhere. So, for example, Blackham, *Galatians*, p. 2: 'John 1:45 tells us that Moses was writing about one Person, the Messiah, in his record of the Law.' Philip does indeed insist there that 'Moses wrote [about] him in the Law,' but this does not extend to validate the claim that the Messiah was the sole content of the Pentateuch.
29. Saville, "Paul Blackham," p. 347.
30. Andrew S. Malone, "God the Illeist: Third-Person Self-References and Trinitarian

Hints in the Old Testament," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 52.3 (2009): 499–518; available online via <findarticles.com>.

31. Along with "God the Illeist", further independent examples and analysis and corroboration are found in the excursus of Günther H. Juncker, "Jesus and the Angel of the Lord" (PhD diss.; Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2001), pp. 38-41. Other aspects of Juncker's thorough dissertation, supervised by D. A. Carson, are also pertinent to the Trinitarian conclusions of Blackham.
32. Although not analysed in meticulous depth, I offer some further study of and sources concerning Justin's influence, Gen. 19:24 and 2 Tim. 1:18 in "God the Illeist:, esp. pp. 500-2, 504 n.14, 507-8.
33. Blackham, "Trinity," p. 39; repeated in Saville, "Paul Blackham," p. 346. It is intrinsic to my demonstration that Blackham expressly 'use[s] the title "Most High" here to refer to the LORD' (p. 46 n.9).
34. e.g. Blackham, *Genesis*, p. 35; cited in full by Saville, "Paul Blackham," p. 347. I have preserved this interpretation in my earlier citation of the verse.
35. Some simplified translations (e.g. TEV, CEV, NLT) overtly practise the usual understanding that the mention of Yahweh is repeated for the sake of emphasis or clarification. They thus conflate the two Yahwehs, and simply and singly translate: 'the LORD rained'.
36. Blackham, *Trinity*, p. 35. The weight of this claim increases when we note that it comes from his opening paragraph, outlining the very purpose of his essay.
37. Blackham, *Genesis*, p. 1; partly cited by Saville, "Paul Blackham," p.348.
38. Amongst the grammars, see *IBHS* §7.4.3; GKC §124; Joüon §136; and, in the seemingly endless literature, e.g. Alan J. Hauser, "Is the Doctrine of the Trinity Implied in the Genesis Creation Account? No," in Ronald F. Youngblood (ed.), *The Genesis Debate* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986; and various reprints), pp. 110-29.
39. e.g. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2002), p. 632. He argues that 'In every language, plural forms sometimes denote singular realities.' In addition to English, he notes how Revelation repeatedly uses '*seven* spirits' as 'an intensive reference to the Holy Spirit.' Other biblical words, in both Testaments, can be found that also behave this way.
40. Blackham, Genesis, p. 29 (emphasis original).
41. So, too, with Blackham's teaching on Gen. 3:8. One web document (<web.me.com/paulblackham/Following_Jesus/Articles/Entries/2008/11/18_The_Trinitarian_God.html> accessed 10 May 2010) insists, 'It is made very clear that this Voice of God is a distinct divine Person in chapter 3:8 when we read that Adam and Eve heard

the Voice of the LORD God as **HE** was walking in the Garden.' Blackham does not seem to allow that the participle is masculine because it refers back either to the LORD God himself or to the masculine word 'voice' (qol). Such enthusiasm for the word 'Word', or for the concept of spoken communication, is only marginally tempered by Blackham's concession ("Frequently Asked Questions," p.301) that not every occurrence must be interpreted christologically. See also the following examples where diachronic development of theological terms is denied, at least in practice.

42. e.g. Blackham, *Genesis*, pp. 15-16 = Exodus, pp. 7-8. For the development and fluid application of the term, see e.g. Wolter H. Rose, "Messiah," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), pp. 565-8, esp. 566; Tremper Longman III, "Messiah," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), pp. 466-72, esp. 467; various contributions to Philip E. Satterthwaite, Richard S. Hess and Gordon J. Wenham (eds.), *The Lord's Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995), e.g. pp. 2, 9, 282-5. For a dissenting treatment of the title, similar to Blackham's, note John H. Sailhamer, "The Messiah and the Hebrew Bible," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44.1 (2001): 5-23.
43. Blackham, *Genesis*, p. 27; cf. *Exodus*, p. 2; "Frequently Asked Questions," p. 298, 305-6.
44. e.g. Blackham, *Exodus*, p. 25; cited and developed by Saville, "Paul Blackham," pp. 347-8.
45. On Calvin's more biblical use of 'Mediator', see e.g. *Inst*. II.10.1; II.15.6; II.17.1. Indeed elsewhere (e.g. II.6.1; II.6.4) Calvin seems to readily interchange 'Mediator' and 'Redeemer'. See especially the analysis of Barbara Pitkin, *What Pure Eyes Could See: Calvin's Doctrine of Faith in Its Exegetical Context* (New York: OUP, 1999), pp. 150-1, drawing on E. David Willis, *Calvin's Catholic Christology* (SMRT 2; Leiden: Brill, 1966). These demonstrate Calvin's dual uses of the term—and that 'Mediator' as communicator (as commonly intended by Blackham) was both secondary in importance and in development in Calvin's thinking. Such conclusions are upheld in commonly accessible summaries like John Murray, 'Mediator,' NBD3 746-7; Oswald Becker, 'Mediator: μεσίτης,' *NIDNTTE* 1:372-5; Albrecht Oepke, 'μεσίτης, μεσίτηύω,' *TDNT* 4:598-624.
46. This form of John 5:39 is promoted by Martin Luther's "Preface of Jesus Christ" to the Psalter, *Luther's Works* 10:7; cited favourably by Blackham, *A Study Guide to the Book of Psalms* (Carlisle: Authentic Lifestyle, 2003), p. 1; recorded by Saville, "Paul Blackham," pp. 356-7 n. 18.

47. So the reading of Blackham, *Genesis*, p. 16; cf. 'Frequently Asked Questions,' p. 293. Such a reading was promoted by Luther, esp. *LW* 15:319-23, which some moderns do accept; see e.g. the claim and sources of James M. Hamilton Jr, "God with Men in the Torah," *Westminster Theological Journal* 65.1 (2003): 117.
48. John Owen, Exercitation VIII, 'The first dissertation concerning the Messiah, proving him to be promised of old' (1668), *Hebrews* 1 = *Works* 17/18, p. 177: 'That she, together with Adam, believed the promise, had the consolation, and served God in the faith of it, I no way doubt; but that she had an apprehension [*sc.* comprehension] that the promised Seed should be so soon exhibited, and knew that he should be the LORD, or Jehovah, and yet knew not that he was to be born of a virgin, and not after the ordinary way of mankind, I see no cogent reason to evince. Nor do the words mentioned necessarily prove any such apprehension in her.' For more on Owen's treatment of such texts, see my survey of "John Owen and Old Testament Christophanies," *Reformed Theological Review* 63.3 (2004): 138-54.
49. Frame, *Doctrine of God*, pp. 637-8 (emphasis original). Frame's caution is all the more pertinent given his own preference to identify triads.
50. Blackham, *Exodus*, pp. 49-53; noted in passing by Saville, "Paul Blackham," p. 357 n. 28. Notice also Blackham's direct influence on Levy, *Bible Overview*, pp. 115-16.
51. The whole notion of the ark—or, more precisely, the cherubim-laden cover of the ark—as God's throne is questioned by Stephen T. Hague, '*ʾārôn* (778),' *NIDOTTE* 1:500-10, esp. 506: 'There also is no example in which the word *kissē'* [throne] is linked with the ark itself, its cover, or the cherubim. (The closest association with enthronement and the sanctuary are the passages that suggest Jerusalem or the sanctuary is Yahweh's throne, but there is no hint that either the ark, atonement cover itself, or the cherubim is a throne.)'
52. Blackham, "Frequently Asked Questions," p. 301.
53. Blackham, "Evangelicals and the Bible," p. 98.