

# John Sailhamer's *The Meaning of the Pentateuch*: A Review Essay

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

**T**HIS BOOK RECEIVED significant electronic attention. Mark Driscoll and John Piper went back and forth over it on Twitter, then Piper blogged on it, followed by a Collin Hansen *Chris-*

*tianity Today* interview, all linked on Justin Taylor's *Between Two Worlds* blog. Even before the generation of this digital excitement, I had been looking forward to this book for several years. If asked to identify the major influences on my thinking about the Old Testament, Sailhamer is on the short list with T. Desmond Alexander, Stephen Dempster, William J. Dumbrell, and Paul House.

Sailhamer's Presidential Address to the ETS, later published as "The Messiah in the Hebrew Bible," was a watershed moment in my thinking about the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup> That address gripped and fascinated me, as

did an essay Sailhamer wrote on the connections between Genesis 49, Numbers 22–24, and other texts.<sup>2</sup> I say all this to preface the following points of appreciation, puzzlement, and disagreement.

## 2. POINTS OF APPRECIATION

### 2.1 IMPRESSIVE RESEARCH IN LATIN AND GERMAN

A few years ago I had the opportunity to meet Sailhamer and visit with him for a few moments. When I asked him who he read and who influenced his thinking, he explained that he had given himself to reading mainly German and Latin works, which meant that he did not spend much time with contemporary work being done in English. That decision is evident in this volume. Sailhamer quotes freely from the Latin of Augustine, Jerome, Coccejus, and others. He ranges widely through an array of German authors as well.

This exposes Sailhamer to streams of influence that are not available in English, and it puts him in position, for example, to critique Moses

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Stuart's translation of Johann Augusti Ernesti's work on Hermeneutics (106, 111 n. 14, *passim*). This remarkable strength of Sailhamer's opens him up, however, to a corresponding weakness. The decision to focus on older works in Latin and contemporary German authors has given Sailhamer unique abilities and perspectives, but it also has implications about his awareness of what his contemporaries are writing, as will be seen in §3.4 below.

## 2.2 FOCUS ON THE MESSIAH

Sailhamer has a salutary focus on the Messiah in the Old Testament, and he seeks to show how this theme rises from the text of the Old Testament and develops as the texts unfold rather than reading it back in from the New Testament. For instance, Sailhamer convincingly shows how Genesis 49 is interpreted in Numbers 24, such that "The messianic hope begins to emerge from these poems along with the eternal reign of God as king" (36–37). Sailhamer rightly sees that one of the major unifying themes in the OT is the hope for a coming deliverer that springs from Gen 3:15 and grows into a mighty rushing river as the tributaries of other promises feed into the stream of messianic hope across the pages of the Old Testament.

## 2.3 FOCUS ON THE FINAL FORM OF THE TEXT

Too much Old Testament study is hampered by flat out rejections of what the texts claim in favor of the fictions invented by modern scholars. Many of these theories fall under the label of "historical-critical," but they are neither historical nor critical. These theories are actually unhistorical because the reconstructions are simply not plausible, and they are uncritical because authoritative secondary literature has taken precedence over primary sources. The evidence that "counts" fits with what critical orthodoxy recognizes as a legitimate conclusion. The claims of the primary texts have to be filtered through critical orthodoxy. Sailhamer's confessional stance, embracing the Bible as the

inerrant word of God, and his canonical perspective moves him past so many of these impasses.

Sailhamer rightly focuses on the text as revelation (see the first word of the book's subtitle: *Revelation*) rather than seeing the events that the texts describe as the revelatory moment. The text is a revelatory work of literary art. He writes, "We do not understand a Rembrandt painting by taking a photograph of the 'thing' that Rembrandt painted and comparing it with the painting itself" (19). And again, "in this book, the focus falls on final texts, the OT as we have it today in our Bibles. *OT theology is the study and presentation of what is revealed in the OT*" (63). Sailhamer argues, "This is what is meant by the grammatical-historical approach" (73).

## 3. PUZZLING FEATURES OF THE BOOK

I want to be clear that I am not out to bash Sailhamer. I was eager to see this book appear, excited to read it, and went through it carefully. Many things struck me as puzzling. Some are incidental questions, others have to do with structural features of the book involving a high degree of repetition and redundancy. Still other questions have to do with more substantive questions about the relationship between the text and events that lay behind it, the dialogue partners Sailhamer has chosen, and a lack of clarity on the question of typology.

### 3.1 INCIDENTAL QUESTIONS

Some of the printing conventions used in the book are not explained.<sup>3</sup> What does note 64 on p. 321 mean?<sup>4</sup> Where is "figure 5," to which the reader is directed on p. 368? It seems that figure 4.1 is intended. What is the point of the list of quotations on pages 456–59? It almost looks as though Sailhamer has gathered quotations he intended to marshal in support of an argument, but all the reader finds is the list of quotations under the sub-heading "History of Interpretation" with no word from Sailhamer on why he cites them here or how

they serve his argument. After the last quotation the chapter ends. This list of quotations hardly exhausts the history of interpretation, so perhaps this section was unfinished.

### 3.2 REPETITIONS AND REDUNDANCIES

Making my way through the book, at several points I got the strange impression that I had already read the passage in front of me. That was because I had. In some cases whole pages and series of pages, footnotes and all, are repeated later in the book. See these examples:

A comment about Berkhof's critique of Coccejus (41–42) is substantially repeated (354).

A paragraph on two altars (43) is substantially repeated, divided into two paragraphs when it reappears (358).

A roughly four page discussion of "A Compositional Approach to the Old Testament Canon" on pages 48–51 reappears, footnotes and all (cf., e.g., 50 n. 35 and 202 n. 75), on pages 200–03.

The discussion of the "compositional approach" on pages 53–54 reappears on page 206.

The answer to the question "How did Moses 'make' the Pentateuch?" on pages 54–56 is given again, footnotes and all (cf., e.g., 56 n. 46 and 208 n. 88), on pages 206–08.

The footnote just mentioned, note 46 on page 56, is surprising not only because it is repeated verbatim as note 88 on page 208, but also because in both places we read this: "see also, in chap. 2 below, 'The Coming Eschatological King' . . ." Page 208 is in chapter 4, so the discussion referenced is no longer "below," but the reference is problematic even in its first occurrence in the introductory chapter since there is no section on "The Coming Eschatological King" in chapter 2. We do find a section with that subtitle in chapter 5, beginning on page 244.

Footnote 11 on page 574 refers to Sailhamer's discussion of Matthias Millard "in chapter 5," but the discussion of Millard is actually in chapter 9. Sailhamer repeatedly gives the same quotation

from Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown (see pages 54–55, 196, 207, 280, 356 n. 4, and 464 n. 5). This quote is often accompanied by one from Campegius Vitranga (55, 207, 280–81, and 464 n. 5). Unfortunately, these quotations are used in basically the same way every time they appear. Material from pages 277–78 appears again on pages 323–24.

There is a nine line quotation from Frank Crüsemann in footnote 20 on page 294, and three of these nine lines are quoted again in footnote 23 on page 295.

The discussion of the big idea of the Pentateuch that first appears on pages 155–61 reappears almost word for word in the conclusion of the volume on pages 607–11.

Sailhamer repeatedly discusses the composition of the Pentateuch and its importance, pushing me to the conclusion that this is a book long on method and short on actual exegesis of the text: so many discussions of the significance of the Pentateuch's composition, and by comparison, so little discussion of the *contents* of that composition.<sup>5</sup>

Another repeated discussion in this book is that of the relationship between Genesis 49, Numbers 24, and Deuteronomy 33. I noted my appreciation of an article Sailhamer wrote on these texts above, and I would not have been surprised to find the ideas from that article restated in this volume. I was surprised that these ideas seemed to be restated again and again (see pages 335–46, 468–81, 518–20, 553, etc.). I was hoping for more examples of this kind of inner-biblical interpretation from this book, not the same examples over and over again.

Sailhamer's emphasis on compositional strategy and his focus on intertextuality actually prompted me to wonder whether he was imitating the Bible itself in the composition of his own book. He writes regarding the collections of laws in the Pentateuch: "no attempt was made to avoid duplication or repetition" (292), and he takes this as a cue to seek intelligent design behind the Penta-

teuch's structure. So it may be that Sailhamer has intentionally repeated himself in all these places to pursue some elaborate literary agenda, but I think a simpler explanation is more likely. My guess is that this book was put together from a series of articles (and in various footnotes Sailhamer acknowledges substantial drawing from earlier articles). Sailhamer does not identify the volume as a collection of essays, but he does refer to "the studies in this book" in the opening words of the conclusion (602).

The repetitions and restatements look to me like they originated from the need to address related ideas in a series of articles over the years. Rather than find a new quote to make the same point made in an earlier essay, the one cited in the earlier piece is reused. Rather than rewrite a new section on the big idea of the Pentateuch, an earlier one is touched up and incorporated into a new context, and so forth. Perhaps a note in the preface or introduction acknowledging the composite character of the volume as a collection of essays, declaring up front that no effort has been made to eliminate repetition, would prepare readers and make them more tolerant of this sort of thing.

### 3.3 TEXT OR EVENT?

As noted above (§2.3), I very much appreciate Sailhamer's call to interpret the text as it now stands. Sailhamer argues against the interpretive approach that pursues or is based on historical reconstructions (e.g., 102–05). That is, in keeping with his words quoted above, we should interpret Rembrandt's painting rather than comparing it to a photograph of the thing painted. He explains,

[A] focus on the biblical text necessitates the identification of the meaning of the text with the "author's" intent. This means not what the author may have been thinking or feeling when he wrote the biblical text, but rather what his words actually say.... First, we seek to know the words that the author has written.... Next, we need to know the lexical meaning of each of his words and how

they fit together in the written text....

The second question that we may use to discover the verbal meaning or the author's intent is the compositional strategy of the author who "made" the text (604).

Can we divorce what the words say from what the author was thinking or feeling when he wrote? For instance, in Deuteronomy, as Israel is about to take the land, Moses reminds Israel of their conquest of Sihon and Og (Deut 2:26–3:11). The passage closes in Deuteronomy 3:11 with a note on the size of Og's bed and the observation that he "was left of the remnant of the Rephaim." Can we not posit that Moses gives this information because he is *thinking* of the way Israel refused to enter the land because of the size of its inhabitants back in Numbers 13–14? Are we not on the right track if we suggest that Moses *feels* a desire to teach Israel to trust Yahweh as he relates how large Og was? Can we not suggest that this is what Moses was *thinking* and *feeling* even though the text does not say so explicitly?<sup>6</sup> How do we distinguish between the author's *intent* and what he was *thinking or feeling*? Our assessment of what an author is thinking or feeling will directly affect our assessment of his intent.

Sailhamer wants to interpret the text, not the event behind the text. Sailhamer is not interested in the event behind the text that is described in the text, but he is interested in another event behind the text—the author's process of composition. That is to say, while Sailhamer is not interested in reconstructing the parting of the Red Sea, for instance, he is interested in the actions of the author of the Pentateuch. Rather than interpreting the text as it now stands, drawing out the meaning of the author's intended message, Sailhamer is looking for hidden clues about the author's purpose that are revealed in what he calls "authorial commentary." He explains,

The unity of a book's plan, its design and scope, betray a singularity of purpose that can only be described as that of an author (*mens auctoris*).

The aim of a theology of the Pentateuch lies in the discovery of that purpose through careful examination of the author's compositional strategy. Ultimately, our aim is not to deconstruct the Pentateuch, but to let it remain intact and attempt to sort out its various parts, assigning some weight of importance to their pattern of distribution within his book. The goal must always be guided by the hope of catching a glimpse of the author at work (282).

I voice a hearty "Amen" to Sailhamer's recognition that there will be an overarching purpose driving the author of the Pentateuch. He is essentially declaring that there will be a center of the Pentateuch's theology.<sup>7</sup> I also agree with his view that understanding a text's literary structure is crucial for understanding an author's message (29). But I disagree with what he says in the statement just quoted about "catching a glimpse of the author at work" (282). Do we want to be affected by Rembrandt's painting, or are we prying into the process of the making of the work of art? Can we get behind the final product? Thus it seems, at least in part, that for Sailhamer the question is not really: text or event? Rather, the question is: text or event-of-authorial-activity/compositional process? This event-of-authorial-activity can be seen, according to Sailhamer, in "the commentary ... inserted into the poetry by the author in the final stages of composition" (573-74). How does he know that parts of the poetry were inserted later? Because similar phrases appear elsewhere? Does that prove the case?

Sailhamer is very interested in this "authorial commentary," and as an instance of it he identifies the final phrase of Gen 49:18, which he translates, "I will wait, O LORD, for your salvation," as falling into this category of material (327 n. 68; cf. also 573-74). But what evidence leads him to the view that this is a comment from the author of the Pentateuch rather than a comment from Jacob, who is depicted as speaking through this whole section (Gen 49:1)?

This is a significant question in view of Sailhamer's method. In response to a question from Collin Hansen, Sailhamer writes of later OT authors,

They had essentially the same Pentateuch we have today, plus a number of comments that they passed along as their explanatory notes. Being for the most part prophets, their comments and explanations ultimately found their way into the later versions of the Old Testament text. It is in those notes that we can see most clearly their longing for the coming of a Savior foretold by Moses in the poems of the Pentateuch.<sup>8</sup>

These are momentous assertions! First, Sailhamer is claiming that there are interpretive comments in the Pentateuch from later biblical authors. Second, he claims that this "authorial commentary" provides the clearest window into the developing messianic hope. In view of the significance these comments play in Sailhamer's interpretive scheme, a more specific discussion of criteria for distinguishing between comments from Moses and comments that supposedly come from later authors is needed.

*The Meaning of the Pentateuch* is a long book with many discussions of these issues, but the nature of the book is such that each return to the issue of compositional strategy has the feel of another set of introductory comments that are only scratching the surface. These comments never seem to go beyond what can be said within the confines of an article that stands by itself, and it is unfortunate that we do not get an examination of the issues that probes new depths each time a topic discussed earlier is resumed.

Sailhamer writes, "The goal of the interpretation of the OT is its author's intent" (68). But this goal is complicated in Sailhamer's program because he is not only interested in the text as it now stands, but pursues the question of "whether and to what extent a biblical book may have been interpreted after its initial composition" (265).

This is a good question, but Sailhamer is not merely referring to interpretations of earlier texts *in later texts*, but later interpretations that are now *part of* the earlier text. So he speaks, for instance, of “commentary” that has been “inserted into the poetry by the author in the final stages of composition. As such, [these comments] reflect the central interests of the final shape of the Pentateuch and the Tanak” (573–74). The author, here, is not Moses, but someone who stands at the end of the line of prophets and is now issuing what Sailhamer refers to as “Pentateuch 2.0” (e.g., 48, see §4.1 below). But again, how does Sailhamer know these are later insertions? And if we are to follow him, how do we distinguish between the earlier text and the later commentary? Is this a method that has constraints or is it dependent upon Sailhamer’s ability to catch glimpses of authors at work? If we follow him in trying to catch such glimpses, are we still seeking to interpret the text as it now stands?

It seems that we are not looking at Rembrandt’s painting and interpreting it. Instead, we are looking at Rembrandt’s painting, and Sailhamer is pointing to what he sees as evidence that some later artist has highlighted colors or darkened hues to add interpretive nuance. I will have more to say below (§4.3) on the “text or event” question. In this section I have tried to capture the way that Sailhamer argues for interpreting the “text” but moves from the text to the “event” of later “authorial” activity. Color me unconvinced.

### 3.4 SAILHAMER’S DIALOGUE PARTNERS

It is surprising to me that there is no mention—not a single reference—to prominent recent evangelical Old Testament theologians. Sailhamer never once references Paul House’s *Old Testament Theology*. Neither T. Desmond Alexander’s *From Paradise to the Promised Land* nor his *The Servant King* appear, nor does either Stephen Dempster’s *Dominion and Dynasty* or William J. Dumbrell’s *The Faith of Israel*.<sup>9</sup> And Sailhamer neither refers to nor interacts with the recent Old Testament theologies by Bruce Waltke and Eugene Merrill.<sup>10</sup>

Sailhamer is of course free to ignore these contributions to evangelical Old Testament theology, but if he is going to do so he is not in position to make assertions about what evangelical Old Testament theology has overlooked, downplayed, or must deal with in the future. If he is not going to interact with evangelicals who are writing on Old Testament theology, he should not make statements like these:

Page 72: “evangelicals have much to ponder about their approaches to biblical narrative.... a basic lack of clarity among evangelicals ...”

Page 102: “Given its commitment to the Bible as the necessary starting point of a biblical theology, evangelicalism must continue to rethink itself in light of its starting point ...”

Page 110: “it is equally important for evangelicals to look at these same events . . .”

Page 122: “If, today, evangelicals desire to reclaim their focus on an inspired text ...”

How does he know that these things are not being done? At many points Alexander, Dempster, Dumbrell, House, and others<sup>11</sup> have agreed with Sailhamer. Unfortunately, Sailhamer limits his interaction to Walter C. Kaiser Jr., Geerhardus Vos, figures from church history (in Latin), a smattering of German authors, and various higher critical scholars—many of whom cannot really be expected to agree with him. The historical figures were operating with different categories, and the higher critics start from a different set of presuppositions.

Since he does not interact with recent evangelical Old Testament theology, to say nothing of New Testament theology and biblical theology (no mention of Beale, Goldsworthy, Leithart, Martens, McConville, Motyer, Schreiner, or Scobie), Sailhamer’s discussion of “Evangelical approaches to biblical theology” (178–82) rings hollow. What evangelicals take these approaches? Nor does Sailhamer inspire confidence that he is in position to say things like, “Contemporary evangelical bib-

lical theologians have taken three approaches” (551)—he cites no one as he describes what they have done.

Let me say again that I would have no problem with Sailhamer never citing the main stream of Old Testament theologians who are writing in English right now (Alexander, Dempster, Dumbrell, House, Merrill, Waltke, etc.) if he were not constantly making comments about evangelical scholarship.<sup>12</sup> An author is free to choose his dialogue partners, and he can limit his conversation to as few as he pleases. The problem arises when so many assertions are made about the state of evangelical scholarship. For instance, Sailhamer writes, “As we have noted often in this book, contemporary evangelical biblical theology has focused not so much on the text of the OT as on the historical events pointed to in that text” (550). Sailhamer gives the impression that Kaiser and Vos<sup>13</sup> are representative of evangelical Old Testament theology at large, and that is simply not the case. He typically refers to “evangelical attitudes” and “evangelical approaches” (three times on page 566) but cites no one in particular.

In view of Sailhamer’s lack of interaction with evangelical biblical theologians writing in English in the last two decades, it is startling that he would write, “My treatment of evangelical theologians and biblical scholars, and their views of history and the Bible, stands at the center of the argument of this book. Simply put, real (historical) biblical events ... came to replace the biblical version of that history found on the pages of the OT” (604). This statement may have been true of the situation in 1975, perhaps even 1990, but it is no longer the case in these days of a renewed interest in typology and biblical theology, narrative theology, and even “theological interpretation of Scripture.” This comment of Sailhamer’s is reminiscent of the argument made by Hans Frei in his 1977 book, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, which has had widespread influence. The mention of Frei’s *Eclipse* provides a natural transition to the question of typology.

### 3.5 TYPOLOGY?

It does not seem to me that Sailhamer’s treatment of typology in this book will bring clarity to the discussion of the issue. Summarizing Frei’s description of precritical biblical interpretation, Sailhamer speaks positively of “figuration,” but he appears to distinguish between “figuration” and “typology.” He writes,

In figuration, each individual story is cast as a figure, or similarity [*sic*], of other stories. OT stories thus can be figures of NT stories, and biblical stories in general can be figures of events in the life of individual readers. Discovering connections through meditation on Scripture thus becomes the central means of spiritual enlightenment and understanding (cf. Josh 1:8; Ps 1:2). This does not mean that OT stories can be read as “types” or “symbols” of NT stories. It means that “in reality,” real events recounted in the OT have a basic similarity to real events recounted in the NT and events in the “real life” of individual readers of both. For there to be figuration, the events of both Testaments must be real. Only in that way can a real (historical) connection exist between the two events (91).

This quote gives the impression that figuration is different from typology, and that whereas figuration depends on real events having taken place, since figuration is different from typology, that might not be the case with typology. Sailhamer is summarizing Frei approvingly, but Frei made no such distinction between typology and figuration. That Frei equated the two is apparent from the way he uses the terms interchangeably, for instance: “... to make earlier biblical stories figures or types of later stories and of their events and patterns of meaning.” And again a few pages later, Frei writes, “Typology or figuration,” and again, “figural or typological interpretation.”<sup>14</sup>

My complaint is that Sailhamer is not sufficiently clear on this point. I am not sure he is defining typology in a way that would be accepted

by those who write on the issue. Earle Ellis has helpfully contrasted typology with other interpretive methods:

Unlike allegorical exposition, the typology of the NT writers represents the OT not as a book of metaphors hiding a deeper meaning but as an account of historical events and teachings from which the meaning of the text arises. Unlike a Judaizing hermeneutic, typology views the relationship of OT events to those in the new dispensation not as a “one-to-one” equation or correspondence, in which the old is repeated or continued, but rather in terms of two principles, historical correspondence and escalation.<sup>15</sup>

Sailhamer may not intend to distinguish typology from figuration, and he may not intend to suggest that typology deals with “unreal” events while figuration deals with “real” events. His words seem to indicate that he does mean to do just that, and if so he is alone in using the terms this way. Beale writes, “[M]ost scholars today agree that typology is not allegory because it is based on the actual historical events of the Old Testament passage being dealt with and because it essentially consists of a real, historical correspondence between the Old Testament and New Testament event.”<sup>16</sup>

Sailhamer later says that another word for “‘spiritual’ interpretation” is typology (228), and in his unpersuasive explanation of the use of Hos 11:1 in Matt 2:15 he writes, “When Matthew quoted Hosea 11:1 as fulfilled in the life of Christ, he was not resorting to typological interpretation of OT events. He was, rather, drawing the *sensus literalis* of the OT description of the exodus from the book of Hosea” (513).<sup>17</sup> In the conclusion of his book he alleges, “The church has reversed the order by reading the OT in light of the NT (typology and allegory)” (606).

If Sailhamer is embracing Frei’s description of precritical interpretation, along with figuration, that is a good thing (but see his description of his own approach as “neither ‘critical’ or ‘pre-

critical’ but noncritical” [7]). There is no warrant for distinguishing between typology and figural interpretation. If someone is going to distinguish between the two, characteristics peculiar to each should be clearly stated. Equating typology with “spiritual interpretation” muddies the waters, as does lumping typology in with allegory. Sailhamer claims that the New Testament authors interpreted the Old Testament just as later Old Testament authors interpreted earlier Old Testament texts. With this I agree, and I have argued that the interpretations of Old and New Testament authors are often typological.<sup>18</sup>

## 4. POINTS OF DISAGREEMENT

### 4.1 PENTATEUCH 2.0

Sailhamer translates Deuteronomy 34:10 to mean “A prophet like Moses never did arise in Israel, one who knew God face to face,” then writes, “Clearly, the author who made this statement knows about the entire line of prophets who followed Moses.... All of them have come and gone, and Moses had no equal. A huge jump is made here at the end of the Pentateuch, taking us from the last days of Moses to the last days of the prophets” (31).<sup>19</sup> This is a massive claim, one that we might expect to find supported in great detail. Surely other ways of interpreting the phrase will be discussed and eliminated, and ample evidence in support of the far reaching claims presented, defended, with alternative explanations shown to be implausible. Instead, Sailhamer only makes the assertion, then moves on as though the case is closed.

Sailhamer’s view is a possible understanding of the meaning of Deut 34:10, but it is not the only possibility. Is there evidence in the Old Testament that other figures are described with similar statements? Consider the description of Hezekiah in 2 Kgs 18:5 (ESV): “He trusted in the LORD the God of Israel, so that there was none like him among all the kings of Judah after him, nor among those who were before him.” I doubt that the author of 2 Kings wants his audience to think that Hezekiah

really was greater than even David, and there is evidence that he is speaking hyperbolically in 2 Kgs 23:25 (ESV) when he uses similar language about Josiah: “Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moses, nor did any like him arise after him.” Wait a minute. The author said in 2 Kgs 18:5 there was none like Hezekiah after him, and now 2 Kgs 23:25 says that there was no king like Josiah before or after him—and he was after Hezekiah. We could take these statements very literally and claim they are contradicting each other. Or we could understand these two statements as hyperbolic ways of emphasizing the greatness of Hezekiah and Josiah. I am inclined to think, against Sailhamer, that Deut 34:10 is speaking of Moses hyperbolically, similar to the ways Hezekiah and Josiah are described. If that is the case, then Deut 34:10 does not demand that the whole line of prophets has come and gone.

#### 4.2 ABRAHAM AND MOSES

Sailhamer repeatedly contrasts Abraham and Moses:

The Pentateuch is a lesson drawn from the lives of its two leading men, Abraham and Moses. The Pentateuch lays out two fundamentally dissimilar ways of “walking with God” (Deut 29:1): one is to be like Moses under the Sinai law, and is called the “Sinai covenant”; the other, like that of Abraham (Gen 15:6), is by faith and apart from the law, and is called the “new covenant” (14).

And again:

Simply put, we will argue that the authors of the OT Scriptures were prophets, not priests. Their heroes were not like Moses, who focused on keeping the law, but like Abraham, who focused on a life of faith and was reckoned as one who kept the law (Gen 15:6) (66).

Small problem: at least Jeremiah and Ezekiel were priests (Sailhamer does not discuss these facts). Are there not similarities between, for instance, the way the nation rejected and opposed Moses and their later treatment of Jeremiah? Could Jeremiah have seen these similarities and presented himself as an installment in a life of “prophets like Moses” (cf. Deut 18:15–18), who were opposed by the wicked in Israel just as Moses was, and could this typological pattern be fulfilled in Jesus (cf. Acts 3:22–23 and 7:37)?<sup>20</sup> Ezra, too, may be presented as a kind of new Moses.

A third example:

The author of the Pentateuch understood this well. That is why he, like the apostle Paul, illustrates the nature of faith with stories from the life of Abraham (Gen 26:5) rather than Moses (Num 20:12) (556).

This is bizarre and absurd, and I think Sailhamer owes Moses an apology and should probably (at least) offer one to the author of Hebrews as well. Moses is clearly presented as a man of faith in Heb 11:23–29. Moses considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt and left Egypt by faith (11:26–27). And this is not to impose the New Testament’s interpretation of Moses onto the Old Testament. The Old Testament authors who celebrate Moses as a hero were not doing something wrong (advocating legalism or clinging to the old covenant rather than the new) but holding Moses up as the man of faith that he was. Yahweh calls Moses “my servant” (Josh 1:2). First Chronicles 6:49 calls Moses “the servant of God.” Ezra 3:2 calls him “the man of God.” And there are many other examples along these lines. Sailhamer’s over-interpretation of Num 20:12 pushes a maverick conclusion that is out of step with the broader context of the Pentateuch, the rest of the Old Testament, and the New. Moses does not enter the promised land, a tragic consequence of a sinful failure, but there is no indication that he was not a man of faith. He knew the LORD

face to face (Num 12:8; Deut 34:10).

These kinds of false dichotomies do not help us understand what the Pentateuch actually teaches. The law of Moses is a law that must be kept by faith. The only thing that is going to cause an Israelite to take an expensive, flawless animal and sacrifice it is faith in what Moses has said. The only thing that is going to cause an Israelite to leave home and goods unprotected to go to Jerusalem thrice yearly is faith. The only thing that will prompt them to release debts in the seventh year is faith, and so forth. They had to believe that God had spoken through Moses (cf. Exod 24:7), believe that it was more dangerous to disobey this God than to obey him (cf. Lev 10), and believe that if they did what Moses said, Yahweh would be pleased with them. The law of Moses had to be kept by faith. And this also strikes against Sailhamer's view of the purpose of the law, which is related to his view of what happened at Sinai.

#### **4.3 THE EVENT AT SINAI AND THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW**

Sailhamer's understanding of what happened at Sinai goes against his own program of interpreting the text as it now stands. Rather than interpreting the canonical text, Sailhamer seems to go behind the text to get at what really happened at Sinai. He argues that Exod 19:13 calls both Moses *and* the people to ascend the mountain to worship God. According to Sailhamer, there are different versions of what happened at Sinai. In the first (Exod 19:1–16a), the whole nation is to be a kingdom of priests. In the second (Exod 19:16b–25), there is a distinction between the people and the priests (378–79). Sailhamer explains that the nation was commanded to ascend the mountain in Exod 19:13, sinned by refusing to do so because they were afraid, and as a result God gave them the law:

In light of these compositional clarifications in Exodus 20:18–21, what we learn about Exodus 19 is that God's original intention to meet with the people on the mountain (Ex 19:13b; cf. Ex 3:12)

was fundamentally altered by the people's fear of approaching God (Ex 19:16b). In their fear, the people traded a personal, face-to-face relationship with God for a priesthood (392).

This is not at all the picture we arrive at if we interpret the canonical text as it stands. Exodus 19:12 calls for boundaries to be set up around the mountain so that the people will not even touch it, and the relevant verb in 19:13b (יעלִי) can easily be understood to mean "they shall come up to the mountain" (ESV) or "they shall come near the mountain" (NKJV). Only if the context were disregarded and we looked behind the text would we take this verb, as Sailhamer does, to call the people to ascend the mountain with Moses. The context is clear that if they so much as touch the mountain they will be stoned (Exod 19:12b). Yahweh calls Moses up the mountain (19:20), and then he sends him back down to warn the people again that they are to keep a safe distance from the mountain (19:21–25). The text does not tell Sailhamer's story.

It seems to me that Sailhamer here is not interpreting the text but going behind it to the event, against his own hermeneutical protestation. He writes, "These are important biblical-theological questions that lie behind the present shape of the Sinai narrative" (389). Against this, I would argue with Sailhamer against Sailhamer that biblical theology should be driven by the final form of the canonical text.

It seems to me that Sailhamer has invented a fictional event that never happened, and then on this he builds a false theology. Rather than interpret the contents of the Pentateuch that consist of legal material, he identifies collections of laws and explains,

If we look at the various sets of laws edited into the Pentateuch, we can see that there were several "transgressions." Throughout the narratives of Exodus 19–Deuteronomy there are numerous examples of Israel's failure to follow God's will.

Here we can see the hand of the author at work. After each episode of disobedience we see that God gave Israel a new and more complete set of laws. As Israel continued to transgress the laws given to them, God continued to give them more. God did not give up on his people. When they sinned, he added laws to keep them from sinning further. The laws were not added to keep them from sinning; the laws were added to keep them from disappearing into the world of sin around them (561).

So according to Sailhamer, Israel failed at Mount Sinai by not ascending the mountain. Then after Israel sinned again with the golden calf, Sailhamer argues that “the episode of the golden calf is intended to signal a fundamental change in the nature of the Sinai covenant” (362). He explains,

What began as a covenant between God and Israel, fashioned after that of the patriarchs (the Decalogue and the Covenant Code), had quickly become an increasingly more complex set of restrictions and laws primarily aimed at the priesthood (the Priestly Code) (363).

None of this, in my judgment, matches what we find in the final form of the canonical text of the Pentateuch, nor is it reflected by the way that the rest of the Old Testament deals with what happened at Sinai and the Law God gave through Moses. Sailhamer interprets Gal 3:19 to support this strange view of his, but Paul’s statement that the law “was added because of transgressions” (Gal 3:19 ESV) could be taken in a number of ways. Thomas Schreiner says that four views predominate: that the law was given to (1) restrain sin; (2) define sin; (3) deal with sin; and (4) increase sin, and Schreiner opts for the last.<sup>21</sup> From this summary we can see that Sailhamer’s view is not a prominent option among those who comment on Gal 3:19.

Nor does it match the Pentateuch itself. In Deuteronomy the law is God’s good gift to his people

(e.g., Deut 4:5–8; 6:24–25). After the Ten Commandments are rehearsed (Deut 5:1–21), Deuteronomy 6–26 exposit, interprets, and applies the ten commandments to a variety of situations and circumstances.<sup>22</sup> The narratives in Joshua–Kings employ the language of Deuteronomy to interpret Israel’s history, and the prophets from Isaiah through the Twelve indict Israel for breaking the covenant. The prophets also warn that the consequences of the covenant are coming on Israel, culminating in exile, but the prophets point beyond exile to a glorious restoration. After exile, back in the land, Malachi calls the people to remember the law of Moses (Mal 4:6). Texts in the writings such as Psalm 1, 119, and Proverbs 3 present the law of Moses as the path to blessedness (cf. also Eccl 12:9–14). Ezra set his heart to study, teach, and do the law (Ezra 7:10), and with Nehemiah’s aid he taught it to the people (Neh 8).

Never does the Old Testament indicate that the nature of the mosaic covenant was altered because the people sinned. Rather, the narratives in the former Prophets, the message of the latter Prophets, and the songs and narratives of the Writings all relate the fulfillment of what Moses prophesied in texts such as Leviticus 26, Deut 4:25–31, and 28–32. These texts point forward to a new covenant beyond the curses of the mosaic covenant, beyond the exile, but they do not indicate that God changed the character of the mosaic covenant in response to Israel’s sin.

#### **4.4 OTHER DISAGREEMENTS**

There are other problems with this book, such as the unjustified statements about the MT of Jeremiah (165–67)<sup>23</sup> and the way this influences his reading of Daniel 9 (214–15), the mistaken perspective that “According to the version of the Tanak that ends with Ezra–Nehemiah, there are no significant events to be expected in Israel’s subsequent history” (214),<sup>24</sup> the way that Sailhamer plays the “two altars” against each other (357–63), and the suggestion that the covenant in Deuteronomy 29 is to be distinguished from the

Sinai covenant (400, 403–15, 553). Rather than explain Sailhamer's positions and offer alternative proposals, I will simply say that I find Sailhamer's treatments of these issues unsatisfying both for reasons of methodology and for their lack of explanatory power.

## 5. CONCLUSION

We noted above that Sailhamer argues for an interpretation of the text as it stands. He likens this to interpreting a painting by Rembrandt rather than comparing the painting to a photograph of the thing painted. As I read Sailhamer's *The Meaning of the Pentateuch*, it looks to me like he moves away from the interpretation of the text itself in at least two ways. First, he moves from the text to the event of the text's composition, seeking to catch a glimpse of the author at work (§3.3 above). Second, he moves from the text to the events behind the text at Sinai (§4.3 above).

I submit that Sailhamer makes these moves away from the text itself because interpreting the text demands that we examine more than the text itself. Knowing how Rembrandt worked, what materials he used, who influenced him, and what was happening beyond his canvas helps us understand the painting before us. In addition, Rembrandt probably sought to deepen, enrich, and teach through his art. He sought to do this by capturing what his contemporaries experienced in real life, and his artistic depiction of it was intended to help them see what was there in real life. The biblical authors expect their audiences to read their works in a wider context of shared assumptions and given realities. Can all of that be communicated in a text? Experts on Rembrandt do not interpret the paintings without reference to what is beyond the painting itself. Sailhamer's emphasis on the text is salutary, but that emphasis must be balanced with the reality that in order to understand the text, at many points we must do some historical reconstruction.<sup>25</sup> I am not rejecting Sailhamer's point, only seeking to balance it, fully aware that he might take that as a rejection

of his point.

Here at the end of this review let me say that though I have catalogued many points that puzzled me and many others with which I disagreed, John Sailhamer is a fascinating and stimulating author. It was a joy to read this book and engage its arguments. Ultimately our interpretations and proposals must be measured against the text itself, as Sailhamer writes,

Continual rereading may also suggest that one's idea of the meaning of the Pentateuch is basically wrong and in need of being replaced.... Obviously, such a process requires a great deal of time in reading the Pentateuch. Commentaries and books about the Pentateuch may be helpful, but ultimately it is reading and rereading that tell us what the Pentateuch is about and what it intends to say (152).

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>John Sailhamer, "The Messiah and the Hebrew Bible," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44 (2001): 5–23.

<sup>2</sup>John Sailhamer, "Creation, Genesis 1–11, and the Canon," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 10 (2000): 89–106.

<sup>3</sup>For instance, what do the dots mean in note 76 on page 273? There are also numbers in this footnote, and it is not clear what they signify—here is an example from the list: "1 <1> Genesis .". In this footnote Sailhamer refers to nineteen instances of the word "book" in the Pentateuch, but then one of the sets of numbers only adds up to 18. Is this intentional?

<sup>4</sup>Footnoting a reference to the "author" of the book of Isaiah, the note reads, "This is not to say that Isaiah was not the author of the book of Isaiah, but rather to say that although there is a real distinction in status between a prophet, such as Isaiah, and the author of a book about a prophet, such as the book of Isaiah, it is important to distinguish the two kinds of tasks that one person would be called upon to perform" (321 n. 64). Does Sailhamer mean to suggest that the book of Isaiah is a book about the prophet? The book seems

to claim to be the vision of the prophet, not an autobiography (cf. Isaiah 1:1, “The vision of Isaiah . . .”). This footnote seems to reflect a sensitivity about the authorship of Isaiah, which is unnecessary given Sailhamer’s confessional stance and canonical approach.

<sup>5</sup>For discussions of the composition of the Pentateuch, see 22–29 (“The Composition of the Pentateuch”), chapter 4 (“Finding the Big Idea in the Final Composition of the Text”), 200–06 (“Compositional Approach”), 225–26 (“Part Two: Rediscovering the Composition of the Pentateuch within the Tanak”), 253–56 (“Exegesis and composition”), 265ff (“Composition, Canonization and Consolidation”), chapter 6 (“The Composition of the Pentateuch”), 323 (“The compositional strategy of the major poems”), 349 (“Legal Strategies . . . : A Compositional Approach”), chapter 7 (“Exploring the Composition of Legal Material in the Pentateuch”).

<sup>6</sup>For discussion of the many things that are not stated in texts but must be known to interpret them correctly, see Peter Leithart, *Deep Exegesis: The Mystery of Reading Scripture* (Waco: Baylor, 2009).

<sup>7</sup>For my argument that the center of the Pentateuch’s theology, as well as the center of the whole Bible’s theology, is the glory of God in salvation through judgment, see James M. Hamilton Jr., *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010).

<sup>8</sup>John Sailhamer, “Finding Meaning in the Pentateuch,” interview by Collin Hansen [cited 11 January 2010]. Online: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/januaryweb-only/12-11.0.html?start=1>.

<sup>9</sup>Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998); T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Main Themes of the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995); T. D. Alexander, *The Servant King: The Bible’s portrait of the Messiah* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1998); Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003); William J. Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel: A Theological Survey of the Old Testament* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002).

<sup>10</sup>Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: An*

*Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007); Eugene H. Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2006).

<sup>11</sup>Including myself. In James M. Hamilton Jr., “The Glory of God in Salvation Through Judgment: The Centre of Biblical Theology?,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 57 (2006): 57–84, I state in note 7 on page 58 that I am following Sailhamer, among others, in pursuing canonical biblical theology; and in “The Seed of the Woman and the Blessing of Abraham,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 58 (2007): 253–73, I rely very much on the insights in Sailhamer, “Creation, Genesis 1–11, and the Canon.”

<sup>12</sup>For example: page 295 refers to a “consensus” but cites no one; page 303 refers to “Some recent studies” but cites none; page 419 refers to “NT scholars” but cites none; page 513, “It is axiomatic among most OT scholars,” citing only Leon Wood; page 548, “Most covenant theologians today,” citing none; page 563, “Although evangelicals often have understood the question of salvation in the OT in terms of the beliefs of particular individuals in the OT, such an aim is not the focus of a textually based biblical theology,” citing no one.

<sup>13</sup>Discussing Vos on page 569, Sailhamer writes, “This view of OT salvation has enjoyed a continuing influence in the thinking of evangelical biblical theologians,” but he cites no one. Nor does he refer to discussions of Vos’s thinking and those who have followed him in, e.g., Vern Sheridan Poythress, “Kinds of Biblical Theology,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 70 (2008): 129–42.

<sup>14</sup>Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University, 1974), 2, 6, 19.

<sup>15</sup>E. Earle Ellis, “Foreword,” in Leonhard Goppelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New* (trans. Donald H. Madvig; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), x.

<sup>16</sup>G. K. Beale, “Did Jesus and His Followers Preach the Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts? An Examination of the Presuppositions of Jesus’ and the Apostles’ Exegetical Method,” in *The Right Doctrine from the*

*Wrong Texts? Essays on the Use of the Old Testament in the New* (ed. G. K. Beale; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 395.

<sup>17</sup>It seems to me that part of the problem in this instance is that Sailhamer is understanding Matthew's use of Hosea as an instance of typology even as he insists it is not typology and calls it instead the *sensus literalis*. When he writes, "Hosea himself may have actually understood his reference to the historical exodus as a metaphor or symbol of the coming messianic kingdom" (514), he is not far from saying that the historical exodus has become a type of a new exodus. If that is what he means, then he is also a short step from saying that Matthew has read Hosea to be citing the first exodus in order to point forward to the new exodus, which Matthew claims to be fulfilled in Jesus. See also the way that Sailhamer speaks of the magi being "patterned after Balaam," Herod slaying the children being "modeled after the story of Pharaoh," and of Christ as "a 'new Moses'" (521 n. 100). All of this is moving in the direction of typological interpretation. For my typological interpretation of Hos 11:1 in Matt 2:15, see James M. Hamilton Jr., "The Virgin Will Conceive: Typological Fulfillment in Matthew 1:18–23," in *Built upon the Rock: Studies in the Gospel of Matthew* (ed. John Nolland and Dan Gurtner; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 243.

<sup>18</sup>James M. Hamilton Jr., "Was Joseph a Type of the Messiah? Tracing the Typological Identification between Joseph, David, and Jesus," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 12 (2008): 52–77; idem, "The Lord's Supper in Paul," in *The Lord's Supper* (ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Matt Crawford; Nashville: B&H, forthcoming); idem, "The Virgin Will Conceive: Typological Fulfillment in Matthew 1:18–23"; and at many places in idem, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment*.

<sup>19</sup>Cf. also note 19 on page 19: "If Deuteronomy 34 also tells us that the prophet promised in Deuteronomy 18 "never came" (rather than "has not yet come"), then the former chapter likely was written at a time when there were no more prophets. Prophecy had ceased." The ESV renders Deut 34:10, "And there has not arisen ..."; the NAS, "Since then no prophet

has risen ..."; the NIV, "Since then, no prophet has risen...." It seems that the Hebrew phrase in question, וְלֹא־קָמוּ נְבִיאַי עוֹד, could mean "And there *still* has not arisen" or "And a prophet did not arise *again*," with "still," "yet," and "again" all possible meanings of עוֹד. Thus, Sailhamer does not present us with all the possibilities, nor does he argue for the one he chooses.

<sup>20</sup>See further Hamilton, "Was Joseph a Type of the Messiah?"

<sup>21</sup>Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians* (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming).

<sup>22</sup>See esp. Dennis T. Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses: A Theological Reading* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

<sup>23</sup>I say these statements are unjustified because I see no evidence of the kind of exhaustive study of the translation technique of the Greek Jeremiah that would put someone in position to make the kinds of claims Sailhamer makes. See esp. Peter J. Gentry, "The Septuagint and the Text of the Old Testament," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 16 (2006): 217–18, n. 66; and Peter J. Gentry, "The Text of the Old Testament," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 52 (2009): 43–44, n. 84.

<sup>24</sup>For a stimulating study, see J. G. McConville, "Ezra–Nehemiah and the Fulfillment of Prophecy," *Vetus Testamentum* 36 (1986): 205–24.

<sup>25</sup>I have described the task of biblical theology as follows: "When we do biblical theology we are trying to lay hold of the perspective from which the biblical authors have interpreted earlier biblical texts and from which they write. We are looking for the matrix of assumptions and conclusions that necessitate the statements made by the biblical authors. We are trying to get at the world view that gives rise to the assertions the biblical authors make. The only access we have to their beliefs and assumptions is what they actually wrote, so biblical theology seeks to understand the literary features that the biblical authors used to: (1) structure their message, (2) connect it to earlier Biblical passages, (3) locate it in the grand story, and thus (4) encourage their audience by showing them God's glory in his displays of jus-

tice, all of which highlight his mercy and love for his people. Biblical theology is the attempt to understand the Bible in its own terms” (James M. Hamilton Jr., “Biblical Theology and Preaching,” in *Text Driven Preaching: God’s Word at the Heart of Every Sermon*, ed. Daniel L. Akin, David Allen, and Ned L. Mathews [Nashville: B&H, forthcoming]).