

# Paul Blackham: a Trinitarian Reading of the Old Testament

Andy Saville

## Who is Paul Blackham?

Revd. Dr. Paul Blackham was until recently the Associate Minister (Theology) at All Souls, Langham Place, where he had served since completing his training at Oak Hill in 1997. In early 2008 Dr. Blackham moved to the Farm Fellowship, a new church plant in Tarleton, Preston, as an All Souls mission partner.<sup>1</sup> Born in 1970, he studied theology at King's College, London, where he completed his PhD under Colin Gunton on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the work of Thomas Goodwin, the Puritan Congregationalist.<sup>2</sup> His chief area of influence, and the focus of this study, has been in the Trinitarian interpretation of the Old Testament.<sup>3</sup>

## Why study his theology?

There are two main reasons for a study of Dr. Blackham's theology: his ideas are important, and his influence is significant.

Dr. Blackham is an able and passionate advocate for his views, and he has had a noticeable influence amongst conservative evangelicals, mainly at the more popular level.<sup>4</sup> His ministry at one of the largest churches in London has influenced many hundreds of people, particularly through his *Frameworks* course which combined systematic and biblical theology over 24 or so weeks.<sup>5</sup> He also contributed to the *Open Home: Open Bible* video course from Creative Publishing and CPO. More recently he has authored the *Book by Book* material, an on-going series of booklets and DVDs on biblical books, which he co-hosts on screen with Richard Bewes.<sup>6</sup>

In 2001 he took part in a debate at Oak Hill with Graeme Goldsworthy, Lecturer in Biblical Studies at Moore College, Sydney, Australia, on the subject of "Faith in Christ in the Old Testament".<sup>7</sup> Later that year he was invited to Australia to give the keynote addresses at a national Leadership Consultation of the Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Communion (Australia).<sup>8</sup> He has also written a modest number of articles and chapters.

Thus far there has been little critical interaction with, and assessment of, Dr. Blackham's views,<sup>9</sup> in part because Dr. Blackham has not published widely.<sup>10</sup> Further his ideas are not widely shared amongst the current generation of academic evangelicals. I will therefore spend most of my time in exposition, quoting fairly extensively, so that the shape of, and arguments for, his position can be perceived.

### What are his distinctive views?

While no one's theology can be neatly labelled, in current terminology Dr. Blackham would be best termed a 'conservative evangelical'. He thus stands in the broad orthodox, reformed theological tradition.

The area of Dr. Blackham's thought that has gained the most notice is his Trinitarian reading of the Old Testament.<sup>11</sup> In brief, he argues that the Old Testament is explicitly Christian, and that the Old Testament saints had conscious faith in Christ. It is not simply that the faith of the Old Testament saints in promises and types was deemed to be faith in Christ, but that they knew the promises and types foreshadowed Christ and thus they consciously put their faith in him. Indeed, many of the saints actually met and recognised Christ in his pre-incarnate form. This is neatly summarised by the strap line of the Biblical Frameworks charity which produces the *Book by Book* series: 'The Joy of meeting Christ in all the Scriptures'. Building on this, Dr. Blackham also argues that all the Old Testament writers were self-conscious in their knowledge of the three distinct divine persons.

The clearest summary of Dr. Blackham's views is his chapter, "The Trinity in the Hebrew Scriptures" in *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology* ed. Paul Louis Metzger.<sup>12</sup> He has contributed a substantial Appendix to a *Bible Overview* by Steve Levy,<sup>13</sup> in which he deals with 'Frequently Asked Questions' about this more Trinitarian reading. The particular answers are fairly brief, and at a popular level, but they touch upon a wide range of biblical passages and issues. There are also many comments scattered through his *Book by Book* series, especially those on the Old Testament books, in his chapter, "Evangelicals and the Bible," in *Not Evangelical Enough! The gospel at the centre*,<sup>14</sup> and in his *Frameworks* series.<sup>15</sup> I will focus on these published works. A few quotes, of many, may serve to give an introductory flavour of his position.

Genesis 15:6 is the model of Christian faith throughout the Bible. Abram didn't just believe in 'God' in a general sense. He believed in Christ specifically; Christ who set the gospel promises in front of Abram.<sup>16</sup>

David as a Spirit-filled prophet was able to speak clearly, accurately, and directly about the work of the Messiah.<sup>17</sup>

The following quote is in the context of discussion of Luther, but reflects Dr. Blackham's own position:

Moses is an apostle of Jesus Christ—the gospel preached by Moses is exactly the same gospel preached by the New Testament apostles. The only point of difference is that Moses looked forward whereas the apostles looked back. The gospel has always been a matter of justification by faith alone in Christ alone since the beginning of the world.<sup>18</sup>

In following Luther, Dr. Blackham points to the extension of Moses' knowledge beyond the person of Christ to his work of justification. The saving faith of the Old Testament is thus explicit faith in the dying and rising of the incarnate second person of the Trinity. He argues on two chief grounds, which we will call exegetical and theological, supported by a third, the historical.

### The exegetical arguments

In his published work Dr. Blackham refers to a number of specific passages and broader arguments, sometimes in discussion of secondary authors. We will note three sets of passages: the New Testament quotations of the Old; the appearances of God in the Old Testament; and Old Testament passages which reveal directly more than one divine person.

The first set of passages are the New Testament quotations of the Old. For example, he discusses the Old Testament quotations in Hebrews 1: 'All these Scripture quotations are listed as manifestly showing those relations between the Son and the Father that we now label Trinitarian...'<sup>19</sup> There also more general statements about the Old Testament. Dr. Blackham discusses several of them in answer to the question 'Can the gospel of Christ really be understood from the Old Testament as well as the New Testament?'<sup>20</sup> He replies:

Jesus himself gave Bible studies that explained his person and work from the Old Testament. See Luke 24:45-47: Then he opened their minds so

they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, this is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.’

The apostles preached the gospel of Jesus Christ from the Old Testament.<sup>21</sup> He goes on to refer to a series of passages in Acts as evidence: Peter’s sermon in Acts 2, Acts 7, Acts 8.26-40, Acts 13.13-48 and 17.2-3. He concludes, ‘If both Jesus and his apostles preached his gospel from the Old Testament,... The gospel can certainly be understood in the Old Testament just as in the New Testament.’<sup>22</sup>

Dr. Blackham also finds support for this Christological reading of the Old Testament in the lack of any apparent difficulty in the New Testament to speak of Jesus as divine.

The New Testament never *struggles* to speak of Jesus as divine. It never indicates a tension between a Hebrew doctrine of Yahweh and any affirmations of the full divinity of Jesus. In fact, the constant and repeated assumption of the New Testament is that the Hebrew doctrine of God includes and demands a whole-hearted confession of the divinity of the Father, Son and Spirit.<sup>23</sup>

More broadly, Dr. Blackham notes that ‘In the gospels, Jesus actually imagines that anyone who read the Old Testament properly would be a Christian, a person who recognised Jesus as the Lord God of Israel’.<sup>24</sup> Conversely, ‘As long as we assume that the doctrine of the Trinity is the summit of a long process of development, there is no possibility of arriving at the exegetical results we find in...the New Testament itself.’<sup>25</sup>

Further support is offered in the observation that many Christological interpretations are used apologetically with Jews. Thus, for example,

The first chapter of Hebrews is a compilation of Hebrew Scriptures indicating the relationship of the Son to the Father... If the writer of the book of Hebrews were engaged in a theologically driven eisegesis we must ask to what extent this would have been persuasive to his original audience. If these Scriptures were not recording the Father’s declarations concerning his divine Son, then what value would they have to the Hebrew readers who were struggling to understand the identity of Jesus?<sup>26</sup>

Dr. Blackham contrasts his view with the common alternative construction:

The standard ‘story of the doctrine of the Trinity’ that I was taught cast the first generation of post-Pentecost believers as people in theological crisis. They were portrayed as committed to the ‘monotheism’ of the Hebrew Scriptures, but faced with the ‘problem’ of the obvious divinity of Jesus. Therefore, they had to ‘revise’ or ‘reconstruct’ their doctrine of God to cope with a second divine person. No sooner had they begun to do this than they were faced with a similar problem with the Spirit! Now they had to ‘revise’ further their doctrine of God until after much discovery and crisis they arrived, out of breath, three hundred years after Pentecost at ‘a doctrine of the Trinity’. This ‘story’, I grant, is a little simplified here, but I hope it is a recognizable account.<sup>27</sup>

In fact Dr. Blackham’s position is even more radically distinct from the standard story, in that he holds that the Old Testament is clearer than the New, in the sense of giving more sustained and detailed attention, on doctrines such as the Trinity:

Exodus is the book in which the doctrine of the Trinity receives its most detailed exposition. In no other book do we have such a careful delineation of the roles of the Three Persons. It is the best book from which to explain the Trinity.<sup>28</sup>

Therefore he can write of ‘that most brilliant and careful Trinitarian theologian, Moses’,<sup>29</sup>

One objection that Dr. Blackham responds to arises from the references to ‘mystery’ in the New Testament, which might seem to suggest that these things were not known previously.

Some have said that we should not speak about Christ in the Old Testament because He is the mystery ‘which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now *been* revealed’ [Eph. 3:5]. However, the next verse of Ephesians 3 explains that the mystery is not Christ, but the way in which Israel was extended out to include Gentiles all over the world—‘this mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs **together** with Israel, members **together** of one body, and sharers **together** in the promise in’ Jesus the Messiah. We see the same explanation of this ‘mystery’ in Romans 16:26 where the truth about the Messiah in the prophetic writings is now being revealed to the whole world.<sup>30</sup>

A second set of passages are those that refer to the appearing of the LORD God. Blackham's argument has 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. This distinction is clearest and most common in the Pentateuch.

I would like to explore one of the most obvious and foundational features of the Hebrew doctrine of Yahweh-Elohim, focusing on the writings of Moses...it will highlight reasons why the biblical scholars of the second century were able to pose the kind of theological challenge that they did.

The question of the visibility of the Living God is a key issue within the Bible. *Seeing* the Living God is taken very seriously. We see this in Exod. 33.18-23. Moses speaks to the LORD who hides himself in the thick darkness, and requests that he may see the Most High. This request is very firmly rejected. However, within the Pentateuch we find that there is a divine Person whose face may be seen, a divine Person who appears to a variety of people, Moses included. We need only look back earlier in Exodus 33 to see an example of this, in vv. 7-11.

Exodus 24.9-11 provides an intense and specific example of the visibility of the LORD God. This crucial Scripture acknowledges the significance of *seeing* the LORD. Far from being an isolated aberration within the Pentateuch, the *appearing* of the LORD is perhaps one of the most consistent features of this doctrine of God.<sup>31</sup>

Dr. Blackham concludes—

At face value this would naturally lead to the confession that one of the divine persons can be seen and one of the divine Persons cannot be seen. Surely, only on the strange assumption that the Living God must only be a single divine Person would we see any tension or difficulty here.<sup>32</sup>

An example of this logic at work is a comment on Genesis 3:

the LORD God came for an evening walk in His Garden. This tells us straight away that it was the Second Person of the Trinity who had come to see them—as no-one has ever seen the Father at any time (John 1:18).<sup>33</sup>

Blackham understands this to be the view of many of the early church fathers, such as Justin Martyr, and to inform their exegesis: ‘For Justin it is manifestly plain that the one God of Israel is not a single person, but a transcendent, invisible Father, an appearing, sent LORD, and the Spirit of the LORD.’<sup>34</sup>

The second step in this argument is that the LORD who appears was God the Son, and thus the Theophanies are Christophanies. I will say more about this below under ‘Theological argument’.

A third set of Old Testament passages are those which directly teach or demonstrate more than one divine person. There are many examples scattered throughout the *Book by Book* studies, including these—

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.<sup>35</sup>

So, the LORD on the mountain tells Moses and the people to get ready for the LORD to come down onto the mountain... What is happening here [in Exodus 19], with two LORDs on Mount Sinai? The Angel of the LORD has brought His people to meet with the LORD—the Son has brought His people to the Father.<sup>36</sup>

Exodus 33-35 is perhaps one of the clearest explanations of the Trinity in the whole Bible... The Yahweh-Person in the thick darkness is never seen. However, that is not the only person called Yahweh, the LORD, that Moses would meet with. In Exodus 33.7-11 Moses explains how he used to meet with the LORD face to face as a man speaks to his friend in a tent pitched at the bottom of the mountain. THIS Yahweh-Person has already been seen.<sup>37</sup>

In Hebrews 1:5 we are told that Psalm 2 contains a speech from the Father to the son. The same is true of Psalm 45:6-7 (Heb. 1:8-9), Psalm 102:25-27 (Heb. 1:10-12) and Psalm 110:1 (Heb. 1:13).<sup>38</sup>

### The Theological arguments

Dr. Blackham bases his belief that the appearances of God in the Bible are those of God the Son not only on the direct exegesis of Scripture, but also on the theological truth that the Son is always the mediator of the Father.

There only has ever been one Mediator between God and humanity and that is the Angel of the LORD, the One who later became one of us, born of the Virgin Mary, the man Christ Jesus—see 1 Timothy 2:5.<sup>39</sup>

A similar point is also made from Genesis chapter 1:

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. We will see that every work of God in the Bible is from the Father, through the Son and by the Holy Spirit.<sup>40</sup>

Dr. Blackham gives extensive discussion of this point in the first module of his Frameworks course, which reveals it as the key theological foundation of his thought. Therefore he can conclude:

So, in our study of God, in all our Bible reading, we are always asking, ‘what does this tell me of the Father or the Son or the Holy Spirit?’ and ‘how is all this related to Jesus Christ?’<sup>41</sup>

### The historical arguments

In response to the question ‘Do all Christians understand the Old Testament in this way?’,<sup>42</sup> he answers—

There are Christians who see the promises in the Old Testament as physical and earthly, and see those promises of God as speaking of nothing beyond earthly land, kings and signs. This perspective sees the Old Testament people as trusting in these promises, without knowing of the person of Christ.

However, it seems to us that the best way to understand the Old Testament is around the person and work of Jesus Christ. In all the promises and signs of the Old Testament, Jesus Christ was presented to his church. The great creeds and confessions of the historic Christian church tend to take this view of the Old Testament.<sup>43</sup>

Dr. Blackham then proceeds to quote from the Heidelberg catechism (Question 19), the 39 Articles (Article 7), the Westminster Confession (chapter 7) and the Baptist Confession of faith (Article 7). He also draws on a number of particular writers as advocates for his position.<sup>44</sup> In a conclusion he mentions the following from across the centuries:

When we adopt the theological convictions of exegetes such as Justin, Irenaeus, Luther, Owen, Edwards, and moderns like Colin Gunton, we are able to follow the careful detail of the Hebrew text in its delineation of the identity and roles of the divine Persons.<sup>45</sup>

Foremost among these are the patristic theologians of the second century, Justin Martyr being the most frequently quoted. Thus, for example,

The fundamental problem with this common narrative [see above] is that it does not do justice to the New Testament nor to the theological writings of the second century...the assumptions that we find scattered through the writings of Philo, Justin, Tertullian and Irenaeus.<sup>46</sup>

In summarising Justin's view, he writes—

When we read Justin's own account of the doctrine of God found in the Hebrew Scriptures we find a very robust account of the Trinitarian God, for Justin, the Jews who reject Jesus as the divine Messiah were rejecting the explicit and intentional theology of Moses and the prophets.<sup>47</sup>

It is striking that Dr. Blackham also highlights the century immediately before the incarnation as one in which the Old Testament was read in this way, as the reference to Philo above indicates: '...when we study the thought of biblical scholars of the first century BC through to the second century AD we do not find a theological crisis about describing the Second God, the Great Angel, Jesus the divine Messiah.'<sup>48</sup>

Moving ahead in time, Blackham quotes from Luther a number of times as an advocate of this reading, concluding:

Luther does not try to confine the theological truths of the earlier books [of the Old Testament] to a hypothetical embryonic faith, allowing it to slowly grow as the history of the world develops, in the manner of the theory of progressive revelation. Rather, the whole gospel of Jesus Christ is set out from the very first page of the Bible.<sup>49</sup>

Blackham also refers to the Puritans for support, although his concluding qualification rather weakens his argument at this point:

When we read the pre-critical exegesis of Puritan scholars, as well as the great Jonathan Edwards, we still find the general assumption that the

doctrine of God in the Hebrew Scriptures is Trinitarian, either fairly well-formed or at least present in principle.<sup>50</sup>

In David L. Baker's comprehensive survey of modern solutions to the issue of the relation of the Old and New Testaments, the position closest to Dr. Blackham's that he studies is that of Wilhelm Vischer.<sup>51</sup> There are differences, for example in the presence of Christ in the Old Testament,<sup>52</sup> but they share the 'basic presupposition...that the two Testaments have the same theology and the same Christology.'<sup>53</sup> Baker concludes on its historical significance—

This solution to the problem of the relationship between the Testaments is not new: it dates back to the earliest days of the church. In fact it may be considered the traditional Christian approach to the Old Testament, apart from that of Marcion [*sic!*] and his followers, until the rise of historical criticism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>54</sup>

Amongst more recent writers, not yet mentioned, who take a similar exegetical position to Dr. Blackham two of the more prominent academic writers are Walter Kaiser<sup>55</sup> and Anthony Hanson.<sup>56</sup> To give just one quotation from the latter—

According to Paul, Christ spoke in the Old Testament times to Moses, to David, and to Isaiah, proclaiming a gospel of faith in himself, and commissioning them to preach this faith, and foretelling his incarnation, cross, resurrection, and the accession of the Gentiles.<sup>57</sup>

The reason that this reading of the Old Testament is not universal is, Dr. Blackham claims, due above all to two points in church history. The first is the writing of Augustine:

Very few Hebrew exegetes actually take the time to explain and defend theologically a non-Trinitarian approach to these Scriptures. However, the great Augustine takes a great deal of care to explain why he departs from the exegetical tradition that has gone before him, beginning in Bk 2, ch. 7 of his mighty work *On the Trinity*... Augustine argues that it is essentially impossible for God to be seen, so all 'appearances' must be through creaturely intermediaries.<sup>58</sup>

Dr. Blackham draws on the work of Colin Gunton in his response. 'Professor Gunton showed that Augustine translated the text of Exodus into the language

of Neo-Platonism, losing on the process the primacy of the Persons over the divine substance.<sup>59</sup>

From the premises that the appearances of God were appearances of the divine substance and that this can only be mediated through a creature, it follows that there are no real theophanies.<sup>60</sup>

A related influence that Dr. Blackham sees adversely influencing the history of interpretation is that of Greek philosophy.

A classic approach to the doctrine of God produced in the Greek philosophical tradition begins with a definition of a single divine essence... When we begin from a tradition that sees a non-Trinitarian divine essence as the starting point for a doctrine of God, it is no surprise that...it creates exegetical difficulties.<sup>61</sup>

The second point of rejection was post-enlightenment critical biblical scholarship.

Critical biblical scholarship brought a definite change. The reasons for this are too complex for us to trace here (though all our minds are certainly reaching for Hegel right now), but we should certainly note the assumption of a progression of the doctrine of God through human history from animism, to polytheism, to monotheism and finally (for the Christian exponents of this perspective) Trinitarianism. Under such a theological understanding of history, it is anachronistic to recognize a Trinitarian faith in the early stages of Hebrew thought, for it would identify the final stage of the progression at a time when the Hebrew theologians were still (allegedly) struggling out of polytheism!<sup>62</sup>

Dr. Blackham laments, 'For too long Old Testament scholarship has been dominated by Yahwistic Unitarianism.'<sup>63</sup>

### Some implications of Dr. Blackham's position

#### (1) *Progressive revelation is sharply qualified*

Dr. Blackham directly addresses the question 'is the revelation of God 'progressive'? He answers—

Yes. The living God reveals so many aspects of Jesus Christ throughout the Bible. Although the gospel itself remains the same from first to last, yet it

is expressed and filled out in so many rich ways down the ages... Yes, the gospel of faith alone in Christ alone is the same from Genesis to revelation, yet surely Moses could describe more about the theology of atonement than the earlier saints? Surely the Prophet Isaiah could speak more fully of the sufferings of the divine Servant?<sup>64</sup>

However this involves less progression that is usually understood by the term. Indeed elsewhere Dr. Blackham makes it clear his view requires a rejection of the usual idea of progressive revelation. This is stated clearly in a favourable comment on Luther's view—

Thus Luther does not try to confine the theological truths of the earlier books to a hypothetical embryonic faith, allowing it to slowly grow as the history of the world develops, in the manner of the theory of progressive revelation. Rather, the whole gospel of Jesus Christ is set out from the very first page of the Bible.<sup>65</sup>

In expressing the teaching of Justin Martyr, Dr. Blackham expresses his own view: 'The content of the apostolic proclamation in Acts was new to Jewish audiences in but one respect: that the same Word known by the patriarchs had now come in the flesh.'<sup>66</sup>

Again, 'As long as we assume that the doctrine of the Trinity is the summit of a long process of development, there is no possibility of arriving at the exegetical results that we find in writers like Philo or Justin, or even the New Testament itself.'<sup>67</sup>

Indeed, Dr. Blackham raises an even more radical challenge, suggesting that the Old Testament revelation, and the older parts of it, are in certain ways actually superior. Thus, for example, he speaks of: 'That most brilliant and careful Trinitarian theologian Moses, ....'<sup>68</sup>

In this he is following a patristic view, which he mentions favourably.

Justin's understanding of history turns upside down the modernist understanding of history. For Justin, Moses is automatically more trustworthy, profound and truthful because he is older than the Greek philosophers... We find this same attitude to the antiquity of the Hebrew theologians in the New Testament. When Paul wishes to establish the truth

of his claims his preference is to go right back to Abraham and Moses—see Rom. 4.1, Acts 26.22-3 *et al.*<sup>69</sup>

(2) *The Sensus Plenior is rendered unnecessary*

Commonly linked to the idea of progressive revelation is that of the Old Testament scriptures having a *sensus plenior*—a fuller meaning—that the original authors did not grasp, but was understood in the light of further revelation.<sup>70</sup> Dr. Blackham rejects this on at least two grounds. First, the New Testament teaches that the Old Testament writers knew what they were writing about. In answer to the question, ‘Weren’t the writers of the Old Testament trying to work out what they had written according to 1 Peter 1:10-12?’, he replies—

They were not trying to understand what they were prophesying about. Sometimes people have suggested that these ancient prophets almost fell into strange trances and uttered words that they could not understand. However, Peter tells us that the prophets were carefully and intently searching to find out what and how their prophecies would be fulfilled... the Old Testament prophets wanted to know when and how Christ would suffer and then enter into his glory. This is so important. They knew that the Christ would suffer and that his glory would only come after that suffering... they also knew that their prophecies did not merely refer to the events of their own day and circumstances. It was revealed to them that their prophecies referred to a future time, the time of the Messiah.<sup>71</sup>

A second ground for rejecting the *sensus plenior* is the subjectivity it brings to interpretation. Dr. Blackham makes this point in his answer to the question: ‘Did the writers of the Hebrew Scriptures understand what they were writing?’

The meaning of these words can be understood by studying the grammar and context of the Scriptures. When they wrote these words they intended to convey specific meaning. Our job is simply to faithfully and carefully explain what the authors originally intended to say...we have to trust that the Old Testament writers meant what they said and said what they meant. If we deny this then it seems that we enter into a maze of personal opinion and speculation.<sup>72</sup>

Thus Dr. Blackham rejects what he calls ‘an imposed “Christian” eisegesis, claiming to find (whether by the Spirit of a new perspective) a “meaning” that the original authors knew nothing of.’<sup>73</sup>

*(3) We can follow the exegesis of the Apostles*

Dr. Blackham notes the relevance of this question: ‘Whether the New Testament authors had an exegetical method that is either possible or desirable to imitate is a matter that seems to attract more and more discussion.’<sup>74</sup> His own conclusion is: ‘When we reject the assumptions of one such as Harnack and acknowledge this Hebrew doctrine of God...we can understand and imitate the Trinitarian exegesis of the New Testament and the second-century scholars.’<sup>75</sup>

*(4) It provides a firmer foundation for the doctrines of God and the Gospel*

Dr. Blackham’s view provides a very significant argument against two related positions on the salvation of non-Christians. One position is that the Old Testament shows that there is a saving knowledge of God without a knowledge of Christ, and that contemporary theists may be in the same position, and thus saved. He highlighted this point in the conclusion of his prepared remarks in debate with Graeme Goldsworthy:

What difference does all this make? Is this an important issue? We live in a time when the whole of society is multi-faith and pluralistic. If the OT saints had real knowledge of God without knowledge of Christ, then knowledge of God without a knowledge of Christ is possible, reasonable. This is not just a theoretical problem. There are people, and there was a book just last year which used just such a view of the OT as a basis for inter-faith dialogue. We must stand firm on the biblical teaching that there is no knowledge of God without knowledge of Christ.<sup>76</sup>

A second position is that there is a common link between monotheistic religions, which could be used to argue that each is a stepping stone to true faith, or even a vehicle for salvation. Dr. Blackham comments: ‘The contemporary assumption that Islam, Judaism and Christianity all worship the same God is nourished by the tradition of classical theism.’<sup>77</sup> Once the Old Testament is seen as explicitly Trinitarian, this assumption is undermined.

Positively, Dr. Blackham sums up his hope that this re-discovery of what he believes is the biblical reading of the Old Testament will enrich theology more broadly.

Trinitarian theology is the subject of renewed interest. The solutions to the problems of third-millennium life are being rediscovered in the divine life

of the Three who are One. In the past, such Trinitarian thinking was deeply nurtured by an appreciation of the profoundly Trinitarian theology of the Hebrew Scriptures, but today this renaissance has been slow to arrive...I want to think about the theological assumptions that have prevented the depth of exegesis that we so desperately need at this time.<sup>78</sup>

## Conclusion

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. No doubt the reader will have many questions springing to mind. Dr. Blackham has attempted to answer at a popular level what he calls ‘Frequently Asked Questions’ of his view.<sup>79</sup> My own conclusion is that Dr. Blackham has pointed modern evangelicalism in the right direction to re-discover a truly Christian reading of the Old Testament, and that this renewed reading will serve to strengthen and enrich the church.

The Revd. Dr. ANDY SAVILLE is Assistant Minister at All Saints, Fordham, in the Diocese of Chelmsford.

## ENDNOTES

1. <<http://www.farmfellowship.com/wp/>>. On his personal web-site (<[http://web.me.com/paulblackham/Paul\\_Blackham/Home.html](http://web.me.com/paulblackham/Paul_Blackham/Home.html)>), which contains a wide range of material, Blackham describes the church as ‘part of a Jesus movement’.
2. For some key themes of this research, see “Thomas Goodwin: Word and Spirit” (The Congregational Library Lecture), 2001.
3. Debate tends to focus on the identification of the second person of the Trinity. In his biographical page on the All Souls web-site, his writing was summarized as ‘material about the interpretation of the OT’. (<<http://www.allsouls.org/ascm/allsouls/static/whoiswho/blackham.html>> accessed 09/02/09).
4. Writing in 2004, Andrew S. Malone of Ridley College, Melbourne, notes, ‘Blackham has created a noticeable wave on the issue in several countries and among a number of denominations.’ (“John Owen and Old Testament Christophanies,” *Reformed Theological Review* 63/3 (2004):139 [henceforth Owen], also available at <<http://www.theologian.org.uk/doctrine/johnowen.html>>). The best audio introduction to his views is a talk from 26th March 2001 entitled “Faith in Christ in the Old Testament” on the All Souls’ website.
5. Dr. Blackham produced full scripts of his *Frameworks* course over the years, and

these are gradually being revised and posted on the Farm Fellowship website at <<http://www.farmfellowship.com/wp/?cat=10>>.

6. Dr. Blackham is Chief Executive of Biblical Frameworks, which produces the Book by Book material. <<http://biblicalframeworks.com/index.html>>.
7. Available here <<http://www.theologian.org.uk/bible/blackham.html>>.
8. The EFAC site, where these addresses can be found, calls him ‘the controversial theologian’ (<<http://old.efac.org.au/>>).
9. Mr. Malone has published two articles which critique important aspects of Blackham’s position: Owen, and “The Invisibility of God: A Survey of a Misunderstood Phenomenon,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 79/4 (2007):311–29, also available at <<http://www.theologian.org.uk/bible/invisibility.html>>. A critical assessment of some of the texts Blackham uses is provided in James R Oakley’s BA dissertation, ‘Do the following texts imply a conscious faith in the person and work of Christ on the part of Old Testament saints? Genesis 15:6; John 8:56; Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6; Heb. 11:10,’ available at <<http://www.oakleys.org.uk/system/files/diss.pdf>>.
10. Writing in 2004 (before the publication of Dr. Blackham’s 2005 chapter in *Trinitarian Soundings*—see fn. 10 below), Mr. Malone notes: ‘It is a significant commentary on the role of modern communication that Blackham has had such a wide impact on evangelicals without yet committing his (relevant) thoughts to academic print.’ (Owen, p.139, n.2).
11. Amongst other distinctive views which have gained a wider audience, Dr. Blackham also advocates Young Earth Creationism. A critical comment is found here, <<http://www.iscast.org.au/pdf/bulletin/Bulletin41.pdf>>, p.11.
12. (T&T Clark, 2005), pp. 35-47 [henceforth *Trinity*]. Blackham set out his own views more directly in several essays such as “Christ the Object of our Faith”, “Do the NT writers misunderstand the OT?”, and “Faith in Christ in the Old Testament”. These were previously published on his web-site but are not currently available, although the latter is available as a talk on the All Souls’ website (see fn. 4 above).
13. (Christian Focus, 2008), pp. 286-308 [henceforth *Bible*].
14. Iain Taylor (ed.), (Paternoster Press, 2003) [henceforth *Evangelicals*].
15. See fn. 5 above
16. *Genesis* (Authentic Lifestyle, 2003), p. 29.
17. *Psalms* (Authentic Lifestyle, 2003), p. 1.
18. *Evangelicals*, p. 100. Blackham also quotes Luther favourably at the start of his book on the Psalms, and extends this principle to every prophecy: ‘Martin Luther, in his preface to his work on the Psalms, said: ‘Every prophecy and every prophet

must be understood as referring to Christ the LORD, except where it is clear from plain words that someone else is spoken of. For thus He Himself says: “Search the Scriptures...and it is they that bear witness to Me” (John 5:39). Otherwise it is most certain that the searchers will not find what they are searching for.’ Luther, M. (1999, c1974). Vol. 10: Luther’s works, vol. 10: First Lectures on the Psalms I: Psalms 1-75 J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann (eds.), *Luther’s Works* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House). *Psalms*, p.1.

19. *Trinity*, p.36, 37.
20. *Bible*, question 20, p.304.
21. See *Bible*, p. 304. See also the use of these verses on p. 289.
22. *Bible*, p. 304. See also, amongst many examples, 1 Peter 1:10-12, p. 287; Romans 16:25-26, p. 299.
23. *Trinity*, p.37, emphasis original.
24. *Bible*, p.111.
25. *Trinity*, p. 39.
26. *Trinity*, p. 36-7. A similar point could be made from the rebukes by Jesus for failure to believe in him on the basis of the Old Testament scriptures (e.g. Luke 24:25-27): if the scriptures were not clear, the rebukes would be unfair.
27. *Trinity*, p. 37.
28. *Exodus*, pp. 1-2. This is revealed particularly in the Tabernacle furniture, *Exodus*, Study 9, p. 49ff. Similarly Blackham writes, ‘The book of Leviticus takes us down into the theological engine of the Scriptures to show us how and why the work of the Messiah is what it is.’ (*Leviticus: Holistic Holiness*, Biblical Frameworks, 2008).
29. *Trinity*, p.46.
30. *Genesis* (Authentic Lifestyle, 2004), p. 16 (bold original), also *Exodus*, p. 8, n.1 (emphasis original). See also question 14, *Bible*, p. 299. Many other objections are dealt with in Dr. Blackham’s appendix.
31. *Trinity*, p. 39.
32. *Trinity*, p. 40.
33. *Exodus*, pp. 14-15. Blackham also argues from, “Colossians 1:15 – Christ is the image, the visible form, of the invisible God.” (*Exodus*, p. 30).
34. *Trinity*, p. 42.
35. *Genesis*, p. 35. The previous chapter is not, though, an example of multiple LORDs: ‘Because it talks of “three men” arriving at Abraham’s tent many Christians have thought of this as the trinity visiting Abraham. However, no one has ever seen the Father at any time. Rather, when we read the story carefully (notice 19:1), we see that it is the LORD plus two angels.’ (*Genesis*, p. 34.)

36. *Exodus*, p. 32.
37. *Exodus*, p. 38.
38. *Psalms*, p. 2.
39. *Exodus*, pp. 25-26.
40. *Genesis*, p. 1.
41. *Frameworks*, 1/2/e.
42. *Bible*, question 24, p. 307.
43. *Bible*, p. 307.
44. There is a list of quotes from church history compiled by Steve Levy in Appendix 2 of his *Bible*, pp. 309-22. Steve Levy notes in the Acknowledgements, p. 8, that Dr. Blackham advised him on, and edited, the book, but that there have also been disagreements. Therefore the quotes may not fully reflect Dr. Blackham's reading.
45. *Trinity*, p. 45.
46. *Trinity*, p. 37.
47. *Trinity*, p. 38.
48. *Trinity*, p. 38. Blackham refers to the work of Margaret Barker in support of this, p. 37. See *Exodus*, p. 32 for an example of Philo's exegesis.
49. *Bible*, p. 100.
50. *Trinity*, p. 38. Blackham quotes from Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2003), p. 23. In a footnote he invites us to "See especially John Owen's brilliant tenth introductory essay in vol. 1 of his commentary on Hebrews, entitled 'appearances of the Son of God under the Old Testament'" (*Trinity*, p. 46, n.6). Mr Malone has interacted critically with Dr. Blackham's reading of Owen in Owen.
51. David L. Baker, *Two Testaments, One Bible* (Apollos, 1991), ch. 4: "The Old and New Testaments as equally Christian Scripture," pp. 94-116.
52. See Baker, p. 102.
53. Baker, p. 104.
54. Baker, p. 104. He also places Karl Barth as an advocate of this position (pp. 105-6).
55. Kaiser has written very widely on the Christian reading of the Old Testament. His views have been most recently restated in *Three Views on the New Testament use of the Old Testament* (Zondervan, 2008, ed. K. Berding and J. Lunde), especially ch. 1, pp.45-89.
56. Hanson has also written very widely on the New Testament's understanding of the Old, although unlike Kaiser, he doesn't think we should follow the New Testament's interpretation. His most comprehensive surveys are *Jesus Christ in the Old Testament* (SPCK, 1968) and *The Living Utterances of God* (Darton,

Longman & Todd, 1983).

57. *Jesus Christ in the Old Testament*, p. 46. Besides Steve Levy's *Bible Overview*, there are other popular level examples of this teaching, such as the sermons of Jonathan Stephen, Director of Affinity, published as *Theophany: close encounters with the Son of God* (Day One Publications, 1998), and *The Children of Abraham* (Verité, 2007) by Philip James.
58. *Trinity*, p. 43.
59. *Trinity*, p. 44, drawing on Colin E. Gunton's *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (T & T Clark, 2nd ed. 1997), especially ch. 3, 'Augustine, the *Trinity* and the Theological Crisis of the West', pp. 30-55.
60. See Blackham's discussion, *Trinity* pp. 43-45.
61. *Trinity*, pp. 35-36.
62. *Trinity*, p. 38.
63. *Evangelicals*, p. 111.
64. *Bible*, question 18, p. 302.
65. *Evangelicals*, p. 100.
66. *Trinity*, p. 40.
67. *Trinity*, p. 39.
68. *Trinity*, p. 46.
69. *Trinity*, p. 39.
70. A brief and helpful introduction to this and related issues is given by Jonathan Lunde in his "Introduction" to *Three Views*, especially pp. 13-18.
71. *Bible*, question 2, pp. 286-7. The most extensive discussion and rejection of the Sensus Plenior is by Walter Kaiser, summarised in *Three Views*, especially pp. 47-60.
72. *Bible*, p. 288. This is a point made regularly and forcefully by Walter Kaiser in various places, for example his chapter in *Three Views*, entitled 'Single meaning, unified referents'.
73. *Trinity*, p.36. I think that Blackham would hold that this rejection of the Sensus Plenior supports his arguments for the perspicuity of Scripture: 'The great hope of interpreting the Bible biblically is that it recovers the truth of the perspicuity of Scripture—and perhaps this is the most needed doctrine of our day.' [*Evangelicals*, p. 112].
74. *Trinity*, p. 36. Jonathan Lunde sets this question in context in *Three Views*, p.32ff.
75. *Trinity*, p. 46.
76. <<http://www.theologian.org.uk/bible/blackham.html>>. In the same debate Blackham links this to his experience of evangelizing Muslims: 'having spent 10 years explaining the gospel to Muslims, I never turn to the NT to explain the doctrine of the Trinity.'

77. *Trinity*, p. 36.

78. *Trinity*, p. 35.

79. *Bible*, pp. 286-308.

Here are five quotes from the Old Testament that many scripture scholars agree are hidden references to the reality of the Blessed Trinity. Genesis 1:1 "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters."