

Mats Wahlberg. *Revelation as Testimony: A Philosophical-Theological Study*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014. x + 256 pp. \$20.00 (paper).

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Contemporary academic theology takes a negative stance toward the traditional premodern account of divine revelation construed as divine testimony, according to which revelation primarily consists in, *inter alia*, the communication of conceptually structured propositions to humanity. In *Revelation as Testimony: A Philosophical-Theological Study*, Mats Wahlberg eschews this prevailing academic ethos by competently defending the traditional account; in so doing, he expertly draws on insights from the literature in the analytic epistemology of testimony and in conversation with important work in modern academic theology. In what follows, I canvass the structure of this monograph and offer some brief reflections on its contents.

The first two chapters focus on ground-clearing. These include some potent objections to the rather in vogue manifestational accounts of divine revelation on which God's self-disclosure doesn't aim at the communication of propositional truths about himself. To note, a manifestational account of revelation holds that the vehicle of revelation is a "natural sign" of the object revealed, viz. God himself. As Wahlberg explains: "To reveal x by manifestation means to present something that naturally calls x to mind — such as x itself" (42). Three points are central to his rejection of these accounts. First, manifestational accounts of divine revelation ignore the obvious insight that if God reveals himself, this manifestation *ipso facto* places the recipients in a privileged epistemic position vis-à-vis propositional knowledge of God. In other words, by experiencing a manifestation of God, the recipient is thereby in a position to know certain propositions *about* God. Secondly, on Wahlberg's view knowledge is essentially a propositional attitude—i.e., a relation one of whose relata contains a proposition. Finally, manifestational accounts of divine revelation fail to explain how beliefs about God can be epistemically justified or known.

At this point, it would provide helpful clarification to summarize the implicit argument of these chapters (and on which Wahlberg elaborates in the rest of the book) as follows (one can substitute "known" for "rational" throughout, depending upon the epistemic properties one values):

WAHLBERG'S ARGUMENT SUMMARY [WAS]

1. Theological beliefs are rational. (Premise)

2. If theological beliefs are rational, then they derive their rational support either from a robust natural theology or from divine revelation. (Premise)
3. Theological beliefs either derive their rational support from a robust natural theology or from divine revelation. (1, 2 MP)
4. A robust natural theology won't provide justification for certain important theological beliefs that Christians take to be justified (e.g., the belief that God is omnipotent). (Premise)
5. Thus, they derive their rational support from divine revelation. (3, 4 DS)
6. If certain important theological beliefs that Christians take to be justified are justified by divine revelation, then either a manifestational (nonpropositional) or nonmanifestational (propositional) account of divine revelation will explain the justification of the relevant Christian beliefs. (premise)
7. Either a manifestational (nonpropositional) or nonmanifestational (propositional) account of divine revelation will explain the justification of the relevant Christian beliefs. (5, 6 MP)
8. A manifestational account cannot explain the justification of the relevant Christian beliefs. (Premise)
9. Thus, a propositional account (or nonmanifestational account) of divine revelation is required. (7, 8 DS)
10. If a propositional account explains the rational status of certain theological beliefs, then this should be construed on the model of divine testimony. (Premise)
11. Thus, the rational status of beliefs about God should be construed on the model of divine testimony. (9, 10 MP)
12. If the rational status of certain theological beliefs should be construed on the model of divine testimony, then it should be given an antireductionist account (à la John McDowell).
13. Thus, we should understand certain theological beliefs on an antireductionist model of divine testimony (à la McDowell). (11, 12 MP)

The first five chapters constitute the bulk of the defense of this argument, and only the last few chapters consider details as they suitably pertain to the Bible and Christian faith, specifically.

Returning to the individual chapters, chapter 3 considers the various models of divine revelation as they are presented in Avery Dulles's influential *Models of Divine Revelation*. Relying on some critical points to which I alluded above, in this chapter Wahlberg shows that the manifestational accounts presented by Dulles and certain postliberal theologians all presuppose (in some way) the communication of propositions in the act of divine revelation. Thus, on Wahlberg's view, the testimonial character of divine revelation remains inescapable even in the most influential manifestational accounts that seek to avoid it.

Turning to his positive case, Wahlberg focuses on the magisterial work of Nicholas Wolterstorff and the notion of double agency discourse in Chapter 4, upon which *Revelation as Testimony* significantly relies. In *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (New York: Cambridge University Press,

1995), Wolterstorff defends the coherence of the notion of divine speech by drawing on academic literature in speech act theory. An important facet of this literature is J.L. Austin's distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts. To clarify: One performs a given locutionary act by saying something meaningful in a language. And one performs a given illocutionary act—a speech act such as promising, asserting, lying, etc.—in virtue of performing a particular locutionary act. Thus, a person S performs the illocutionary act (a speech act) of making a promise by virtue of performing a particular locutionary act, viz.: S's uttering the sentence to one's spouse: "I promise that I will remain faithful." Applied to the issue at hand, double agency discourse relies on the notion that the agent performing the speech act and the agent performing the particular linguistic act can permissibly diverge. In other words, an agent S1 can perform an illocutionary act by virtue of *appropriating* a given locutionary act of a distinct agent S2 (for our purposes here, where S1 is God and S2 is the human authors of Scripture). Wahlberg utilizes Wolterstorff's double agency discourse model, making the point that God's self-revelation will bottom out in some particular (set of) human locutionary act(s). In other words, God speaks to us in Scripture by appropriating the humanly-authored statements contained therein.

In Chapter 5 Wahlberg continues the defense of his positive proposal, which concern premises 7-9 of the WAS, by utilizing John McDowell's antireductionist model of testimonial justification. Briefly, the distinction between reductionist and antireductionist models of testimony concerns whether testimony is an irreducible source of epistemic justification, or whether it depends on other sources. Antireductionists say the former, while reductionists take the latter view. The chapter begins with some further ground-clearing. He recounts some difficulties considered to be insurmountable for a reductionist model, and then he turns to outline and endorse McDowell's positive proposal. It remains beyond the scope of this review to examine in any significant detail the objections he poses to reductionism, but among the most important difficulties confronting the reductionist account of testimony is the failure of its most promising account (due to Elizabeth Fricker) to explain the empirically grounded positive presumption of trust accorded to speakers in testimonial exchanges. As Wahlberg puts the objection, "Since our theorizing about the trustworthiness of particular speakers crucially depends on the legitimacy of our appealing to the default settings [i.e., our presumption of trust], and since Fricker has not shown how the legitimacy of our appealing to the default settings can be empirically grounded, it seems that Fricker does not succeed in giving even a 'locally' reductive account of testimonial knowledge" (132). While Fricker's account requires positive (local) reasons in support of the reliability of the testifier, by Wahlberg's lights the account McDowell provides has the upper hand since it only requires a negative condition vis-à-vis the speaker's reliability (one which falls out of McDowell's condition of "doxastic responsibility"). According to this condition, the recipient only must be suitably responsive to indications of the unreliability of the speaker rather than possess positive reasons for local trust. In this way McDowell's account, but not Fricker's account, respects testimony as a *sui generis* source of knowledge.

Chapter 6 addresses the question: how can God be identified as one who speaks through humans? In essence, the answer lies in just two points. Firstly, Jesus

is authorized to speak on God's behalf. Understood as someone like a prophet who is divinely authorized, for instance, he can speak the very words of God. Furthermore, he performed miracles as an indication of his truthfulness and the reliability concerning that which he speaks. Together these facts provide the information necessary to epistemically warrant our taking Jesus's speech on the model of divine testimony.

Chapter 7 addresses concerns regarding the reliability of the Bible. First, Wahlberg recounts an important subset of biblical scholarship on account of which we can trust the Gospels as reliable sources for the life and teaching of Jesus, and then he responds to the infamous Humean arguments against miracles by canvassing prominent objections due to recent commentators, such as John Earman. One response he issues for Hume's objection is that it requires the assumption of a reductionism about testimony. On the other hand, the argument fails on a framework where testimonial beliefs are noninferentially justified.

Finally, in chapter 8, Wahlberg considers whether his positive model of divine testimony fits with the Christian tradition's notion of faith. He proposes the following idea. Since on the anti-reductionist model trust plays an important role for the epistemic justification of testimony and faith amounts to a kind of trust, we can see that these two notions fit squarely within Wahlberg's model of divine testimony.

By way of closing, I should remark that this monograph makes important headway in defense of revelation as divine testimony. Crucial to its success in this regard, *Revelation as Testimony* synthesizes an incredible amount of (methodologically- and ideologically- diverse) academic literature spanning across the fields of both theology and philosophy. For this merit and others, I highly recommend it for graduate audiences and above.