

Henry M. Knapp. "Review of *Divine Discourse*, by Sebastian Rehnman." In *Calvin Theological Journal* 38 (2003): 186-188.

Review of Sebastian Rehnman, *Divine Discourse*.

By Henry Knapp

Although he was easily one of the most influential men of his generation—chaplain to Oliver Cromwell, Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, prominent voice for Independents, prolific Puritan author, and defender of orthodox Christianity—the work of John Owen (1616-1683) has been almost entirely neglected in the past two centuries. Thankfully, scholarship in recent decades has begun to correct this glaring deficiency, and Sebastian Rehnman's contribution toward this cause should be well received and appreciated—both for its historical accuracy and for its clarity in defining Owen's theological methodology.

Only recently published, *Divine Discourse* is a revised version of Rehnman's 1997 Oxford dissertation—the intervening years unfortunately preventing Rehnman from dialoguing significantly with Carl Trueman's insightful work on Owen's Trinitarian theology, *The Claims of Truth* (1998). The two works are nicely complimentary, as both seek to uncover the fundamentals of Owen's thought by analyzing his discussion of issues belonging to theological prolegomena—the principles, premises and presuppositions which both grow out of the body of doctrine and which function as a self-conscious justification and formulation of that system. (Trueman's work also examines other theological loci—the doctrine of God, Person and Work of Christ, Satisfaction). Rehnman explores his subject primarily by examining his work entitled *Theologoumena* (1661), Owen's most significant contribution to Reformed prolegomena. However, there is enough interaction with the rest of Owen's corpus to assure the reader that Rehnman has faithfully captured Owen's thought.

One of the great strengths of the book is found in the "Introductory" chapter where Rehnman identifies the various intellectual threads which form the fabric of Owen's theology. Meticulously researched and well organized, Rehnman draws on the entire Owen corpus, the auction catalogue of his library, and the academic curriculum of Owen's university education and his tutorial instruction to demonstrate Owen's acquaintance with and use of a vast array of intellectual currents. This research shows that Owen was both a master of the seventeenth-century academic milieu and a product of that scholarly climate. Rehnman identifies four principle influences on Owen's theology: the first and most obvious factor is Owen's own theological tradition as is evident from the hundreds of Reformed volumes contained in his library. Rehnman appropriately notes that the Reformed tradition was itself a product of various currents of thought stretching back to the medieval times, and shows evidence of that trajectory in Owen's work. Secondly, the formative impact of humanism on Owen is evident from his university curriculum, his knowledge and use of classical and patristic literature, his mastery of Greek, Hebrew and cognate languages, and his Rabbinic and Hebraic interests. A third strain of thought that influenced Owen was the renovated Thomistic scholasticism which was mediated to him by his tutor Thomas Barlow, employed faithfully throughout his writings, and whose volumes filled his library. Of course, like other Reformed thinkers, Owen could be abrasively critical of "the schoolmen," and, while he occasionally dismissed philosophers and their systems as opposed to Scripture, Owen's entire work reveals a much more sympathetic relationship with scholastic methodology. The last influence Rehnman identifies is the ever-prevalent anti-Pelagian and subjective (or experiential) Augustinianism. Thus, Rehnman locates Owen in the academic, intellectual and Christian tradition of his time; Owen is "firmly

rooted in Renaissance scholasticism and modified Thomism with a stricter Augustinian and Scotist orientation in the context of his Reformed theology” (45).

When Rehnman comes to the core of his subject, Owen’s prolegomena, he finds that Owen is unsurprisingly traditional in his understanding of the concept and nature of theology. Owen’s views on questions concerning the definition of theology, its existence, the manner of its organization, the role of revelation, and theology’s goal and object all correspond closely or identically with other Reformed scholastics of his day. These chapters emphasize one of the strengths of Rehnman’s approach—the extensive attention he pays to the historical context of his subject. By comparing Owen with other contemporary thinkers, men like Polanus, Junius, Turretin and Prideaux, Rehnman is able to locate Owen historically and demonstrate the great continuity with binds Owen’s thought to the post-Reformation orthodox tradition.

One of the more stimulating chapters in Rehnman’s work is his analysis of Owen’s view of the role of reason in dogmatics. Rehnman again helpfully sets the historical context, defining the different ways the term “reason” is used, and examining Owen’s writings to demonstrate his generally positive, though limited, understanding of reason’s function in the theological enterprise. In *Theologoumena*, however, Owen delivers a withering critique of reason and philosophy, and rejects it *in toto*. Rehnman acknowledges the difficulty in seeking to harmonize Owen’s exceedingly negative comments in *Theologoumena* with the remainder of his theology. This sets up an intriguing historical question which, unfortunately, Rehnman spends far too little time exploring, and the explanation he eventually proposes—that *Theologoumena* was written during a collapse of Owen’s worldview and disaster in his personal life—seems contrived, lacks evidence, and is unsatisfactory.

As in other prolegomena areas, Owen’s approach to the justification of belief, the relationship between the response of faith and the external authority of Scripture, accords well with other Reformed theologians. Rehnman’s discussion here is instructive, thorough, and insightful. He shows that Owen carefully worked out the traditional Reformed solution where Scripture is the self-authenticating rule of faith on account of its evident marks of divine origin—yet, because of the depravity of the human mind, the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit takes precedence over the external evidences in epistemologically grounding the faith.

In the final chapter of his study, Rehnman analyses the importance of method in the organization of theology. Breaking from the majority of orthodox dogmatics written according to the *loci* method (arranging knowledge according to topic), Owen in *Theologoumena* follows the historical-economical model of the emerging federal school. This was not, as Rehnman notes, due to an outright rejection of a systematic approach, but more a reflection of his overall negative assessment of the role of reason and philosophy in theological discourse. Rehnman effectively describes Owen’s unique contribution to the federal method—the organic growth of supernatural revelation seen from the perspective of a threefold division of faith in the Mediator, obedience to the moral law, and adherence to divinely appointed worship.

The one significant drawback in the book is the lack of in-text citations from Owen’s works to support Rehnman’s observations. Rehnman liberally scatters references to Owen’s corpus throughout his analysis, but, rather than provide the raw data in citation form from Owen, Rehnman usually summarizes the text and only footnotes the source; his argument would have been strengthened by including the text itself from which Rehnman draws his conclusions. This limitation can be overcome by having on hand Owen’s work, but, since Banner of Truth Trust decided not to republish Owen’s Latin works (including *Theologoumena*), the relevant material is hard to come by. This one concern aside, Rehnman has produced an excellent work which should serve as a methodological model for all historical studies, and as a significant analysis of Owen’s prolegomena.

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