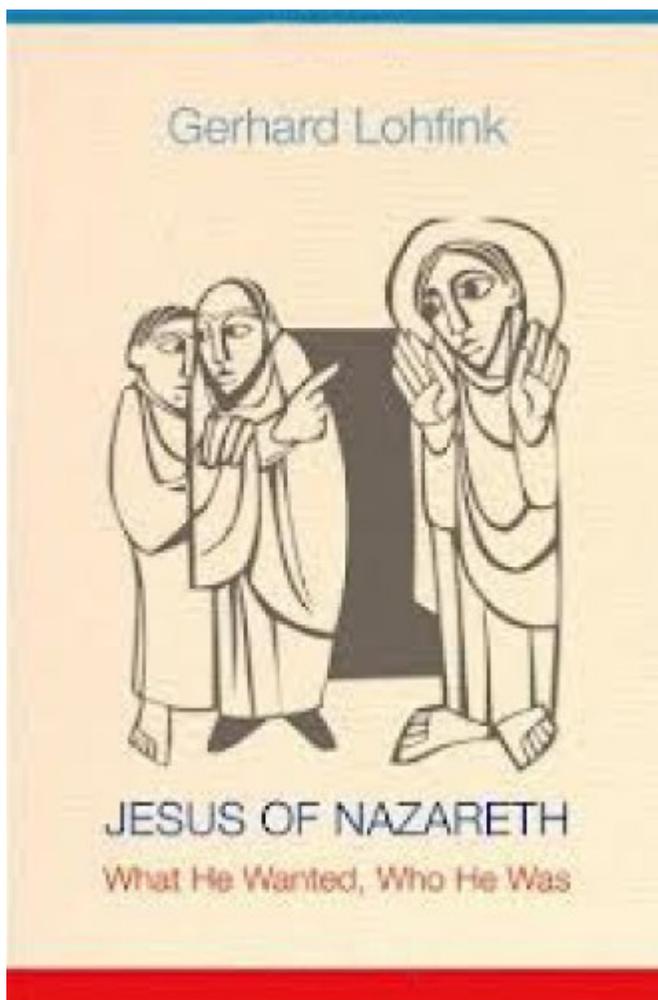


Theology & philosophy

selected by [David Heim](#) and [Richard A. Kauffman](#)

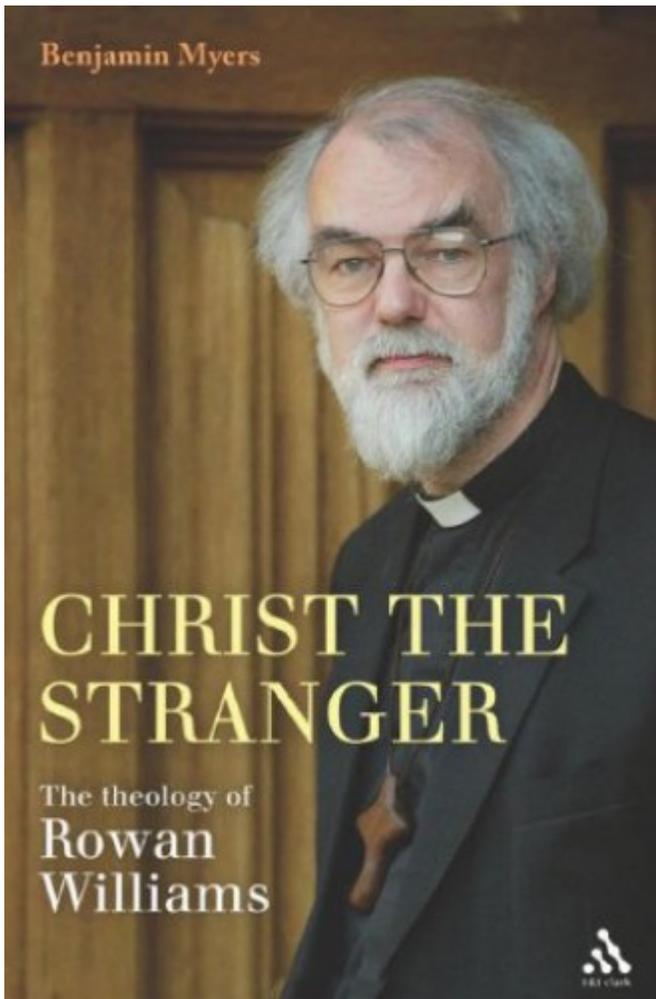
This review appears in the [December 12, 2012](#) issue.

## In Review



### **Jesus of Nazareth**

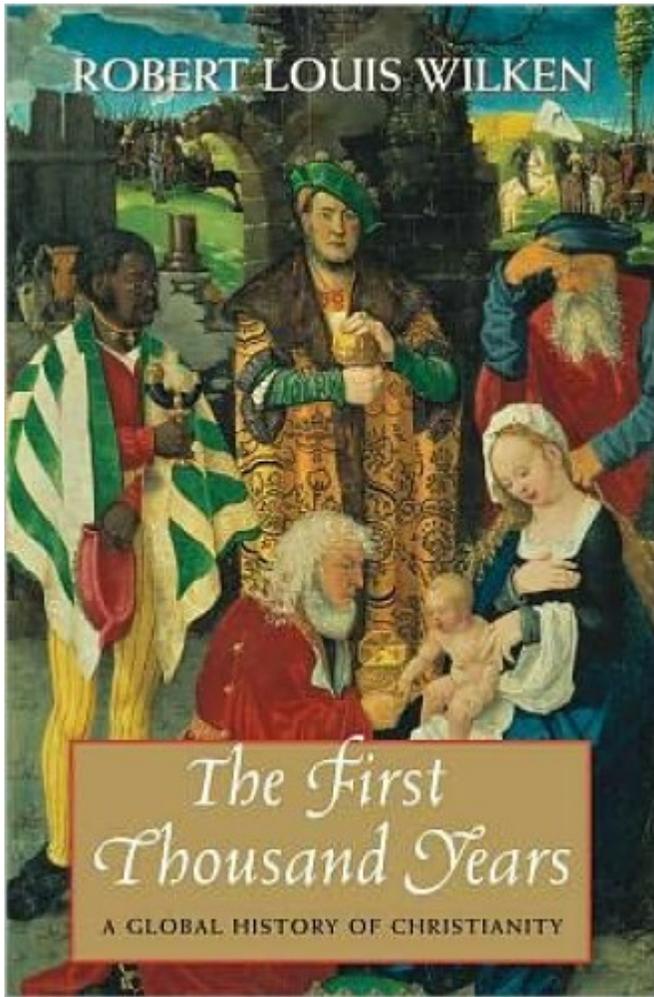
By Gerhard Lohfink  
Liturgical Press



## **Christ the Stranger**

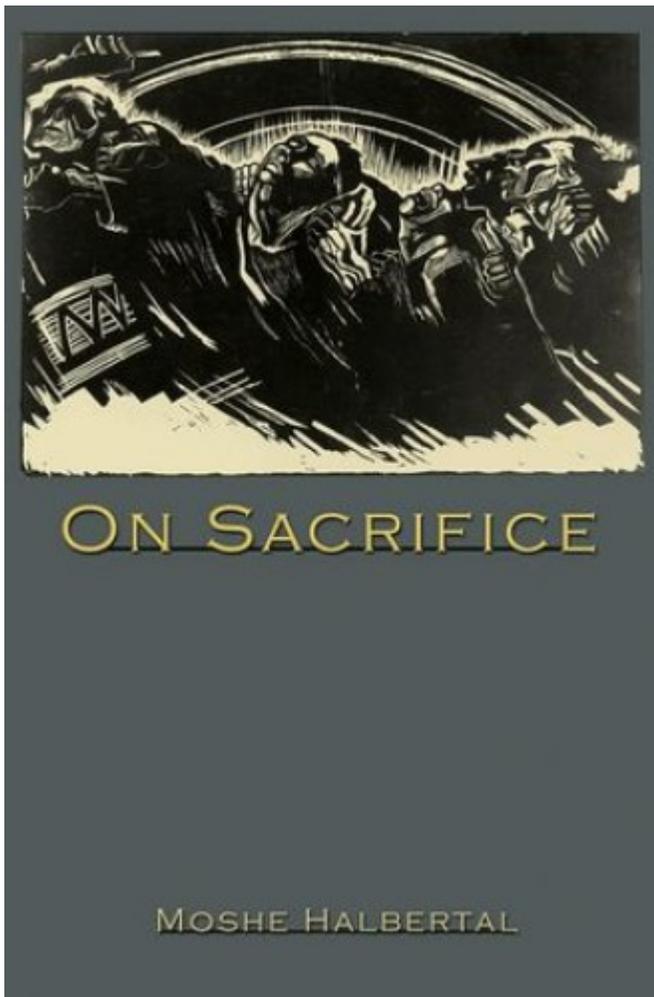
By Benjamin Myers

T & T Clark International



## **The First Thousand Years**

By Robert Louis Wilken  
Yale University Press



## **On Sacrifice**

By Moshe Halbertal

Princeton University Press

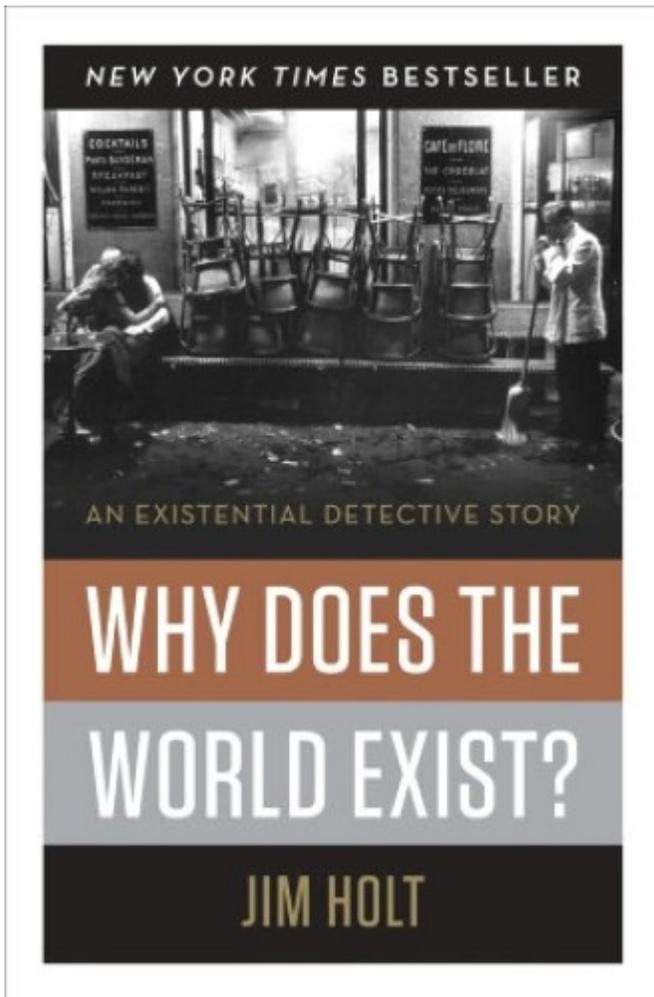


Summoned  
*from the* Margin  
HOMECOMING OF AN AFRICAN

Lamin Sanneh  
*Foreword by* KELEFA SANNEH

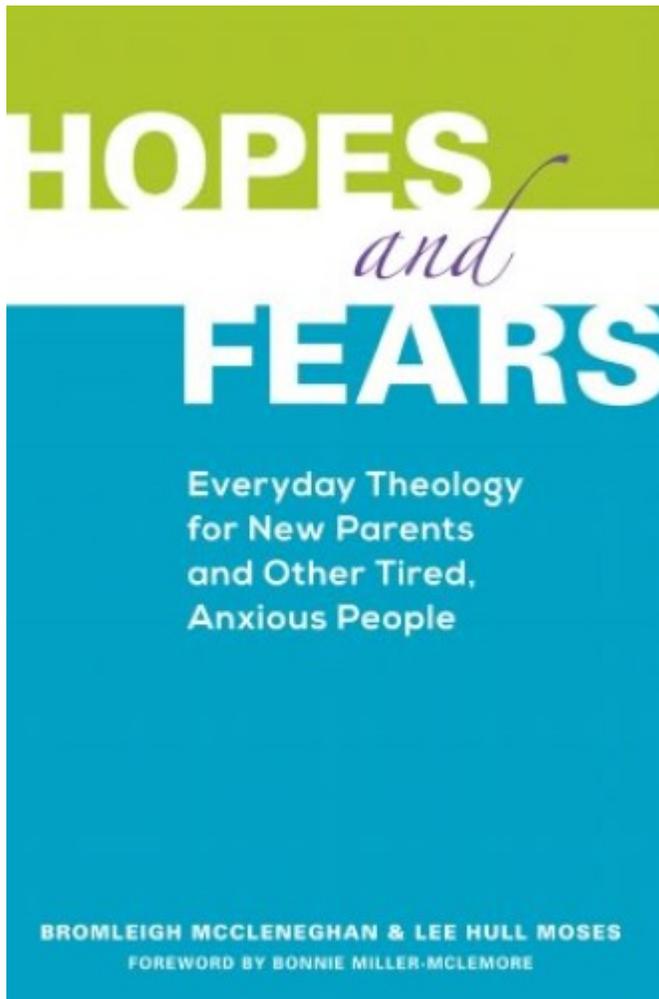
**Summoned from the Margin**

By Lamin Sanneh  
Eerdmans



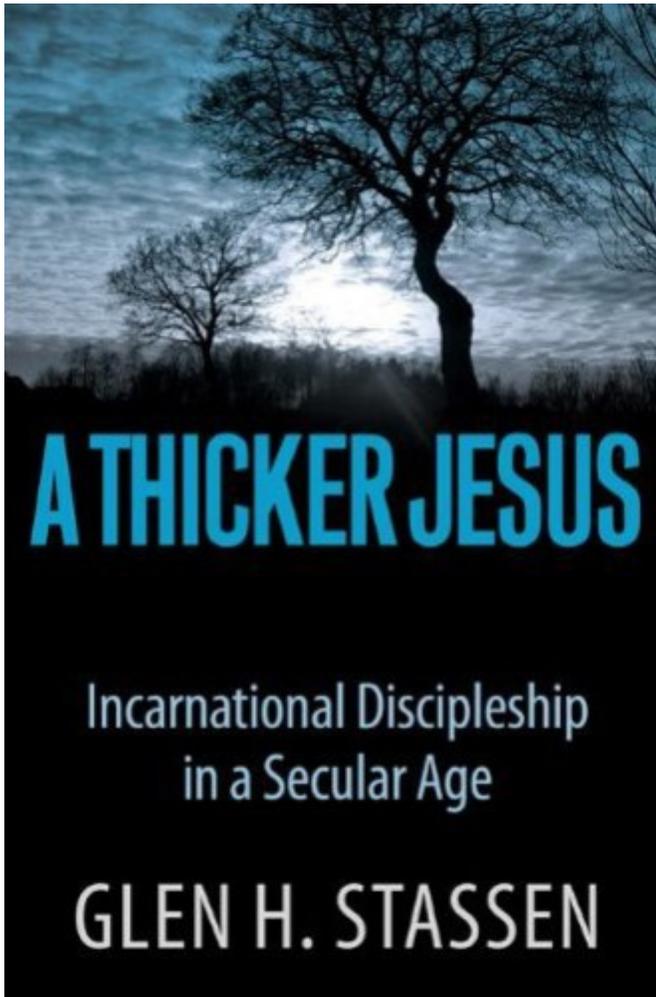
## **Why Does the World Exist?**

By Jim Holt  
Liveright



## **Hopes and Fears**

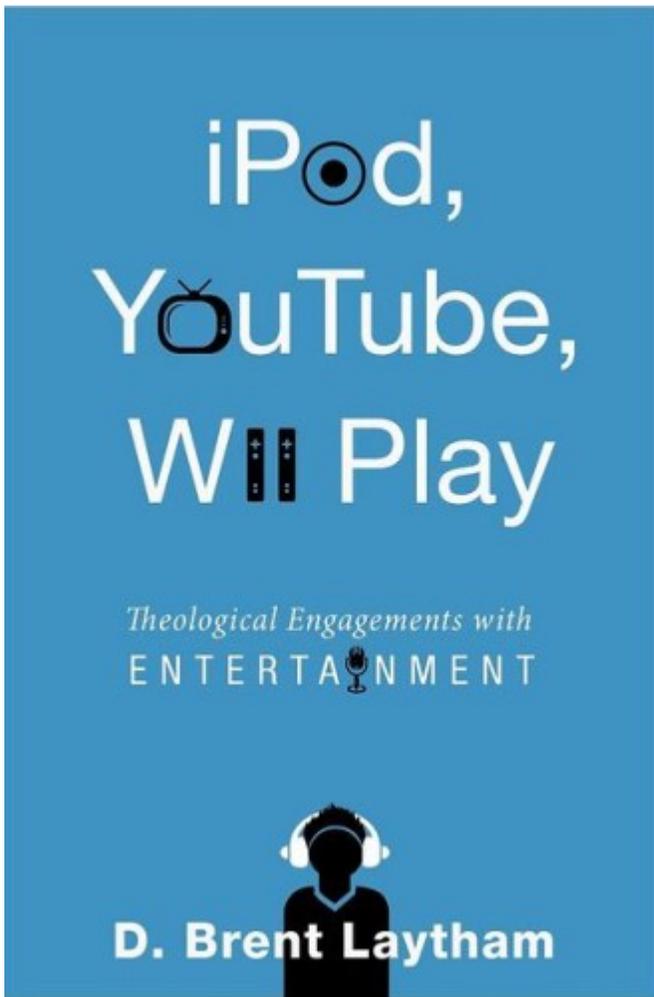
By Bromleigh McCleneghan and Lee Hull Moses  
Alban



**A Thicker Jesus**

By Glen Stassen

Westminster John Knox



## **iPod, YouTube, WiiPlay**

By D. Brent Laytham

Cascade Books

*Jesus of Nazareth: What He Wanted, Who He Was*, by Gerhard Lohfink. The attempt to distinguish the authentic words of Jesus from the inauthentic ones has the whiff of silliness, says Lohfink. The Gospel writers, drawing from numerous traditions about Jesus, put together a narrative interpretation of his life and ministry. The Gospels are interpretation through and through; neither facts nor authentic sayings can be extracted as if panning for gold. The constant temptation in Jesus studies is to re-create him in our own image. Lohfink thinks we need a community of interpretation to protect against private interpretations. Jesus emerged from an interpretative community, Israel, within which he must be understood, and today the church serves as the interpretative community.

*Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams*, by Benjamin Myers. Williams, just concluding his tenure as archbishop of Canterbury, is a brilliant and restless thinker. His reflections are as apt to be expressed in poems, sermons, literary essays or devotional booklets as in scholarly books. “Williams is really just a person who has taken his imagination to church,” writes Myers, who identifies major themes—such as sociality, renunciation and sainthood—and conveys the spirit of Williams’s life of holiness and prayer. Readers not only learn a good deal about options in theology; they get to journey with a creative theologian as he “listens to God and replies to God while looking at the crucified Jesus.”

*The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity*, by Robert Louis Wilken. Christian faith didn’t just create a religious community. Wherever it spread it created a civilization. Wilken narrates the flowering of that civilization, beginning with Jesus and ending with the baptism in 988 of Vladimir, the Rus prince. Early Christians made contributions to art and music—monks created the system of musical notation—and created hospitals. Wilken looks beyond the West to the story of the church in Ethiopia, Nubia, Armenia, Georgia, Persia, Central Asia, India and China. Several chapters are devoted to the experience of Christians living under Muslim rule.

*On Sacrifice*, by Moshe Halbertal. Halbertal, a Jewish philosopher, defines sacrifice as an “offering,” generally either to someone (especially God) or for a cause. An offering is not a market transaction; it is part of an exchange of gifts within a personal relationship. As such, it is accompanied by anxiety: Will the gift be accepted? When invited to a dinner party, we bring a bottle of wine to confirm the mutual relationship but worry that the gift might be ignored or found wanting. Halbertal moves from reflections on such mundane offerings to biblical accounts of offerings made to God by Cain (whose offering God rejected) and Abraham (whose offering God sought as a confirmation of their relationship). This deft essay ranges nimbly from the biblical to the modern period, tossing off fresh insights on every page.

*Summoned from the Margin: Homecoming of an African*, by Lamin Sanneh. Raised a Muslim in Gambia, Sanneh became a Christian as a young adult. He does not think his conversion to Christianity represented an abandonment of his childhood faith. It was more that his devotion to Islam as a true lover of God led him to embrace Jesus. In this autobiography, Sanneh does not flinch from exposing the racism of North American churches or the extent to which American churches are captive to Western

culture. His African and Islamic background give him a unique perspective on interfaith relations and especially on Christianity's relationship with Islam.

*Why Does the World Exist? An Existential Detective Story*, by Jim Holt. Why is there something rather than nothing? Could there really be nothing? These questions arise at the intersection of religion, philosophy and science, but they are ones every human seems compelled to ask. Wittgenstein says, "Not how the world is, but that it is, is the mystery." Holt plays the role of sleuth, tracking down theologians, philosophers and scientists who might offer clues to solving the puzzle (though some philosophers tell him the question is really meaningless). Holt is an exceptionally lucid writer, and his book is a delightful, rare example of philosophy in the mode of investigative journalism, willing to tackle the biggest of questions.

*Hopes and Fears: Everyday Theology for New Parents and Other Tired, Anxious People*, by Bromleigh McCleneghan and Lee Hull Moses. McCleneghan and Moses are pastors, mothers and longtime friends. They write alternating chapters—which have a bloglike character—about the trials and joys of parenting. The writers want to dismantle the myth that families, especially pastors' families, can attain perfection, so they don't try to hide the messiness of their lives. Their stories and reflections add up to something like a theology of marriage. It's a book that all parents will enjoy and benefit from.

*A Thicker Jesus: Incarnational Discipleship in a Secular Age*, by Glen H. Stassen. Stassen asks: How can we find a faithful and solid identity for faith and ethics? And how can that identity be a compass to guide us in our rapidly changing and interactive culture? Secularism as articulated by Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* is the context for this work. By "a thicker Jesus," Stassen means one who is Lord over all of life, not a Jesus reduced to a principle of living or an ideology. A thicker Jesus should lead Christians to an incarnational discipleship, which Stassen views as the antidote to secularism. A church that embodies incarnational discipleship will have the humility to concede that it isn't always correct and will be committed to continuous repentance.

*iPod, YouTube, Wii Play: Theological Engagements with Entertainment*, by D. Brent Laytham. This is not a screed against the entertainment industry but an invitation to think critically about how various forms of entertainment, from the Internet to computer games to iPods, "direct perception, foster desire, generate symbols, structure activity, orient goals, shape relationships, and form community." As that description suggests, entertainment is like a kind of faith. So it will not work to try to

compartmentalize things and act as if entertainment fills one part of our lives and faith another.