



## HEALTH AND MEDICINE

**CHASING METHUSELAH: Theology, the Body, and Slowing Human Aging** by Todd T. W. Daly. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021. 307 pages, index. Paperback; \$38.00. ISBN: 9781532698002.

*Chasing Methuselah* brings “a Christological anthropology to bear on the scientific quest to attenuate aging by manipulating the body” (p. xi). Todd T. W. Daly, who teaches at Urbana Theological Seminary, argues that faith-based lenses are integrally important for interpreting historically diverse, and mostly failed, efforts to slow human aging—an elusive goal typically pursued by biomedical professionals, technocrats, and quacks. “The idea of a significantly prolonged healthy life has captured the public’s imagination,” Daly states in his Introduction, but “to date, the ethics of aging attenuation contains assumptions that often go unchallenged, leaving fundamental questions unasked” (p. 11).

With bold originality and astounding erudition *Chasing Methuselah* fills a major gap in critical gerontology by highlighting ethical foundations and existential dilemmas that scientists and commentators have generally ignored while attempting to alter bodily homeostasis and manipulate basic processes. Blazing a *terra incognita* full of unfamiliar names and references, *Chasing Methuselah* poses questions that reframe a fundamental debate: Should healthful longevity be extended by trying to cure age-related diseases or by slowing the rate of aging? In his critique of this “two endings [that] speak of two disparate paths of old age” framework, Daly pushes gerontology’s limits beyond what most researchers, teachers, and practitioners (regardless of their specialization) regard as its transdisciplinary, cross-professional domain.

*Chasing Methuselah* has five richly nuanced, assiduously researched chapters. Chapter 1 alone is 58 pages long with 284 footnotes. It traces “the quest for longevity [that] has moved from legend to laboratory,” thereby engendering “new hope that human aging might be brought under human control” (p. 76). Daly’s second chapter chronicles how certain Christian texts and doctrines have bolstered two conflicting perspectives—specifically, a secular contention that “prolonging life is unequivocally good”

and an “unequivocal foreclos[ing of] all attempts to secure a longer life by slowing aging” (p. 112).

Chapter 3 examines the legacy of Francis Bacon (1561–1626). Its title, “Relief of Man’s Estate: Francis Bacon and the Theological Origins of the Modern Quest to Slow Aging,” pivots the book to a contrapuntal, interpretive turn wherein technological and theological pathways toward greater longevity have complemented, paralleled, or contradicted themselves for centuries. On the one hand, Daly affirms that Bacon birthed biomedical science as an indispensable approach to practical knowledge about old age and aging. On the other hand, Daly quotes Bacon’s objections to the project: “Natural philosophy [the study of nature] should not be invaded by revealed theology in the Bible,” declared Bacon, “but rather be bounded by it” (p. 148).

The last two chapters of *Chasing Methuselah*’s narrative invite laboratory scientists, policy analysts, and healthcare professionals to grapple with theodicy and eschatology—subjects usually taught in seminaries, not showcased in conferences on aging. Chapter 4, entitled “Adam Again,” reveals the typically unacknowledged importance of theology in reflecting and refracting scientific views on slowing bodily aging. Ascetics tried to attenuate aging to reframe Adam’s Fall in Genesis. For the Desert Fathers,

Bodily practices such as fasting were viewed as the primary means by which the Christian might regain a measure of what was lost by Adam’s sin, namely, a heightened degree of bodily incorruptibility allowing for the possibility of longer life. (p. 199)

Chapter 5, “The Last Adam and Slowing Aging,” builds upon the connection between asceticism, fasting, and prolongation of life espoused by Saints Anthony, Athanasius, and other Desert Fathers. This chapter also considers the work of the Swiss theologian Karl Barth in particular, employing Barth’s “dynamic anthropology” or “dialectical-dialogical anthropology” for framing “christologically informed discussions on the relationship between one’s body and soul as it relates to slowing aging” (p. 206). By taking on “finite humanity as embodied soul and ensouled body” (p. 253), the incarnation affects our perspective on lengthening life: “In light of the real man Jesus, any use of biotechnology ... is

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not without risk, as it may threaten our pursuit of the proper order to body and soul” (pp. 253–54).

Reading *Chasing Methuselah* can be daunting. I had to Google many references, and readers without theological training may well find the discussion of Barth difficult to comprehend. I associated Daly’s *modus operandi* with “thick description” – Clifford Geertz’s method of doing cultural anthropology. This approach gathers biographical details, historical milieus, and societal belief systems to contextualize actors’ symbols, legends, and rituals, thereby explicating individual worldviews and collective behaviors. Geertz (omitted in the 34-page bibliography) used reams of data to synthesize and interpret what he observed being enacted ethnographically.

Daly, in contrast, offers a “conclusion” to each chapter, but rejects narrative foreclosure. To wit: The last sentence of *Chasing Methuselah*’s four-page Conclusion, which begins “Perhaps the best question is whether the use of such biotechnology will help or hinder our pursuit of Jesus” (p. 258), requires readers to formulate their own answer to what Daly implicitly articulates. This tack leaves loose ends unresolved – perhaps frustrating for scientists accustomed to explicit, straightforward conclusions. That Daly chose not to bridge two specific cultures (humanities and science) diminishes his argument’s impact. Reviewing this as an historian of aging, a religious/spiritual believer, and a critical gerontologist, I opt for more transparency.

I commend Daly for invoking Tom Cole and Gerald Gruman, whose histories of science, theology, and myth orchestrated early parts of *Chasing Methuselah*. I am dismayed, however, that the book does not sufficiently acknowledge two fierce competitions raging for decades: (1) turf wars over intramural status and extramural authority within the Gerontological Society of America (GSA); and (2) ideological and methodological rivalries that have pitted GSA advocates against experts in the American Academy of Anti-Aging Medicine (4AM).

For example, the pro-longevity claims made by David Sinclair and Valter Longo, 4AM stalwarts whom Daly frequently cites, are important and pertinent. Nonetheless, their research does not enclose the vast array of theories advanced and debunked by specialists and emerging professionals within GSA.

That strand of historical gerontology was evident in the early twentieth-century pathological model of aging (articulated by Elie Metchnikoff) and its physiological counterpart (presented by I. L. Nascher, the father of US cross-disciplinary geriatrics). Similarly, Daly’s historiography could have paid more attention to Clive McCay’s caloric-reduction experiments (replicated persistently for 90 years) and to Roy Walford’s fasting regimen in Biosphere 2.

This Episcopalian wanted more exegesis in *Chasing Methuselah*. How do women’s opinions about slowing human aging compare with those of male theologians and mystics? Doesn’t Daniel Callahan merit more than a footnote citing his claim that “‘national necessity’ [is] another way of saying ‘research imperative’” (p. 12)? Might assessments of non-Christian or agnostic ethicists have sharpened Daly’s focus on a faith-based lens?

As a critical gerontologist, I was frustrated at the outset by the phrase, “slowing human aging.” What does Daly intend this wording to encompass and exclude? Is it the equivalent of “the scientific quest to attenuate aging by manipulating the body” (p. 15)? Is “limiting caloric intake [which] reduces oxidative stress, allowing DNA to repair damage suffered by cells” (p. 54) a modern-day version of “holy anorexia” practiced by prayerful nuns during the Middle Ages?

This critique of flaws hardly lessens my admiration and respect for what Daly contributes. Rarely, in fifty years of evaluating multidisciplinary books on old age and longevity, have I so willingly engaged dialogically with an author. Addressing questions raised in *Chasing Methuselah* prompted rethinking the dialectical symbiosis of religion and science. Many of my colleagues in age studies will dismiss this book as an outlier, I suspect, because Daly’s Christological anthropology turns them off. That is a pity, if so: The debate and search for meanings embodied in *Chasing Methuselah* advances what truly matters in anchoring the aging enterprise.

*Reviewed by W. Andrew Achenbaum, Professor Emeritus of History and Gerontology, Texas Medical Center, Houston, TX 77054.*