



## Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible

by Marvin A. Sweeney

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IN THIS MASSIVE THEOLOGICAL and critical introduction to the Jewish Bible, Marvin Sweeney writes from a surfeit of knowledge—a lifetime of learning, teaching, and publishing first-rate scholarship on the Jewish Bible. This book offers a compendium of scholarship and an intimate familiarity with Tanak itself.

The arrangement of this book is traditional. Part 1 establishes, through exposition and critique, the particular place of this book in Christian Old Testament theology and Jewish biblical theology. Part 2 covers Torah, though not from Genesis to Deuteronomy, book by biblical book. Sweeney employs the *toledoth*/generations sequence of the Torah as its signal principle of organization. Subsequently, Sweeney proceeds book by book. Part 3A covers the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings). Part 3B covers the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve Prophets). Part 4 introduces the *Ketuvim* or Writings (Psalms, Proverbs, Job, the Five *Megillot* [Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Qoheleth, Esther], Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles). This is the organization of the Jewish Bible rather than the Christian Old Testament. Tanak ends with Chronicles and settlement in the land rather than with a look ahead to the return of Elijah in the book of Malachi, as in the Christian Old Testament. Sweeney does not—and should not—accommodate his introduction to the Christian canon.

Sweeney makes three claims for this work. First, it is *critical*. Second, it is *theological*. Third, it is *introductory*. Let us take each in turn.

The volume is *critical* for Sweeney exhibits a mastery of scholarship—both contemporary and less recent, North American and European. With a firm grasp of the discipline, he “draws heavily on modern critical study of the Bible” (p. 4). “Heavily” may not be quite the right word; I prefer “expertly,” since Sweeney discusses scholarship with evident expertise. For example, the perennial challenge facing any introduction to Tanak is how to interpret Torah in light of two centuries of contentious scholarly debate about literary sources deemed by most scholars to lie behind those five books. Sweeney’s treatment reflects his moderate and level-headed approach. Sweeney presents what others have had to say, over the last two hundred years, about source analysis. He then identifies problems with the influential Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis of literary sources (e.g., J, E, D, P), but he does not throw out the baby with the bathwater by opting exclusively for the final form of the text or adopting a narrative solution that ignores literary striations. Instead, he cautiously adapts literary source theory in a way he finds useful for the interpretation of Torah.

This book is also *theological*, according to Sweeney, in two respects. First, it attempts to discern the theological viewpoints articulated by the biblical texts through close attention to their formal linguistic features and modes of expression, their historical and cultural contexts, and their willingness to grapple with the major theological, hermeneutical, and historical questions of their time. Second, this book “includes dialogue with the Jewish tradition at large” (p. 4; see pp. 25–28). This dialogue, more desultory than systematic, is one of the contributions of this book, particularly for Christians unfamiliar with Judaism. Gems can be discovered whenever Sweeney enters into conversation with ancient Jewish interpreters of Tanak.

By claiming to write a *theological* introduction, Sweeney distances himself from purely historical reconstructions of Israelite history. For example, he does not simply attempt to reconstruct the land-taking traditions in Joshua and Judges. In a lengthy discussion, he takes the historicity of biblical narratives into consideration and concludes that “Israel did not attack and destroy an indigenous Canaanite culture in order to displace the Canaanites and take control of their land; rather, Israel/Judah grew out of that very same Canaanite culture to develop a very distinctive understanding of themselves as a nation and of YHWH as creator of the land/world and G-d of Israel/Judah” (p. 189). This historical observation, however, is not an end in itself. It leads Sweeney to a more theological conclusion: “When read in this light, Joshua is not a call to go out and destroy the Canaanite peoples of the land—indeed, Israel itself appears to have been descended from those very Canaanites—instead, the book of Joshua is addressed to Israelite readers to convince them to assert their Israelite identities, to adhere to YHWH and YHWH’s Torah as the basis for their life in the land” (p. 189). With this conclusion, Sweeney is able to avoid purely historical reconstruction, to sidestep—carefully rather than cavalierly—the presence of genocide in Tanak, and to direct the reader’s attention toward the need for theological identity.

Often I found myself yearning for more theological reflection. For instance, in his discussion of divine faithfulness to Abraham and Sarah, whose narratives include the near sacrifice of Isaac (the *Aqedah*), Sweeney writes,

The critical examination of YHWH’s fidelity would be particularly appropriate in the context of the early Persian period. . . . It would also be pertinent in relation to other experience [sic] of exile and challenge, for example, the destruction of the Second Temple . . . the failure of the Bar Kochba revolt . . . the massacres of Jews along the Rhine by the Crusader armies . . . the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, the Chmielnitzki massacres of Jews in the mid-seventeenth century, and others. (p. 68)

Yes, it would be pertinent and salutary, but Sweeney stops short of theological inference. He stops short again in his discussion of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, when he notes, “this motif . . . raises a problematic moral question as to whether or not Pharaoh should be allowed to exercise his own free will, perhaps to accept YHWH’s demands and to avoid the punishments that he and his nation will suffer” (p. 89). Again, Sweeney avoids serious theological reflection on what is arguably one of the thorniest narratives in Tanak.

On other occasions, Sweeney's theological statements are general and, consequently, slightly disappointing. Following a detailed critical discussion, Sweeney concludes that the Deuteronomistic History "serves an essential theological point, viz., Israel and Judah were constantly engaged in reflecting upon their own understandings of their relationships with YHWH and their experiences in the larger ancient Near Eastern world" (p. 176). True enough, but one might hope for richer reflection from such a seasoned scholar. A *theological* introduction could perhaps contain less protracted discussions of critical issues and richer reflections on theological ones.

Sweeney also caricatures Christian biblical theology as a discipline "based in dogmatic or systematic theological principles" (p. 33; see p. 11). Samuel Terrien's *The Elusive Presence* (Harper & Row, 1978), an insightful biblical theology Sweeney does not mention, is hardly the handmaid of systematic theology. Further, Sweeney summarizes, but does not seriously engage, Walter Brueggemann's "magisterial" (p. 10) *Theology of the Old Testament* (Fortress, 2012). Neither Terrien's nor Brueggemann's theology could be described as a discipline rooted in dogmatic or systematic theology.

Finally, the volume is *introductory*. In his endorsement, Jon D. Levenson recommends this book "to general readers, scholars, students, and clergy alike." Only a rare general reader would have the patience to plod through the dense thicket of information in this book. Nor, I suspect, would many undergraduate or seminary students discover in this book a felicitous introduction to Tanak. Sweeney's eight pages of discussion on the land-taking traditions, for example, are too opaque for typical students. Further, the publisher could have done much to make this book more inviting. Maps, photographs, and interesting graphics would focus students' attention. Today's readers, for better or worse, demand a few pedagogically-oriented features.

On the other end of the spectrum, there is perhaps too much introductory material, and certainly too much summary of biblical texts to make the volume a ready resource for specialists, though Sweeney's analysis of critical issues is rich. I find myself wishing, in fact, that Sweeney had written two shorter books rather than one long one—one for students, with insets containing theological lightning rods (e.g., hardening Pharaoh's heart), another for scholars that unleashes Sweeney's critical acumen.

Whom will this book best serve? It will be a useful resource for college and seminary instructors as they prepare to teach Tanak, even in courses on the Christian Bible. Sweeney summarizes the contents of biblical books, examines critical issues deftly, probes important theological impulses, and with unusual thoroughness provides the basis for a book-by-book introduction to Tanak.

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