

**TANAK: A THEOLOGICAL AND CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO THE JEWISH BIBLE.** By Marvin A. Sweeney. Pp. xv + 544. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012. Cloth, \$59.00.

This substantial volume outlines the theology of the Hebrew Bible in its role as the foundational text of the Jewish people. Its approach is intended to counteract Christian Old Testament theology, which interpreted the text in its own doctrinal image, and “because so much of its teaching is antithetical to that of Judaism if not outright anti-Jewish,” (p. 5). Given the many fine Christian contributions to critical studies of the discipline, surely this author

items (pp. 147–148); While he does not like the somewhat old-school equating of the four-room house with Israelite settlements, he is comfortable with seeing house plans as variations on a theme (pp. 149–150). The reconstructions of houses in figure VI, 1–7 are particularly helpful in giving a flavor for village life. These original images will be excellent teaching tools for the future.

One notable point Dever makes has to do with our perceptions of ancient Israel. When thinking about what life was like for ordinary people in ancient Israel and Judah, we should perhaps abandon our modern concept of people viewing themselves as individuals. In ancient Israel, the social unit of greater significance was the family, not the individual (p. 204). This can be seen archaeologically in the egalitarian nature of smaller villages. Dever distinguishes the egalitarian villages from the socially stratified cities and administrative centers, places like Samaria, with its many ivory inlays that survived from luxury wooden furniture, as well as inscriptional material, such as seals, owned by elite householders. But at the same time, he notes that the main bulk of the population, whether in villages or cities, had only low levels of literacy. In this context, his discussion of the possibility of a middle class is extremely interesting—in particular he looks at the often neglected (but well published) site of Tell en-Nasbeh (p. 234) for potential evidence for shops of artisans and craftsmen.

In chapter 8, Dever discusses the archaeology of religion and cult, familiar territory for him. He explains that whatever might have been going on in a Temple in Jerusalem, the regular people of the villages were probably not aware or interested in it. As he puts it, “we may be fairly sure that no one read the book of Deuteronomy...or sang the Psalms we now have” (pp. 270–271). Rather, the village elders would have been the ones who influenced daily worship for the villagers. There would have been seasonal cultic ceremonies, and cultic sites on hilltops near where deities were thought to reside. He examines archaeological evidence for temples and shrines, especially those connected with trees. He also talks about “cult corners” of houses, and burial rituals.

While the volume is specifically focused on life in the polities of Judah and Israel, Dever takes care not to neglect the other peoples who inhabited the region. In chapter 9, he discusses other political groupings of the eighth century, including a brief paragraph on “Neo-Philistine” sites, followed by Phoenicians, via the archaeology of northern coastal sites. He also examines Arameans who were living in Israel, by looking at sites in the north central area of the southern Levant. He considers these Arameans to be culturally affiliated with the great Aramean kingdoms of contemporary Syria (p. 307). He finishes this section with the usual breakdown of Transjordanian peoples, still moving site by site archaeologically, even though some of the evidence

“doth protest too much, methinks.” In this context Sue Gillingham’s *One Bible, Many Voices: Different Approaches to Biblical Studies* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pre-figured Sweeney’s concluding observations on the diversity of biblical traditions by more than a decade.

In terms of its presentation, each narrative section within the Jewish canon (“Torah,” “Former Prophets,” “Latter Prophets,” and “The Ketuvim/Writings”) is mined primarily for its theological and literary-critical insights. These discussions offer a useful pedagogic reference for teachers when preparing undergraduate classes, although for a scholarly volume relatively little attention has been paid to the historical-critical issues involved. Moreover, while the contribution of Michael Fishbane’s *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* is explained (in order to convey the highly reflective nature of biblical texts), this integral hermeneutical feature is then largely ignored.

The author’s approach to the book of Esther is a case in point: Having presented the literary characterization of the work as a novella, there is then no further discussion of how, or when, such a contrived tale might meaningfully contribute to ancient Judaeon theology. No reference is made to Tal Ilan’s compelling suggestion in “‘And Who Knows Whether You Have Not Come to Dominion for a Time Like This?’ (Esther 4:14) Esther, Judith and Susannah as Propaganda for Shlomzion’s Queenship,” in *Integrating Women Into Second Temple History* (Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum 76. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), pp. 127–153. Nor is there any mention of how the plot in Esther subverts the pervasive inter-marriage polemic, which was so integral to the post-exilic records of Ezra and Nehemiah. This discussion, like the majority of the others, does not cite any new materials beyond 2005.

The structure of the volume, examining each narrative in its canonical sequence, also precludes close engagement with broader ritual, cosmological, and historical questions, and leaves many important areas unexplored: What was the relationship between ancient Israelite theology and the individual biblical laws? And thus, for example, how was the call for the destruction of the inhabitants of Canaan, reconciled with the prohibition of murder in theological terms? And if, as Sweeney has clarified, the account of blessings and curses in Deuteronomy 27–28 is inherently part of the Neo-Assyrian treaty world, is it appropriate to extend notions of “divine morality,” from discussions of the Holocaust, to these consequences? From a critical perspective, the obvious dangers of transposing biblical imperatives to non-contemporaneous historical realities also ought rightly to have been acknowledged—as Jonneke Bekkenkamp has clarified in “Violence and Final Vocabularies: On Mapping Actual Hopes and Beliefs,” in *Sanctified Aggression: Legacies of Biblical and Post-Biblical Vocabularies of Violence* (ed. J. Bekkenkamp and Y. Sherwood; London: T & T Clark International, 2003), pp. 213–229.

Given the actual title of the volume, I fully expected an account of the reception of biblical theologies in early rabbinic literature, with a richer picture to include medieval, as well as early modern and contemporary Jewish scholars. The absence of any reference whatsoever to Rashi (this is the transliterated acronym for רבי שלמה יצחקי—one of the most, if not *the* most, outstanding exegete to survive the massacres of the First Crusade—was, I assume, justified by the author's decision to limit the chronological parameters of "Jewish Biblical Theology," to commence with Johan P. Gabler's 1787 inaugural lecture at the University of Altdorf (pp. 5–6). Although Rashi never produced a systematic study of the divine attributes, his commentaries on the Pentateuch did circulate among Christian scholars throughout France, Germany, and Spain during his lifetime. Presumably the omission of any engagement with Maimonides' theology, in his (still influential) thirteen principles of faith, was also dictated on this basis. This is somewhat surprising, given the author's self-defined task of liberating Jewish biblical theology from the confines of New Testament teachings and Christian doctrine.

While it is very refreshing to find a Jewish theological engagement with literary-critical methods, the title of this book promises more than it actually delivers. This is probably due to the scope and breadth of this project, which could justifiably fill an entire series, rather than a single volume. The wealth of details offered was undeniably impressive, although the danger here was that debatable elements in the theological reconstructions were occasionally presented as scholarly certainties. Clearly the strength of this work lies in its effective narrative and source-critical assessments, and yet for all its careful treatment of ancient Hebrew sacred traditions, not a word on the significance of the theological role of the Jewish Bible as the foundational text of the modern State of Israel appeared. Am I missing something?

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