

BOOK REVIEWS

Philip F. Esler (ed.), *Ancient Israel. The Old Testament in Its Social Context*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006.

Aside from the first two chapters, all the other essays of this volume are the edited versions of papers presented at the “St. Andrews Conference on Old Testament Interpretation and the Social Sciences”, held at St. Mary’s College of the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, between July 30 – June 4, 2004.

The volume is organized in four parts, the first of which begins with a plea for the “social-scientific models” and their use in biblical interpretation. Models are simplifications, exemplifications and systematizations of data used for comparative process. Models are only heuristic tools used for comparison, and not for deduction or induction. This method finds its roots in Max Weber’s sociological research. He argues that generalized theoretical categories help proving the causal relationships in the human and cultural field same as in the natural sciences. Because human action is subjective, it does not mean that it is necessarily unpredictable. A second essay presents some of the most important anthropologists and sociologists that begun to apply models and methods from social and cultural anthropology in their research on the Old Testament. Next, there are brought in discussion issues like the ritual, Israel’s social and political organization, prophecy and law, regarding Old Testament, as seen by William Robertson Smith, Sir James Frazer, Ferdinand Töniés, Emile Durkheim, Bryan Wilson, Max Weber, Mary Douglas, Edmund Leach, Thomas Overholt, Robert Wilson, Robert Carol.

In the second part of the volume different authors bring various social-scientific models and perspectives and apply them to a series of Old Testament issues and texts. We may read studies on: biblical social organization (Robert Coote); comparisons of Israelite practices regarding polygyny with contemporary cultures (Carolyn S. Leeb); essential elements of sacrificial acts as presented by the Book of Leviticus (Adriana Destro and Mauro Pesce); proposals on how to improve a social-scientific model so one can apply it to new situations (Zeba A. Crook); the topos “acquisition of wealth” (Gary Stansell); a presentation of the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith as a prophet (Lester. L. Grabbe); finally a presentation of trance as a protest strategy (Dietmar Neufeld).

The third part of the book shows the way in which exegetical meanings can be derived by applying social-scientific methods to certain texts, exemplifying on texts like Micah 6, 9-15 (Marvin L. Chaney); Deuteronomy 25: 11, 12 (John H. Elliot); Judges 10, 16-12-1 (Richard E. DeMaris and Carolyn S. Leeb); 2 Samuel 10-12 (Philip F. Esler); Ezekiel 1-3 (John J. Pilch); Nahum (Anslem C. Hagedorn); 1 Maccabees (Mario I. Aguilar); and finally, texts of Qumran (Jutta Jokiranta).

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The last part of the book, entirely dedicated to *Biblical Hermeneutics*, makes a case for the hermeneutical value of the social-scientific methods. In view of this declared purpose, Douglas E. Oakman argues that over the past thirty years social sciences have played an increasingly important role in the biblical research. Social-scientific criticism faces biblical theology with a crisis, especially in the rift opened up between biblical world and our world. Subsequently, Bruce J. Malina (*Interfaith Dialogue. Challenging the Received View*) analyzes the document issued by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, from the historical and social-scientific perspective. The document contains categories and understandings that have no connection with the social context of the biblical texts. A straightforward continuity between ancient Israel and contemporary Jewish people is presumed. Finally, Andrew D. H. Mayes (*Psychology – Moses and Monotheism. The Future of Freud's Illusion*) analyzes Sigmund Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* and its relevance to historical understanding, its importance for comprehending the cultural-mythological foundations of the Judeo-Christian tradition, or for its insights in the nature of Judaism.

Ioan Fărcaș, Paula Bud



Walter BRUEGGEMANN, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005.

This paperback edition of Brueggemann's classical work is a basically unchanged version of his work originally published in 1997. The study of the Old Testament receives its questions both from a long history in the Church and in the academy – a history that influences current research – as well as from contemporary contexts and problems. The identification of these questions is regarded by Brueggemann as a “perilous matter”, as it can become a subjective one. The author gives a perspective on the way in which cultural climate and context shaped scholarship and interpretation. The sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation is seen as the starting point of the scholarship in Old Testament theology. The author gives three reasons to sustain this statement. First, the Old Testament theology, in its modern intention, is considered as an enterprise of Protestantism, especially of the German one. Then, the Reformation is seen as an effort to emancipate the evangelical reality of the Bible from the church interpretation. Finally, it is not without importance that this discipline was shaped in an epistemological content of the European intellect, which underwent changes after the 16th century Reformation. For Luther the Bible is a voice of revelation not to be confused, encumbered by, or contained in any human categories of interpretation that make the voice more coherent or palatable. The effect of the Reformation in Biblical interpretation is to let the Bible have its own voice, free of any categories of church interpretation.

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The second retrospect in Brueggemann's study makes an analysis of the contemporary interpretative situation in the Old Testament theology. While in the past interpretation was largely homogeneous and easy to control, today biblical exegesis is made in a pluralistic context. The new situation can bring conflict between varied interpretations. Rival accounts of Old Testament theology, of which the most important alternative appear to be canonical, liberationist in its several submodels, historical-critical, are easy to notice.

Given the new interpretative situation of the present times, several aspects with reference to Old Testament scholarship are mentioned, like intertextuality, the Jewishness of the text, the dialectical and dialogical quality of the Old Testament, and its character of being a response to the crisis of exile. Changes in recent Old Testament study are mentioned, as well as some options regarding the theological enterprise: foundationalism, canon criticism, the *seriatim* reading, the postliberal approach, the second listening community and the polyphonic character.

The book is structured in five parts as it follows: *Part I: Israel's Core Testimony* concerns the core testimony of Israel, given by God. The Old Testament does not give a comprehensive and coherent image of God but only hints and fragments without any apparent clue of how these elements might fit together. To cite God, as a subject of theology, means to take, as the author says, only the "theos" out of theology. *Part II: Israel's Countertestimony* opens with a chapter about cross-examination as a method used in studying the Old Testament. The process of cross-examination is required by Israel's testimony which attests to God's acts whereby He transforms the world. The process of cross-examination goes on in the Old Testament's text itself, the text being pervasively disputatious. *Part III: Israel's Unsolicited Testimony* treats about Israel's unsolicited testimony, having as a starting point the metaphor of the courtroom testimony. But Yahweh is never presented alone in Israel's testimony. He is always Yahweh-in-relation, and He is committed to his partners (as the author names the ones who know Him). There are several kinds of partnership with Yahweh, presented by the author: Israel's partnership with Yahweh, the human person and Yahweh, Yahweh and the nations, Yahweh and the entire creation. Therefore, *Part IV* is concentrating over the embodied testimony of Israel. It tries to give us a picture of the mediators that occur in Yahweh's relation with Israel (the Torah, the king, the prophet, the cult, the sage), about the mediated forms of Yahweh's presence, not without analyzing the direct forms of Yahweh's presence, without any mediating agents. The subject will be treated into two parts: the public immediacy in theophany (for example the theophany at Sinai) and the personal encounters (Abraham, Moses, Elijah). Finally, *Part V: Prospects for Theological Interpretation* gives us some prospects for theological interpretation. In this last part, Brueggemann also makes a summary of the entire study.

Ioan Fărcaș, Paula Bud



Carolyn Osiek, Margaret Y. MacDonald, with Janet H. Tulloch, *A Woman's Place. House Churches in Earliest Christianity*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006.

Carolyn Osiek and Margaret MacDonald are acknowledged for their contribution to scholarship on early Christianity, household and household churches, including women's status. Carolyn Osiek, professor of New Testament at Brite Divinity School, Fort Worth, Texas has published several volumes on the topic, writing on *Families in the New Testament: Households and House Churches* (1997, together with David L. Balch), and most recently on *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History* (2007, with Kevin Madigan). Margaret MacDonald, professor of New Testament at Saint Francis Xavier University, Nova Scotia Canada, is known for her work on *The Pauline Churches: A Socio-Historical Study of Institutionalization* (1988), and the *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion* (1996). The volume also includes a contribution by Janet Tulloch, holding a NT PhD from the University of Ottawa. What brings together the two main authors is their involvement in the SBL Early Christian Families Group and methodologically their interest in the social scientific approach of early Christianity.

The present volume proposes an informed discussion on early Christian women's life, status and role within the social structures of the household and within the household church. The period encompassed goes beyond the time of the NT and early Christian apocrypha, and implicitly of household churches proper, extending occasionally to martyr acts and patristic texts from the 4th century. Some of the chapters are revised versions of earlier essays, but most of the material is new. The topic is extremely broad, and the sources rather scarce, which makes the task of the authors all the more difficult. One of the first impressions while reading the volume is the moderation in making categorical statements and the avoidance of sweeping generalizations. The chapters do not offer easy answers, as if we had clear evidence on the life of early Christian women. Instead the reader becomes aware of the multitude and complexity of questions, of the amount of unknown details.

The authors essay to bridge the polarities dividing scholars into various camps; these polarities are regarded to be those of patriarchy vs. the discipleship of equals, of public vs. private, and of ascetic vs. domestic lifestyle. The authors perform their proposed task with success and avoid falling into one of these camps.

The first chapters introduce the reader to the everyday life of Christian women, as wives, often confronted with the tension between social expectations and Christian ideals, not rarely in religiously mixed families, facing early widowhood and remarriage, finding themselves within a network of relatives and half-relatives due to entering into new marriages. We encounter women as mothers

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giving birth, assisted by midwives, nursing their little children, having to deal with the extremely high infant mortality, or exposed to rather common maternal mortality, as widows to be cared for or providing social care. We get a glimpse into the life of daughters growing up in household(churche)s and that of the older women instructing their younger sisters. We become aware of the double vulnerability of women slaves facing not only social domination but also sexual exploitation. Data are collected carefully from a very broad range of sources, from Christian writings to Greek, Roman and Jewish authors. Details are also recovered from the background of texts meant to convey a religious message, without however taking all explicit data for granted.

Toward the middle of the volume the authors address the ideological discourse on women in the early church, manifest in Eph 5,22-33. This chapter prepares the following part of the volume that tackles with women's position in the household and the church, including leadership roles. The household code in Eph is read against the background of Roman imperial ideology. Thus Eph is seen to both adopt conventional *topoi* on household management allowing a social invisibility of Christians in a non-Christian society and to incorporate countercultural elements, dissociating Christians from the corrupt world. Concord within the couple is both a symbol of and an instrument aiming at achieving the harmony of the community at large. While the overall discussion is detailed and pertinent, one wonders however whether the emphasis on the purity and fidelity of the wife is indeed as countercultural as assumed here, given e.g. the ideal depicted by Hellenistic moralists.

The following chapters deal more closely with women's leadership role, in the household and in the church. Drawing from a large number of Greek and Roman sources the authors argue that women exerted an important role in managing the household, quite often independently and enjoying authority over the slaves. Inference on Christian women is drawn mostly by extension or gained from martyr acts and patristic sources, given that the NT household codes portray women as rather passive. However the authors also bring in various NT-testimonies on women offering hospitality to apostles or itinerant preachers and hosting house churches. A special issue addressed is that of women's participation in meals, including the question regarding Christian women hosting and presiding at ritual meals. While the authors find indices for women doing so, they distinguish the function of hosting and presiding at a (religious) meal from that of teaching, and although noting a number of female teachers, they assert that women very early met obstacles in exerting a teaching role.

The chapter authored by Janet Tulloch on women leaders in funerary meals brings in the contribution of visual arts, discussing the frescos from the Roman catacomb of Marcellino and Pietro.

The chapter on women patrons is one of the most interesting. The authors draw from extensive ancient literary and epigraphic evidence for elite but also common women exerting private and public patronage not only in Rome and Italy,

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but also in Greece, Asia and Northern Africa. Subsequently references in the NT (Acts, Col, Rom and 1 Cor) and Ignatius are discussed on women extending benefactions and hosting Christian gatherings and especially acting as benefactors towards Paul and Ignatius. The authors also notice the tendency to counteract women's power in regulations like 1 Tim 5,13 and the Apostolic Constitutions, that limit widows' influence and subordinate them to hierarchy.

The subsequent chapter discusses at length women's role as agents of Christianization, a role enhanced by the very context of household churches, where they could move at ease and act within a familiar network of relationships.

A word is needed on the layout of the volume. Just like in many other Anglo-Saxon publications, references related to all chapters appear as endnotes in the last part of the volume. This editorial decision is probably meant to favour the continuous reading of the main text. However this procedure makes in-depth reading very difficult as one has to continuously move back and forth from text to endnotes.

The volume is an excellent contribution to scholarship on women's lives and roles in early Christian households and household churches, avoiding both exaggerated optimism and total skepticism concerning the possibility to retrieve reliable information on women's contribution to the life of the early church.

Korinna Zamfir