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A theological introduction to the Old Testament

Paul F. Sadtke

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A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament

Bruce C. Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence E. Fretheim, and David L. Petersen

Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999

475 pages, \$61.95 Paperback

The seminary serves two masters – the academic world and the church. Usually located on a university campus, using classrooms and having faculty with advanced degrees, seminaries easily lean toward the academic. The authors of this book remark that the standard textbooks on the Hebrew Bible need to be supplemented with other materials or lectures. The need for a better balance, as sought by these four experienced teachers, is beyond dispute.

Of course, in doing this they have assumed a great deal about historical and literary scholarship on the Bible, which they freely acknowledge and use. Is this book comprehensible except in conjunction with one of the conventional introductions? How many books can a thoughtful teacher reasonably expect first-year seminarians to purchase? But if I could stop being an academic for a moment, worried about how such a book might be used in the classroom, and simply be a *reader*, perhaps I might find it quite wonderful – and it is. It is well informed by critical scholarship, careful and close in its reading, and comprehensive in scope.

Most of all it really is “theological.” The Bible is not treated as merely a source for historical study, or even as a wonderful piece of literature. The authors listen carefully for its message about God’s plan and purpose. At the same time they avoid treating it as a monolithic tome, well aware of the “polyphony of voices” (26) represented in the text.

The authors never claim to present anything but a *Christian* reading of Scripture, (hence “Old Testament,” rather than “Hebrew Bible”). Thus, the first eleven chapters of Genesis are given a whole chapter, providing a cosmic viewpoint and laying the theological foundation about God’s care for and interaction with creation. Yet the whole bulk of the *Torah*, Exodus 19 through Deuteronomy 34, likewise receives one chapter (“The Structures of Covenant Life”). Indeed this is, as the authors also acknowledge, a liberal Protestant reading, keenly attuned to issues such as justice, ecology, and the healing of broken relationships. The paradigmatic role of the Exodus is well presented. Among the “polyphony of voices,” this is the one that is heard most clearly. The ambivalent attitudes to violence and the land in Joshua-Judges, for example, is clearly acknowledged. But the authors are honest enough to admit that the militaristic language is and remains a problem for modern readers.

Summaries of the historical and literary methods on which the authors build

are given; but these are so brief as to be, at best, confusing to anyone not already familiar with the field. More seriously, historical questions sometimes get mixed up with the theological message of the text. This is especially evident in the chapter on the united monarchy. One might also wish for a better awareness of the cultural context of the ancient Near East and of recent archaeological work in the region.

Still, pastors and seminarians alike will find this an excellent book to help them discover or re-discover the vitality of the Old Testament and its message. Even people who have not previously studied the Hebrew Bible will find most of the book worthwhile. The style is readable, and relatively free of technical jargon. Bibliographies are rather short and selective, but generally well chosen. It is warmly recommended to all who want to hear the Word.

Paul F. Sadtke
Wilfrid Laurier University

History of Paradise: The Garden of Eden in Myth & Tradition

Jean Delumeau (Translated by Matthew O'Connell)

Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000

276 pages, \$23.50 Softcover

Flowerbed plaques proclaim "one is nearer God's heart in a garden than anywhere else on earth." Apartment-dwellers seek peace through aromatherapy and gurgling indoor water fountains. The desire for harmony with nature is age-old. Jean Delumeau's study focuses on Western thought with respect to paradise from the early Middle Ages to the Enlightenment, a time when this natural oasis was identified with the Garden of Eden.

Various images of Eden are presented: a patristic re-visioning of the Greco-Roman golden age; an intermediary home for the dead awaiting resurrection, floating in subspace; a luxuriant garden in Asia, Africa, or along the equator, still existing but inaccessible. Much of the text is an exposition of sacred geography, illustrated with reproductions of ancient maps.

By the 17th century, belief in the continued existence of Eden was waning, replaced by feelings of nostalgia for a mythological paradise. However, theologians, both Protestant and Catholic, maintained a lively interest in their first ancestors. Attempts were made to establish authoritatively the exact location of the Garden, now generally thought to have perished in the flood, and a chronology of the days of creation – knowledge considered necessary for understanding the condition of humanity before the fall. Accounts of questions