Prophets of Love: The Unlikely Kinship of Leonard Cohen and the Apostle Paul

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Book Review

Prophets of Love: The Unlikely Kinship of Leonard Cohen and the Apostle Paul
Matthew R. Anderson
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Prophets of Love: The Unlikely Kinship of Leonard Cohen and the Apostle Paul is a remarkable book by Matthew Anderson. Readers unfamiliar with one or the other, or both, will experience a fulsome introduction to their work, and those more familiar will find themselves drawn into richer relationships with each. Here we have the best of comparative exercises, where we not only find points of similarity and dissonance, but we experience our relationship with both become deepened, troubled, and enhanced.

After setting up the task before him and the reader, Anderson lays out this journey with the following themes that order the chapters: Judaism, Jesus, women, asceticism, masculinity, rhetoric, vocation, mysticism, brokenness and redemption, and their “long afterlives” (vii). Each chapter ends with a textual meditation—looking at the writing of each alongside each other. Anderson helpfully suggests a Cohen piece to listen to while pondering the twinned texts. I found this to be especially rich. Readers are also gifted with a helpful section at the end entitled “Further Reading” that supplements the already generous documentation of primary and secondary sources in the body of the chapter.

The chapters are all worthy of a fulsome accounting, but in interests of space I will restrict my observations to a few. I was especially intrigued by and grateful for Anderson’s treatment of the place of Judaism within each opus. He first addresses the dangers of supersessionism by pointing out that Paul was and remained Jewish. The Jesus movement of the day did not equate to the Christianity that many of us call our religion presently but was a group within Judaism. Paul and Cohen share a solid Jewish identity, even while both imbibed wisdoms outside of their tradition: Stoicism and Buddhism, respectively, in service of their religious life (pg. 22). It is so very helpful that Anderson sets this up early in his text, especially since Christians have too often leveraged Paul’s commitment to Jesus in a kind of anachronistic and agonistic fashion that presumes the end of Judaism in Paul’s thought. In a deft treatment of the issue, Anderson upends a Christian commonplace (Paul converted to Christianity) and so opens new vistas in our understanding of Paul. Of course, Anderson is not breaking new soil with this and other insights but is making scholarly developments available to the reader. Interestingly, he notes that Cohen’s thought is actually closer to “Christianity” than Paul’s in that he had developed a familiarity with Christian themes and practices that had not yet come to exist in the days of Paul (pg. 107). Moreover, he notes that Paul was more interested in the character of Christ, and Cohen in the person of Jesus even while both shared a fixation for the cross, where these two identities of Jesus and Christ meet (pg. 29). Anderson notes that one “of the deepest insights of both writers is that to be human is to be imperfect, in need of lifting up. In some ways, for each, the brokenness of humanity is precisely where divine agency and healing can occur” (pg. 114).

I was intrigued by Anderson’s work with Cohen’s and Paul’s rhetoric—especially in light of his important qualification that these written works under exploration cannot be equated to the persons writing them, in that they clearly make use of license (pg. 7). These
“prophets of love” are also masters of rhetoric and we forget this to our detriment. Anderson nicely outlines the various strategies shared by our two poets. I am particularly grateful for his treatment of *prosopopoeia*, by which an author creates an imaginary interlocutor. Anderson underscores that Cohen’s use of this rhetorical flourish is at its best when the “you” created in his poetry cannot be definitely designated: now suggesting God, now his lover, his confidante, “even some part of himself” (pg. 78). It strikes me that this illumines the potency of the poetry of both Cohen and Paul.

For readers not so very familiar with recent work on Paul, the material addressing the topic of sex and women will be especially provocative. Anderson notes how the treatment of the women in the uncontested Pauline corpus is profoundly respectful. Paul counts them as co-workers and even apostles (pg. 47) in a counter-cultural way in the context of ancient patriarchy. Women, as depicted by Cohen, often appear as tropes (pg. 42) and while their bodies become shrines evoking religious experience, this is not true of their thoughts (pg. 44). Anderson helpfully explicates the relationship between love, sex, and desire in both, noting that for each the end point of “getting closer to God” was intimately related to sexuality (by abstinence or connection, for Paul and Cohen, respectively) (pg. 41). In the end, Cohen saw women as the other with which to unite in erotic spirituality while Paul finally saw the need to move beyond genders in both male and female relationships with the divine (pg. 50). But finally, Anderson notes that both thinkers approach the questions of gender, sexuality, and desire from a “discourse about masculinity” (pg. 52).

There is so much to commend this book. Readers are given a serendipitous introduction to important developments in biblical scholarship. We are reminded of the power of poetry when we read that Cohen “is the poet of the quiet midnight conversation, the dark revelation, everyone’s ally or lover who assures us that, faults and all, we’re known” (pg. 82). In Anderson’s anthem of praise, which both celebrates and critiques these prophets of love, readers are reminded that true love is prophetic, and true prophecy is inspired by love. As you imbibe Anderson’s hymn that lauds these broken vessels who display the power of love, you might find yourself singing their poetry in a new prophetic key. To quote the voice that spoke to Augustine: *tolle et lege* (take it up and read).

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