Reviews


Leila Bronner’s analysis of Rabbinic views on biblical women is a fascinating addition to existing studies of women in Scripture. From Eve to Esther sets out to show the power both Bible and Midrash have had on women’s roles and status for generations. Bronner focuses systematically on the ambivalence of Rabbinic attitudes: upholding modesty as a virtue, yet exhibiting a certain tenderness and sympathy toward bad women; constraining to keep women within home and hearth, yet displaying occasional pride in women as significant leaders of the community. (xi)

She intends to present a balanced picture, recognizing the multivalence of biblical texts and the social preoccupations of the sages interpreting them.

Midrashic analysis typically focuses on difficult words, inner contradictions, and problematical passages in the text. Much can be read into a text (eisegetically) through this sort of interpretation. (xv)

The stories of Rahab and Tamar illustrate this. The rabbis do not condemn them, but “rehabilitate them so thoroughly through midrashic exegesis that both women are transformed into exceptional figures” (148).

Etymology was important to such interpretation since names were thought to be symbols, a key to the nature of personality. Thus Rabbinic tradition attributes arrogance to Deborah and Huldah, calling their names hateful, the former called a homet, ziborata, the latter a weasel, karkuisha.

By imposing a scale of values on biblical heroines they “endeared the characters of the Bible to folk of their own times...and conveyed the values they wanted to spread throughout the community” (3). The rabbis placed a high value on beauty and modesty. Midrashic tradition praises Ruth for her chesed (loving-kindness); beauty and modesty are ascribed to her, even though these qualities are not mentioned in the biblical text.

While women are not “models of prayer in the Rabbinic community, Hannah becomes the prototype for excellence in prayer” (xix). The communal prayer experience, a central activity in biblical and Rabbinic Judaism, was closed to women who were encouraged to pray in private, yet the prayer attributed to Hannah is recorded in the Bible.

In the end Bronner calls for “further studies in the emerging tradition of depatriarchalizing interpretation,” that we might “reclaim biblical women with our own midrash and reinstate them as paradigms for our modern lives” (186).

Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes is a scholarly survey of feminist and womanist interpretations of women of the Hebrew Bible. Designed for courses Alice Bells teaches at Howard University School of Divinity, the material is arranged for religious education classes in churches and synagogues as well. Provocative discussion questions, extensive bibliographies, and notes follow each chapter, and helpful indices to scripture, biblical women, and authors cited make this a comprehensive reference. It begs to be read and studied with a group.

By way of introduction, she defines terms, provides background to women’s status in Israel’s history, and outlines methods of interpretation and approaches to scriptural authority, all in a very thorough-going manner. Women’s stories, so powerful “they have profoundly affected women’s self-understanding and men’s perception of women” (3), are given new readings by well-known feminist scholars.
from varying backgrounds: Northern European, Afro-American, Asian, and American. Bellis brings her own conclusions to bear on their commentaries.

The first chapter is devoted to the story of Eve, "used more than any other as a theological base for sexism" (45). In the succeeding chapters one discovers biblical women were women of color — "they sometimes fared better in the hands of biblical narrators than of modern interpreters" (30); women were cruel and tender, powerless and powerful, devious and devout, revered and brutally victimized. If one cannot match a biblical woman to each of these descriptions, it is time to read Bellis' book!

While "there is not always a single feminist reading of a biblical woman's story" (234), Bellis insists on a close reading of the text using traditional technical tools in order that we see how "past history and the ancients' thoughts interact with, shape, and challenge our contemporary views" (218).

I wondered, as I read, about our children. How can we honestly re-present Bible women, drawn from such multivalent texts, in ways that will enrich their understanding of God's plan for the world, then and now?

The title of Clothed with the Sun describes the portent in Revelation 12, a powerful woman who was not threatened by the dragon and his angels but taken into the wilderness where she was nourished by God. Joyce Hollyday claims this symbol of the church as a metaphor for contemporary women in her nourishing book, subtitled Biblical Women, Social Justice and Us. Arranged as fifty meditations to be used by individuals or groups, women of the Bible are grouped according to types, e.g., "devoted mothers," "women touched by Jesus," or "witnesses to life and resurrection." Reflection questions follow each group.

Stories from the Old and New Testaments are vividly retold and carefully interpreted to make the characters live again in the reader's experience. Each is paired with modern examples, "who courageously defy wrongful authority and band together to demand justice and uphold life" (xii). The writer makes connections between Rahab and the El Salvador martyrs, Michal and Harriet Tubman, Deborah and Hildegard of Bingen, Priscilla and Catherine Booth, considered by one biographer to have "laid the first stone of the Salvation Army" (162).

In this meditation she writes, "God has not been satisfied to carry on the work of faith with only half of the available servants." It seems to me this is reason enough for both men and women to learn more about women in scripture, to find our role models there, and to claim our vocations boldly. Westminster John Knox Press is to be commended for publishing these stimulating volumes.

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As a student in Heidelberg, Rainer Albertz learned from Gerhard von Rad and did a doctoral degree under Claus Westermann. In these volumes, however, unlike his teachers, he chooses not to write a theology of the Old Testament. Instead, he returns to the genre of the late nineteenth century, before the advent of the great Old Testament theologies of recent generations, producing "a history of Israelite religion."

Albertz certainly means no disrespect to his teachers, nor does he simply dismiss their scholarship. His own history could not have been written before their work. Still, for a variety of reasons, primarily his insistence on the historical structure of the Old Testament and the essential connection between religious statements and the historical background from which they derive, he finds a history, not a theology, to be the proper focus of his efforts (I:16-17).

Contemporary American theological students and pastors may be surprised that anyone would still attempt such an approach. What they have heard now for a decade or two is that (1) there is no way to reconstruct biblical history and (2) it
wouldn’t make any difference if you could, since what matters is the literature itself and the reader’s response to it, not its author or background. Admittedly, we have learned much from a literary approach to scripture, and most of its advocates would not make these anti-historical statements quite so boldly (though some would), but the two points nevertheless represent what many students share in quick methodological overviews.

The chief value of Albertz’s work, therefore, is its simple audacity in attempting once again to reconstruct history. He recognizes the problems, asking himself whether, given the level of dispute “over the literary place and date of many areas of the Old Testament, such a work of synthesis makes any sense at all today” (Iviii). But he thinks the attempt is necessary. And he is right. Of course, we cannot simply get at or reconstruct “what really happened” in the ancient world in some direct and uninterpreted way. But neither will it be sufficient to say that “nothing ever happened (or we don’t know what happened), but here’s what it means.” Human honesty and intellectual curiosity demand that we continue to do our collective best to learn as much as possible—recognizing, to be sure, the tentative nature of all such reconstructive work. Maybe even more important for pastors and theologians: a confessional tradition that insists on God’s entry into history can never give up trying to understand history. Everything, literally everything, is at stake. Albertz is to be commended for leaving the safer harbor of literary work and venturing anew into the stormy and dangerous seas of history.

Although Albertz’s work is complex, it is not inaccessible to the diligent and careful reader. (The translation by John Bowden flows particularly well.) It is not necessary, or even intended, that one read the volumes from cover to cover. They lend themselves to selective perusal, as the questions and interest of the reader dictate. The extensive bibliographical notes at the beginning of each section pave the way to further investigation for those so inclined. I have used portions of these books in the seminary classroom to great benefit. Students often have very little sense of ancient history in general or biblical history in particular, so this work fills an important void. Additionally, its admittedly controversial developmental approach to the growth of Israel’s religion (including, for example, the rather important notion of monothelitism) often forces readers to think in new ways and entertain new ideas. Even if virtually any scholar will disagree here or there (for some, it may be often) with Albertz’s particular reconstructions or methodology, the volumes provide a stimulating and critical portrayal of the broad sweep of Israel’s religious history—a history which any student or pastor must somewhere contemplate if she or he is not content simply to divorce the biblical “story” from the contingencies of world history.

An important dimension of Albertz’s history is its attempt to bridge the divisions produced by the increasingly specialized disciplines of recent biblical and theological study. Here Albertz explicitly follows the clarion call of Claus Westermann (see, e.g., Westermann’s proposals in Word & World 13/4 [1993] 342-344). Thus, the book brings together political and social history, literary study and comparative religion, archaeology and theology in its presentation of Israel’s religious history. One significant and insightful result, an area pursued by Albertz throughout his career, is the attempt to penetrate Israel’s “internal religious pluralism” and to define three levels of religion in the Old Testament period: official, local, and familial. Contemporary studies make us well aware of the differences in our own time between a church’s official theology and what people actually believe and practice. Albertz attempts to get at similar differences in the Old Testament. This is not merely of abstract interest. Erhard Gerstenberger, for example, uses Albertz’s work to good advantage in his investigation of the place of women in Israel’s religion (Jahwes—eins patriarchaler Gott?, forthcoming in English from Fortress [1996]?).

Scholars will continue the debate about methodology, the relation between history and theology, or the possibility and value of historical reconstruction. In the meantime, readers of this journal who delve into Albertz’s history will find it provocative and helpful as they do their daily work of
understanding the biblical message for
temselves and presenting it to their pa-
risioners or students.

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MAJESTY AND MEEKNESS: A COM-
PARATIVE STUDY OF CONTRAST
AND HARMONY IN THE CONCEPT
OF GOD, by John B. Carman. Grand

When a blurb for this book says that it is
"the outstanding example to date of the
emerging genre of world theology—that is,
theology in a religious tradition written in
reference to the theologies of other world
religious traditions," it is, surprisingly,
correct. We are swiftly leaving the day behind
when we can treat other religious commu-
nities, their beliefs and teachings, with be-
ign neglect. Whether it be the neighbor
down the street, in the next town, on our
TV screen, or the courses our youth take in
college and university (and increasingly in
high schools as well), or the books and
magazines we read, reckoning with these
other commitments is becoming a part of
our daily lives. Neither can the pondering
of our own Christian faith be done as
though we lived in an isolated space. What
Hindus, Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists be-
lieve, not to mention many others, can affect
significantly how we do our own theology,
and so also our practice of ministry.

Carman, in my judgment, is superb in
the way he enables Christians who really
believe what they confess to think through
their faith in relationship to the commit-
mments of people of other faiths. He has
spent a lifetime in the study of one stream
of the Hindu faith. Though he does not
wear his own faith on his sleeve, it clearly
shows through the pages of the book. I
have long wondered why Carman does not
use his great knowledge to bring Hindu be-
liefs into creative engagement with the
Christian faith. He is, however, much more
patient than I am. This book represents
what I shall call his second phase. He has a
sense of honorable commitment to "objec-
tive" scholarship (he calls it phenomenol-
y) and will move only with the greatest
of caution from descriptive to normative is-
issues. This book begins the move—bringing
descriptive and theological concerns into
contact with each other. I envision a third
phase, in which he begins a full-blown
theological reconstruction of some aspects
of the Christian faith in the light of his pre-
vious work.

Several things please me about the
book. He describes selected Hindu beliefs
clearly and well, and in a way that shows
they invite connection with some basic
Christian beliefs. He expands this conver-
sation to include Buddhist, Jewish, and
Muslim convictions about related matters,
and does so competently. He gets to the
heart of trinitarian issues. In my opinion, if
one converses about other faiths and fails
to come to terms with the trinitarian issue,
one has simply missed the boat theologi-
cally. Furthermore, he doesn’t adhere to
any pop approach to other faith commit-
mments, whether it be the exclusivist, inclu-
sivist, or pluralist. Since he takes
incarnation and trinity seriously he is far
from such pluralist advocates as Hick and
Knitter. He takes the faith he confesses seri-
ously and the faith commitments of others
seriously, and patiently works at funda-
mental issues.

What then is the book about? Carman
has had a lifelong scholarly love affair with
the idea of contrast (polarity) in the very
notion of God. This is the key that he turns
in many directions to open doors of theo-
logical reflection. He happened upon the
importance of contrast in the understand-
ing of God during his study of the Indian
teaching Ramanuja. He discovered here
a strong sense of both the supremacy and
accessibility of God to the pious believer in
Vishnu (Krishna). How could the one who
was supreme ruler of the universe at the
same time be accessible to poor mortals?
Ramanuja gives theological coherence to
the profound piety of the devotees of
Vishnu.

Of course, it didn’t take long to see that
the same kind of polarity is at the heart of
the Christian faith. How can the one who is
seen by none be available in a Bethlehem
stable? The Hindu answer to their form of the
question is both disturbingly close to the
Christian answer while also surprisingly far. From this Carman discovers a rich set of polarities in almost all understandings of God, and uses this encounter with Hinduism to explore them.

What does he mean by polarity? There are many kinds of polarities, and many ways to deal with them. There is wrath and love, justice and mercy, transcendence and immanence, supremacy and accessibility, self-sufficiency and dependence, personal and transpersonal, masculine and feminine, good and evil, maintenance and destruction, one and many—the list could go on. One can deal with these polarities either by transcending them through appeal to a higher truth, by rejecting one or the other pole, by arranging them hierarchically, by making them into paradox or a way of speech about the unspeakable, and so on. His bias theologically, however, others may deal with it, is to see polarities in terms of two contrasting qualities which still belong together in an irreducible way. It is this last insistence of his that makes his discussion of trinitarian matters towards the end of the book particularly fruitful if still only starting that exploration.

He discusses a variety of Hindu perspectives, though his major treatment is of the tradition of devotion to Vishnu. (I refrain from using technical terms in this review.) He deals first with one of their great hymn writers (ca. 9th C.E.), then with their greatest theologian Ramanuja (ca. late 11th-early 12th C.E.), and finally with one of this tradition’s greatest commentators (ca. 12th C.E.). Carman will later get us into polarity in the Christian understanding of God by first taking us to the Christian hymnbook, and then exploring Luther and Jonathan Edwards. In the course of his discussion he will also treat such things as grace and faith in the Buddhist context as well as the Hindu, the difference between avatar and incarnation, Jewish and Muslim experience of God, mysticism, Hindu goddesses, some contemporary examples of a Christian theology of polarities (including Bonaventure [not so modern], Tillich, Barth, Hartsheime, and Hendrikus Berkhof), and of course trinitarian theology itself. The title of the book, “Majesty and Meekness,” comes from Jonathan Ed-

In this book Witherington attempts to examine the whole of Paul’s thought world. Rather than building an artificial topical framework for organizing the Pauline material, he tries to construct a truly Pauline context for organizing it, one that is narrative based. He speaks of Paul’s narrative thought world because he is convinced that all of Paul’s context-specific discourse ultimately arises out of his reflections on a grand Story. This large drama is comprised of four interrelated stories: (1) the story of the entire cosmos gone awry in Adam; (2) the story of Israel in that world; (3) the central and climactic story of Christ which arises out of both 1 and 2 above and the story of God as creator and redeemer; and (4) the story of Christians, which arises out of all three of these stories and promises a world set right again. In the bulk of the book Witherington moves back and forth between the exegetical details and this larger Story, showing both how Paul’s discourse is generated by this larger story and how these details cohere and gel into this large drama.

Although he makes use of information describing Paul’s social world and mentions the importance of rhetorical strategy, this is definitely a theology book arguing for the coherence of Paul’s thought within a narrative framework. It covers most of what one might expect in a treatment of Paul’s theology and will help the pastor remain abreast of the current discussion. In dialogue with other Pauline scholars, Witherington provides interesting exegetical discussions throughout (e.g., that the subject in Rom 7:7-13 is Adam and then in 7:14-25 those who are “in Adam”). Although some of his conclusions present a challenge to Lutherans (e.g., his treatment of progressive sanctification, the Initiatio Christi as important for Pauline ethics, or his denial of the simul), a careful reading of the book will repay the reader with new insights into the shape of Pauline theology. The book contains interesting and accessible prose, good periodic summaries, and a helpful scripture index. Overall, it will be useful for pastors and teachers and deserves a wide readership.

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Although there are many new approaches to the study of the Synoptic Gospels, such as literary and rhetorical analyses, the interest in the theological analysis and interpretation of them has not subsided. The author of this work has shown in earlier works that he is highly skilled in literary studies of the Gospel of Matthew, and now he demonstrates in this book more explicitly than earlier his gift at providing a theological interpretation of it.

But how does one go about giving a theological interpretation of a gospel? The usual way has been to probe a gospel in light of the various loci of systematic theology (christology, ecclesiology, eschatology, etc.). But here the author takes a different approach, using what he calls the “categories related to pastoral theology.” There are five that are explored: mission, worship, teaching, stewardship, and social justice.

The book is based on lectures given at various pastoral conferences and is therefore addressed to a wide audience in the church. At the same time, each chapter is carefully focused on the text of Matthew, and in footnotes the footprints of the author through contemporary scholarship are evident.

Regarding mission, the author contends that the evangelist regards the mission of the church as a continuation of what God has begun to accomplish in the mission of Jesus on earth (3). In the chapter on worship Powell picks up and demonstrates how thoroughly the language of worship pervades this gospel. The chapter on teaching explores basic questions regarding it (What is taught? Who does it? To whom is teaching given?). The chapter on stewardship is a skillful exposition of three parables (21:33-43; 24:45-51; 25:14-30). The final
chapter explores a theme very much neglected. The author demonstrates that the Beatitudes are not a mere “catalog of virtues” (128) but are very much related to social justice. Thorough exposition of the Beatitudes along these lines is one of the strongest parts of the book.

Other topics in “pastoral theology” could have been explored beyond these (sin, forgiveness, healing, proclamation, and so forth), but what the author provides here is fresh, lucid, and helpful for pastoral reflection on a gospel that, in many ways, appears to be a manual for pastoral theology and care.

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In an era of widespread worship experimentation, there comes a much-needed and anticipated book that provides Lutheran (and other) congregations resources for addressing issues of contemporaneity and multi-culturalism in worship. *With One Voice* is a worship supplement that has been designed to stand alongside existing worship resources. It is intended to be used by congregations who, within the framework of traditional liturgical patterns, seek alternative music and modern language for worship.

In the short space of 288 pages, this supplement provides a useful array of liturgical settings, service music, hymns, and songs. There are two newly commissioned settings of the Holy Communion based on liturgical texts from the *Lutheran Book of Worship*: Setting 4 (so named to distinguish it from settings 1–3 in the LBW) offers singable music written in a variety of styles. Setting 5 is noteworthy for the simplicity of its melodies. There is a sixth setting, which may prove to be the most interesting and useful of the three. It is a setting of the communion liturgy that follows the form of Luther’s Chorale Mass. For each liturgical element of this service, several hymn or service music options are suggested. There is a corresponding section of service music that offers selections from settings by various modern composers including Marty Haugen, Jay Beech, Michael Hassell, and Jacques Berthier, as well as some lively options from the world church. In addition to the three settings of Holy Communion, there is included a new “Service of the Word and Prayer” based on scriptural texts and incorporating three new liturgical songs.

The main body of the book is its hymn section which presents 201 hymns and songs for worship use. Among the noteworthy contemporary authors and composers represented are Carl Schalk, Jaroslav Vajda, John Ylvisaker, Gracia Grindal, and Brian Wren. There are also numerous hymns from the rich tradition of Christian hymnody, including tunes by Mozart, Schubert, Vaughan Williams, Dietler, Praetorius, and two choral harmonizations by J. S. Bach. The supplement achieves a rich diversity through its inclusion of numerous folk-songs from various cultures and global faith communities. Represented are songs from the traditions of Africa, the Caribbean, Russia, Central America, Israel, and many European countries, as well as Native American and African American songs. The collection is well selected and will constitute a useful canon of hymns for congregations who seek a fresh voice for their traditional patterns of worship.

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*Transforming Congregations* is the third book in the Alban Institute’s Once and Future Church Series written by Loren Mead. In *The Once and Future Church*, the first and most widely-read book of the series, Mead broadly surveys past and present changes in the church and considers a future to which those changes might be pointing. According to Mead, in this post-Christendom era old assumptions
don’t work and institutions are breaking down. Denominations, structured to do mission in far-off lands or national crises now encounter “mission fields” at their churches’ front doors or in the workplaces and families of their members.

In More Than Numbers, his second book of the series, Mead explores the challenges and complexities of congregational health using a grid “measuring” numerical, mature, rational, organic, and incarnational growth. He challenges congregations to develop their own “mix” of these four types of growth as their vision or goal for ministry.

Transforming Congregations is Mead’s “vision” of the church’s reshaping itself for mission in the turmoil of today’s changing world. After reasserting the seriousness of the complex changes which are dramatically affecting all churches, and arguing that no amount of cosmetic tinkering with programs is going to make any significant difference, Mead calls congregations to an age-old mission: living and breathing the good news promise of spiritual transformation for all to see.

If the church is to be faithful and effective, it must take up its apostolic task of proclaiming the Good News as Jesus did: in response to the world’s experience of “bad news.” Paraphrasing several key New Testament passages and citing Billy Graham and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as examples, Mead develops a four-quadrant model of wholistic evangelism. The quadrants include “secular” and “religious” responses to both individual and social “bad news.”

Transformation-preparation of disciples and apostles is the goal of this wholistic model of evangelism. A faithful and effective congregation will become a gospel community of proclamation that teaches the tradition and serves others. As gospel communities, congregations will reflect the features Parker Palmer claims are characteristic of public life as it should be: strangers meet on common ground, fear of the stranger is tended, scarce resources are shared, and abundance generated, conflict occurs and is resolved, etc.

Even as congregations become apostolic, gospel communities in mission, regional and national judicatories must reconstruct themselves to service congregations in their task of making disciples and apostles. Mead finds nine critical functions for judicatories in his new vision of “regional, national, and international” church. He argues that for judicatories to become the “persistent friend” of congregations is a good place to start.

Congregational andjudiciary leaders, both lay and clergy, will find much provocative, imaginative material in Mead’s proposal. All three books in this series might well become evocative beginnings to church leadership discussions and planning processes. The work is accessible, sound, and engaging. It raises critical issues and points in effective and faithful directions.

For many who have found Mead’s analysis of the challenges facing contemporary congregations particularly insightful and have been awaiting an equally imaginative proposal for an “emerging new paradigm” for the church, Transforming Congregations will be less than satisfying. While Mead’s call for refocusing the church on its apostolic mission is important and clear, there is little in his proposal that pastors have not heard before. Moreover, his focus on shaping ministry around “bad news” could draw congregations into presenting to the world what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the “God of the gaps.”

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