

# Reviews



**ISAIAH 1-39**, by Christopher Seitz. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993. Pp. 272. \$22.00.

Anyone who preaches according to the lectionary knows that texts from the book of Isaiah come up frequently. According to my count, the Gospel of Luke leads the lectionary listings with 75 texts, followed by Matthew and Isaiah, each of which has 60. Since Isaiah continues to be of such importance for the church's preaching and teaching, a fresh commentary on that prophet will be greeted with interest.

And fresh it is. In the context of what Professor Seitz of Yale Divinity School describes as "a general weariness with traditional critical work, its frequently tedious historical reconstructions and literary-critical operations," this commentary comes at the task in a different way. Seitz intends to offer an interpretation that is "geared to the present form of the text or the final shape of a biblical book." He is concerned that the interpreter "pay more attention to the biblical text itself and especially to the larger context that surrounds – and I believe influences – individual passages" (xi-xii).

The lead-off essay in the introduction, "The Character and Position of the Book of Isaiah," provides an orientation to present-day Isaiah studies (see also Seitz, *Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah* [Fortress, 1988]). Characteristics of a contemporary reading of Isaiah include (1) a search for unity in the entire Isaiah book, noting links between the materials in 1-39 and 40-66; (2) an insistence that texts from Isaiah be considered with careful attention to their literary contexts; and (3) less concern for reading sections of the book against reconstructed historical backdrops. This does not mean, however, that the Isaiah material should be divorced from history: "In this commentary we are committed to an approach that does justice to the historical roots of the message of Isaiah, on the one

hand, and the present literary context in which the message is found, on the other" (4).

The introductory section continues with essays on the literary, historical, and theological structures of Isaiah 1-39. These chapters are divided into three parts. The "nations oracles" in 13-27 form the central panel. Framing this are two twelve-chapter units: 1-12 contains both judgment and salvation oracles while 28-39 is a collection of material mostly from the time of the prophet Isaiah. The introduction concludes with a comment on Isaiah 55:11:

We read the Book of Isaiah to see how that purpose was accomplished, in order to know better how and where God's word shall speak to our own day and thereby finally accomplish that purpose for which it was sent. (18)

The commentary section of the book is divided into three major sections: The Presentation of Isaiah: Word and Prophet (Isaiah 1-12); God of Israel, God of the Nations (Isaiah 13-27); and A King Will Reign in Righteousness (Isaiah 28-39). Each section is preceded by an "Overview" which comments on the structure, intention, and themes and points out links to other portions of the Isaiah book. The commentary concludes with a bibliography.

If the proof of the pudding is in its eating, the proof of a commentary is in its exegesis of individual texts. On some occasions, Seitz uncovers a neglected Isaiah text and exposit it in a way that immediately suggests its application in preaching and teaching. For example: the second half of Isaiah 30:15 reads as follows:

In returning and rest you shall be saved;  
in quietness and trust shall be your  
strength.

Seitz comments:

It might be said that the core of Isaiah's preaching can be summed up with reference to one key verse in chapter 30: salva-

tion and strength are the consequence of firm trust and quiet confidence in God's abiding attention and concern for Zion. The same fundamental trust is required of a king, of priest and prophet, of Judah's rulers, of all of God's people. No scheme, no matter how clever or well conceived, can substitute for this basic stance of faith. Amidst the swirling claims of clever politicians, deceitful prophets, crazed priests, and unjust rulers, there remains another way, and the prophet never tires of insisting that it is the only way. (219)

On other occasions Seitz will take a familiar text, such as the Messianic oracle in Isaiah 11, and shed new light on it by considering it in its broad literary context, in this case, Isaiah 5-12.

The author's relentless and consistent pursuit of his literary-contextual approach gives this commentary its distinctiveness and freshness. At times, however, the exposition comes up somewhat short. A treatment of the Song of the Vineyard in Isaiah 5, for example, could well include some comments on the prophet's notions of justice and righteousness and could make connections with the vineyard parables of Jesus. Or what about the meaning of the "swords to plowshares" saying in Isaiah 2 for the quest for peace in our own time? And what of the New Testament readings of the great messianic texts? For some of these matters, the reader may wish to supplement Seitz with the commentary of Hans Wildberger, currently available in English for chapters 1-12 (Fortress, 1990). But then, as Seitz himself says, "A commentary cannot do everything." He continues, "If I have made a coherent and stimulating proposal for reading the Book of Isaiah in its present form, I will be satisfied" (xiii).

That he has done, and done well. If we stay with this treatment of Isaiah, we may well free ourselves from the "pericope preoccupation" which the author identifies and find ourselves both delighted and instructed by following Seitz in his application of that most ancient of hermeneutical principles: let the Bible interpret itself.

James Limburg  
Luther Seminary  
St. Paul, Minnesota

**WISDOM IN THEOLOGY**, by Ronald E. Clements. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992. Pp. 188.

Most of the research that has been and is being done in wisdom literature addresses one of several key questions: (1) Were there schools in Israel? (2) Was there a professional guild of sages? (3) What was the socioeconomic status of the sage? (4) What is the historical and cultural origin of wisdom? (5) Where does wisdom fit into the theology of the Hebrew scriptures? Of these questions, the last has received the least amount of attention. The underlying premise of Clements' volume is related to this last issue: Is wisdom central or peripheral to biblical theology? Clements' work on this issue seems to be an ongoing and developing project. This book is a new revision and expansion of his earlier work entitled *Wisdom for a Changing World* (1990).

While Clements incorporates other wisdom works along the way (Job, Qoheleth, and Sirach), his argument for the contribution that wisdom makes to theology grows out of the basic thoughts expressed in the sentence sayings of Proverbs. His interpretation is informed by a particular socio-historical setting. This setting is the post-exilic period during the time of the Persian empire. Clements acknowledges that Israelite wisdom went through several stages of growth and development before reaching the apex of its contribution. The earliest stage was the pre-exilic period of folk wisdom. Stage two was the monarchic period in which wisdom was developed, nurtured and incorporated into the court setting. The final development in wisdom occurred after the exile. It was during this time that the final form of the book of Proverbs took shape and that the works of Job and Qoheleth were produced. This third phase was the most productive time for wisdom literature in Israel.

The post-exilic period was a time when Israel faced significant change and transition. Using Victor Turner's concept of "liminality" to build on, Clements describes Israel's state during the post-exilic period as a state of liminality. They no longer had the temple, the monarchy, or the land to depend on for their identity. So how were they going to survive? It is Clements'

thesis that wisdom helped to reshape and remind Israel's former nationalistic focus. As a result, unlike many nations taken into exile, Israel was able not only to survive but also to thrive. Religious and personal identities were not lost, but were instead redefined in new ways. "In some respects wisdom became a 'transitional philosophy,' maintaining identifiable links with the past, but adapting them to new ways and conditions" (125). Clements concludes: "Jews found themselves brought to the frontiers of human existence, respecting the past and hoping for a better future, but meanwhile being compelled to rethink and redefine what it meant to be the people of God" (29). Wisdom was the resource that equipped Israel to do just that.

All the dominant theological motifs in wisdom for Clements then are understood in light of this background of change and transition. First, wisdom reshapes Israel's view of the world, that is, its view of both space and time. Space is no longer defined in terms of sacred and profane because Israel no longer has its temple nor its land. Wisdom "desacralizes" space. All space is viewed as a realm of God's created order. In addition, time is no longer marked by the celebration of religious festivals or the movement of the heavenly bodies. Rather time is marked by the life-span of each individual as affirmed by the parameters set in the opening line of Qoheleth's poem: "there is a time to be born and a time to die." Here is a more existential view of time.

Second, wisdom reinterprets the concepts of sickness and health. Prior to 587 B.C.E. the concern for health was addressed through the power of the cult. During the post-exilic period health was broadened to include psychological well-being. As an example of this reinterpretation, Clements refers to Proverbs 17:22. The mind, he says, is disciplined to "maintain a calm and controlled disposition: 'A cheerful mind is good medicine, but a depressed spirit withers the body.'"

Third, wisdom provides a new perspective on politics. Throughout Proverbs there are a number of references to the king and his work. How is this to be understood in light of the post-exilic period when Israel had no monarch? Clements' explanation is

that wisdom asserts that the monarchy is not only a national institution, it is international. The monarchy is a natural part of a wise ordering of the world since the beginning of creation. The Jews living under Persian rule have a responsibility to honor the king.

Fourth, wisdom redefines the role of the family and the neighbor. Interpreting wisdom from the perspective of the dispersion, Clements maintains that there was a shift away from the large extended family with clan and tribal affiliations to a focus on the individual household. The home was now given the primary responsibility for the education of children. Clements' remark is significant on this point: "In spite of all the clues and hints which point to the elements of a formal educational system having developed in Israel and Judah, the primary context of the teaching of wisdom that is to be found in the Book of Proverbs is that of the home" (129). But many scholars conclude that the address of "son" and "father" in Proverbs is simply figurative for the more formal relationship of pupil and teacher. It does not imply that the actual parent was the agent of the teaching. To this Clements replies that "the fact that both parents are sometimes referred to as fulfilling this teaching role very strongly points to the recognition that it was the pupil's natural parents that were involved" (138). Because of the sociological situation in which the Jews found themselves, great emphasis was placed upon the duty of parental instruction.

It was due to this social environment that the Book of Proverbs placed a high premium on the "friend" or the "neighbor." In early Israel, morality was clan oriented. Now many Jews found themselves living on foreign soil separated from their extended families. Those living around them may have been Jews but they were not kin. A significant number of proverbs are devoted to providing a perspective on how one is to live in harmony with these neighbors so that order can continue to be maintained within the community.

Fifth, wisdom during the Diaspora reshapes the Jews' perspective toward the divine realm. Clements, at this point, enters to some degree into the debate over the

sacred and secular issue in wisdom. Is there a movement from individual, to community, to Yahwist proverbs in the development of wisdom (so McKane)? Or is there a movement from lower wisdom to higher wisdom that saw wisdom being more closely connected to divine revelation? Clements settles for neither one and instead offers what he considers to be a more functional approach to wisdom's development: "Wisdom took Judaism into the dispersion and helped to turn the hostile environment of 'unclean lands' into the more acceptable one of a realm of order and design which could be discovered and its rules followed out" (154). So if there is development it is because wisdom worked to integrate all aspects of life, sacred and secular, into one ordered whole.

Clements' work offers a solid contribution to the renewed interest in wisdom literature that is taking place in scholarship. His arguments are well developed and convincing. In addition, his theological and interpretive approach enables the relevance of this genre of literature to continue to unfold before its readers and speak a dynamic word to a church that is itself in a state of liminality. I for one hope that there will be more expansions and developments of this theme forthcoming.

Dave Bland  
Harding University Graduate  
School of Religion  
Memphis, Tennessee

**SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES: A FEMINIST INTRODUCTION**, ed. by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. New York: Crossroads, 1993. Pp. 397 + xiii. \$24.95.

*Searching the Scriptures* will undoubtedly become a standard reference for contemporary feminist biblical scholarship. This collection of twenty-four essays, introduced by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, grows out of the work of the "Women in the Biblical World" section of the Society of Biblical Literature in preparation for the centennial celebration in 1995 of the publication of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible*. This first volume lays the theoretical and methodological ground-

work for a second volume of critical feminist interpretations of individual biblical texts. *Searching the Scriptures* is not a feminist introduction to the Bible, but an attempt "to chart a comprehensive approach to feminist interpretation" (xi). Schüssler Fiorenza's goals for the project as a whole are "to empower readers for the tasks of engaging in critical analysis and for developing a different sociohistorical and theo-ethical imagination" (xi). She hopes it will also "influence and shape the discourses of malestream biblical scholarship" (xiii). This is a book for any scholar, pastor, or lay person willing to invest a fair amount of intellectual energy. While some of the essays may be accessible to undergraduates and seminary students, many expect a familiarity with a variety of methods of biblical scholarship, hermeneutical approaches, and feminist theories.

Drawing on biblical scholarship of women throughout the world, *Searching the Scriptures* is arranged in four parts. Part I: "Charting Interpretation from Different Sociohistorical Locations" includes six essays. Elisabeth Gössmann sketches medieval European women's biblical interpretation. Karen Baker-Fletcher contrasts the lives of Sojourner Truth and Anna Julia Cooper, both "innovative interpreters of scripture who forged a distinctively black feminist hermeneutic to argue for black women's equality" (49). Carolyn De Swarte Gifford evaluates the role of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible* in the women's suffrage movement of its time and considers its relevance for today. Rita Nakashima Brock's essay, "Dusting the Bible on the Floor: A Hermeneutics of Wisdom," borrows a scene from Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* as appropriately representing a woman's "paradoxical choice to both reject and keep her Bible" (64). Teresa Okure discusses how the Bible has interacted with colonialism, particularly in Africa. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz notes that survival and liberation are more important to Hispanic women than the Bible as authoritative source or divine revelation (87).

The six essays of Part II: "Changing Patriarchal Blueprints: Creating Feminist Frames of Meaning" exemplify feminism's self-criticism. Kwok Pui-Lan presents ten theses which she contends "will help us to

address racism and ethnocentrism in biblical interpretation" (101). They include (1) examining biblical authority; (2) judging the potential eurocentric bias of the historical-critical method; (3) telling the stories of women of color; (4) recognizing multiple oppression; (5) condemning feminist anti-semitism; (6) rejecting the use of the Bible for oppression; (7) considering the Bible cross-culturally; (8) using multi-faith hermeneutics; (9) interpreting through the many dimensions of women's oppression; and (10) examining the politics of 'difference' in biblical hermeneutics.

The remaining essays in Part II address several of Kwok's theses. Judith Plaskow points out that feminist claims that "Jesus was a feminist" are often based on misinformation about Judaism of the first century: they make Jesus look good by making Judaism look bad. Carol Devens-Green briefly reviews the history of Native Americans' contact with Christianity, particularly the role of Christian missionaries and Bible-based boarding school education in attempting to change the gender roles observed among Native Americans. Melanie May and Lauree Hersch Meyer suggest that women may have more in common as women than we do with our Christian denominational traditions. They argue that the ecumenical movement is in danger of becoming a movement enforcing uniformity rather than embracing difference. Ivone Gebara sees God, even God as liberator, as imprisoned in the concepts of omnipotence and transcendence; she looks forward to a Copernican revolution in our understanding of God. Claudia Camp addresses feminist theological hermeneutics in the context of canon and Christian identity. Her primary concern is to develop a model of biblical authority that neither collapses into fundamentalism nor privileges women's experiences as divorced from their shaping by the Bible. Camp proposes three models—dialogical, metaphorical, and reading as trickster, each exemplified by a biblical woman: Huldah, who authorizes the book of the law in 2 Kings 22; Woman Wisdom from Proverbs 1-9; and the "strange woman" who allows us to claim "identity with those at the margins" and "to read subversively" (167).

The title for Part III, "Scrutinizing the

Master's Tools: Rethinking Critical Methods," converses with Audre Lorde's essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" (*Sister Outsider*, 1984). While Lorde contends that the master's tools (traditional disciplinary methodologies) are incapable of bringing about genuine change, the essays in part III suggest that, when scrutinized carefully, traditional methodologies *can* support transformative feminist hermeneutical goals. Elizabeth Castelli's essay, the only reprinted essay in the collection, reviews basic issues in translation (including epistemology and the nature of language) through a feminist lens. Monika Fander outlines the positive contributions of the historical-critical method and argues persuasively that this method is suitable, perhaps even essential, for feminist analysis of the biblical text. Brigitte Kahl introduces marxist, materialist, and other non-idealist methods of biblical interpretation. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon and Janice Capel Anderson competently survey the breadth of recent literary approaches to the Bible, focusing on narrative criticism, reader-oriented approaches, and rhetorical criticism. Mary Ann Tolbert distinguishes attention to social description of the background of the New Testament from sociological studies based on modern theories of sociology, such as those of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, which she presents. Tolbert reviews sociology and anthropology from a feminist perspective and offers cautions, given the scanty information, about the use of sociological and anthropological models in NT study. Part III concludes with essays by Barbara H. Geller Nathanson and Karen Jo Torjesen on the roles of Jewish and Christian women, respectively, in the first centuries of the common era.

In Part IV: "Transforming the Master's House: Building a 'Room of Our Own,'" the biblical texts meet contemporary cultures within communities of faith. Marjorie Procter-Smith holds that proclamation within the liturgical context authorizes radical recontextualizing of scripture, offering "both possibilities and perils for feminist proclamation" (313). Katie G. Cannon discusses the purposes and practices of preaching in black churches, raising womanist critiques about

the occlusion of women in black preaching and the linguistic sexism often practiced "in the guise of Christian piety and virtue" (333). Alison M. Cheek builds on the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, offering a series of Bible studies on the Mary and Martha story in Luke and the Sarah and Hagar stories in Genesis that aims to raise consciousness in women's Bible study groups. Lieve Troch comments on how the Women and Faith Movement in the Netherlands uses Paulo Freire's method of "conscientization." Kathleen O'Brien Wicker reviews her own use of African novels in a "Women's Studies in Religion and New Testament" course to talk about the role of education in colonization. She raises important questions for feminist teachers: "how does a teacher ensure that no mistake is made in the care of the students who are entrusted to her? How can she be sure that her vision will liberate them? How self-reflective is she about the bases for her own convictions? Does she have clear insights about how souls are warped, and sensitive strategies to prevent her from warping them?" (371).

In her introduction, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza contextualizes Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible* and contrasts it with the present volume. She notes the racist, classist (13), and anti-semitic presuppositions of the former, and she makes explicit the reasons for the terms in her collection's title. Schüssler Fiorenza acknowledges the "radical political implications" (4) of *The Woman's Bible* in recognizing that the Bible is androcentric, that it does not merely need to be stripped of biased interpretations, yet she is annoyed with Cady Stanton's presumption of the normativity and authority of the Bible as the word of God.

In selecting a title for this essay collection, Schüssler Fiorenza takes issue with several standard terms related to biblical interpretation in the church. First, she wants to problematize the terms "Bible" and "biblical" because they are linked to "the Protestant notion of a revealed text or a canon of books that serve as the primary locus of authoritative teaching" (9). She seems, perhaps too easily, to equate authoritative with authoritarian. Similarly, Schüssler Fiorenza rejects "canon" and

"canonical authority" because writings friendly to women were excluded in the process of forming the canon, and the closure of the canon prevents any contemporary addition of marginalized voices (9). She insists that "feminist political interpretation for transformation must become canonically transgressive" (9).

Schüssler Fiorenza chooses the term "scriptures" for the collection title, deeming it more clearly relational and contextual than "Bible." The metaphor of "searching" arises from her view of the canon as a "cover-up" (11) in need of feminist detective work and the scriptures as a resource of texts to be plundered (not her word) "for submerged meanings, lost voices, and authorizing visions" (11). Schüssler Fiorenza's own approach here (as in her earlier work and like that presumed by many of the essays in the collection) continues to be one of adopting a physical "canon within the canon," accepting or rejecting individual texts on the basis of their ability to function in support of "everywoman's struggles to transform patriarchal structures" (21).

Schüssler Fiorenza chooses the self-consciously political term "feminist" for her subtitle, while recognizing the challenges by marginalized women to a term often linked with white women's feminism. The categories "woman" and "women" must be problematized (15) because women do not all have the same struggles and privileges. Though the term "feminist" is also suspect for its overgeneralizing tendencies, Schüssler Fiorenza retains it as a "mixed blessing," first, because feminism "as a worldwide political movement" (16) has opened doors for a variety of women's voices and, second, to avoid "engendering the 'balkanization' of feminism in academy and church" (17). She insists on the participation by women from a variety of sociocultural locations in the defining and shaping of feminism, and the variety of contributors to the essay collection bears out this concern.

Schüssler Fiorenza surely deserves the tribute that Claudia Camp pays her: her work "has virtually defined the field" of feminist theological hermeneutics (159). *Searching the Scriptures*, under her editor-

ship, provides a carefully formatted, cogent mapping of this field. The recommended bibliographies and detailed notes for each article, alone, make it worth owning. Yet, in assenting to Schüssler Fiorenza's canon, which "places biblical texts under the authority of feminist experience" (159, citing Schüssler Fiorenza's *Bread Not Stone* [14]), as the only approach to canon, this volume misses an opportunity to address the questions about biblical authority and interpretation currently plaguing various denominations. The multiple sociohistorical locations of the contributors is not paralleled by a variety of feminist positions on the authority of scriptures.

Biblical scholars, even feminists, need not agree with all of Schüssler Fiorenza's claims about canon and authority to benefit from this welcome contribution to feminist theological hermeneutics. For the breadth of perspectives presented, for the helpful references and bibliographies, for the questions about the Bible and its authority in relation to our lives today, for its clarification of several of the positions and questions within feminist biblical scholarship, and for its many fine essays, this volume deserves to be read and studied critically by leaders of both the academy and the church.

Beverly J. Stratton  
Augsburg College  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

**FAITH AND THE OTHER: A RELATIONAL THEOLOGY**, by Paul Sponheim. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993. Pp. 248.

Paul Sponheim's task is to unpack "the specifically Christian orientation to the other" (21). What is an other? An other is "some one or something meeting us truly from outside—outside our skin, our thinking, our believing, our world" (v). If we understand ourselves in relation to the other in various forms—other races, genders, cultures, and religious faiths count as other; so does nature; so does God—then we are ready to understand theology as relational. We cannot go it alone. Relations are essential to who we are. Even the self in

Kierkegaardian terms includes otherness and relationality: "the self is a relation that relates itself to itself." With this set of general observations about otherness, Sponheim sets about asking: What word should faith speak to these things?

Faith, according to the Luther Seminary professor, has two things to say about God: God is other and God is in relation to us. Sponheim finds us "before God." God is still "first," of course; yet we are "before God" in the sense that we are "in the presence of" or "face-to-face" with a God who is different from us. God is the *a se* or completely self-reliant and independent creator of all things, including us. We as creatures cannot help but be in relation to our creator God who, as our creator, is other to us. Yet "in creation God wills to be in relationship, God wills to know otherness" (89). We are the other with whom God wills to be in relationship. This will to otherness means that God loves us and that God suffers with us.

The word "other"—referring to what is outside us—seems to apply to a number of different things in Sponheim's book, some of which deserve more distinctive treatment. First, there is the class of given others to which we are both connected yet from which we can be differentiated. Three examples appear. Other personal selves with whom we share a dynamic relation are simply given and are constitutive of our own self formation. But Sponheim goes on to designate nature as other too, even though we are nature and nature is us. God also counts as other; but God does not stay other. An eschatological understanding of the *imago dei* means that "we will bear the image of God's son" (48). Now I ask: Do we relate to all three the same way? The answer is not clear. And these are just the others as given.

Second, in addition to others as given, we also make others. Women, for example, are made into the other when they are marginalized "by systemic devaluing, by their effacing, and by being cast on the border of order-threatening chaos" (169). Creating others by marginalizing them is more than an epistemological issue; it is a moral issue. One could add that enemy creation constitutes another form of making others into

the other. It would seem to me that there is considerable difference between the *given other* and the *created other*, because the latter calls for some form of ethical resolve to overcome otherness. Further, the overcoming of otherness – what we might call reconciliation with enemies we have created – would necessarily require confession, forgiveness, and a relationship characterized by renewal. I would like to have seen the reconciliation dimension of otherness explored in more detail.

The stated task of this book is to look at otherness from the perspective of faith. However, I find it curious that faith can speak so glibly in Sponheim's view. I ask: Whose faith? If it is not the faith of a who, of a particular self, then does this faith stand as a discrete entity apart from actual selves engaged in dialectical relation to otherness? Sponheim seems to presume that faith is an entity untouched by the relativizing and pluralizing forces in our disintegrating post-enlightenment culture where blurring boundaries while creating otherness has become such a confusing concern. Can faith be thought of as a discrete entity, so confident in its own identity as to simply look as a spectator does at otherness and relationality and then offer a word about it?

The philosophical and theological discussions of otherness and relationality over the last two decades have led to a non-foundationalist understanding of the human self. Descartes' *cogito* has for centuries provided the epistemological foundation for modern knowing, as well as the point of departure for liberal democratic principles that we accept as western individualism. However, various versions of an emerging post-modern view tend to de-center the isolated or independent self, finding that we must begin human reflection from a network of prior relations. At bottom, the human reality is relational. It is "attestation" that provides us with the assurance that we exist in the mode of selfhood, says philosopher Paul Ricoeur (*Oneself as Another* [University of Chicago, 1992] 302). The human subject does not ground its own becoming, says theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg, because its openness to the realities of the world around it (*Weltoffenheit*) and openness even to the reality of the transcendent God are constitutive. "The

being-outside-oneself-in-the-other would constitute the ego's proper identity" (*Anthropology in Theological Perspective* [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1985] 271). In sum, the other is not just outside.

What Paul Sponheim has done for us in this book is to expand these insights for living the Christian life in community. My only questions regarding this work have to do with the status of faith – what he calls the specifically Christian orientation. First, is it the faith of somebody – the faith of some self in relation to another who is constituted by that relation? Or, does the faith come to us from outside as the other and enter into our self-constitution? In either case, does the faith itself participate in the relational dynamic of otherness, or is it exempt? Is this a non-foundationalist understanding of faith, or is faith exempt from the post-modern critique?

Overall, Sponheim's book is characterized by a generosity of spirit, a mood of inclusive affirmation that seeks to break down barriers and affirm unity in the best sense of the word. Perhaps more than its content, the book's affective mood gives expression to the generous spirit that accompanies genuine faith.

Ted Peters  
Pacific Lutheran Seminary and  
Graduate Theological Union  
Berkeley, California

**PERSUADE US TO REJOICE: THE LIBERATING POWER OF FICTION**, by Robert McAfee Brown. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992. Pp. 159. \$11.99 (paper).

New Testament scholar David Rhoads has recently made the suggestion that pastors might benefit as much from peer-group discussions of novels and stories as from shared exegetical study of biblical texts ("...And with a Good Novel in the Other Hand': Why Pastors Should Read Literature," *Word & World* [Spring 1993] 117-122). But not every pastor finds kindred spirits nearby with whom to gather and reflect upon shared reading. *Persuade Us to Rejoice* can serve as a guide and con-



versation partner for those pastors who must for one reason or another read alone. In this collection of essays, Robert McAfee Brown offers pastors a taste of selected twentieth-century authors. His purpose is not to provide in-depth study of any single author. Rather, he offers just enough to give a sense of the theological import of various works and to whet the reader's appetite for the original sources.

The title of the book comes from a poem by W. H. Auden. The subtitle will come as no surprise to those who recognize Brown as one who has done much to introduce liberation theology to a broad audience in the U.S. He argues convincingly that fiction can illumine the realities of bondage and the possibilities of liberation at both personal and corporate levels.

The book falls into three parts. The three chapters of Part I explore in general terms the relation of faith and fiction. In one of those chapters, Brown uses the biblical story of David and Nathan to illustrate his contention that stories carry more than one meaning and that we can discern these multiple meanings only to the degree that we can stretch beyond our customary perspective. Comfortably-situated people read David and Nathan as a judgment of adultery and the personal abuse of power. And so it is. But people who live under oppression see this story as a message of social sin, not merely personal transgressions, a story of speaking truth to power that offers hope and courage. And so it is.

Part II consists of three chapters, each of which explores several works by a single author. Of the three authors, Elie Wiesel is perhaps best known to readers of this journal. His thirty-some books offer eloquent testimony to Wiesel's role as a witness to and messenger of the Holocaust.

The name Ignazio Silone, whose novels first appeared in the 1930s, may not be a household word in parsonages today. Silone observed an Italian church that refused to confront gross social injustice and poverty. Silone consequently rejected the institution of the church — but continued to draw upon the imagery of Christian faith and history.

One of the main themes of Silone's writing, which Brown lifts up, is the notion that

God's work is carried on through *pseudonyms*. God is not dead, but hidden in unlikely places. Ordinary peasant people, struggling for social justice, represent one of God's strange names. Readers today cannot help but see Silone's anticipation of a theme now prominent in liberation theology.

Another theme that Brown highlights is Silone's notion of God as *suffering presence*. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness should not expect to be exempt from that divine suffering. The notion of a God who suffers with us, "a fellow sufferer who understands" as Whitehead put it, is perhaps less shocking today than sixty years ago. But the prospect of the cost of discipleship to us still makes some of us squirm.

The other figure in Part II, Charles Williams, was a literary critic, a playwright, a novelist, a poet, a lecturer in English literature, and a lay theologian. Presupposed in all of Williams's novels, which have been described as "spiritual shockers" and "murder mysteries set in eternity," is the interrelation of the material and the spiritual in a single reality. The natural and the supernatural are a single cloth of reality woven by God. The reign of God permeates all time and space. No sharp lines separate heaven and earth or past, present, and future. Such a view may strike some people as out of touch with the modern scientific worldview. But then post-modern science — the cutting edge of physics and biology — rejects the flattened mechanistic world of modern science, too. *Purpose* and *internal relatedness* have again become respectable scientific categories. While post-modern religious thinkers would be uncomfortable with Williams's embrace of supernaturalism, they would likely welcome his considerable expansion of the realm of the natural world.

Two other concepts of Williams deserve mention here. One is the "practice of substituted love." Brown summarizes it this way: "Individuals voluntarily consent to bear the fear or the burden that properly belongs to someone else: If your resources are inadequate for the occasion, I will lend you mine" (87). This sounds like St. Paul's dictum: bear one another's burdens. But Williams extends the possibility of mutual

indwelling to the whole universe. Again, on this point, he is not far distant from some contemporary theologies (such as process thought) that describe all creatures as subjects inwardly shaped by their relationships.

Seven shorter chapters, each exploring a particular book, comprise Part III of *Persuade Us to Rejoice*. Albert Camus's *The Fall* has been much discussed elsewhere so will be passed over here. Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Color Purple* will be familiar to most pastors and parishioners. Brown's brief commentary provides a helpful reminder of two themes: Celie and Shug's understanding of God; and the miserable relationship between Celie and Mr. — and the prospects for its redemption. Anyone who has not read C.S. Lewis's *Till We Have Faces* will surely be prompted by Brown's helpful guidance to remedy that oversight. Frederick Buechner is well-known in church circles and beyond, so readers will welcome Brown's comments about *Brendan*. Readers who have treasured Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country* will appreciate the chapter on Paton's *Too Late the Phalarope*.

In his discussion of Ursula LeGuin's *Always Coming Home*, Brown contends that there is more to the fantasy genre than fuel for escapism in a trivial sense. The larger sense of escaping can mean discovering an alternative set of possibilities and then introducing them into our situation. "The hallmark of fantasy," says Brown, "is to provide new models and thereby new visions. And here is Ursula LeGuin's greatest gift to us" (145). For instance, by describing the Kesh people living in Northern California in the distant future, LeGuin is able to put before us new ways of regarding technology and ownership of property. Fans of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* will be interested in Brown's comparison of that fantasy classic to LeGuin's *Always Coming Home*.

The only author who was wholly new to me—and to many other readers, I suspect—is George Dennison. Brown retells enough of the 1985 novel *Luisa Domic* to give a sense of what it is about and to entice one to search out a copy of the novel itself. The plot weaves together three different social worlds: (1) the world of the narrator,

a father in a family in Maine; (2) the world of Luisa, a victim of a brutal regime in Chile; and (3) the world of creative artists in New York City.

Dennison presents a glimpse of the tenderness and care that can make human life and loveliness flourish for a time. There is a wonderful healing in music. Harold, a composer now using his music as therapy with handicapped children, is able to reach and comfort Luisa with music when her tortured memories have left her screaming, beyond the reach of words.

Even after Luisa's death, we see a kind of hope and redemption, as the daughter of the father in Maine chooses to align herself with beauty, which seems so frail, and against horror, which seems so strong. Artistic *beauty* in this novel is not something distinct from what is *good* and what is *true*. Rather, beauty incorporates the other two qualities, eliciting love and admiration. Brown's discussion brings to mind John Keats's words: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, — that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

In summary, I commend the reading of *Persuade Us to Rejoice* as a reminder of some novels that may have been forgotten. If some favorite authors are not included, that only points to the need for more books of this sort. Pastors by and large are hard-pressed for time to read contemporary fiction. Yet such wide reading strengthens the ability to communicate the faith effectively. To this end *Persuade Us To Rejoice* can be an invaluable introductory tool for unlocking the riches of literature.

Jack A. Keller  
Abingdon Press  
Nashville, Tennessee