

ing the Greek tradition exemplified by Plato and Aristotle, Compier stresses the importance of Roman treatises on rhetoric, especially those by Cicero and Quintilian, who refused to separate rhetoric and philosophy, thus enabling rhetoric to become a full-blown educational theory. According to Compier, the rhetorical ethos of Roman oratory is practical (it is a branch of political science), public, active (a praxis designed to effect desirable consequences), contextual, contingent (recognising that all knowledge is inescapably imperfect), polemical (or combative) and holistic (appealing to 'the whole person in rational, emotional, ascetic, ethical, and volitional terms'; p. 11). Tracing its history of effects, Compier notes that while the rhetorical tradition decisively shaped the theology of the Reformers as well as important Christian thinkers such as John Henry Newman, the modern period saw its decline due to the embrace of objectivism in the new empiricist and realist philosophies.

However, with the reign of modernity approaching its end, Compier detects signs of a revival of the rhetorical ethos in such diverse trends and figures as postmodernism, Nietzsche, Barth, Johann B. Metz, Latin American liberation theologians, Lindbeck, Kierkegaard, Schüssler Fiorenza and Schleiermacher (Chapter two). Taking his cue from these and reviewing the seminal contributions to rhetorical theology by David Tracy, David Cunningham and Rebecca Chopp, Compier proposes to redefine theology as rhetorical hermeneutics.

Chapter three deals with rhetorical epistemology. Refuting the claim that analytical method offers more reliable access to reality and hence to social efficacy and suggesting that the Christian doctrine of sin rules out the possibility of human knowledge more certain than that which persuasion is capable of achieving, Compier nonetheless does not subscribe to epistemological relativism. Indeed, he notes that any assertions about textual meaning must be warrantable, that the construal of signification must be defended and that the rhetorical worldview involves a belief in realities that underlie and transcend particular social formations.

Compier concludes his case for rhetorical theological method by considering the rhetorical construction of a contemporary theology of sin. He notes the current lack of interest in hamartiology on the Northern American scene, which he traces back to Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, the 'masters of suspicion', who considered hamartiology itself a sin, which actively contributed to the oppression of others. Criticising the academic debate about the question of original sin, which has turned sin into an intellectual problem rather than a moral one ('a question not of actions but of meaning', p. 56), Compier is concerned about the cogency of theology as a reflection on and response to the massive suffering of our age. What is needed, in his view, is a critical theory of society based on the prophetic traditions found in Scripture, which 'offers a pragmatic diagnosis that aims to loosen the readers' allegiance to the oppres-

sive status quo' (p. 59). Compier in this context points to Calvin, who in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* pursued hamartiology as a critique of oppressive doctrines of sin, seeking to contribute to emancipation (in his case that of exiled Anabaptists in whose defence the *Institutes* were written). He holds that Calvin's example demonstrates that 'hamartiology performed as rhetorical hermeneutics does have the potential of reading texts in ways that can inspire persons to actively address the horrors of our time' (p. 70).

In a concluding peroration, Compier comments on the catholicity and historicity of theology, noting that as any particular theological reading takes place on a unique horizon, catholicity needs to be redefined as 'a rich pluralism of perspectives' (p. 72).

Being quite short, this book raises a number of questions that Compier does not have the space to pursue (e.g. the danger of such a rhetorical theology becoming too provincial, of surrendering transcendence or of courting the audience so that their values are not altered but reaffirmed). One may also question Compier's easy dismissal of the Greek tradition of rhetoric as well as his definition of catholicity, which does not do much to help the church rediscover an identity (other than as a voice against modern evil, which though surely important seems hardly sufficient). Yet, these problems and criticisms notwithstanding, there is much of value in this study and Compier's call for a rhetorical theology that seeks to change and inspire its audiences should not go unheard.

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### *Ancient Israel's Faith and History: An Introduction to the Bible in Context*

George E. Mendenhall (ed. Gary A. Herion)

Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, xx + 284 pp., pb., £20.00, ISBN 0-664-22313-3

#### SUMMARY

This is a synthesis of Israel's faith and history from Abraham to Jesus, in which Mendenhall combines a development of religions approach, with an emphasis on the archaeological and ancient Near Eastern backgrounds to the Old Testament, with sociological perspectives. He reconstructs Sinai religion as the foundation of Israel's religion and examines its development in later periods. The book is stimulating and contains many valuable insights although some conclusions are questionable. Occasionally, Mendenhall uses modern sociological ideas at the expense of the ancient Near Eastern self-testimony.

#### ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Das Buch bietet eine Synthese des Glaubens und der Geschichte Israels von Abraham bis Jesus, wobei Mendenhall einen religionsgeschichtlichen



Ansatz, der vor allem den archäologischen und altvorderorientalischen Hintergrund des Alten Testaments betont, mit soziologischen Perspektiven verbindet. Er rekonstruiert eine Sinai-Religion als Grundlage der israelitischen Religion und untersucht deren Entwicklung in späterer Zeit. Das Buch ist stimulierend und enthält viele wertvolle Einsichten, doch sind manche Schlussfolgerungen durchaus fragwürdig. Zum Teil werden Erkenntnisse der modernen Soziologie auf Kosten des altvorderorientalischen Selbstzeugnisses verwertet.

## RÉSUMÉ

Voici un ouvrage de synthèse sur la foi et l'histoire d'Israël de l'époque d'Abraham jusqu'à celle de Jésus, qui tire profit de l'apport des études sur le développement des religions, en s'appuyant tout particulièrement sur les découvertes archéologiques et la connaissance du Proche-Orient ancien, et en y ajoutant des considérations sociologiques. Mendenhall présente la religion du Sinai comme le fondement de la religion israélienne et étudie son évolution dans les périodes ultérieures. Le livre est stimulant et apporte bien des éclairages utiles, même si certaines conclusions demeurent sujettes à caution. Il arrive aussi que Mendenhall fasse intervenir des idées sociologiques modernes au détriment d'une prise en compte de ce que l'on peut apprendre sur le Proche-Orient ancien dans les textes qui en proviennent.

Being 'an attempt to condense and incorporate sixty years of study into a clear and comprehensive overview of the biblical tradition, particularly as it pertains to ancient Israel's faith and history' (p. xvii), this book investigates Israel's theology and history from the time of Abraham to the postexilic and intertestamental periods. A chapter on how Jesus and his ministry relate to Israel's earlier history and religion is also included but the focus is on Israel's early history and religion, which are examined against their archaeological and ancient Near Eastern contexts.

Mendenhall combines modern sociological insights with a development of religions approach in which Israel's history is divided into a prologue and formative, adaptive, traditional and reform periods. Seeing himself as a representative of the middle ground between maximalists and minimalists, Mendenhall accepts the standard critical dating of the biblical material while holding that the archaeological and extra-biblical data for the most part supports the reliability of the biblical tradition. Based on his interpretation of the extra-biblical data and the dating of the biblical documents, Mendenhall reconstructs a pre-monarchic Sinai religion, which served as the foundation for Israel's religious experience. He also discusses its development in later periods, including its corruption by the monarchy as well as subsequent attempts at reform and restoration.

Mendenhall's development of religions approach and

especially the notion of a Sinai religion whose concerns differed from those of the later monarchy are interesting and stimulating. The same is true for his sociological observations concerning power, politics and religion in Israel and the ancient world. For instance, he notes that during the time of the monarchy the thinking and religion of the urban monarchic administrative centres differed substantially from that in rural areas. Mendenhall also offers illuminating reflections on the issue of multi-ethnicity in ancient Israel as well as on Jesus' religious reform movement. His skilful use of extra-biblical sources, which are shown to be of great relevance for understanding Israel's faith and history, as well as the employment of sociological categories are helpful and instructive. While taking narratives that describe divine interventions as explanations of unusual events (for instance, a thunderstorm is said to be the basis for the Sinai theophany), Mendenhall does look at accounts of divine intervention from an ancient Near Eastern perspective.

However, he occasionally uses sociological concepts at the expense of the ancient Near Eastern self-testimony. Thus, he considers Baalism as an oppressive political system, understanding Yahwism as a reaction against it. While there may be some truth in this, one wonders whether this is how the Israelites themselves would have understood it and whether, for instance, the focus of the prophetic criticism of Baalism is indeed a political one. Similarly, Mendenhall's perception of the pre-monarchic tribal system and its religious and political thinking as purely defensive may be too idealistic. Equally questionable is his belief that the supposedly 'peaceful' constitution of the Yahwist confederation would have ruled out a conquest. Indeed, this prompts him to date the Joshua narratives late and to consider them unhistorical. According to Mendenhall, the various local pronunciations of Shibboleth (Judg. 12) attest to a multi-ethnic society, which in his view rules out the possibility of a common origin of the Israelites. However, dialectal changes can occur over time, and if (as the book of Judges suggests) the Israelites assimilated to Canaanite culture, this too may have led to dialectal variations.

Unfortunately, the lack of referencing (further reading lists are the only references in the book) does not help to evaluate Mendenhall's less convincing conclusions. Overall, however, this is a stimulating work, which anyone interested in Israel's history and religion will find worth reading.

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