

○ **REVIEW OF MELODY D. KNOWLES, ESTHER MENN, JOHN PAWLIKOWSKI, TIMOTHY J. SANDOVAL (EDS.), *CONTESTING TEXTS: JEWS AND CHRISTIANS IN CONVERSATION ABOUT THE BIBLE* (MINNEAPOLIS: FORTRESS PRESS, 2007)**

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For me, one of the pleasures of biblical studies is the fact that it is inherently a multi-faith and multi-cultural exercise. Jewish and Christian biblical canons share a large body of texts in common, albeit arranged differently and, especially for Eastern Christians, in differing versions. Furthermore, the greater part of the stories and characters in these canons are shared with Islam in the major retelling that is the Qur'an. Such a shared textual legacy provides an enriching opportunity for encounter and exchange across cultural and religious boundaries. All too often, however, it has meant that not only each tradition but even each sect within those traditions has jealously asserted and guarded its interpretive rights to and ownership of this ancient textual legacy. The spectre of supersessionism has loomed large in these contests with concomitant vilification and subordination of the perceived Other. Within Europe, this long process of vilification and subordination was conducted by Christians, comfortably 'at home', over Jewish communities characterised as alien outsiders (and for a short time, too, over the Muslims of defeated al-Andalus). This long process stands behind the catastrophe of the Holocaust.

It was as a reaction to the Holocaust, that many western Christians initiated a process of dialogue and reconciliation with Jews and Judaism. This anthology is the published proceedings of a conference of Jewish and Christian biblical scholars seeking to contribute to Jewish-Christian dialogue. In fact, the editors point out that 'the majority of the editors and contributors to the volume are not theologians or ethicists who are, or have been, professionally concerned with Jewish-Christian dialogue' (6). The editors further observe that 'it is regularly Christians who initiate interfaith conversations' but 'that these same Christians are sometimes surprised, and a little disheartened by the fact that their interlocutors often do not share the same passion for

“dialogue”... as the Christians themselves’ (6). What distinguishes this volume is that, while it doesn’t exactly respond to, it is informed by the September 2000 statement on Christianity, *Dabru Emet* (Speak the Truth), issued by four prominent Jewish scholars and subsequently signed by over 150 rabbis and Jewish scholars from North America, United Kingdom and Israel.

The essays are grouped into four sections: Jews Christians and the Bible; Texts of Violence: Early Jewish and Christian Interpretations; Religious Identity and Other in the New Testament; Looking to the Present and the Future. The full text of *Dabru Emet* is included in an appendix. The anthology is a valuable work not merely for those interested in inter-faith matters and Jewish-Christian dialogue, but more broadly for discussion of the ethics in reading and questions of otherness, alterity and difference. My only complaint is a practical one. There is no bibliography with references being consigned to notes. Even worse is that the publishers use endnotes rather than footnotes, a practice I personally despise as disruptive and awkward for reading.

The first section comprises three essays including the Introduction. David Novak is one of the four authors of *Dabru Emet* and in his ‘Jews, Christians and Biblical Authority’ he reflects on the question of the authority of scripture from a Jewish perspective in the context of Jewish-Christian dialogue. The role of scripture was addressed in two clauses of *Dabru Emet*:

Clause 2 – Jews and Christians seek authority from the same book – the Bible (what Jews call ‘Tanakh’ and Christians call the ‘Old Testament’).

Clause 4 – Jews and Christians accept the moral principles of Torah.

These two clauses shape Novak’s reflections. He is particularly concerned to respect Christian acceptance of the authority of the Old Testament scriptures as vehicles of divine revelation. However, while he acknowledges that for both Christians and Jews, such authority will be understood differently if they are ‘liberal’ or ‘traditional’ in outlook, I think he tries too much to harmonise a ‘traditional’ Christian and ‘traditional’ Jewish position. For only a small number of ‘traditional’ Christians will the revelatory and normative qualities of their Old Testament be equivalent to the role of Torah and Tanakh in Judaism. All Christians will read their Old Testaments through the lens of the Christ event and the resulting New Testament. It remains the very ordering principle of the various Old Testaments of Christianity. This fact is made quite clear by the other essay in this section, Ralph Klein’s ‘Promise and Fulfillment’. Klein’s essay represents a pretty standard piece of Christian biblical theology with which I imagine most Christian denominations across the theological perspective – from ultra-evangelical fundamentalist to ultra-high sacramental (Catholic/Orthodox) – could concur, even across the so-called ‘traditional/liberal’ divide.

From a biblical studies perspective I particularly enjoyed the two essays in section 2. Barbara Rossing’s essay on Revelation, ‘Apocalyptic Violence and Politics’, argues cogently that Revelation’s model of conquering is a non-violent one in contrast to and critiquing that of the ‘violent Rome’ of 2000 years ago. Rossing uses this model to critique contemporary fundamentalist end-times thinking as typified by the *Left Behind* novel series. Her observation that the ‘blood of Revelation is first of all the *Lamb’s own blood*’ (72) strikes me as consistent with the liturgical/Atonement resonances of this text. Steven Weitzman’s essay, ‘Unbinding Isaac’, addresses the fraught issue of martyrdom/voluntary death/suicide in biblical traditions by exploring the way that Josephus ‘used biblical interpretation to develop a subtle critique of martyrdom and even

perhaps to develop an alternative to it' (83). This alternative Weitzman terms virtual martyrdom, the expression of a willingness to die to exert influence on authority which has the same effect as giving up one's life. Josephus' reading of Genesis 22 'establishes the possibility of successfully balancing between the martyrological impulse and survival' (88). Most provocatively for some, Weitzman finds a modern exemplar of Josephus' model in the late Yassir Arafat.

In the third section, the essays address New Testament discourses that create identity by marking out boundaries between early Christian communities and the 'Jewish' Other(s). Barbara Bowe – 'The New Testament, Religious Identity and the Other' – draws on theoretical perspectives on alterity, conflict, religious self-definition and boundary maintenance to reflect on the rhetoric of difference and vilification as deployed in New Testament other ancient (and modern) texts. While she cites some brief examples her short essay serves more as a theoretical introduction to the section. Sarah Tanzer's essay, 'The Problematic Portrayal of "the Jews" and Judaism in the Gospel of John', as the title suggests, addresses the vexed question of 'the Jews' (*Hoi Ioudaioi*) in John's gospel. As she points out this gospel poses an acute dilemma. It one of the foundation texts of Christianity, preaching the love command together with a 'high' Christology not to mention 'the various exemplary roles that individual woman play in the Gospel' (104) (important for both specifically Mariological and broader feminist concerns). And yet the Gospel promotes an anti-Judaism by which 'the Jews' together with 'the world' are on 'the receiving end of judgment' which 'happens now as a result of the encounter with Jesus' (103). Bowe identifies various textual devices for delivering such judgment including inferiority and distance, explicit condemnation and presenting 'the Jews' as other. She then examines the various scholarly approaches to resolve the problems of the Johannine *Hoi Ioudaioi*. Finally she explores the ramifications of such approaches and their application in the pastoral context of liturgical and devotional use of John. I agree with Tanzer that simply removing the offending texts from the lectionary is not a solution. I would suggest that perhaps in the biblical religions, there is warrant for the view that scriptures should cause discomfort and cause one to grapple with texts rather than serve as a reassuring balm. Although I would also argue that *Hoi Ioudaioi* warrants a more nuanced and considered rendering by translators than simply 'the Jews'. The third essay by Laurence Edwards, 'Luke's Pharisees', I found particularly fascinating. He explores the way the Pharisees in Luke provide 'evidence for extensive overlap between emerging rabbinic Judaism and emerging Christianity' becoming 'a trope for the shades of gray between two approaches... that eventually gave birth to separate and distinct communities' (120). He surveys representations of Pharisees in both the Gospel and Acts. In the former, while they remain primarily a foil to Jesus, both 'recognize each other as teachers whose authority carries weight and is to be taken seriously', a portrayal, at least, 'more benign than in the other Gospels' (133). In Acts, the situation is more complex because the Pharisees serve to vindicate the Jewish authenticity of this new movement not least in the figure of Paul 'whose pharisaic credentials serve to heighten his legitimacy' (132). Edwards closes by reflecting on the implications of that other great Pharisee in Acts, Gamaliel, whose words serve as both the 'voice of pharisaic Jewish teacher and the voice of Christian scripture' (135). Gamaliel is a sign for Christians that 'there is room in the divine plan... for... the continuing vitality of Judaism' for 'multiple religious traditions able to stand the test of time... from God, of God, destined to endure as a separate way' (135).

Part 4 includes three response essays, although the first, by Walter Brueggemann, is much longer and more complex to be classified simply as a response. Instead he reflects on biblical

studies in the context of contemporary US society, its challenges, conflicts and politics to explore a theology, an ethics of reading/interpreting shared texts. Whether or not one is a believer, Brueggemann's essay definitely merits reading. The final two essays are shorter and respond to the preceding essays. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite presents a Christian response to *Contesting Texts*, which, like Brueggemann's, highlights the political and cultural contexts/contests of 'the Bible' in contemporary US society. David Sandmel's more modestly subtitled 'Afterword' concludes the anthology with a Jewish reflection on the issues raised in the collection and more broadly in the context of the role of scripture in interfaith dialogue and theological debate.

There was one question I felt was not really addressed by contributors; it is that contesting texts is not simply a matter of readers contesting interpretation and ownership but also the contesting authority of different texts, which albeit appear to be almost identical. In other words, despite their similarities, Tanakh and Old/First Testaments are not the same. Only Ralph Klein gives any intimation (consigned to an endnote) that there are 'differences between the Protestant, Orthodox and Roman Catholic canons of the Old Testament' (not to mention the Tanakh) but dismisses them as minor ('some') and 'not germane to the present discussion' (192). However, Orthodox Old Testament canons not only include texts not found in the Tanakh but also (some markedly) different versions of texts Jewish and Orthodox canons appear to share (and the Latin canon is a hybrid of both). There is no clear way of determining priority for these differing versions (and nor should we). They remain different and such difference and plurality is to be acknowledged and celebrated. Only by such acknowledgement and celebration can the presumed Other be recognised as not the perversely Other(Same) but simply as different and not Other at all.