Reading the Hebrew Bible After the Shoah: Engaging Holocaust Theology

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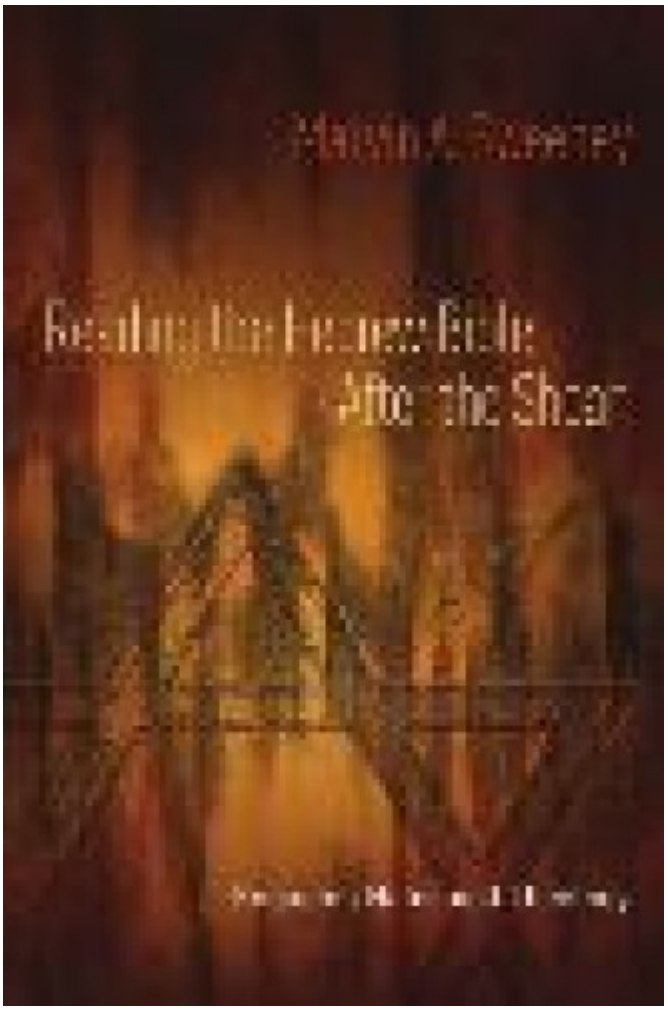
In Review



Reading the Hebrew Bible After the Shoah: Engaging Holocaust Theology

Marvin A. Sweeney
Fortress

In the film *The Reader*, Kate Winslet, playing an SS guard accused of great brutality, says to her meaning-seeking erstwhile partner, “Nothing comes out of the camps.” He wants to have a relationship that can restore their former joy, but in her emptiness she resists. He hopes, but she knows that out of the death camps cannot come tradition or meaning or hope or memory or faith or any human possibility: nothing! The point can hardly be contested. In this volume Marvin Sweeney takes up the burdensome but inescapable task of thinking about what the Bible could possibly mean when it is read in light of the camps.

The question, unresolved though it must remain, is not new. Sweeney begins his discussion with a valuable summary of Jewish and Christian theological responses to the Holocaust thus far. It is not surprising that Richard Rubenstein, with his bold death-of-God Judaism, stands front and center in the discussion of Jewish theological responses; beyond Rubenstein, Sweeney focuses especially on Emil Fackenheim, Eliezer Berkovits, Elie Wiesel, Arthur Cohen and David Blumenthal. The Jewish discussion, perforce, pivots around issues of God’s righteousness, power and faithfulness. These are, of course, the standard terms of any theodicy, except that in this context these terms are acute and existential.

Next Sweeney reflects on recent Christian responses. As will be expected, responses to the chastening summons of Jon Levenson are to be noted. Sweeney especially considers Rolf Rendtorff, Tod Linafelt, Kathleen O’Connor, James Crenshaw and this reviewer to be scholars who have at least begun an acknowledgment of the issue. It is worth noting that all of these Christian scholars have focused on the laments of the Hebrew Bible as the place of reckoning.

The introduction is matched by a conclusion in which Sweeney reads texts in the Hebrew Bible with reference to the general problem of God and evil and lets the general theme trickle down to the specificity of the Shoah. The key learning is that everything about faith and about God has been deeply problematized, even while the text seeks to exonerate God. Sweeney briefly considers the way in which the New Testament places blame generically on Jews for the destruction of the temple and defends the character of God by focusing on divine compassion in the event of the crucifixion. By contrast, the rabbinic literature is acutely aware of the suffering of Jews at the hands of foreign rulers. Partly as a result of that suffering, the rabbis are much more capable of critical theological thought.

Following a long tradition typified by the work of Martin Buber, Sweeney arrives at a recognition of God's absence. But instead of that absence evoking resignation, it becomes, in characteristic Jewish fashion, a call to responsibility:

> Do we recognize that perhaps G-d needs us just as much as we need G-d? We are, after all, created as partners with G-d, and our task is to assist G-d in the completion and sanctification of the world of creation. Like Eve—and countless other examples in the history of human existence—we may err in carrying out such a task, but we must nevertheless accept our own responsibility to complete and sanctify the world of creation in which we live.

Sweeney's refusal to give in to divine absence or to the reality of the evil that may be enacted in God's absence is perhaps an echo of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who relied on God's saving rescue and then, in the face God's absence, refused to give in anyway (Dan. 3:16-18). This stubborn resolve is a response to God whether God is absent or present.

Between the introduction and conclusion, Sweeney offers ten textual studies in the problematic of faith. These studies range over the Hebrew Bible and take up a spectrum of literary genres. In each case, Sweeney offers a critical introduction to the text, then draws the text closer to the questions left by the Shoah. There is an unevenness in the balance between historical-critical data and questions left by the Shoah: sometimes Sweeney becomes so involved in critical discussions that there is little attention given to the questions. For example, in "Abraham and Divine Fidelity" he says only that Abraham poses questions about divine fidelity and righteousness, and he leaves for the reader the issue of theodicy. In the Moses tradition, Sweeney merely recognizes divine violence. In these two cases the response remains quite general and does not at all advance our understanding or our thought. In the remaining studies, Sweeney redresses the imbalance and focuses more attention on questions raised by the Shoah.

As Sweeney works his way through the textual traditions, it becomes clear that for the most part the issues boil down to two concerns. The first is that the normative claim of the text, most evident under Deuteronomic influence, is a tight system of obedience that leads to blessing and of disobedience that leads to punishment. That is the baseline of moral coherence in the Bible for understanding the destruction of Jerusalem, which stands in important ways as a cipher for the much more

problematic reality of the Shoah.

Such a rule, however, leads to the completely unacceptable conclusion that the Shoah is divine punishment. For that reason, the tight calculus is powerfully problematized, and the text traditions are left with deep questions about the character of God; this is the second concern. The drama moves back and forth in the text between systemic explanation and resistance against it, especially in the tradition of lament that refuses guilt. Concerning Psalms and Lamentations, Sweeney concludes:

> They give expression to repentance when necessary, but they are also not hesitant to accuse YHWH of abandonment, neglect, and even deliberate wrongdoing when evidence of the people's transgressions is not evidence. Such a dialogue points to a robust relationship between YHWH and the people in which both parties express themselves, forcefully and deliberately, when either perceives wrongdoing on the part of the other. Nevertheless, neither YHWH nor the people abandon the dialogue, but instead look to the means to ensure its continuity.

Sweeney does not go much further than that, and one wishes that his interpretive comments had more bite. But he does go that far to show how ancient Israel, even as contemporary interpreters, knew about the problematic of our best theological claims. Sweeney sees that for both Jews and Christians the issue is acute; he observes, moreover, that the gospel tradition attempts "to defend G-d against charges of neglect, impotence, unrighteousness, and infidelity."

Christian interpreters will do well to notice and take up the task. There is an enormous temptation among Christians to fall into a kind of triumphalism, either by stressing God's sovereignty or by accenting the limitless mercy of God. The hard theological work that remains to be done may draw serious Jewish and Christian interpreters closer together in the common task. They may come to a shared confession of fragility—and in heaven as on earth, such fragility says much against the absolutism and certitude that are all around us. Sweeney quotes from the Mishnah: "You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it."