

[*MJTM* 14 (2012–2013)]

#### BOOK REVIEW

Marvin A. Sweeney. *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2012. xv + 544 pp. Hbk. ISBN 0800637437.

This book is another contribution to the burgeoning field of biblical theology but with a distinctively Jewish accent. While some Jewish scholars are not interested in the academic discipline of biblical theology because of its Christian roots, nonetheless a significant number of Jewish scholars have made recent contributions to the field. Sweeney's book is the first comprehensive study of the Tanak from a Jewish *and* biblical theological perspective. Throughout the book, he keeps one eye on the development of biblical concepts and ideas and another on showing their relevance for Judaism as a religion. Indeed, Sweeney's introductory chapter describes the fundamental relationship between the Tanak and Judaism as foundational. Many Christians would claim a similar relationship between the Old Testament and the New and Sweeney's discussion provides some helpful points of similarity and contrast with a Christian reading of the Old Testament. As a simple illustration, Sweeney, citing Levenson, shows how these different faiths understand Genesis 22. While Judaism sees in this story the basis of its own identity as the people of God as liberated from death and bondage, Christianity sees the story coming to a climax in Christ who goes to the cross and saves his people from death.

One of the important sections in this introduction is Sweeney's understanding of the task of a distinctive Jewish biblical theology. Partly by way of contrast with a Christian biblical theology (hereafter BT), Sweeney explains his understanding of the task of a Jewish BT in the following manner: (1) it is committed to a relationship with God through Torah observance as

opposed to a relationship through faith in Jesus Christ. The different arrangements of the Hebrew Bible and Christian Old Testament stress important differences, the Tanak structure emphasizing the fundamental role of the Torah in Judaism (Torah), the disruption of the ideal (Prophets), and the restoration of the ideal (Writings), while the Old Testament posits a more linear structure which culminates in the Christ event. (2) Judaism's distinctive postbiblical reading tradition is claimed to be a more organic integrated reading of the Tanak. The concern with the Jewish people and their identity is the focus instead of the New Testament's more "markedly foreign" elements such as Christ and the nations. Jewish theologies, unlike Christian theologies, refuse to provide systematic delimitations and definitions of God. (3) Jewish BT claims a more rigorous commitment to examine closely the entirety of the biblical text, rather than privileging a group of books or a certain number of themes. This implies the importance of the Masoretic text, and the primary importance, of the plain meaning of scripture (*peshat*). (4) The belief in the dialogical character of the Hebrew Bible stresses the importance not so much of unity or systematic organization, but the Bible as a group of documents that are in dialogue with each other, and in keeping with Jewish tradition. Various rabbinical interpretations occur alongside one another—sometimes in sharp contradiction. In fact, Sweeney concludes that the Jewish Bible does not represent a consistent view of God, Israel's relationship with God, the temple, or the land.

With these principles in mind, the theological journey through the Tanak begins with the Torah. With keen literary sensitivity, Sweeney lays out the synchronic structure of the Torah around the genealogies that begin with Genesis and continue through Numbers. For him, the genealogy of Israel, which began in Gen 37:2, extends to Num 2:34. The genealogy of the Levites is followed from Num 3:1 to Deut 34:12. Sweeney discusses more diachronic considerations such as the role of independent sources and a reconceptualization of these literary documents more in line with recent developments in the field (although he emphasizes the late pre-exilic character of three of the documents). The message of the Torah seems to be that Israel has been chosen to

occupy a central role in creation, to observe divine Torah, and to establish a holy sanctuary by which God's presence is recognized in the world. Thus, Israel is a holy nation "whose task is to act as partners with G-d in completing and sanctifying creation at large" (p. 55). The "nations will learn to recognize G-d as the author of creation and the judge of holy and righteous conduct and to conduct themselves accordingly" (p. 55).

While the Torah sketches an ideal understanding of Israel in the midst of creation, the Prophets present the failure of living out this ideal and its fundamental disruption. The Former Prophets stress the failure of the kingship under Manasseh to the South and Jeroboam in the North. Diachronic considerations lead to discussions of sources and the development of compositional histories from a variety of viewpoints, with Sweeney coming down in favor of Frank Cross's theory of double redaction of the Deuteronomistic History. History and faith collide head-on in this section as Sweeney states categorically: "the historical portrayal of the complete conquest of the land of Israel and the destruction of the Canaanite population is simply not true" (p. 182). As for the Latter Prophets, they also reflect on the failure of Israel to observe Torah and the ensuing divine judgment as well as the divine intentions for the future to re-establish Israel at the center of creation. Diachronic issues are discussed in each of the fifteen prophetic books, with Sweeney maintaining many of the standard historical-critical views about these works—if in somewhat nuanced form.

The Writings conclude the Tanak and while there is a lack of clarity regarding many of the diachronical questions of this division, Sweeney argues that it clearly presents a "restoration of the ideals of Jewish life in the land of Israel and the world at large laid out in the Torah and disrupted in the Prophets." The Psalter provides a liturgical basis for worship in the coming rebuilding of the Temple, while Proverbs presents an alternative means to learn Torah through the order of Creation. Daniel predicts a future restoration of the world led by the Jewish nation, and Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles detail the beginnings of this restoration. Sweeney dates the canonization of this last section of the Tanak to a rather late date between 300 and 600 CE.

Sweeney's book is rich with extraordinary detail as the following samples of exegetical insight indicate. The inscription to the prophetic book of Jeremiah implies a 40 year span of his ministry, which is seen

as an effort to make a theological point by comparing Jeremiah to Moses, i.e., whereas Moses spent forty years leading Israel from Egypt to the promised land, Jeremiah's forty years saw Israel/Judah exiled from the land and Jeremiah ultimately in Egypt (p. 295, cf. 311).

Similarly, Sweeney posits that Moses and Aaron were disqualified from entering the Holy Land because they had not yet been purified from ritual contamination in the burial of Miriam when they sought to do the divine will at Meribah. The high priest in Israel represents Adam "as Ben Adam (son of Adam) attempting to re-enter the Garden of Eden" (p. 242). This is explained as the reason why Ezekiel (a priest in exile) is addressed repeatedly as "Son of Man" (p. 323). Readers of Sweeney's book will be rewarded with many exegetical nuggets like these.

The Jewish perspective of the book stresses aspects of the Scriptures that Christian interpreters tend to miss; namely, the importance of ritual, liturgy, and the temple. Thus, as mentioned above, Adam is viewed as a priestly figure, and the Garden of Eden a sanctuary, much like the holy of holies, which is guarded by the Cherubim. In the discussion of sacrifice and sin in Leviticus, the point is made that the tabernacle serves as the holy center of creation, which means that Torah violation disrupts the created order, thereby indicating the need for the purification of both the sanctuary (creation) and the offenders. Thus, later in the Prophets, Elijah entering the cave to experience a theophany is likened to the priest entering the holy of holies on Yom Kippur, and Elisha's curse of the forty-two boys, who taunt him because of his baldness, is viewed as analogous to approaching God in the temple without attending to the proper ritual requirements. Similarly, the tabernacle/temple serving as the holy center of creation explains the central concern for its restoration in the Former and Latter Prophets and the re-establishment of this ideal

in the Writings. Chapters 38–39 of Ezekiel are not viewed as an apocalyptic addition to the book but they function “as an integral part of the book . . . in that it portrays the purification of the land from the defilement of corpses in preparation for the restoration of the holy temple in chapters 40–48” (p. 337). Indeed, Christian—and particularly Protestant Christian—interpreters, often miss such important points, which suggest the cosmic and dramatic importance of the temple cult as the means by which the created order is maintained and renewed in ancient Israel.

The Jewishness of this book sometimes comes through in the shadow of the Shoah, which is not far in the background. From the beginning of the book, the holocaust’s place in the history of Jewish theology is noted and discussed. Sweeney cites various attempts by Jewish scholars to understand the holocaust theologically (whether the millions killed were a vicarious sacrifice), that the event indicates the death of God, or that Jews must now learn to forgive God in the same way an abused child must later try to forgive an abusive parent. This shadow of the Shoah is also prominent at various points in Sweeney’s book, particularly in passages dealing with obedience and blessing and disobedience and curse (Deuteronomy) and in other books, such as Esther and Job. While not always agreeing with Sweeney’s analysis, I appreciated his willingness to let his humanity shine through and throw off the mantle of the purely “objective” historical critic. This shows the extreme difficulty of being a “neutral” interpreter in light of one of the greatest catastrophes of the twentieth century, which specifically targeted a people because of their biblical ethnic identity. Indeed, in my judgment, Sweeney’s lack of neutrality actually helps him to be a better interpreter of Scripture. It shows that Scripture is Scripture and not just an antiquarian archive of records.

While profiting from Sweeney’s major study, I am still left with some significant reservations. It seems at times as though there is no backbone to the body of material which is the *Tanak*. In other words, there seems to be a mass of detail that defies a final comprehensive picture. This is shown in the final concluding chapter which draws together only three pages of conclusions (pp. 487–89) after 486 pages of description! One tends to

get lost in the mass of detail. While it is true that Sweeney argues that the Hebrew Bible is dialogical and there is no final consistent picture of God and humanity in it, one wonders how Sweeney can be so certain of his overarching categories of the centrality of Torah-keeping as the creation ideal, the disruption of it in the Prophets, and its reestablishment in the Writings. This theological forest is overshadowed by all the trees of theological detail.

While I personally appreciate these general overarching categories, I think they could be more refined since they also occur within each major division of the Tanak. Thus, the creation ideal is disrupted with flood and reinstated with Noah, and again disrupted with the Tower of Babel and restored in Abraham. Then the Sinai covenant is disrupted with the Golden Calf incident and re-established afterwards. Disruption happens again with the wilderness generation and Deuteronomy renews the ideal. Similarly, in the Prophets, there is often a thread of hope found in the former prophets despite the disruption of the ideal, and in the latter prophets, the entire cycle is often shown—initial ideal, fall, and restoration (Hosea 1–3, Micah 6–7, Jeremiah 2–4, etc.). Similar points could be made about the third division of the Tanak in the books of Job and Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah etc., where there is an initial state of rest, complication, and final resolution.

Sweeney's point about the distinctive Jewish structure of the canon is too forcefully made. Recent studies (e.g., Peter Brandt, *Endgestalten des Kanons: das Arrangement der Schriften Israels in der jüdischen und christlichen Bibel*, Berlin: Philo, 2001) have suggested that this is not as neat and clean as it is made out to be. For example, the so-called Septuagintal ordering was not necessarily Christian even though it was adopted by Christians, but it probably had Jewish roots. Moreover, while it is often stressed that the Tanak ordering downplays eschatology, that is not necessarily the case. The ending of an early Tanak ordering with Chronicles, which stresses the 70 year period of exile predicted by Jeremiah, may increase the eschatological temperature by reinforcing the reinterpretation of this number in Daniel's prophecy, whereas an ordering concluding with Ezra/Nehemiah

does not (cf. John Sailhamer, “Biblical Theology and the Composition of the Hebrew Bible,” in S. Hafemann (ed.), *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect*, [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002] 25–37). Moreover the ending of the first half of the Hebrew Bible with Jehoiachin’s release and the ending of the second half with the release of Jewish exiles to build the temple (in the first ordering), shows a Messianic shape to the structure of the Tanak, focused on the building of God’s house understood as the Davidic dynasty and the Davidic temple. While the Tanak is contrasted with the Christian Old Testament as being more like a cycle in which the original ideal is restored, surely the same case can be made for the Old Testament where, in the words of a famous German scholar, the *Endzeit* of the prophets at the end re-establishes the *Urzeit* of the Torah at the beginning.

I do not think that Sweeney’s interpretation wrestles enough with the nature of sin and the redemption that is required to make human beings able to keep the Torah. While his understanding of the Tanak suggests the importance of keeping Torah for Judaism, the real question seems to be the possibility of keeping Torah. For within the Torah itself, there is the dismal failure of human ability apart from a circumcised heart to keep the Torah—even the great Moses does not get into the land!—and there is the expectation that sometime in the last days this will be remedied by a new Torah written on the heart of the faithful through a new covenant. If the restoration of the ideal of Torah keeping is found in the Writings, it is found wanting. The ending of Nehemiah and Ezra suggests an Israel that is found wanting at the end of the Tanak, and the picture of post-exilic Israel in some of the prophets puts an exclamation point on this observation.

Sweeney’s acceptance of the standard canonization theory of the Tripartite canon as developing in a linear sequence with the Torah canonized first, then the Prophets, and finally the Writings, has been challenged for some time. There is also plenty of evidence to suggest that the canonization process was complete by the beginning of the Common Era, although other studies continue to push the completion of the canonization process much later.

It may seem that Sweeney’s Jewish treatment of the Tanak is

fundamentally at odds with a Christian understanding of the Old Testament. I think, however, that Christians need a book like Sweeney's to see the importance of the Torah ideal and the structure of creation as fundamental to the revelation of God in the Scriptures. I would welcome his book as a needed partner in the conversation around the Big Picture of the Bible. As iron sharpens iron, Christians and Jews can sharpen each other's understanding of the Scriptures of Israel. As a Christian, I would also draw the attention of Professor Sweeney to the fundamental calling of Israel to be a light to the nations and its repeated failure to realise this. Perhaps, then, Christ and the nations in the New Testament are not so foreign to the Tanak as he suggests. For after all, Israel was blessed to bless the nations, and the stunning success of a new Adam, a new Noah, a new Abraham, a new Moses, a new David, a new Israel—all rolled up into one—restores the creation ideal and paves the way for Israel to bless the entire world through the offer of simple faith in the promise of God, leading the entire world back into creation blessing. Christ and the nations become the climax of a story, whose long journey began in the Garden. Thus, returning to the story of Genesis 22 with which this review began, the difference between the understanding of this text in Judaism and Christianity is one of scope. While the text on one level does stress the liberation of the Jewish people from death and bondage, Christianity asks why? And its answer points to another journey up the same mountain millennia later, in which one Israelite Son experienced bondage and death so that the whole world could go free.

Stephen Dempster  
Crandall University  
Moncton, NB