

[MJTM 14 (2012–2013)]

BOOK REVIEW

Wong, Priscilla. *Anne Steele and Her Spiritual Vision: Seeing God in the Peaks, Valleys and Plateaus of Life*. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012. x + 144 pp. Pbk. ISBN: 9781601781857.

Anne Steele (1717–1778), daughter of an English Particular (Calvinistic) Baptist pastor and author of numerous hymns and poetry, is brought to life by Priscilla Wong’s study of her writings. Steele was one of the leading female hymn writers of her time and her hymns ranked among those written by Isaac Watts, John Newton, and William Cowper. Wong helps to lift the life and legacy of Steele out of an oft forgotten past and provide contemporary Christians the opportunity to grow in their faith and understanding of God through Steele’s life work. Wong demonstrates how Steele was able to see God in all her different life settings, a perspective that becomes evident in three main themes that permeate her hymns: the glory of God in creation, faith in the face of suffering, and hope in the promised glory.

Priscilla Wong is an evangelical Baptist who lives in Markham, Ontario, Canada. In her book Wong writes concerning Steele that her literary talents were offered “for the purpose of glorifying her Creator” (p. 142). Wong’s genuine approach to her subject matter is offered in that same vein. She has a degree in English literature from York University and a Master of Theological Studies from Toronto Baptist Seminary, along with training in radio and television broadcasting and creative writing. Wong has received awards for her short stories and poetry and her book on Steele has already received acclaim from both Baptist and hymnody scholars alike. Her literary and theological expertise, along with her reflectiveness, gives her a solid vantage point from which to interact and critique the works of Anne

Steele.

It is impossible for an author to write a work on someone's spiritual vision while disregarding their own faith. For Christians in academia, it can sometimes be difficult to be objectively academic while still allowing their faith to infuse their work. Wong accurately captures Steele's faith and remains true to her own, and yet engages the historical sources in an academic manner. On p. 9 Wong articulates the points of her thesis, which are well developed in the supporting chapters as she employs solid historical methods and styles to support them. By maintaining a firm academic grip she fulfills her faith-filled objective to provide a "close analysis of Steele's hymns in relation to specific themes [that] will not only establish a more coherent and intimate picture of her life and spirituality, but also cultivate a more intense desire for Christians to grow in their faith and understanding of God" (p. 9).

Before Wong begins her investigation of each theme, she situates Steele's writings in the historical milieu that influenced them. Wong also incorporates the theological writings of Steele's family friend and Baptist minister, John Gill, whom Steele appreciated, in order to provide Steele's wider theological context. Steele lived in the village of Broughton, England, which lay in a valley cut by the River Test and was nestled beside Salisbury Plain. As a result of being surrounded by the glory of God's creation, sovereignty and providence became recurring themes in her writings. Steele also faced great suffering in her life. As a Baptist who dissented from the Church of England, Steele was part of a tradition that faced the trials of persecution. Steele also had many physical ailments, including malaria, irritable bowel syndrome, and peptic ulceration of the stomach. She was confined to bed for the last seven years of her life and also began to suffer deafness. Her physical ailments were understood to be an image of the reality of her dire spiritual sickness and her need for the Great Physician. Steele "did not use her suffering as an excuse to neglect God" but rather saw an opportunity to see God in her suffering (p. 61). Steele's physical distress, along with the many family deaths she witnessed during her life, drove her to hope in the promise of glory. In chapter 3,

however, it is unclear whether Wong is presenting her own eschatology or Steele's. The eschatology that is evident seems to be a simplistic understanding of heaven as opposed to the robust hope found in the New Testament of "the resurrection from the dead and the life everlasting," as the Apostles' Creed puts it. Ambiguity regarding what exactly Steele was hoping for is a confusing distraction in the third chapter.

Wong's mastery of English literary devices and her ability to parse Steele's hymns for the reader enables her to unlock Steele's spiritual vision. This is evident throughout Wong's three supporting chapters. Perhaps the greatest contribution Wong offers towards better understanding Steele's hymns is drawing the reader towards the notion of ineffability. Wong notes that Steele was a balanced product of pre-Romanticism, Romanticism, and the Enlightenment; the former two focusing on the heart and feelings and the latter centering on the mind and reason. Steele shows through her hymns that God is knowable but still mysterious. This mystery produces ineffability and is reflected in the profoundly reflective and worshipful character of Steele's hymns.

Though Wong's work is laudable, there are a few areas of concern. She duly notes the three contemporary biographical works on Steele, but only provides extracts of her life when it directly pertains to her investigation. A brief but more complete sketch of her life in a preliminary chapter would facilitate the placing of her hymns in context for those encountering Steele for the first time. When an author is working with historical biography the danger of hagiography also exists. Though Wong presents Steele as a real person, she does err on the side of praise and only once critiques her (p. 133). Her footnotes are exemplary and provide many details, but they are at times long and distracting. Given her desire to make this book accessible, which is also what Steele and her contemporary hymn writers desired of their hymns, Wong's footnotes and occasional use of sophisticated words instead of simpler ones detract from this.

Anne Steele's pen name was *Theodosia* (gift from God), which is appropriate given that she continues to exert an influence through her hymns, such as "Father of Mercies, In Thy

Word” and “And Did the Holy and the Just,” even where the details of her life are unknown. Wong helps to recapture Steele’s spiritual importance within eighteenth-century Evangelicalism and the benefit of her works for spiritual nurture today. She also helps shed light on the importance of Steele within the broader history of English hymnody and her influence within the Particular Baptist community of her time. Wong rightly captures her piety and desire to be industrious for Christ in the ways in which she was able. This work was informative, practical, and academic. I hope Wong’s book is only one of many to help contemporary evangelical and baptistic Christians understand and appropriate their deep spiritual heritage and inform their faith today.

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