THEOLOGICAL
Studies

Book Reviews

Theological Studies
2014, Vol. 75(2) 404–450

DOI: 10.1177/0040563914529909
tsj.sagepub.com
SAGE

Dark God: Cruelty, Sex, and Violence in the Old Testament. By Thomas Römer. Translated from the French by Sean O'Neill. 3rd ed. New York: Paulist, 2013. Pp. vi + 154. $17.95.

With this volume—in its third French and first English edition—Römer contributes to the growing conversation in recent years on the problematic portrayals of God in the Old Testament. The work is structured according to six common questions raised by certain biblical depictions of God that modern readers may find offensive: "Is God Male?," "Is God Cruel?," "Is God a Warlike Despot?," "Is God Self-Righteous and Humans Mere Sinners?," "Is God Violent and Vengeful?," and "Is God Comprehensible?" R. devotes a chapter to each question, with the primary goal of adding what he believes to be a much-needed historical perspective to the discussion of these issues. Such a perspective prevents the indiscriminate, uncritical use of biblical texts to advance a particular agenda that R. labels "theologically inadmissible . . . whatever the reason" (vi).

R. applies his historical-contextual analysis of these six questions in two ways. First, he considers troubling OT texts in light of their ancient Near Eastern backgrounds, a comparison that often casts the OT in a more favorable light or provides the basis for alternative interpretations more palatable to modern Western sensibilities. Second, he shows that the OT is rarely consistent in its testimony about God. Therefore any disturbing image of God must be considered together with other biblical texts presenting opposing views. For example, in his informative treatment of the issue of gender ("Is God Male?"), R. offers an interpretation of the OT's divine father imagery that de-emphasizes the image's potentially troubling patriarchal associations and views it instead as a democratization of the common Near Eastern claim of royal divine parentage. At the same time, he highlights the use of feminine imagery to describe God in the OT (e.g., Isa 42:14; 43:2) to show the lack of unanimity in its presentation of God's gender. Similarly, the revulsion produced by texts advocating horrific violence against persecutors (like Ps 137) or the genocide of Israel's Canaanite enemies (like Deut 7) must, in R.'s view, be moderated by the historical fact that the former was composed in a time when the powerless Israelite exiles could not enact their wish for vengeance, while the latter describes a military conquest of Canaan that likely never occurred.

While his contextualization of the OT is an important first step in addressing some perennially vexing issues, R. acknowledges that in some cases even historically

informed exegesis cannot completely explain the problems away. In such instances, R. emphasizes the ultimate incomprehensibility of the divine and warns against holding God to any human standard of justice since "a 'politically correct' God risks becoming . . . an idol who does nothing but legitimize merely human aspirations" (57). R.'s repeated appeal to divine incomprehensibility, however, exposes a contradiction in his work that he never addresses: if God's justice cannot be evaluated in light of human reason and ethics, what is the point of spending the majority of this book using contextually informed exegesis to make problematic biblical texts more agreeable to modern readers? Why go to great lengths to show that Genesis 22 presents "an incisive polemic against human sacrifice" (57) when one believes that God's command for Abraham to slay Isaac cannot be criticized as evil by humans because of our limited knowledge?

Alongside this question, another critique deserves mention. R. occasionally will choose a less offensive biblical text to exemplify a particular troubling issue when other texts that present the issue in a more disturbing fashion are available. For instance, in his discussion of divinely mandated ethnic cleansing in the OT, R. presents as his example Deuteronomy 7:1–6—a passage that, unlike other texts describing the ban (*ḥerem*) such as Deuteronomy 20:16–18 or 1 Samuel 15:1–2, does not explicitly mention the abhorrent command to slaughter children and animals. Likewise, R.'s discussion of divine violence is curiously centered on the Cain and Abel story, where God is only indirectly implicated for violent acts. A much more appropriate text for the discussion of divine violence is found in the very next narrative block of Genesis: the flood story of Genesis 6–9, in which God repays human sin with a violence that nearly destroys all life on earth. It seems that Genesis 4 is chosen because R. can commend God's actions in forgiving Cain's crime and can therefore show that God wishes to limit violent retribution; whereas God's actions in the flood story are not as amenable to a nonviolent reading. Avoiding the more difficult cases in favor of those in which God can be more easily exonerated weakens the force of R.'s argument.

Despite these complaints, R. has presented a lucid and accessible text that serves as a good introduction to the wide range of topics in the discussion of the troubling aspects of the OT's portrayal of God. It is well-suited to an undergraduate classroom or to the interested layperson.

Stephen M. Wilson
Duke University, Durham, NC

The Oral Gospel Tradition. By James D. G. Dunn. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013. Pp. x + 390. $45.

This book gathers 15 essays by Dunn that have appeared as articles in journals or as chapters in edited collections. Twelve were originally published in 2003 or later; two come from 1991 and 1992, respectively. One from 1977–1978 is still well worth reprinting; it refuted definitively the thesis (of Rudolf Bultmann and Ernst Käsemann, among others) that in the earliest days of Christianity many prophetic