

*Das christliche Gottesbekenntnis. Eine andere systematische Theologie.* By Raphael Schulte. Münster: Aschendorff, 2014. Band 1: *Prolegomena*. Pp. 339; Band 2: *Im Anfang erschafft Gott Himmel und Erde und den Menschen*. Pp. 395. €44; €48.

Schulte must have intended his work to be completely different from other books devoted to systematic theology when he announced its subtitle: *An Other Systematic Theology*, and not *Another Systematic Theology*. While there is little doubt that it differs from the typical book devoted to systematic theology, there will most likely be some confusion over what it really is. Is it a massive biblical commentary or is it an extremely lengthy sermon? The answer may well be that it is an uneasy combination of both.

The first volume, the “Prolegomena,” seems intended to lay out the fundamental theme of the book as announced by the title: the Christian Declaration of God. However, the theme is not expressly stated but rather is suggested; a detailed examination of the book of Genesis. The contents of the second volume are indicated by the sentence “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth,” and it contains detailed exegesis of each word. But, S. adds “and man,” suggesting that humans will figure prominently in his narrative. Both volumes have two themes: the first is primarily negative while the second is mostly positive. The first involves S.’s disputes with other scholars over their interpretations of the biblical words and concepts; the second is his discussion of the extended nuances and various sounds of these same words. These are the words and the concepts that are found throughout the Bible, but more specifically in Genesis, and they include the ideas of God, creation, nature, and man. He takes his point of departure from contemporary theological encyclopedias and he argues that the authors of the entries on these terms show a fundamental misunderstanding of them. One would expect that a Catholic theologian might find fault with the fourth edition of the Protestant *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* but he also identifies problems with the Catholic *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*. S. also takes issue with the *Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament* and even with the standard *Brockhaus*. His complaints often seem reasonable: the authors of the entries in these scholarly works appear to be fixated on the sterile definitions of the words and are not concerned with their spiritual contexts. S. objects to this type of reading and he maintains that the Bible cannot be examined in a sterile scholarly manner. Instead, he insists that it must be listened to. S. reminds us that God does not provide written concepts and clear definitions, but, instead, speaks in metaphors, parables, and even riddles. The Bible is not a textbook but is full of secrets and riddles. It does not contain perfect paragraphs and logical sentences but is composed of signs, symbols, and of course, sounds.

S. is concerned with the beginning sentence of Genesis and so he examines each part. “In the beginning” cannot be considered a typical beginning and although it may seem “simple and easy” to understand, it is not. God is also not a normal creator and it is wrong to think of him as an Aristotelian “First Cause.” The “I am” is not to be taken in the usual sense, and the name “God” cannot be reduced to an anthropological monotheistic classification. When we speak about “heaven and earth” we are talking about the “world” and “nature.” But, “world” is not easy to understand and we need to be clear about which of the various definitions of “nature” we mean. Is it nature as

“essence,” as “world,” or as “*telos*,” as in end or purpose? What is meant by “man” and what is his nature and purpose? Are we to answer these questions from our point of view? S. counsels us to look at the words as they occur in Genesis.

Despite S.’s focus on the Old Testament, his book is filled with New Testament themes. These include freedom, life, and above all, love; that is, God created a world with love and with freedom. If the NT is about rebirth and resurrection, S. believes that the OT is about birth and life. It is about a “creation,” one that is continuing to happen and has an ongoing “history.” It is not a dead letter that we need to read to comprehend. Instead, it is a living spirit that we must listen to in order to understand.

The book has a number of scholarly conventions: it is set out systematically, with divisions and subdivisions as well as footnotes. But the footnotes are sparse, and often lengthy (some running full pages). Nor are the indices very helpful (the “Name Index” comprises only one page that contains fewer than 50 names). There are additions and appendices that seem like regular reviews of books, but these are as close as we come to finding a bibliography. In most other cases the reader needs to guess at the abbreviations for the titles of the encyclopedias and other books. Yet, for someone who seems to look down on the conventions of scholarship, S. does it rather well. His complaints are neither cavalier nor specious. And his arguments are often persuasive, especially his insistence on the importance of listening to God.

Given S.’s repeated emphasis on God “speaking,” it seems peculiar that there is almost no mention of mysticism. In particular, the Rhineland mystics (Meister Eckhart, Johannes Tauler, and Heinrich Suso) believed in the mystic’s need to remain quiet in order to listen to God, but they also believed in the incredible power of the spoken and written word. I cannot help but think that there is another, almost mystical, voice lurking in the background. This someone also railed against the deadness of scholarship and emphasized the importance of language—Martin Heidegger. Heidegger is indeed mentioned once, almost in passing, and as a philosopher. But, we should remember that Heidegger was educated as a Catholic, began his seminary studies before leaving because of ill-health, and did seem to have mystical leanings. Like Heidegger, S. seeks the living voice, not of Being, but of God. Schulte may reveal everything in the third and final volume; yet, one is entitled to be somewhat skeptical. S. is evidently not as concerned with endings as he is with beginnings; he has little interest in the books of John and Revelation, but has far more interest in Exodus and Genesis. For those who want a scholarly analysis, S.’s book may be too subjective and perhaps almost excessively poetic. And, for those who are looking for inspiration in a sermon it may be too scholarly and overly long. However, it is a rather well-written book, and even more crucially, it is devoted to the immense importance of the spoken word—the words that were spoken in the beginning when God was creating heaven and earth, and of course, humans.

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