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Review: Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible by Marvin A. Sweeney

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Review

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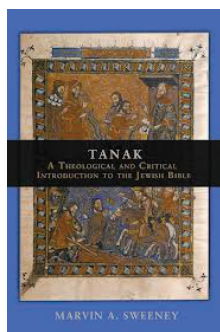
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Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible



By Marvin A. Sweeney. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012. Pp. xvi + 544. Hardcover, \$59.00. ISBN 978-0-8006-3743-9.

This book opens with a sweeping survey of the field of biblical theology that includes a detailed summary of how Jewish scholars with theological interests have contributed to the budding field of Jewish biblical theology.

In the chapters that follow, Sweeney takes the reader through the Hebrew Bible in canonical order, dividing his discussions based on various canonical markers. One of Sweeney's major strengths is as a systematic form critic. As such, he treats not only the parts of the Tanak that commonly receive attention but also many lesser-known and even obscure texts. Furthermore, he includes clear charts mapping out the total structure of a book or a larger theme that cuts across several books. He also is to be complimented for striving to keep his notes to a minimum and for placing them at the end of each chapter.

While it is evident that Professor Sweeney knows both the biblical text and the vast secondary literature surrounding it exceedingly well, it is less clear that he succeeds at the task he has set for himself. This is so for a number of interrelated reasons: (1) his various approaches to the text are rarely well-integrated; (2) his engagement with the postbiblical Jewish tradition is not fully satisfying; and (3) his choice of what arguments to present and his tendency to go through the text passage by passage often leave the reader feeling overwhelmed with information but less sure how these many facts fit together and give one a better understanding of the biblical material and its Jewish theological import.

The lack of integration is particularly noticeable in the abrupt shifts between the synchronic and diachronic analyses that one finds near the end of most sections of the biblical text that Sweeney examines. Thus throughout his treatment of Exodus, after summarizing a block of material and treating its content synchronically, he regularly adds a terse diachronic analysis. These statements generally consist of a list of the author's conclusions but lack fuller argumentation and supporting evidence. One

is often unsure how these summations of diachronic scholarship deepen our understanding of what these texts might have meant to an ancient Israelite audience or might mean to a contemporary audience. This reader would have liked the author to explore how certain variant notes in the text that may have arisen for understandable historical reasons now contribute to a larger theological viewpoint within a given text. In other words, in what ways might a synchronic and diachronic reading each seek to make sense of an unevenness, or a gap, in the text? Further, in what ways, if any, can each approach inform the other?

Turning to Sweeney's treatment of postbiblical Judaism, this book implicitly raises the important question: What makes an essay or a book Jewish biblical theology? Is it simply that any theological reflection on the Tanak written by a Jew is a type of Jewish biblical theology? While the answer to this question could be debated, much of this book's content might be better categorized as very solid biblical scholarship written by someone sensitive to Jewish concerns. Oftentimes the author does not highlight what I would see as central Jewish uses of and interest in a particular passage or biblical book. For example, it seems odd that in his section on Jonah Sweeney never mentions that this text is read each year on the afternoon of Yom Kippur, the most solemn holiday of the year. In fact, noting this connection would have bolstered his theological argument that the text is not a critique of Jewish particularism but rather addresses questions of God's ability to respond mercifully to repentance. Similarly, one hears nothing about the central liturgical place of the final passage in Micah, a passage read during Tashlikh, a ceremony performed on Rosh Hashanah in which Jews symbolically cast their sins into a body of water.

Clearly, it is not possible to touch on the Jewish use of every biblical passage in a broad overview such as this. But inasmuch as the subtitle of this book is "a theological and critical introduction to the *Jewish Bible*" (emphasis added), it seems odd not to include more explanations of how various texts and passages have and continue to shape Jewish life and practice. That Sweeney is aware of these types of connections is evident from occasional comments, such as the one on Psalm 19 in which he points out that the Amidah, the central prayer in the Jewish liturgy, makes use of the ending of this psalm in its concluding paragraph.

Furthermore, one would think that a book like this would include a plethora of references to various midrashim and to various classical Jewish commentators, yet the findings here are slim. The index notes only three uses of the word *midrash* in the whole book (although in fairness Sweeney does occasionally cite aggadic material found in the Talmud). Similarly, Rashi is mentioned only four times, two of which are in Sweeney's

opening survey. But it is not only a question of quantity but also of quality. The choice of which postbiblical Jewish insights are included seems to be dictated more often than not by the modern critical preoccupation with questions of authorship, such as when Sweeney shows that a variety of ancient and medieval Jewish sources had long ago suggested that parts of Isaiah may not have been authored by the prophet. But one would have liked to see more instances where rabbinic and later Jewish thinkers were used to unpack central theological issues raised by various biblical texts.

Finally, I would like to draw attention to the author's choice of arguments and his style of presenting the material. Here I was disappointed to see that Sweeney has a tendency to include some rather idiosyncratic arguments without alerting the reader to the fact that some of the ideas he presents are widely accepted, while others are more controversial. For example, in the discussion of 1–2 Kings, Sweeney states that Elijah's judgment and curse of Ahab's dynasty inevitably doomed the Davidic monarchy once Athaliah, a descendant of Omri, married into the Judean royal family (see pp. 254–55). If this is so, one must ask why the Deuteronomistic Historian, who took the time to draw connections between Elijah's curse and the fall of Ahab's dynasty, did not explicitly link Elijah's curse to Athaliah or the fall of Judah. A book that is subtitled an "introduction" should either omit such highly speculative assertions or should qualify them with phrases such as "one wonders" or "perhaps there is a textual connection." This will allow less expert readers to gain a fairer and more balanced sense of the material under discussion.

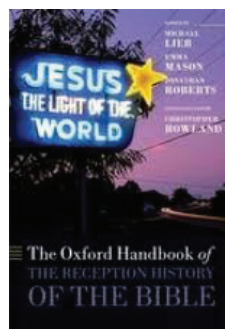
On the stylistic front, Sweeney spends far too much time summarizing the contents of the biblical text, passage by passage. At times one finds multiple section headings on a single page, even though all that follows is a single sentence of commentary under each heading (e.g., the five bold section headings on p. 335). Furthermore, even within lengthier sections, the drive to treat as many passages as possible in serial order inevitably forces Sweeney to use very dry and repetitive phrasing. Thus on pages 382–84 almost every paragraph begins "Psalm X, ascribed to David..." Here one wonders whether Sweeney would have been better served by first charting out the larger structure of the book under discussion, then commenting on a series of major themes within it, as he does near the end of his short section on Esther.

There is no question that Professor Sweeney has brought together a lifetime of scholarship in this volume and has demonstrated that biblical scholars with Jewish commitments bring unique and valuable perspectives to this material. Those who have the patience to work through this book carefully will learn

much. But this book asks a great deal from its readers. One often encounters a running summary of the biblical text and a somewhat loose array of facts and insights rather than an organized and integrated introductory overview. The result is that this book is too dense and stylistically inaccessible for most undergraduates. I also suspect that all but the most educated lay Jewish and Christian congregants would find it a tough read, most especially because of the author's tendency to include technical diachronic analyses with little effort to explain their relevance. Even seminarians and graduate students as well as professors and clergy who are trained to read books like this one may be more inclined to treat it as a reference work, rather than to read it cover to cover. However, these criticisms should not totally overshadow the fact that Professor Sweeney has produced the first truly comprehensive introduction to the whole Hebrew Bible that attempts to bring both modern critical insights and a Jewish theological sensibility to bear on the text—and for this we remain in his debt.

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The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible



Edited by Michael Lieb, Emma Mason, Jonathan Roberts, with Christopher Rowland. Minneapolis: Fortress; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. xv + 725. Hardcover, \$150.00. ISBN 978-0-19-920454-0.

In the field of biblical studies, whether construed broadly or narrowly, the Bible's reception—how it was read, used, and interpreted—has received increasing attention in recent years. As this volume shows, because of the enduring cultural significance of the Bible, the question of how its constituent books have been interpreted also occupies scholars from fields other than biblical studies. Of course, this recognition means that no single volume, even one of more than 700 pages, could treat this subject fully, and the editors of the