

Carol M. Bechtel, editor. *Touching the Altar of God: The Old Testament for Christian Worship*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008. 211 pages. \$14.04.

This volume is part of the Liturgical Studies series produced by the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship under the guidance of its director John D. Witvliet. For this project, the Institute assembled six professors of Old Testament: editor Carol M. Bechtel, Thomas A. Boogaart, Corrine L. Carvalho, Ellen F. Davis, J. Clinton McCann, Jr., and Dennis T. Olson. Along with Witvliet and printmaker/sculptor Margaret Adams Parker, they discussed the Old Testament and its relevance for Christian worship, working against the widely held conviction that the Old Testament has limited relevance to Christian worship. As you might imagine, these scholars insist, “the Old Testament is indispensable for the practice of Christian worship” (xii). The discussion is, of course, not a new one, extending from Marcion to debates about the proper use of the Old Testament within three-year lectionary systems; neither is their assertion about the importance of the Old Testament a new claim. Nevertheless, these essays provide fresh readings of the biblical texts and of common worship that move the discussion forward in constructive ways.

The authors address the following topics, relating each to liturgical practice: Sabbath and sacred time (Olson, 1-34), drama within the sacred text (Boogaart, 35-61), a reading of Isaiah that moves beyond “pretty texts” (Witvliet, 63-94), prophetic texts as preaching that refuses to explain God’s ways (Davis, 95-121), the Temple and sacred space (Carvalho, 123-153), the Psalms as prayer with and for the poor (McCann, 155-178), and Job’s wisdom as call to accept human limitations and then to pray accordingly (Bechtel, 179-211). Sidebar conversations within each chapter open up various related topics, such as “The Babylonian Captivity as an Enforced Sabbath for the Land” (22, see Leviticus 26: 34-35). Two hymn texts are offered at the close of each chapter, included among them are classical texts from writers like Charles Wesley and Robert Grant and texts from contemporary hymn writers like John Bell, Shirley Erena Murray, and Brian Wren (59, 93, 119, 152, 177, 210). Presenting these hymn texts keeps the discussion close to the practice of corporate worship and reminds us of the ongoing relevance of the Old Testament witness (note Bell’s naming of “torture” as an idolatry, 93).

One finds numerous thoughtful insights here, some bordering on the provocative. For instance, Olson explores the idea of enforced Sabbath exegetically, and then he offers a prophetic and pastoral word: Just as Sabbath calls us to care for the earth, it also calls us to care for ourselves. “If we neglect or abuse our bodies through overwork, lack of sleep, bad eating habits, lack of exercise, and the like, our bodies will sometimes impose on us an enforced Sabbath” (22). Boogaart offers a sidebar conversation in which he demonstrates that the biblical narratives may be read as drama and not merely as history. They are playwriting (p. 40), he insists, written as drama under a set of conventions that he describes in detail (p. 50-51). Such an argument, of course, legitimizes use of drama in worship, likely to the comfort of some and the consternation of others.

I was particularly encouraged to encounter a variety of references to ecological stewardship and care of the earth. These themes are present within the Old Testament scriptures as well as the rest of the Bible, but they have often been overlooked in liturgy and preaching. A new trend is emerging, however. McCann observes that the Psalmist calls all Creation, including the rivers and mountains, to the worship of God (Ps. 148: 1-13, etc.). As he suggests, we might not call the Psalmist an “environmentalist,” but one finds in the Psalms ample grounds for reflection on ecology (p. 172). Quoting Daniel Migliore, he points toward God as playful artist

and suggests that God's "work" should not be equated with drudgery (173). In her reading of Job, Bechtel points to "God's gleeful descriptions of the nonhuman dimensions of creation" (203-04). Hearing these assertions helps us realize that worship is not primarily about the meeting of our myriad needs, as some contemporary practitioners would have us believe (pp. 198-99).

Of course, this text stands well beyond easy stereotypes about Old Testament and New Testament depictions of God. Various authors insist, however, that God's grace is often known in the midst of difficult circumstances and human limitation. In his essay on Isaiah, Witvliet notes that Christians tend to read only the bright passages in Isaiah, not realizing that they often stand in contrast to the dark scenes, the word of God against idolatry. Such one-sided reading is impoverished. So, we need something more than "pretty pictures." (66-67). In a telling comparison, he notes that Isaiah is more like Rembrandt, who depicts light coming amidst the shadows than it is like Thomas Kinkade, who allows no shadows (68). McCann calls the church to sing the full range of the psalms, including the laments. Refusing to do so is costly for the church. Even if we are not making our own lament, we sing them on behalf of others (160-61). Bechtel suggests that we read Job, not primarily as a treatise on suffering, but as a call to accept the limits of human wisdom (181). Such insight serves as correction for various misplaced assumptions about worship, especially the idea that it is primarily a vehicle for our self-expression (196, 199).

Davis's intriguing woodcuts provide another reading of the texts. The woodcut of Adam and Eve with whales and dolphins playing in the background invites one into the play of Sabbath (1). Introducing the chapter on Job with a rendering of a galaxy and interstellar space complements the new liturgically oriented reading of the text that follows (179).

This is a well-designed text. It could be a helpful addition to courses on Old Testament theology, liturgical theology, or preaching. It might work particularly well in a cross-disciplinary class, perhaps a team-taught course on preaching from the Old Testament.

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