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J. Gary Millar, Now Choose Life: Theology and Ethics in Deuteronomy

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Now Choose Life: Theology and Ethics in Deuteronomy* by J. Gary Millar

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our author's ascription and dating of biblical texts. Instead, a reluctance to grapple with or even cite dissenting opinions by a respectable cadre of specialists undermines the credibility of the redaction-criticism that characterizes this work.

Sweeney comes into his own as a literary critic, for he has an ear for the music of these ancient texts and is unafraid to challenge earlier readings. For instance, he makes a convincing case that the image of the Assyrian Empire as a political agent in DtrH ends with the destruction of Sennacherib's army and the Assyrian king's own ignominious death in the reign of Hezekiah (pp. 53–54, 62, 72, 254). By removing Assyrian entanglements from the reigns of Manasseh and Josiah, the biblical authors freed them to behave at once more appallingly evil and more steadfastly pious than had they been represented as Assyrian or Egyptian vassals, cogs whirring in the imperial machinery. While this observation is not original, it does justice to the literary economy of 2 Kings, nimbly avoiding the temptation to read sinister Assyrian cultic introductions into the religious affairs of these kings simply because we "know" that abandonedly wicked Manasseh and Ahaz could not have resisted them and irreproachably good Josiah must have demolished them. Other evidences of Sweeney's sensitivity to the message of the text include his reluctance to construe the structure of the central section of the Deuteronomy legal instruction as an extended meditation on the decalogue (pp. 144–45); other instructive examples could be cited.

The readership for this book is biblical specialists who approach the study of the Hebrew Scriptures with methodological expectations similar to Sweeney's and the larger pool of scholars who are willing to navigate the redaction-critical undercroft in order to glean the hidden gems of his literary insights. I cannot in good conscience recommend it as a survey of current scholarship and approaches to the study of Josiah because too many important voices and perspectives are missing.

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Now Choose Life: Theology and Ethics in Deuteronomy. By J. GARY MILLAR. *New Studies in Biblical Theology.* Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998. Pp. 216. \$24 (paperback).

Now Choose Life, a revision of an Oxford University D.Phil. thesis supervised by John Barton, was published in a series aimed at evangelical scholars and clergy. The work comprises six chapters: "Introduction: Old Testament Ethics and Deuteronomy" (pp. 17–40), chap. 1: "Ethics and Covenant" (pp. 41–66), chap. 2: "Ethics and Journey" (pp. 67–98), chap. 3: "Ethics and Law" (pp. 99–146), chap. 4: "Ethics and the Nations" (pp. 147–60), and chap. 5: "Ethics and Human Nature" (pp. 161–80). The chapters move thematically through Deuteronomy in canonical order, so, for instance, chap. 2 canvasses Deuteronomy 1–3, 4, 5–11, and 27–34. The book concludes with a brief afterword, bibliography, and author and scripture indexes.

The evangelical focus of this volume presupposes the acceptance of a specific Protestant hermeneutic of Deuteronomy as a guide to contemporary ethical praxis. As such, the worldview of the biblical authors, as refracted through the author's religious tradition, is that espoused by Millar. The vast scholarly corpus of Thomistic moral theology figures nowhere in its pages. *Now Choose Life* does not speak the language of professional ethics, and those yearning for a rigorous discussion of modern philosophical ethics and Deuteronomy must look elsewhere. Similarly, liberation, feminist, black, and other emancipatory theologies born in the turbulent twentieth century, with their characteristic visions of constructive and demonic life choices, have no place in this text. I believe it is safe to say that the ethical conclusions drawn by this author would not be those of mainstream Orthodox Jewish scholarship, and certainly not the waning voice of the liberal Christian tradition. Granted these exclusions, the introduction succeeds as a competent survey of twentieth-century scholarship on Deuteronomy and ethics: Johannes Hempel (1964), Walther Eichrodt (1964), John Barton (1978, 1983, 1996), Walther Kaiser (1983), Brevard Childs (1985, 1992), Christopher H. Wright (1983), and Waldemar Janzen (1994).

Millar's ultimate goal of providing a roadmap of Deuteronomical ethics leads him to concentrate

on the parenthetic or exhortative frame narratives at the expense of the legal material in Deut. 12–26. Within this circumscribed ambit, he emphasizes throughout the theme of obedience to YHWH as the ultimate guarantee that Israel shall be allowed to possess Canaan. Sensitive to subsidiary themes, he notes that the motif of repentance and forgiveness plays little part in the cultic regulation of life in the promised land; Deuteronomy alludes neither to the Day of Atonement ritual nor to sin offerings (pp. 164–65). The image of human nature Millar distills from Deuteronomy is darkly pessimistic, in that Israel (read: humankind) exhibits a marked aptitude for evil and divine disobedience that, without the leavening agent of unmerited grace, is a recipe for moral disaster. Chap. 4 seeks to come to terms with the infamous Deuteronomic prescription for Canaanite genocide as the acid test of Israel's obedience to YHWH and license to occupy Canaan itself. Although clearly troubled by the ruthlessness of the command to ethnic cleansing (he uses neither the terms "ethnic cleansing" nor "genocide" in his exposition), observing, for instance, that, "it is shocking that the trees receive more mercy than the Canaanites" in Deut. 20:19 (p. 133), the author ultimately sides with the perspective of the text: "The dangerous religion of the Canaanites is an obstacle to all that Yahweh has for his people, and it must be destroyed, along with those who keep it alive" (p. 159). In this, Millar loses a signal opportunity to probe the implications of a biblical teaching that was exploited with terrifying immediacy in the twentieth century and whose reverberations show no signs of decay.

Millar's dating of the text and notion of his historical *Sitz-im-Leben* figure very little in his exposition. He is unimpressed with the Graf-Wellhausen documentary hypothesis and sees no compelling reason to link the book found in the Jerusalem temple in Josiah's reign with Deuteronomy, though his rationales for this skepticism are sketchily elaborated at best. He consistently rejects scholarly efforts to equate the Deuteronomy call to worship YHWH at a single place with exilic or postexilic reflections on the Jerusalem temple and will not allow that threats of expulsion from Canaan in the book should be read against the disasters of the Babylonian Exile. Our author is by no means unread in com-

parative materials from the ancient Near East and can marshal sophisticated arguments to bolster his rejection of direct authorial reliance on the Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon, for instance (pp. 42–44, 66). His stated reluctance to clutter up his manuscript with the minutiae of exegetical studies (p. 99), unfortunately, works against him in his attempts to tease out the theological and ethical themes in his treatment of law in chap. 3. The explanations he cites for the prohibition of boiling a goat in its mother's milk are not very current (pp. 118–19), and his bafflement over the placement of the law forbidding a woman to injure a man's genitals might have been mitigated had Millar examined the corresponding passages in the cuneiform law tradition with more care (p. 142). Few if any items in his litany of why biblical laws "are necessarily of a different genre from most comparative material" (p. 105) can survive a rigorous comparison with the cuneiform law tradition; a presupposition of the incommensurability of ancient Israel closes more exegetical doors than it opens.

Millar, to his credit, finds no single overarching structure that unifies either Deuteronomy as a whole or its legal corpus in chaps. 12–26. He dismisses Eckart Otto's hypercomplex reading of the laws of Deuteronomy as an updating of the Book of the Covenant (p. 106). Millar is intrigued by Kaufmann's theory that Deuteronomy 12–26 uses the version of the Decalogue in chap. 5 as an armature for building the legal narrative but in the end rejects it due to the fact that the Decalogue is never quoted in Deuteronomy 12–26, and "the connections with it [are not] always terribly clear" (p. 107).

I heartily second the statement by the series editor, D. A. Carson, that this volume will benefit "not only serious students of Scripture, but preachers who want to work their way through Deuteronomy in the course of their regular ministry" (p. 9), with the caveat that the message of *Now Choose Life* will appeal primarily to an evangelical readership.

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