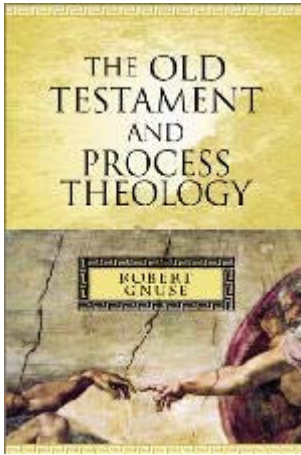


RBL 04/09/2002



Gnuse, Robert K.

The Old Testament and Process Theology

St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001. Pp. ix + 230,
Paperback, \$29.99, ISBN 0827227132.

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In *The Old Testament and Process Theology*, Robert K. Gnuse offers both an argument in favor of “utilizing process philosophical categories to explicate theological themes in the Hebrew Scriptures” (55) and an initial exploration of what such explication might look like. Gnuse begins with an overview of process philosophy and theology. The heart of the book, chapters 4-11, takes up various theological topics—divine suffering, creation, covenant, and so on—in turn, showing how the claims of the Hebrew Scriptures might be appropriated in process-theological terms. Finally, Gnuse turns his attention to “the intellectual advance of the Hebrew scriptures” and the composition and canonization of the Bible. A brief review cannot do full justice to the breadth and depth of Gnuse’s lucid and wide-ranging volume. Only a few prominent aspects of the book can be highlighted here.

Coming at the matter from the biblical side, Gnuse repeatedly demonstrates that certain biblical depictions of God are easier to integrate into process theology than into classical philosophical theology. Gnuse’s treatments of passages that describe God as suffering emotional pain, whether the pain of rejection by human beings or pangs of regret at divine intentions gone awry (as at the beginning of the flood narrative in Gen 6), are particularly good in this respect. So too is Gnuse’s attention to the recurring biblical claims of divine self-commitment to various individuals, groups, and historical processes, often expressed in the Tanak in terms of covenant. Process theology’s God, who is intimately involved with and affected by the cosmos and its inhabitants, is more congenial to such imagery than is classical theology’s impassable, impervious deity.

On the process-theological side, one notion that Gnuse develops at significant length is the “lure of God.” Indeed, Gnuse seems to consider this metaphor the most important area of contact between process theology and the Hebrew Scriptures (80). Gnuse describes God in process-theological categories as that future which “lures” the present to itself, thereby generating temporal flow. In this perspective, God can be said to lure, goad, or attempt to persuade other entities to follow the pattern God has set. Those other entities can respond in any number of ways to God’s, either conforming or resisting God’s lure (with many variations on these two basic trajectories). For Gnuse, God’s lure finds repeated expression in the Tanak. Emphasizing the biblical imagery of creation as divine combat and passages extolling God’s ongoing care for the world, Gnuse describes the creative process as God’s never-ending attempts to lure the cosmos toward a better future. Gnuse cites the blessings associated with God’s covenant(s) with Israel as another example of a divine lure. Gnuse casts prophetic call narratives as expressions of God’s lure, this time working on certain individuals. Even those prophetic oracles that proclaim forthcoming judgment (Gnuse focuses on the “Day of the Lord” passages) can serve, for Gnuse, as “an effective divine lure proclaimed by the prophets” (139).

Gnuse also seems particularly interested in the interplay between process theology, the Tanak, and the “problem of evil.” He returns to this theme on a number of occasions (even though neither “evil” nor “problem of evil” appears in the volume’s index). In general, process theology is able to attribute evil to actual entities resisting the divine lure or responding to the divine lure in ways other than those which God wills (which are always good, or so Gnuse seems to imply). Gnuse is keen to distance the God of process thought from classical theology’s “omnipotent deity who is responsible in some way for the existence of evil, either as predestined by the active will of God or permitted according to the so-called permissive will of God” (83). Yet in this regard Gnuse studiously avoids those biblical texts that depict God as explicitly luring individuals toward evil (e.g., Ahab in 1 Kgs 22 or Pharaoh in the early chapters of Exodus), not to mention strong claims for God as the source of evil or misfortune (e.g., Isa 45:7; Amos 3:6). Although Gnuse makes a virtue of “lead[ing] us to emphasize much more the gracious nature of God and mov[ing] us away from imagery that characterizes God in stern, judgmental, or even coercive terms” (80-81), such imagery is prominent enough in the Tanak that it must be taken into account by any theology claiming to give voice to the Hebrew Scriptures’ witness to God.

This last point touches on the aspect of this volume that seems to me the most confusing. I found it difficult to tell precisely what sort of relationship Gnuse was advocating between process theology and the study of the Tanak. At times Gnuse seems to argue—quite persuasively—that process theology can express the Tanak’s theological claims better than classic philosophical theology can (“Process thought can preserve the imagery and language of the Bible and render it intellectually acceptable for modern theologians” [110]). At other times Gnuse seems to set process theology in the role of a “filter” for theological appropriation of biblical imagery (“Process theology directs us to

certain aspects in the biblical traditions for specific metaphors” [80]). Yet again, Gnuse elsewhere seems to claim that biblical imagery expressed in process-theological categories is a more accurate depiction of God than classical theology could provide (“Biblical theology and process thought together express more completely a portrayal of the divine nature, especially in regard to the question of suffering and theodicy, than theological models in the classical tradition” [95]). Of course, the integration of process theology and the study of the Hebrew Scriptures need not be a simple one-way affair, but I would have appreciated more clarity, perhaps in the form of methodological reflections, on this point.

Gnuse’s major contribution in this volume is his demonstration that process theology offers a conceptual framework and language for doing constructive theology in a mode that can accommodate many Old Testament images of, metaphors for, and claims about God with fewer apologies, qualifications, or outright disavowals than classical theology typically requires. Gnuse does not, in my view, establish that *only* process theology successfully extends such an offer. (His opening chapter, which argues that recent models for the Israelite occupation of the Palestinian highlands—models that depart significantly from the models proffered by the biblical texts themselves—demonstrate a “need for a new theology,” seems to me unconvincing and even well off the mark.) It would be interesting, for example, to rigorously compare and contrast Gnuse’s vision of the integration of process theology and biblical studies with the “open theism” currently being debated in evangelical circles, as a way of testing whether themes such as divine persuasion, divine commitment, and divine suffering can be appropriated independent of the philosophical underpinnings of process theology—or whether some contemporary theologians might almost be described as inadvertent process thinkers. (Gnuse himself suggests that process thought has become “the normal way of thinking” [201].) Such is, of course, beyond the scope of this review and beyond the task Gnuse sets for himself in the book, but the fact that the volume lures readers beyond itself toward additional inquiry is testimony to its helpfulness. Anyone interested in using the Hebrew Bible to inform contemporary theology should give Gnuse’s *The Old Testament and Process Theology* serious and sustained attention.