

RBL 08/2007



**Reventlow, Henning Graf**

*Die Eigenart des Jahweglaubens: Beiträge zur Theologie und Religionsgeschichte des Alten Testaments*

Biblisch-Theologische Studien 66

Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2004. Pp. vi + 169.

Paper. €19.90. ISBN 3788720689.

Mark W. Hamilton  
Abilene Christian University  
Abilene, Texas

Repeatedly in his exemplary career, Professor Reventlow has helped address the central questions facing sophisticated readers of the Bible. His volumes on early modern biblical scholarship, eschatology, creation, politics, and theopolitics, not to mention his early work on the Holiness Code and the prophetic office in Amos, have helped our discipline clear up misunderstandings on both discrete problems and overarching approaches. Thus readers will welcome this collection of seven of his essays published between 1974 and 1996, all addressing, as the subtitle implies, the relationship between theological and religio-historical approaches to the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible. Like other volumes in Neukirchener Verlag's series *Biblisch-Theologische Studien*, this work makes careful scholarship available to a wide audience at an affordable price.

The book's chapters reprint "Die Eigenart des Jahweglaubens als geschichtliches und theologisches Problem" (1974); "Der Eifer um Recht und Gerechtigkeit im Alten Testament und die theologische Frage nach dem Recht im Zusammenhang mit der heutigen Menschenrechtsdiskussion" (1973); "Friedensverheißungen im Alten und im Neuen Testament" (1979); "Mythos im Alten Testament—Eine neue Wertung?" (1990); "Der Tempel als Ort der Kommunikation im alten Israel" (1996); "Tod und Leben im Alten

Testament” (1991); and “Zwischen Bundestheologie und Christologie: Überlegungen eines christlichen Alttestamentlers zur Biblischen Theologie” (1995). Although the essays differ in topic, audience (biblical scholars and educated laypersons), publication venue, and complexity (as evidenced in the footnotes or lack thereof), they well illustrate both how the author’s thinking has developed over the past three decades and to some extent how the field as a whole has changed.

For example, the earliest essays show Reventlow grappling with the then-prevailing animosity toward mythology and the denial of its existence in the Bible (as in the Albright school) or the expressed need to eliminate it (as in the Bultmann school). He argues for a more balanced understanding of the mythological language of ancient Israel. Later essays take this turn toward greater appreciation for mythology for granted but must then seek new ways to respond to the Israelite canon from a Christian perspective. In this particular shift of emphasis, Reventlow’s work mirrors changes in our entire discipline since the 1960s. While many of us find it necessary to focus on historical or literary or theological issues, Reventlow seeks, rightly in my view, to address all three and to seek convergence among them.

Since the book collects essays written over more than two decades and with little obvious regard for their interconnections, readers will value different contributions. To my mind, the most important essays are those trying to work out the nature and function of mythological language in the Hebrew Bible. His 1973 essay, although clearing away then-popular overemphases on Israel’s uniqueness, still left room for the theological integrity of the traditioning process behind the Bible. As he puts it, “Der Inhalt seines [Israel’s] Glaubens war vor diesem Hintergrund darauf gerichtet, daß ihm ein Gott begegnet war, der sich in den Führungen seiner Geschichte als der Herr der Welt und alles Geschehens in ihr erwiesen und ihm in freier Zuwendung seine Liebe und seine Forderung zugesprochen hatte” (26).

Such a formulation leaves room for him to write, twenty years later, of the connections among Israelite and Christian theologies without falling prey to reductionist approaches of either historicist or supersessionist stripe. Many of his conclusions now seem obvious, but they were hardly so at the time, and the present understanding of the problems of history and theology owe something to Reventlow’s interventions.

Similarly, his 1990 essay clarifying possible meanings of the word *mythos* clears away errant claims of a myth-free Bible, and his 1996 article on the temple as a “place of communication” sketches the primary exegetical issues necessary for understanding how the Bible (and thus Israelite religion, *mutatis mutandis*) understood the symbolic aspects of Israel’s primary holy site. Reventlow’s careful reading of texts and his judicious

handling of (mostly) German-language scholarship demonstrate how much can be done within the framework of a fairly conservative approach to biblical scholarship.

Herein lies the rub for readers of this book, however. The collection makes readily available the work of an important scholar, and each essay is highly suggestive in multiple ways, if for different audiences. I will not think about the problem of the Bible's relationship to modern views of human rights in quite the same way again, for example. At the same time, however, some aspects of the book remain puzzling. Thus, it is difficult to justify the near total omission of English-language scholarship since the 1970s in essays from the 1990s. A great deal of work has taken place in English on precisely the topics Reventlow addresses, and one could argue that failing to address that work in, say, treatments of the symbolic meaning of the temple or on the relationship between Jewish and Christian theology or on human rights seriously limits the usefulness of the book as a whole. Certainly biblical scholarship looks different in the United States and the United Kingdom than in Germany, not least on methods of reading texts and of connecting them to other sorts of evidence, but the book gives an appearance of insularity that is not characteristic of the Reventlow's other work. On the other hand, the problem lies less in one author than in an entire system of scholarly communication. Certainly such broader communication remains a high desideratum.

In summary, then, we should welcome this small collection of helpful essays for what it is, a set of clarifications of major issues by a sophisticated biblical scholar. For that we must thank the author and his editors.