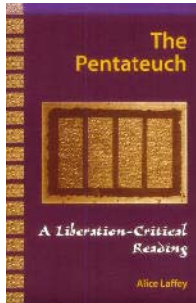


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Laffey, Alice L.

The Pentateuch: A Liberation-Critical Reading

A Liberation-Critical Reading of the Old Testament 1

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998. Pp. 256, Paperback,
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The Pentateuch is the first of four volumes in a series, "A Liberation-Critical Reading of the Old Testament," that "assume a nonhierarchical paradigm and . . . emphasize those texts and interpretations which are believed to be liberating, freeing, and life-giving . . . for all of the components of creation that stand in relationship to one another" (p. 5). So this book highlights feminist and especially ecological themes, but gives surprisingly short shrift to other liberationist issues. Laffey accentuates "the nonhuman, since modern readers are almost always accustomed to reading the texts through the lens of human and divine interaction" (p. 5).

Laffey uses a commentary-style format of short biblical quotations followed by one to three paragraphs of interpretation. She selects texts for thematic purposes, so the book does not work sequentially through the Pentateuch but rather skips back and forth to highlight issues such as "Cosmic and Human Interdependence" (chap. 1), "Sin: the Legitimation of Patriarchy" (chap. 3), and "Reciprocity" (chap. 8). Laffey's feminist and ecological concerns govern the selection of texts and the amount of space given them: the chapters on "Interdependence" and "Reciprocity" take up almost half the book while the "Liberation" chapter contains only ten pages. The book does a good job of addressing texts from the whole range of Pentateuchal genres, including genealogies, laws, and blessings as well as narratives.

Laffey does not interact explicitly with any other commentators, whether they share her theoretical perspectives or not. The book thus provides no comparative argumentation to back up its theoretical perspectives or particular interpretations of texts, but is simply presented as a possible reading of the Pentateuch. In many cases, her comments do not go much beyond paraphrasing the text. The result is a very readable volume, but one that provides no sense of the relationship of Laffey's views to the rest of biblical or theological scholarship. The book's bibliography fills the gap to some extent, and also

confirms Laffey's emphasis on feminist and ecological perspectives at the expense of liberation theology.

Lacking comparative argumentation, this reader wonders whether Laffey's thesis that the "biblical materials . . . , despite the patriarchal culture that produced them, are nonpatriarchal, nonhierarchical, and liberating" (p.193) is the book's presupposition rather than its conclusion. Her treatment of particular texts confirms that suspicion. For example, the use of the *tôlédôt* formula, "these are the generations of," for the account of creation (Gen 2:4) "implies that creation involved an evolutionary process . . . a movement from self-sustaining matter to more dependent life forms" (p.13). Her reading of the flood story "deliberately minimizes Noah's role in order to balance the reader's tendency" to focus on human beings (p.18).

Without any clear definitions of Laffey's key categories of reciprocity, hierarchy, and patriarchy, the reasons for her selection and organization of texts under these headings frequently remain unclear. For example, the chapter on "Sin: the Legitimation of Hierarchy" covers subtopics ranging from sibling rivalry and slavery through war and economics to the environmental damage depicted in the plague stories of Exodus. Her description of sanctification through sacrifice offers little explanation of the meaning behind the rites except to note that through them "reciprocity is achieved" (p. 169). The chapter on "The Land" emphasizes the goodness of the promised land (presumably as encouragement toward ecological awareness though this application is not developed), while ignoring the ethical issues surrounding the Cananites dispossession; this theme is reserved for the chapter on hierarchy where she briefly notes on the war with Amalek that "Israel legitimates and even sacralizes its own domination of others" (p.119). Laffey is, however, quite capable of taking the text to task for other ethical lapses, as her extensive survey of patriarchalism in the genealogies, narratives, and laws shows (pp.81-109).

The Pentateuch succeeds in presenting a reading informed by feminist and ecological concerns. Its method of presentation does not extend to demonstrating the plausibility and effectiveness of such readings, for which one must look elsewhere.