

Reviews

EZRA AND NEHEMIAH by Matthew Levering, (Brazos/SCM Theological Commentary on the Bible, Brazos Press, Michigan, 2007). Pp. 240, \$29.99 hbk.

Matthew Levering's book on Ezra and Nehemiah forms part of a new *theological* commentary on the Bible and as such uses the biblical text as a source for doctrinal reflection. The question of the legitimacy of this undertaking is not addressed by the commentary itself and nor in my view should it be. Further, Levering situates the chosen books in the context of the broad sweep of biblical revelation, illustrating his remarks with references from both Old and New Testaments, an outlook he admits without apology as the goal of his work: 'Through the commentary genre, I seek to explore how the books of Ezra and Nehemiah belong to the unified biblical revelation of God's covenantal gift of holiness' (p.19).

We see that his own 'template' of *holy people, holy land*, explained in his 2005 work *Holy People, Holy Land: A Theological Introduction to the Bible* (co-authored with Michael Dauphinais) guides the interpretation but it is his claim on the 'commentary genre' that is notable. Rather than addressing his interpretative skill to verses and pericopes, Levering uses the *text* to comment on his theology, which reaches into the New Testament and beyond. The whole bible is brought to bear upon the possible meaning of the stories of Ezra the Scribe and Nehemiah.

The book roughly divides into two to deal with each text, with an introduction and conclusion for both books. Then, each chapter of the biblical work merits a chapter in Levering's work, grouped again into two sections corresponding to Levering's own template: holy people, holy land. Theological thought flows from examining each chapter, but with an eye to the grand scheme of both the overall narrative and then its place in the whole of God's revelatory action in history. Individual verses are not cited and then examined; rather, Levering simply supports his theological interpretation of the entire chapter with suitable references from the text, along with references from other biblical books. The former quotations are distinguished from the latter by *italic* type. In this way the narrative of God's action through the deeds of Ezra and Nehemiah is not obscured in textual fragmentation.

In addition to biblical authorities, the Venerable Bede is our companion in interpretation and is the only ancient commentator cited. This shows the type of biblical interpretation in which Levering is engaged, for Bede finds in the story of Israel's restoration (as does Levering) a type of the temple fulfilment in the Incarnation, God coming to dwell with his holy people. It is an unapologetically Christian hermeneutic. Questions raised by employing other genres of biblical criticism are not addressed directly but mentioned in footnotes from noteworthy commentators such as F. C. Fensham, J. Blenkinsopp and G. F. Davies. Such readers are alerted to historical-critical, textual or literary concerns without such information occluding Levering's theological argument. On the other hand, we are still enabled to measure the success of his interpretation in the light of recent study of the accounts of the Restoration.

Broadly speaking, the account of the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra) and the rebuilding of Jerusalem (Nehemiah) is situated alongside the call for the rebuilding of covenantal obedience to God's Law: to have a holy land you need a holy people. You need not only a place for God to dwell but an environment fit for God's presence. The success of Ezra and Nehemiah's restoration depends

upon this latter type of holiness, purity most visible in the severing of marital ties to the nations. Levering's contention is that while these post-exilic leaders began to fulfil 'the word of the Lord by the mouth of the prophet Jeremiah' (Ezra 1.1) and restore the temple and God's people for God to once more dwell among them, such restoration is only completed in Christ, in whom Torah obedience and God's dwelling place are perfectly united: holy person, holy place. The goal is eschatological restoration. This is why Nehemiah's restoration ultimately fails to take root (Nehemiah 13).

Levering's interpretation is stimulating and his arguments persuasive although I think he relies too much upon the unity of biblical revelation to legitimise some textual comparisons. The least successful is his clause for clause parallel of Nehemiah's covenantal oath (Nehemiah 10) with the Lord's Prayer as found in Matthew 6.9–13. Although bolstered by other New Testament references, the comparisons are so general as to make the specificities of each text, and so the interpretative undertaking, irrelevant. Such a stretch in the imagination is only occasionally required however. On the whole, generous use of the vast resource of biblical revelation confirms and expands this exciting interpretation of Ezra and Nehemiah. Levering's new book fulfils its goal exceptionally and fully exhibits the qualities sought for in this new Brazos commentary series. It certainly provides an aid in preaching and teaching, and suitably demonstrates the continuing intellectual and practical viability of theological interpretation of the Bible.

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TALES FROM ANOTHER BYZANTIUM by Jane Baun, (*Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2007*). Pp.xii + 461, £52.25.

To the modern reader, the *Apocalypse of Anastasia* reads like a hybrid, in content and social function, of a chain letter, the Miraculous Medal, and the *Left Behind* series. 'Blessed is that person', it concludes grandly and, as far as manuscript circulation is concerned, rather usefully, 'who takes this epistle and copies it in another city and land: even if he should have sins exceeding the hairs of his head, I myself will wipe them out and number him among my saints, and I will bless him upon the earth' (§53).

The *Apocalypse of Anastasia* and its sister text, the *Apocalypse of the Holy Theotokos*, are two now little-known but once extremely popular pseudepigrapha of the Middle Byzantine Period, presented to the English-speaking reader in new translations and a comprehensive study as *Tales from Another Byzantium*. They describe the ascent of two women — an apocryphal nun and the Virgin Mary, respectively — to the divine places of judgement, reward and punishment. These journeys, like those of more well-known travellers such as Enoch and Dante, are 'apocalyptic' according to the definition of the SBL's Genres Project: "'Apocalypse" is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world' (*Semeia* 14:9 [1979]). Like 2 Enoch and the *Commedia*, the Middle Byzantine Apocalypses purport to unveil the transcendent origin or structure of the world, and so naturally, and with a bluntness unique to this genre, deal with their authors' and readers' most vital concerns.

The other-worlds projected by the Apocalypses of Anastasia (mid-tenth century) and the Holy Theotokos (ninth to eleventh centuries) are those of a popular and distinctly medieval imagination. In both, the places of primary interest are the