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Donald E. Gowan. *Theology of the Prophetic Books: The Death and Resurrection of Israel*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998. Pp. xiii + 250. No Price Listed.

[1] Donald Gowan, Professor of Old Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, presents a thorough and highly readable theological survey of the "canonical" prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve. The author follows a systematic program of setting the prophetic message within a categorical framework of "death" and "resurrection," terms which represent for him national disaster and exile on the one hand, and the return of exiles and the re-establishment of Jerusalem temple society on the other. The thesis of Gowan's book is that the divine message of Israel's death and resurrection,kerneled in Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones (Ezek 37:1-14), is the "unifying theme of the prophetic corpus." He drapes the unfolding of this divine message upon three key moments in Israel's history: 1) The Fall of Samaria (722 BCE) marks the fulfillment of Yahweh's uncompromising message through Amos, namely that "the end has come upon my people Israel" (Amos 8:2); 2) these words are taken up and incorporated into the prophetic call in Judea leading up to the Fall of Jerusalem (587 BCE); and 3) upon the decree of Cyrus the Great (538 BCE) some from among the exiled community return to the land, encouraged by prophets who saw Yahweh's judgment as the precursor for divine promise and hope for a new beginning.

[2] Gowan's approach is hardly new to biblical studies. His book represents a well-worn, conservative theological perspective aimed at reaffirming the uniqueness of the canonical prophetic corpus over against earlier Israelite prophets and especially the phenomenon of ecstatic prophecy in general. Gowan treats the prophetic books as "works of theology" and handles them in a self-consciously theological way, focusing exclusively on the divine message he finds thematically contained therein. Those interested in the appreciation of prophetic texts as human artifacts, taking into account other significant aspects of prophetic phenomena like personality or sociology in order to get a fuller and more balanced picture, likely will not be satisfied by the constraints of these narrow parameters.

[3] Chapter one of Gowan's book makes cursory mention of other approaches to the prophets, but it is done in a highly polemical manner. Gowan especially takes issue with Lester Grabbe's sociohistorical treatment of the prophetic phenomenon, (*Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages: A Socio-Historical Study of Religious Specialists in Ancient Israel* [Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1995]) on the grounds that Grabbe's approach sets prophecy within a general phenomenological context that Gowan finds threatening toward maintaining the uniqueness of the prophetic corpus. Avoiding any real biographical or sociological inquiry of his own, Gowan defends these self-imposed limitations on the basis that "the lives, religious experiences, and social status of those responsible for these books seem to have been of little or no interest to the Israelites who collected and produced the final editions of the material . . ." This is a questionable assertion on a number of counts, chief of which being the dubious methodology of allowing a subject to define and control the shape of inquiry. Still, it is difficult to fault a book that delivers exactly what it promises, no matter how limited the scope.

[4] Another problem with the book, and for thematic theological approaches generally, is that in the attempt to make everything fit together in a comprehensive way, some minor elements become forced into larger roles while other more significant features are glossed over or ignored. Gowan very effectively presents Amos's message of divine judgment, illuminating the engaging imagery with which this prophet of doom describes Israel's thorough and complete destruction. Indeed, the prophet's "no way out" scenario was unparalleled in Israel's history, and the ancients may well have understood that "two legs and an ear" of a sheep hanging from the mouth of a lion (Amos 3:12) meant not a "remnant," but "no longer a sheep." With the threat of first Assyria, then Babylon, casting ominous shadows over Judah, one can understand how and why Amos's words of divine judgment might be taken up and applied, as Hosea and Isaiah seem to have done. The power of Amos's imagery and the radical nature of the message could not help but reverberate throughout later prophetic utterances; but does this constitute anything that can be called the beginning of a unified prophetic voice? One may posit a prophetic tradition in Israel without limiting its many voices to a single theme, no matter how profound or well-attested it may be.

[5] Relatedly, in the attempt to preserve the uniqueness of the prophetic corpus, what does positing such a matrix mean for the uniqueness of each book of prophetic pronouncement? For example, even if Ezekiel's vision marks the transition to postexilic Judaism that Gowan seeks, there are a great many other things going on in Ezekiel's curiously astounding prophetic utterances that do not seem to fit Gowan's paradigm of "death and resurrection," for example, the oracles of doom aimed at surrounding foreign nations (Ezek. 25-32) and the prophecy about Gog of Magog (38-39). Furthermore, it is difficult to see how many of the minor prophets like Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, or Malachi fit convincingly into Gowan's framework. The section on Nahum, for example, seems especially forced, as Gowan has little choice but to appeal to Isaiah and other biblical texts to carry the weight of his argument that Nahum's message somehow reflects the theme of "death and resurrection" for Israel. If one requires a unifying theme to the prophetic corpus, in light of texts as diverse in form and content as Isaiah and Jeremiah or as historically vague as Joel, let it be simply (and powerfully) the overarching testimony of the Hebrew Bible, namely that God

acts in the world, intervening in human affairs in a variety of ways. This is the root of biblical (and prophetic) "theology." Serious study of the canonical prophets should be carried out with a view toward the phenomenon of prophecy as a whole, free of the presuppositions that have long skewed biblical scholarship in this area.

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