

David Fleer and Dave Bland, eds. *Reclaiming the Imagination: The Exodus as Paradigmatic Narrative for Preaching*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2009. 256 pages. \$25.99.

“It would be difficult . . . to overestimate the importance of the exodus story (as distinguished from the biblical book bearing that name) in the development of Israelite thought and literature.” (50)

“. . . the New Testament does not preach the exodus in particular strange paragraphs here and there. Rather, the New Testament breathes the exodus.” (92)

“Our own lack of familiarity with the stories of the exodus . . . leave us without memory of God’s larger salvation.” (88)

“As the depreciated story of salvation that takes away my personal sins and makes Jesus my personal savior, we are left with dying Christianity in the Western Hemisphere.” (90)

These four quotations, the first from Mark Hamilton’s essay in this volume, the other three from John York’s, capture the truth and consequence of the fact that a significant segment of the Christian Church is deaf to the echoes of the story of Israel’s exodus that permeate the entire Christian Bible, Second Testament as well as First. Taken out of the context of Israel’s central narrative, the meaning of Jesus is shrunk to the source of forgiveness of my sins after I die. It’s all about me and whether I will have life after my life in this world is ended, not about this world itself and how I live in it such that I participate in and find joy and eternal life right now in God’s work of redeeming it. Learning the story of Israel’s exodus and learning to recognize in the Bible the many imaginative ways Israelite prophets and psalmists and followers of Jesus re-appropriated that story will re-parent Christians into living the full gospel of God’s salvation. It is a challenging task, but a crucial one. The articles and sermons in this volume exhibit exciting potential as an effort far from an academic exercise in biblical exegesis. It is a highly imaginative enterprise that opens us to a new understanding of our own world when seen from the perspective of God’s liberating work throughout the history of Israel, including the fruit it bore in the early Christian church.

One stunning example of what the challenge of this book can result in is Dave Bland’s sermon “The Luxurious Vine” (62-67). Following Mark Hamilton’s exposition of Psalm 80 and the way the psalmist “constructs a grid of images (shepherd, parades of tribes, divine theophanies, farming, farmer on a rampage, decay, devastation) both to stimulate the hearers’ memory of the exodus event and to signal the radical disconnection between current experience and the eternal verities confessed by Israel’s tradition” (55), Bland suggests a variety of possible contemporary images of exodus (e.g. an abused child taken into a loving family and growing into a healthy adult), but stays with the image of Israel as a vine brought out of Egypt that takes root and fills the land. He then narrates a story of a contemporary exodus from devastation in the world of contemporary listeners, the transformation of an abandoned quarry into a lush garden, so that it in turn can become a metaphor for specific ways that people in the listeners’ city of Memphis are reclaiming the city from its ravaged condition. The exodus, as an event in the history of Israel that became a paradigm for many other exodus events or visions in Israel’s history, spilling over into the story of Jesus and of the New Testament church, thus leads the

preacher to imagine the life of the church today as participating in God's ongoing work of liberation begun in Israel's exodus from Egypt.

I hope this much will give the reader of this review a sense of the vital importance of the task to which this volume summons us. Its emphasis on imagination and metaphor is richly developed by Raymond F. Collins' *The Power of Images in Paul*, reviewed in this issue. And the call to inhaling and exhaling the comprehensive understanding of God's salvation in Jesus Christ that is the atmosphere breathed by the New Testament itself is the relentless theme of N.T. Wright's new book, *Justification*, also reviewed in this issue.

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