

*An Introduction to the New Testament: Witnesses of God's New Work*, by Charles B. Cousar. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006. Pp. xv + 201. ISBN 0-664-22413-X. Paper. US\$ 29.95.

The author of this book is Professor Emeritus of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary. He is the author of numerous books, including a commentary on Galatians in the esteemed *Interpretation* commentary series, and co-author of the three-volume lectionary commentary *Texts for Preaching*.

The book is considered a post-critical introduction to the New Testament. The term *post-critical* refers to the latter part of the twentieth century during which the genre of an Introduction to the New Testament has undergone significant changes. One of the main changes has been the reduction in the number of critical material in books intended for classroom in colleges and seminaries. The work of Cousar follows this tendency. His book is an overview of the content and purpose of the books of the New Testament within the context of the development of the Early Church. It is divided into five chapters.

Chapters one and two deal with Paul, his letters, and the Pauline tradition. The introductory part presents Paul as the earliest Christian theologian and describes four characteristic features (pp. 3–10): (1) Paul wrote letters to communicate with the Christian groups he started; (2) Paul was a Jew who was converted to Christ. His experience did not make him less a Jew in his own eyes than before the experience. His world was reconfigured by the Christ experience; at the same time, he adhered to the traditional Jewish understanding of God, to Israel's election as the special people of God, its calling to be a light to the nations, and the future consummation of God's reign; (3) still claiming his Jewish heritage, Paul nevertheless saw and identified himself as apostle to the Gentiles. It was the revelation of Jesus Christ (Gal 1:12) which caused "a reconfiguration" of his world with Christ in place of the Torah as the center of this new world. He read the Old Testament differently and found the inclusion of the non-Jews into the people of God in the promise of Abraham, now fulfilled in Christ; and (4) Paul wrote as a pastor-theologian. He spoke to concrete situations in local congregations and reflected on those situations in light of the gospel. The epistles have been treated in the canonical rather than historical order. This is due in part to the lack of agreement among scholars on the historical sequencing of the letters. Faced with this dilemma, the author prefers to follow the canonical sequence. The epistles were written with an eye toward their being read aloud in the receiving congregations (1 Thess 5:27). Cousar presents two features about Paul's letters that are noteworthy: (1) They reflect a sophisticated and varied use of argumentation. The issue about whether Paul

received formal training in rhetoric is a matter of debate; (2) this sophistication indicates scholastic activity within the communities to which they were written. The letters themselves display careful attention to the Old Testament, particularly the Septuagint, and anticipate readers who know and value the stories they contain.

In chapter three the author deals with the Synoptic Gospels and Acts. The two-source hypothesis is assumed. Mark is the earliest gospel, written about A.D. 65–70, and circulated widely within approximately two decades after its composition. Matthew and Luke clearly borrow material from Mark, and yet they do not displace Mark because they remain distinct stories. That is, Matthew and Luke do not reproduce Mark's story in such detail as to render Mark or either of them redundant. In addition, there is a considerable amount of material that Matthew and Luke share. The source of this material is called Q, but its presence or absence makes no difference because the author of the book deals with the material in its canonical form. The Gospels were primarily written for circulation among Christian communities; however, there is an increasing recognition that they had a missionary function and were also read by non-Christians. In this chapter there is a subtitle about the problem of the historical Jesus. Cousar includes a brief survey (pp. 133–37) about the church's struggle with the reality of the historical Jesus. He presents the claims of a plethora of liberal scholars such as David Friedrich Strauss, Ernest Renan, Albert Schweitzer, Martin Kähler, Rudolf Bultmann, Ernst Käsemann and Karl Barth. He also dedicates some pages (pp. 137–40) to consider the project known as the Jesus Seminar led by Robert Funk, John Dominic Crossan, and Marcus Borg. The last part of the chapter focuses on the Acts of the Apostles, and the Gospel and letters of John.

In chapter four Cousar comments on the General Epistles. They are also called "Catholic Epistles" in the early portion of the fourth century, during the time of Eusebius of Caesarea. The list usually included Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1–3 John, and Jude. In an earlier list only seven were included. Hebrews, though written anonymously, was often counted as a Pauline letter, and in the third century papyrus P46, it even follows Romans in the canonical order. The adjective *general* or *catholic* seems to have derived from the fact that the authors and audience are not as specific as in the Pauline letters. Cyril of Jerusalem (c. A.D. 348) used the term to designate the universal church in distinction from the local congregation. While Paul's letters were written to specific communities of Christians, it was thought that these letters were intended for the church at large, and were most likely encyclical in nature. In the canonical order of the early manuscripts, they appear in different places.

In chapter five the author introduces the Book of Revelation. The term refers usually to a revelation, given by God to a seer which has to do with events soon to take place. Cousar mentions that the majority of Bible readers simply ignore the Book of Revelation. For them it makes no sense. The book is unusual in three particular ways (pp. 179–80). First, though clearly an apocalypse, it nevertheless functions as a prophetic apocalypse in that it communicates to a concrete historical situation and brings to the readers a prophetic word of God. It enables them to discern the divine purpose in their situation and to respond to their situation in a way appropriate to this purpose. Second, Revelation is a circular letter addressed to seven churches in Asia Minor. Each message written is aimed at specific congregations, yet the seven messages are introductory to the rest of the book as can be seen from the promise to “conquer,” which concludes each message. Third, usually apocalyptic writings were penned in a time of persecution, when people were deprived of their rights. The writings not only provided comfort and reassurance that God was ultimately in control of history despite current appearances, but also served as protest literature. They encouraged their readers not to accept the worldview and value system embraced by the dominant culture. Other characteristics are mentioned such as the highly theocentric perspective that runs throughout the book, the predominant emphasis on worship, and the importance of Jesus and his relationship to God.

In my opinion, Cousar’s volume is commendable for several reasons. First, the substantial reduction of the critical material and his focus mainly on the theology of the different books of the New Testament makes the work more palatable to those who have no formal theological training. In other volumes many pages are often dedicated to the discussion of critical problems and issues that overburden those who are just introduced to the text of the New Testament. Cousar avoids this by providing a clear, insightful, and theologically rich orientation to the New Testament.

Second, his position regarding the claims of the historical Jesus movement are noteworthy (pp. 133–40): human faith depends on the faithfulness of God shown in the crucified and risen Jesus and not on what the historians can confirm about what Jesus said or did not say, and what he did or did not do. While the church listens to the historians, it must always be sensitive to the possibility that under the historians’ research may lie a hidden Christology that requires neither resurrection, nor canon or creed. If this happens, then, in Cousar’s opinion, a reconstructed Jesus supplants the crucified and risen Christ as the object of faith, and the historian subtly replaces the canon.

Third, the principles for interpreting the New Testament presented by Cousar (pp. 183–86) are valid for those who are engaged in the task of interpreting the sacred writings, and at the same time they constitute a warning against the claims of both the Enlightenment and postmodernism: (1) We need the guidance of the Spirit; (2) the Bible is always to be read in the light of past and present readings of the text; (3) Scripture interprets Scripture; (4) Jesus Christ is the center of Scripture; (5) the Bible needs to be read in a community with others; (6) the Bible is to be read in the light of the rule of love; (7) the Scriptures are always to be read in the light of the literary form, and the social and historical context in which they were written; and (8) the interpreter must be open to change. It is the recognition of our limitations and the work of the Spirit which can lead in directions we have never gone before. Based on all what has been said above, this book is a good read not only by those who have theological training but also by those who seek a fresh encounter with the text of the New Testament.

Héctor O. Martín Fuentes

Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, PHILIPPINES

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*Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament*, by Richard M. Davidson. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007. Pp. xxix + 844. ISBN 978-1-56563-847-1. Paper. US\$ 29.95.

Richard Davidson, the J. N. Andrews Professor of Old Testament Interpretation at Andrews University, has set out to write a “wholistic theology of [human] sexuality in the OT” (p. 1). His method is to examine the “final canonical form” (p. 2), using synchronic methodologies drawn from the literary school and biblical theology. He acknowledges a debt to feminist scholarship while rejecting any hermeneutic of resistance (p. 3).

Broadly following the shape of the canon, the work falls into three sections. The first, “Sexuality in Eden” (65 pages), takes Gen 1–2 as “the divine design” or paradigm, and Gen 1–3 as “the interpretive foundation for the rest of Scripture” (p. 15). This section introduces ten themes which will organize the rest of the book: sexuality as creation order, heterosexuality, monogamy, gender equality, sexual wholeness, marital exclusivity, permanence, intimacy, procreation and the wholesome beauty of sex. It then begins to consider the effects of the fall in Gen 3.

The second section, “Sexuality outside the Garden” (459 pages), treats the vast bulk of OT material regulating or reporting on imperfect sex in a fallen world. It is organized according to the ten principles established in section 1, and analyses later sexual behavior as either consistent with the original plan or a distortion of it. It also analyses texts within their culture,