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Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

The Drama of Scripture: Finding our Place in the Biblical Story, by Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004, ISBN: 0-8010-2746-2, 252 pp. Reviewed by Dr. Keith C. Sewell, Chair of the History Department and Professor of History, Dordt College.

Reading Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen's *The Drama of Scripture: Finding our Place in the Biblical Story* is like entering a promised land of milk and honey. *The Drama of Scripture* is an extraordinarily good book. It is a book that can be reliably recommended to those wondering "what's the Bible all about?" and to those new to the faith, while seasoned veterans will derive encouragement and depth from page after page. The authors have drunk from the wells of the redemptive-historical tradition of biblical understanding. They stand in the line of S. G. De Graaf's, *Promise and Deliverance* (1977-81), but this is no mere update and rework. The text is keen and fresh.

In discussing "the biblical drama," the authors have drawn on the "five act structure" familiar to readers of N. T. Wright and have amplified this somewhat at Act 5, "Spreading the News of the King," and by adding Act 6, "The Return of the King" (Bartholomew and Goheen, 26-7, cf. 21). [For N. T. Wright's most recent formulation, see his *The Last Word* (2005), 121-7]. In this respect, Bartholomew and Goheen are on solid ground, in my judgment. For centuries, the notion that "Christians go to heaven" has re-enforced a "world-flight" mentality, whereas the Bible clearly teaches that at the renewal of all things, the dwelling place of the Creator Redeemer is with His people in a cosmic setting (211-13). Although not a work of heavy scholarship, the easy-to-read prose is nevertheless the fruit of extensive learning and mature reflection.

Some problems remain. In a society threatened with *jihad*, more surely needs to be said about the violence (even genocide) of the Hebrew entry into the land of promise (77-85). Our authors have not skirted this issue, but it cries out for a more stringent treatment. Of course, part of the answer is that we derive our difficulties from biblical teaching itself. The clear and thoroughly sound intention of the authors is to enable us to place ourselves in the wider biblical story. In line with this purpose, they take time out from the actual biblical narrative to draw cameo

pictures of contemporary Christian discipleship (202-5). I found these depictions to be both interesting and encouraging. Yet I also experienced the transition from Paul and Barnabas (187-96, 200-1) to the post-apostolic church (202) to be deeply disturbing. The problem is that once we enter into the post-apostolic life of God's people, we must confront the question of apostasy. We need to address the process whereby "the Way" became the tool of empire; and we need some insight into how the Christian religion came to take on certain of the more egregious practices of Islam, such as so-called "holy war," slavery, and genocide. Why has Christianity so often sided with repression – sometimes with churchmen fighting to retain their coercive powers until the very last moment? We are not permitted to excise problems because they are inconvenient. Of course, great men such as Wilberforce struggled mightily in the cause of abolition, but sheer honesty demands that we recognize how much Christianity was previously involved in extending such a dreadful evil. And then there is the question of Christian anti-Semitism in all its hideous forms. It is a legitimate question: "If this is the true faith, how is it capable of distortions that have resulted in such human suffering?"

Of course, Bartholomew and Goheen are not purporting to offer us a comprehensive church history, and it would be unfair to criticize them for failing to have done so. Yet they have written for first-year undergraduates specifically (11), many of whom barely possess sufficient knowledge to have such questions come to mind; a failure to recognize their strength will not impress. These caveats notwithstanding, this is a very fine book. It should be recommended to all undergraduates and to all those wanting to know what the Bible is all about. It is clear and positive, and should help to deliver some of those who are enslaved by millennial fantasies. The authors have placed us all in their debt. Their work deserves to remain in print for a long time and is strongly recommended.

The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity, by Carl A. Raschke, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004, ISBN: 0-8010-2751-9, 335 pp. Reviewed by Dr. Keith C. Sewell, Chair of the History Department and Professor of History, Dordt College.

The idea of "reformation" is still with us – as powerful and as suggestive as ever. A while ago I discussed in these

pages (*Pro Rege*, September 2002) the standpoint adopted by the authors of *Whatever Happened to the Reformation?*