Ordinary Sins: After Theophrastus (Book Review)

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only possibility and obvious to anyone, yet did not offer evidence” (238). Indeed, with only a 30-page position paper, three responses, and a rejoinder from each presenter, repetition and assertions without evidence do occur. This is really a benefit of this book, though. Each view is exposed and well critiqued.

As is common with most debates, readers may not find here the firm conclusions they are looking for. Instead, what they will find is an appreciation for the enormous complexity of the debate over the historical existence of just one man (and woman—let’s not leave Eve out of this). Most of the arguments in the book focus on Genesis, but they occasionally and fruitfully veer off into the New Testament, asking questions about what Jesus and Paul believed about Adam. Indeed, Four Views on the Historical Adam is really about how we read the Bible, which exposes what we assume right interpretation is.

Despite the four views presented, the book demonstrates the quite obvious point that there are and must be more than four views on Adam’s possible existence. Gaps in logic, shoddy arguments, and short-sightedness abound, which is a feature of the book, not a defect. I was quite frustrated with each presenter at times. None of them put everything together, though Walton’s view is persuasive, and he is the most exacting about the logic of the other writers. They all ignore something crucial in key moments, especially modern anthropological findings and the impact that each of their views has on the doctrine of the Fall. But that’s because they cannot address all of the subjects and problems that loom over the question of the historical Adam. This is a topic that requires the most erudite of polymaths to be rhetorically savvy; anyone else who weighs in, beware. Questions about Genesis 1-11, a historical Adam, and human origins demand seasoned thinkers who are reasonably well-read in ancient history, anthropology, population genetics, linguistics, hermeneutics, Christian theology, the philosophy of science, geology, literary theory, evolutionary psychology, and other disciplines that give insight into the question at hand. Yes, all that and more. May the Lord raise up such faithful, humble thinkers for His church and for His kingdom.

Addicts” are almost shockingly virtuous: “To each other’s eyes, they were bright roses in a dense forest.” Even their lust is pure.

They are their own aphrodisiac, smooth and moist and just short of violent. But in the delirium of their readiness, they are not helpless servants of lust. They are not desperate pilgrims on a treacherous frontier. Their marsh of passion does not foreshadow the ashy pyre. This is their verdant kingdom, and they are the king and queen.

Heynen claims that he wants to channel Theophrastus in this scrapbook of characters, an ancient Greek whose similar character portraits Heynen says enchanted him way back in high school. While that may be true, the form these character-sketches assume is nothing new to Jim Heynen. Those of us who’ve been reading him for years will recognize the genre from The Man Who Wore Cigars in His Cap (1979) and You Know What Is Right (1985) and then the masterful The One-Room Schoolhouse (1993).

He’s not departed from these books with Ordinary Sins. He’s doing what he’s always done so well—creating miniatures whose sometimes astonishing heft make them feel like parable if they wouldn’t be so charmingly mysterious. As one of his blurb-ers says, on the back cover, this is “serious fun.”

What separates this new collection from The Man Who Wore Cigars in His Cap is basically setting. Let me be inexcusably provincial here, but I miss the country, the sense of Heynen’s own northwest Iowa home that frequented the old tales. “The boys,” whose misadventures are the stuff of Heynen’s earlier collections, weren’t just any kids; they were rural, they were upper Midwesterners, and, at times, they were rather delightfully Dutch Calvinist kids, as Heynen was, and, well, is.

While a few of the sketches go back to the Heynen farm and homestead, Ordinary Sins reaches beyond geography, or attempts to. His characters’ namelessness is most often matched with a placelessness that creates a warm and loving kind of universal sensibility present in the earlier volumes but not as deliberately created.

As a Dutch Calvinist myself, living in Heynen’s own boyhood haunts, I’ll admit it—I miss ye olde regionalism. But I love the character of the characters in this book, despite their being, well, diaspora. In inching away from his roots, he may well have given the portraits a wider berth.

That doesn’t mean that Jim Heynen is not still one of the boys.

“I’d like to think,” he says in the preface, “that Theophrastus was gently mocking himself in some of his portrayals.” Then this darling confession: “I certainly am in Ordinary Sins, several of which are thinly disguised self-portraits.” Then he starts a game: “You are welcome to find Waldo, if you can.”

I like that. But then, I like Ordinary Sins.