

Singing Ethos of God Review

Brian Brock,
Singing the Ethos of God: On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture
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In his earlier life, Brian Brock participated in what we might call ‘extreme’ sports. He enjoyed an outdoor life in the wild elements of the Colorado mountains, a world apart from the sedate quadrangle of the ancient university of Aberdeen where he now teaches Christian ethics. Or so it would seem.

In a world of double-glazing, central heating and air conditioning, the elements are something we tend to observe rather than experience. These modern conditions, providing security, warmth and safety, are to be found in all dimensions of modern life, including the ways that we read Scripture.

For Christians, the modern logic of the discipline we call ‘hermeneutics’ (interpretation) works something like this: the text contains something called a ‘meaning’, which the preacher must ‘extract’, and the listener must ‘apply’. For many today, it is impossible to encounter Scripture any other way. All is neat and tidy and comfortable and warm, as the most disturbing Scriptural challenges are filtered through a system that nevertheless convinces us that we have indeed been deeply challenged.

But for huge chunks of Scripture, this way of reading simply does not work. The psalms cannot be mined for timeless meaning which can then be delivered with a clear moral injunction. For instance, the infamous example is how we cope with the psalmist’s desire to smash the Babylonians’ toddlers against rocks. The psalms themselves, and Scripture as a whole, is full of such difficulties, which question either the reliability of Scripture as a moral text, or the ways in which we read Scripture.

Singing the Ethos of God is a book which invites us to read Scripture differently. In this instance, by singing it! This does not mean that on Sundays we pick more hymns that make bible passages rhyme and fit to music. It means rather, that instead of trying to extract a comprehensible meaning out of the text, we walk, stand and sit with the psalmists: we share their anger, feel their pain, taste their despair, experience their hope, witness their vision, and address their God in God’s own words.

Here, we are offered a way of engaging with Scripture that may appear to be a novel innovation. But his guides are the great theologians of the church. His attention is focussed particularly upon Augustine’s and Luther’s work on the Psalms. Their ethics, he shows, were not some separate thoughts based upon summarising supposedly scriptural principles. The whole of our lives are addressed by the whole of Scripture. Far from ethics being concerned with the correct application of timeless truths, Brock invites us out into the stormy elements of the psalms. Here we are drawn to encounter God directly, and to allow our ‘ethical lives’ to be reshaped by this doxological confrontation.

This is neither manual, nor commentary, nor guidebook. It is a call to abandon our modern interpretive comforts and venture out into the wild elements of the place we dare to call ‘Holy

Scripture', because it is here that we encounter a Holy God. But *Singing the Ethos of God* is no easy read. However, it is one of those few books which opens up an entirely different way of encountering Scripture. The modern interpretive trend can leave us feeling that we have mastered Scripture, which in turn means that we know in advance what kind of God we are likely to find there. In so doing, we domesticate the Almighty, even if we still credit him with high-sounding biblical descriptions. Brock's book calls us out to engage directly with a God who is usually kept outside our comfortable lifestyles. It is a book on Scripture which makes the armies of commentaries filling many shelves of our studies seem sadly redundant.

A famous French philosopher was recently asked if he had read all the books in his extensive library. "No, only four of them" he replies, "but I read those very carefully". This book is worthy of such careful reading and will remain an important text for all who read it. Not simply as information, but because it inspires extreme exposure to the stark beauty of what Barth once called 'the strange new world of the Bible'.