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Lohfink, Norbert

In the Shadow of Your Wings: New Readings of Great Texts from the Bible

Translated by Linda M. Maloney

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In his long, distinguished, and prolific career, Norbert Lohfink has focused his acute, critical attention on the traditions related to Deuteronomy. He has established himself as the foremost interpreter of those traditions. Alongside that critical project, however, he has offered, in a very different idiom, a steady stream of more popular interpretive essays that reflect his commitments of faith as a Jesuit, his sense of the matrix of contemporary interpretation, and his passion for social justice. These sorts of essays are offered, for example, in his important collection of 1982, *Great Themes from the Old Testament*, and, more recently, *The Inerrancy of Scripture and Other Essays* (1992) and *Theology of the Pentateuch: Themes of the Priestly Narrative and Deuteronomy* (1994). The present volume is yet one more collection of Lohfink's occasional papers, each of which demonstrates his masterful capacity as an interpreter. We are indeed fortunate to have these essays in translation in this collection that reflects the last decade of Lohfink's work.

Of the twelve essays offered here, the first five are concerned variously with (1) the death of Moses, (2) the call of Abraham and Sarah, (3) the land narrative of Joshua, (4) the new covenant of Jeremiah, and (5) God's wrath in Hosea. Concerning Moses' death, Lohfink appeals to his long-term study of Deuteronomy to propose that the death of Moses and the arrival at the Jordan function canonically to create a decisive caesura in the tradition,

so that Lohfink considers various other canonical texts that are juxtaposed to the Torah-synchronic ways. Concerning Joshua, Lohfink makes a powerful case that the land narrative there is no ground for contemporary arguments about “the right of return” by either Israelis or Palestinians. This essay exhibits Lohfink’s courage and passion concerning contemporary issues and the complex matter of moving from text to contemporary issue.

Six essays concern the Psalter, including a study of the songs in Luke’s infancy narrative. Lohfink makes a powerful advocacy for the canonical reading of the book of Psalms:

At the present time biblical scholars are learning again to regard the Psalter as a redactionally conceived, unified book, no longer as a collection of songs or a hymn book in which each song stands alone.

... The Psalms are intended to be a running text with an overall message that is more than the sum of the messages in its individual parts. Of course its building blocks were originally, almost without exception, independent songs and prayers. But it appears that the redactors of the book had a different intention. The Psalter was meant to be memorized as a whole and to serve as a text for meditation. (137)

In another essay he argues that the Psalms are sequenced together by “key word linkages,” in which a psalm that follows connects to a preceding verbal usage. While there is some merit in the argument, the case is not an easy one to make. Such an authority as Lohfink should, in my judgment, at least acknowledge the difficulty of the case. He proceeds as if the “canonical” reading were a consensus opinion that was obvious and well-established. He proposes, moreover, that the sum of the Psalter was designed for meditation (murmuring; see Ps 1:2) that was concerned with both pedagogy and piety.

The most interesting element of Lohfink’s discussion of the Psalter is his consideration of four specific psalms: 1; 36; 46; and 109. His reading of Ps 1 concerns an individual believer who, against mainstream societal values, deliberately opts for the “counter-world” of those who love Torah and who as a result experience profound loneliness. Such a person dwells in a “contrast society,” a phrase I believe coined by the author’s brother, Gerhard Lohfink. Psalm 36 has provided the title of the book (see 36:7); in this psalm the speaker again voices a “countermotif,” in a “counter-text,” in this case, in the broad space of the temple. Thus cultic practice and intimate personal spirituality converge.

In his discussion of Ps 109, Lohfink takes the conventional view that verses 6–19 are a quote from the adversary. Lohfink’s strategy is not to insert the phrase “they say,” as is done in many translations without textual support. Rather, he accomplishes the same

maneuver by putting the verses in quotes and building his reading on that basis. Now, that may be correct; I believe, however, that Lohfink at least owes the reader candor enough to report that such quotes in texts are not text-based but, rather, constitute a decisive interpretive maneuver. Thus I believe, in this case, Lohfink claims more than is warranted in letting his reader know about the problematic of the text itself without covering over the problem with quotation marks.

The collection concludes with a consideration of “The New Covenant,” a theme Lohfink has already explored in *The Covenant Never Revoked: Biblical Reflections on Christian-Jewish Dialogue* (1991). Lohfink gladly follows recent Vatican teaching, and resists conventional supersessionism, and offers Judaism as “the ancient tree [that] yet brings forth shoots.”

This book, albeit with some inevitable German rhetorical complexity, is a wondrous exhibit of biblical theology by a craftsman who moves securely from critical to contemporary comment. Lohfink’s insistence on a canonical reading of the Psalms indicates how much he remains at the cutting edge of fresh critical thought.