

The steward living in covenant: A new perspective on Old Testament stories

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Ronald Vallet's book is part of the *Faith's Horizons* series, which began in 1994, and is an attempt to provide a *mosaic about God's work in the created world*.¹ His book includes a foreword by Bruce C. Birch, an introductory chapter and the rest of the book is divided into six parts. One can also look forward to the ninth book in the Faith's Horizons series (also by Vallet), which will look at biblical and theological dimensions of our relationship with the environment, which was created by God and of which God calls us to be stewards.

Based on Old Testament stories and the connecting thread of covenant, *The steward living in Covenant* sees the promise and command aspects of God's covenants with us as vital dimensions of what it means to be a genuine steward (p. xi). Stewardship entails a lot more than the adequate or responsible use of money and resources. Still, in many congregations this is the way the concept of stewardship is most often understood. This book challenges that misconception and attempts to give an adequate understanding of Christian stewardship that is biblically based and takes into account the rich biblical tradition dealing with stewardship. In contrast with the traditional view of stewardship, Vallet rightly points out that, '*The journey of a steward living in covenant is wondrous, and sometimes terrifying*' (p. 1).

In the introductory chapter Vallet raises the questions whether the church should subvert the present culture or be seduced by it. I would share Vallet's opinion that, '*The church everywhere is called to subvert the culture around it, but it often happens that the church is entrapped or seduced by the comfort of a consumer society that erases the church's memory of what it is called to be and do.*'(p. 1) In this respect it is of vital importance to have an adequate understanding of what Christian stewardship entails. Vallet help us to remember the importance of stories in general, and in particular the informative and transformative nature and potential of Old Testament stories. *The believing community must remember Old Testament stories in such a way that it will bring power and imagination to the church in this new century* (p. 3). This remembrance could assist the believing community in subverting the present culture and enable believers to live as Christian stewards. Vallet also discusses some *Instruments of Christian stewardship* (p. 13), e.g. the Gospel, baptism, the Eucharist etc. that could help believers on their journey of stewardship, living in covenant with God. Remembrance could lead to the empowerment of believers, which could result in the subversion of the present culture.

1. Ronald Vallet is the general editor of the Faith's Horizons series. He also serves the American Baptist Churches of New York State as a minister for stewardship and mission support, and is adjunct professor in Christian ministries at McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton Ontario.

In his book Ronald Vallet takes the reader on a quick but insightful journey through the stories of the Old Testament. He begins this journey with the creation narratives of the Old Testament (*Creation and its aftermath* -thus the primeval history). In these creation narratives we are reminded that God's creation is purpose-filled (p. 19). We also come to the realization that God limits Himself in dealing with His creation. What is often perceived as God's absence in creation is actually a result of God's willingness to limit Himself. God takes His creation seriously. So serious, that our response to God's creation and covenant making has an influence on the development of things. Stewards living in covenant should strive toward maintaining the integrity of God's creation, which requires that we live in a right relationship with God. Readers are reminded that stewardship most definitely requires caring for God's created world.

Vallet continues the journey by visiting our *ancestors in the faith*. The stories of the patriarchs are traced until they reach Egypt. Here an interesting observation is made. The stewardship of Joseph actually led to the enslavement of the people of the covenant. The readers are confronted by the question, are they stewards of the household of God, or of the household of pharaoh, i.e. the prevailing culture? Stewards need to be obedient to the calling of the covenanting God and this always involves a risk. Still, God is also taking a risk in entrusting humans with His creation (p. 49). In the present context the Church all over the world stands before new challenges and opportunities. However, the church's response will require imagination, vision and risk. In this regard it is important to remember the Old Testament stories. God commands His people, but the command is always accompanied by a promise. Promises that are kept by God.

The journey continues and the reader travels along *from slavery to freedom and into the wilderness*. Here the importance of remembrance becomes clear. The readers observe how God provided for the people of the covenant. We realize that God's promises are real. Even today God calls us to live by these promises (p. 124). Through obedience, divine reversals will result. However, the reader also observes that material needs and crisis can result in forgetfulness regarding God's promises and our calling as stewards living in covenant. As the journey continues, readers are reminded that God is a God of abundance. In the wilderness God provided His people with the opportunity to be an alternative community, a community that commits itself to the just distribution of God's abundance. It is important that the church remembers who and what it is, and to whom it belongs (p. 135).

When the journey reaches the monarchy (*The failings of royalty*), it becomes clear that the people of God did not always commit themselves to this command of God. The kings of Israel and Judah serve as prime examples. Readers realize that high position does not mean high privilege, but rather high responsibility. Christian stewards must choose whether they want to live by the covenant of God or by the ethos of the prevailing culture (p. 170). Once again this decision involves a risk. To speak out against the abuses and injustices of the prevailing culture is always risky. Still, the believing community must reach out to the world in need, but must resist the temptation to be like the world. The church must resist the temptation to institutionalize God (like Israel tried to do with the building of the temple). Even though God limits Himself in His dealings with creation, He does not allow Himself to be boxed in (p. 159).

Christian stewards must deal responsibly with God's great abundance, if not, our faith journey enters dangerous territory. This becomes apparent when the readers reach the prophetic literature (*The prophets and a new covenant*). Here God's passion for justice becomes clear. When humankind breaks its covenant with God, the whole earth suffers as a result (p. 186). As it became clear in the travel through the wilderness, God calls His people to become an alternative community, based on a new covenant relationship (p. 189). As an

alternative community, believers should take seriously God's command to care for creation. A community faithful to the call of God, over and against the call of a culture of materialism and consumerism. In the prophetic literature it becomes clear that the spirit of God enables a faithful, human response to God's call. Believing communities should remember God's passion for justice and His interest in new beginnings. This remembrance will enable believing communities to live in expectation and anticipation for God's transformation (p. 206). Vallet reminds the reader that Jesus, the Suffering Servant, serves as a model for the Christian steward who desires to live in covenant with God (p. 220). The subversion of the present culture could result in something totally new.

When the journey through the Old Testament stories has come to an end, Vallet reflects on the implications of these stories for the Christian Church today. What has become clear is the call to subvert the prevailing culture. Churches are often marked driven (p. 221). They minister to the world, but also takes on the form of the world. What is needed is the reversal of the status quo (p. 226). Stewards living in covenant should not be satisfied with the ordinariness of life. As Vallet puts it, '*To be a Christian steward is to be one who seeks to participate in God's plan and mission to distribute justice to all...it is to seek to implement God's mission, to enable people to live out the meaning and implications of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.*' This is an empowering understanding of stewardship, but could only be realized if the believing community lives in a covenant relationship with God. Living in covenant always means taking a risk.

Vallet's book is in the first instance aimed at the believing community (local congregations) and not the academic guild. *The steward living in covenant* is not filled with jargon and technical terms. This will make it accessible for a larger audience. Some biblical scholars might ask whether Vallet takes the complex nature of Old Testament literature series enough. In this regard it must be said that Vallet does not attempt to give a technical discussion of Old Testament stories, though he takes the diverse and complex nature of Old Testament stories serious. Rather he attempts to give an understanding of Christian stewardship that is Biblically founded. Still, the academic community can and should take note of his contribution since it is a good example of the creative and imaginative use of Scripture. Congregations concerned about their calling as stewards living in covenant with God could find Vallet's book very helpful. The choral readings and dramas by Wanda Vassallo, included in this book, could serve as a useful tool. It could be used in small groups, bible study groups or even as part of a sermon. It could contribute to a better understanding of certain concepts and ideas relating to stewardship, as portrayed by Old Testament stories. Perhaps Vallet's book was published at exactly the right time, given the controversial energy policy of the newly elected American president, the ongoing debate concerning debt relieve for third world countries and the insurance of the fair distribution of justice for all people, which is a global concern. This speaks directly to the believing community in South African. The challenge to be an alternative community is real, but so is the promises made by God. Believing communities must remember the Old Testament stories dealing with stewardship, and be empowered and transformed by them. Vallet's book can be recommended to all believing communities concerned with their role as stewards, living in covenant with God.