

BODY SYMBOLISM IN THE BIBLE

by Thomas Staubli and Silvia Schroer

(Translated by LM Maloney)

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Reviewed by Lisel Kruger Joubert

This book is a welcome translation of an important work and a definite contribution to the field of Biblical anthropology. The authors describe it as a little snippet in this field with the theme of “body and bodliness”. Even so this book has the potential to influence a wider range of biblical and theological studies.

The first part of the book consists of an introduction which has two main themes, namely: “Aspects of Theological Anthropology: from the Human Being to the Male and Female Body” and “Aspects of Biblical Body Spirituality: From Sinful Flesh to Temple of God”. The introduction outlines the boundaries of the study, the perspectives of the authors and enters into dialogue with scholars and other disciplines. This is followed in the second part of the book with the author’s own discussion of the various body terminology in the Bible.

The first theme of the introduction discusses the human being as the image of God; the human being as a vulnerable creature; philosophical and theological answers to the human question and the search for a body orientated Biblical anthropology. In these discussions they highlighted the different proponents and theologies which motivated their own study.

It is recognised that Christian anthropology is to a great extent a speculative *imago Dei* theology, centering on the words “image” and “likeness”, which lead to a lot of dogmatic exercise. Only in 20th century did Old Testament scholarship took up the challenge of discussing these words outside dogmatic disciplines. This was done in comparative studies with other Ancient Near Eastern literature. This comparative tradition is developed further in this book. Therefore the authors are more interested in the concrete male and female than abstract speculations about Adam/man/human being. They also aim to overcome androcentric anthropology and a long line of anti-body interpretation. Scholars and disciplines they enter into dialogue with are amongst others: Hans Walter Wolff, James Barr, Levinas, Franz Rosenzweig and some Feminist perspectives.

The following quotation can be seen as a key to understand the intention of the authors: “The biblical image of the human offers us an opportunity to break through the androcentrism of our Western tradition at several points. This is not to say that Israelite society was not patriarchal, but the stereometric way of thinking in that culture, with its interest in the dynamic, as manifested in its language and imagery, conceals a potential for resistance against our fixed conceptual systems and internalized images, a potential that can be activated. In the first place it is the strangeness and alien nature of the biblical way of thinking and imagining that encourages us to enter into dialogue with it.” (p21)

The above is further formulated in their conviction that our otherness and alienation with respect to Semitic thought and the Hebrew language can be thought of as analogous to the otherness of women in the traditional, androcentrically-organized world of symbols.

The question I ask is if the authors are not constricting themselves in this clear delineating of types, Semitic and Greek/western, which tend to have the potential for stereotyping.

In the second part of the introduction attention is given to Biblical body spirituality. Some of the themes are: beauty as an expressive form, God who becomes a real body, the healing of body and spirit, the body as temple of the Holy Spirit. The authors stress that in the Biblical imagery it is the dynamic of the bodily parts that count; the activity is more important than the form. Again they compare the Greek/western notion with the Near Eastern ideal. They also stress that in the Biblical language the relational is more important than the individual. Men and women in their physicality, their need for healing and forgiveness, are thus at the centre of the proclamation of the reign of God.

The introduction is followed by the discussion of the different body parts: An Understanding Heart, From Throat to Soul, God in the Belly, "The very hairs of your head are numbered", "They have eyes but do not see", "Let anyone with ears to hear listen", "My mouth shall declare your praise", "With a mighty hand and an outstretched arm", "You have placed everything under his feet", "All flesh is like grass"

In the discussion of these body symbols a wide range of imagery is used: artefacts from the Ancient Near East, ancient Jewish and Christian art, medieval and modern Christian art as well as modern Jewish and secular art. Throughout the book 110 figures are found which makes it a compelling visual experience. For example the making of sounds of praise (hallel) by using the throat (p57), the shocking modern poster depicting the vulnerability of life (p218), the heart as centre of understanding (p43), pictures loss in nuance in translating *nephesh* (throat) into *psyche* (p64).

This book can be recommended as worthwhile for Biblical scholars as well as theologians interested in anthropology, the understanding of the human in relationship to God. The most positive contribution is the visual aids opening a new world which in the past was not always so accessible for students in theology or any other interested person. These pictures and comparative texts can confront and change some set western ideas regarding God and humankind, and make us worry less about our souls and reclaim our bodies.