

Caroline Vander Stichele and Susanne Scholz, eds., *Hidden Truths from Eden: Esoteric Readings of Genesis 1–3*. Semeia Studies, 76. Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014

April 13, 2018

Re: *Hidden Truths from Eden: Esoteric Readings of Genesis 1-3*

Dear readers,

This collection of esoteric readings deserves a different approach, hence this review in the form of a letter. The letter-form allows me to be “inner-oriented” (recognizing that “eso” in “esoteric” comes from the Greek for “within, in”; 2), and to avoid being impersonal as one tends to be in a traditional book review.

You would be pleased to know that this book is organized in the traditional format: there is a helpful introduction by the editors, followed by essays organized in three parts, then it closes with two responses (the custom of Semeia Studies). The three parts (of three essays each) cover different areas in the reception of Genesis 1–3: in early Christian discourse; in zoharic, kabbalistic, and alchemical literature; and in the eyes of some post-modern, esoteric readers. It is interesting that the “post-modern” is as early as Emanuel Swedenborg in the eighteenth century (see 170–79). In any case, not everything is worked out in this book about esoteric reading, or about Genesis 1–3.

The scopes of the three parts is wide, and this collection would be useful for people interested in “esoteric approaches to the Bible as an academically serious, intellectually rich, and culturally important area for further scholarly research” (5); i wish it was available eighteen years ago when i taught a subject on the politics of interpretation where we explored different ways of interpreting Genesis 1–3. Better late than never, one might say.

The book offers a lot of interesting insights that one would not find, together, in traditional commentaries. Of course, one could find in commentaries references to and information about, for instance, Origen’s views on Genesis 1–3, but reading the chapter on Origen in this collection, alongside the views of other esoteric readers, gives Origen, so to speak, a new breath (even though it is not a fresh breath, as i explain below). The same applies to the other esoteric readers presented in this book.

At this point, i must confess, with all due respect, that the broad range of esoteric readings – from the Acts of Andrew, Apocryphon of John and Origen (in Part 1) to Sefer Hazohar, Bihar, Zohar and Paracelsus (in Part Two), to the works of Emanuel Swedenborg, Rudolph Steiner, Samuel D. Fohr, Béla Hamvas and Africana

personalities (in Part Three) – did not all hold my interest in the same way. But all the essays caught my attention in some way, and i share with you what i found most intriguing in each.

Anna Rebecca Solevåg’s essay interested me because i had not studied the Acts of Andrew before, and i was pleasantly hooked. The Acts of Andrew turns out to be the kind of narrative that interests me: there is abstention, paid sex, gender confusion and crucifixion, with references to Adam, Eve, the serpent, Cain, and more. The biblical garden narrative is given a new twist: Cain is the offspring of the union between Eve and the serpent, and Maximilla (who is male in Andrew’s narrative) is the new Eve. This new Eve is a lot more interesting than the new Adam of the Christian canon, i must say.

I am curious about the depiction of Christ as the eagle that sores in the Apocryphon of John, as discussed by Tuomas Rasimus, given that the eagle was a symbol for Rome’s military power (41). Was there imperial propaganda in paradise, Rasimus rightly asks. This is an interesting counter to the image of Christ as the sacrificial lamb, and i wonder what might happen if this eagle meets the serpent in the Acts of Andrew.

Origen’s rejection of the literal reading of the “garments of skins” that God gave Adam and Eve in the garden (Gen 3:21) because it is “exceedingly foolish and old womanish and unworthy of God” (70) is problematic for me. Origen did not explain why, but Peter W. Martens takes this to be evidence of Origen’s tendency to “talk fittingly about God” (80). Origen was a man of his time. Then, it was fitting to talk of God as an eagle, or in association with an empire, but foolish to imagine God as womanly.

Elliot R. Wolfson’s focus on the matter of gender in the kabbalist tradition helps reduce the bitterness i received from Origen. I welcome, for instance, the affirmation that “it is correct to say that Adam was not perfected until Eve was perfected” (102) and “man and woman would be truly equal in the indifference of infinity where there is neither male nor female” (114). Nonetheless, who lives in “infinity” anyways?

The Jewish and Christian “speculative kabbalah” that Peter J. Forshaw discusses blow my mind. While i speculate and ruminate in my own interpretation, the precision with which kabbalist numerical interpretation works eludes me. Obviously, different folks speculate in different ways. For “some Christian kabbalists (with apologies to Saint Paul), sometimes it is important to pay attention to the letters and *not* the spirits” (140). For Pasifika islander folks, we fly in the winds of orality.

The ways of alchemical interpretation that Georgina Hedesan discusses is also beyond my thought world, but i nonetheless appreciate the concept of *mysterium magnum* (“great mystery”). “The text is not meant to be philosophical in the modern sense of the world, but revelatory: it seeks to postulate certain ‘truths’ about the universe that cannot be verified or examined logically” (154). In other words, the *spirits* in and of the text do matter. Like a work of art (163), the text is open to interpretation. No one owns the final interpretation.

Susanne Scholz’s essay on three post-modern readings is, to my islander mind, a banquet. The three readers come from different periods, but they share the same

esoteric tradition. In their readings, the text is not about the external and physical world but the internal and spiritual levels. The text thus “provides access to religious mystery, and it is the task of interpreters to uncover at least some of it” (192). In this regard, esoteric reading provides “a way out of a rigidly literalist worldview, whether it is religiously or secularly defined” (193).

I appreciate that László-Attila Hubbes brings Béla Hamvas to the hermeneutical banquet. Hamvas did not write directly on Genesis 1–3, but about creation, fall and restoration – “love is a power, it is the ultimate mean of salvation, of restoration” (211) – and made references here and there to the biblical narrative. Hence, “Eve came into existence as the essence of man and being. As *matrix mundi*, as Böhme puts it: the matrix, the archetype, the Ur-form: mother of the world” (cited at 210). This view counters the male-orientation of the other esoteric readings.

Hugh R. Page Jr. winds up the essays by drawing attention to esotericism in, for example, resistance movements and Black churches, as well as in the works of artists and musicians in Africa and the African Diaspora. Africana esotericism has not been fully studied, but Page identifies implications for the study of Genesis 1–3 (229–30).

It seems to me that Africana esotericism could offer a different response to the question that Scholz raises: “Do the ... [esoteric] approaches provide tools for resistant Bible readings, or do they merely provide spiritualized escape mechanisms for discontented elite?” (192). Resistant reading is not just inner esoteric reading in a world of materiality, but reading that resists imperial powers and “flying eagles.” Elaine Pagels allows for this possibility in her response (245), whereas Samuel D. Fohr is more interested in adjudicating who does esoteric reading properly (on Page, e.g., see 261–62).

May I ask, as I wind down, what are the implications of the majority of esoteric readers presented in this collection being male? Might this mean that the future of esoteric approaches to the Bible is in the hands of women?

This book has something for everyone, whether one’s interest is with methodology or/and with interpretations of Genesis 1–3. I hope that you will at some point find time to study it.

Takeikaupē [in solidarity],

Jione Havea



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