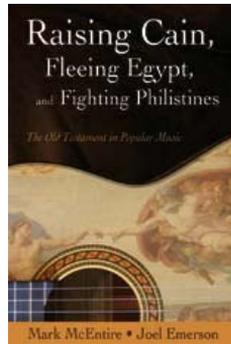


# ○ REVIEW OF MARK MCENTIRE AND JOEL EMERSON, *RAISING CAIN, FLEEING EGYPT AND FIGHTING PHILISTINES: THE OLD TESTAMENT IN POPULAR MUSIC*

(MACON, GA: SMYTH & HELWYS, 2006)

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The subtitle of this book says it all: the representation of motifs from the Old Testament in popular music is here described, primarily in the form of a host of specific examples. There are a number of books on pop music and religion/spirituality available; this book itself mentions one, ‘Call me the Seeker’, edited by M. J. Gilmour. But books on the more specific topic of pop music and The Bible are less easily found, and the present volume is a welcome addition to the short shelf of such work.

The entire breadth of the Hebrew Bible and its inspiration for popular song is covered in seven short chapters: ‘The First Family’ about creation, Eden and beyond; ‘Surviving the Storm’ about the flood story; ‘Family Matters’ about the patriarchal narratives; ‘Let Me Out’ about the Exodus; ‘The High and Mighty’ about the narratives from Joshua to Kings; ‘The Poet’s Poets’ about Psalms and wisdom literature and ‘Shouting in the Wind’ about the prophetic books.

Each chapter commences with a brief exegetical essay introducing the major themes of the biblical passages or books in question. These sections presuppose no familiarity with biblical scholarship, and so the book may serve the reader who comes to this particular crossroads of subjects from the popular music angle as well, although conceivably the average reader will have a certain previous interest in biblical studies. These exegetical essays focus on the coherence and narrative sequence of the prose parts of the Hebrew Bible, highlighting the recurring plot issues. The treatment of the poetic books in the last two chapters of the book, too, bear witness to a leaning toward ‘holistic’, literary readings: the Book of Psalms is primarily a composition with a literary and theological structure, and only secondarily a collection of examples of various Psalm *Gattungen*. And something similar goes for the relation between oracles and books in the

prophetic literature. These sections are informative and, in view of their extreme brevity, fine introductions to the various parts of the Hebrew scriptures. They are only introductions, however, to the real issue of the book.

Following the introductions to the biblical ‘raw material’ of interpretation, the authors lead us on a breathtaking journey through that interpretation itself as it is evidenced in popular song, primarily of the last four decades or so. The repertoire ranges from Bob Dylan (predictably), via Metallica and Garth Brooks to Coolio’s ‘Gangsta’s Paradise’. Few songs are allotted more than half a page’s treatment, which is wildly frustrating for the fan and/or scholar, but probably the perfect decision for a high-school or lay study-group audience. Plus, obviously, it allows for the inclusion of more songs. The net result, therefore, is not so much a deeper understanding of the songs dealt with, as a whetted appetite for being aware of possible biblical allusions in any song you come across. Which I guess is exactly what the authors aimed for.

Each chapter ends in a short list of ‘questions for reflection’. They may not be to everybody’s taste: the scholarly minded will find them too concerned with issues irrelevant to the text, and the clerically inclined may have other quibbles. Personally, I find the ‘how does this relate to your own life?’ approach better suited for youth groups than for classroom purposes, but then again, anyone is free to skip the questions.

Possible criticisms of the book must be directed towards sins of omission rather than commission. After all, the book treats a vast subject (actually, two vast subjects) in 115 pages, including bibliography and three elaborate song indexes. It is to be expected that anyone who feels strongly about popular music will be scandalised by some favourite artist or song going unmentioned. Personally, I would suggest the inclusion of P. J. Harvey’s ‘Snake’ in the chapter on the Garden of Eden in future editions. And seeing that mainstays like Bruce Springsteen and Leonard Cohen do in fact form part of the authors’ diet, why is Cohen’s ‘Story of Isaac’ absent from the treatment of songs interpreting the *akedah*? And why is the allusion to the Exodus in Springsteen’s ‘The Price You Pay’ passed over in favour of the same artist’s much weaker and less pertinent use of the same motif in ‘The Promised Land’?

This is an unfair game to play, however: what the authors have included, they treat well. A more reasonable criticism is deserved for the sloppiness of the indexes: why go to the trouble of indexing the songs treated both by title, artist and biblical passage – and then leave the job half done by letting the spread sheet programme decide that artists should be ordered by first rather than last names, and biblical books by alphabetical and not canonical order?

Such nitpicking aside, the book is a pleasant read and probably highly useful in a number of teaching environments. It does not so much fill a gap as point the gap out and start serious work on it. This in itself is a worthy achievement. It is inspiring in one more way, incidentally: having read it, the present reviewer really must be off to the record store to supplement his Dylan LPs with an OutKast disc.