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BOOK REVIEW

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**A Theology of Literature: The Bible as Revelation in the Tradition of the Humanities. By WilliamFranke. Pp. ix, 112, Eugene, Oregon, Cascade Books, 2017, $16.98.**

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In the last sixty years or so, theologians and Christian thinkers have adopted and explored literary modes and style, such as metaphors and narrative. In turn, literary critics have become more open to exploring literature in the context of theological traditions and for interpreting poetic language theologically. Several scholarly publications have appeared that discuss in theoretical terms the relationship between literature and theology. We are still looking, however, for a balanced, unprejudiced and impartial way forward that does not subordinate literature to theology or vice versa. Franke goes to the heart of the issue here. Eschewing militant secularism on the one hand and religious fundamentalism on the other, this volume marks out a space where the literary and the theological interact and challenge one another on equal footing. The Bible is an exemplary text for illustrating this ‘theology of literature’.

In our ‘post‐secular age’, Franke observes, secular literature is frequently said to reveal a potentially sacred meaning. Here he explores a converse possibility, namely, the potential of literary art in texts traditionally viewed as the sacred Word. His reading of the Bible as literature is not, as practised in rhetorical criticism, an exercise in identifying literary devices or registers within a predetermined theological framework; it is rather an attempt to read it solely on the basis of its merits as literature. His aim is to lead his readers to appreciate how the ‘revelatory powers’ inherent in the Bible's literary forms outline its religious matter and ‘determine’, in his words, ‘the sense of its theology’. In this way revelation can be understood as a poetic no less than a religious category.

Franke here develops themes he has explored in previous monographs and essays. It follows their *leitmotiv,* namely that literary language is ‘world‐disclosing’ in that it opens up a ‘horizon of the infinite’ calling for a theological understanding. Literature is neither the instrument of nor a substitute for religious revelation, but rather a locus where revelation may come into existence. The content is partly adapted from his *Revelation of Imagination: From Homer and the Bible through Virgil and Augustine*. What distinguishes the present volume is that it focuses exclusively on the Bible; it contains insightful new material on the Book of Job and the Psalms and adds an introduction and a conclusion elaborating the principles underlying his arguments.

At the outset Franke clarifies what he means by ‘Bible’, ‘theological revelation’ and ‘theology’. The Bible is ‘made up of the many books that represent the ideal of a Book speaking with authority and disclosing a truth that can serve as guide for human beings living in the present’. It becomes authoritative by means of ‘a comprehensive outlook on the universe reaching beyond the finite capacities of knowing’. This ‘disclosure of a comprehensive significance for the world and of an ultimate meaning for human life’ is ‘theological revelation’, enabling the Bible to communicate ‘an authentic presence of divinity’. ‘Theology’ is therefore understood here not as ‘a set of doctrines given in advance and circumscribing the meaning assigned to the text’ but rather as a message inherent in the text and acquiring unlimited different meanings.

The five chapters are organized around these ideas. The first sets the sacred text in the tradition of the humanities: the Bible is best understood as partaking of the hermeneutical circle of interpretation. Like all the humanities texts, the Bible enters into dialogue with the reader, creates its own tradition and assumes different characters through its translations. The Bible read in this way and not as a series of factual accounts, carries ‘a revelatory element’ that, in keeping with the literary genre of each book, recurs in the present by virtue of the ‘dimension of the interpreter's lived experience’. Religious myth, we learn from chapter two, is the prevailing literary genre of the Book of Genesis and key to its interpretation. It reveals ‘the fundamental condition of existence’, the universal meaning of human life as created in its original perfection and as it exists in its fallen state. The prevailing literary genre of the Book of Exodus, epic history, reveals the founding event of a nation while, as chapter three explains, simultaneously mirroring the present human experience of being freed by a God who is perceived as Liberator before he is recognized as Creator. Prophecy, the prevailing literary genre of the prophetic and apocalyptic books dealt with in chapter four, revisits the revelations of Genesis and Exodus through its essentially poetic form. The Psalms, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and the Book of Job arise out of subjective human experience and are more consciously literary in form, yet they are no less revelatory. The last chapter surveys the literary genre of the Gospels; it discloses a self‐transforming, world‐revealing element summing up and encompassing the significance of the biblical texts previously discussed.

In the Conclusion Franke addresses the inevitable question: Do the biblical books disclose ‘a comprehensive significance for the world’ and the ‘ultimate meaning for human life’ because they are so inspiring as literature, or are they captivating as literature because of their ‘unfathomable divine and revelatory power’? His reply is disarming. He argues that his approach is justifiable irrespective of the position that we take on this matter. He approaches the Bible ‘not as wholly other to all other books classed as products of human hands’, while still interpreting it as revelation, as the Word of God. Far from leaving it exclusively the product of human beings, his reading of the Bible as an exemplary text for the humanities discloses ‘some of the furthest and fullest possibilities of what literature can be at its highest and most inspired’. In short, it exemplifies what is meant by ‘theology of literature’, i.e. that in the act of writing a human being struggles for and aspires toward ‘a transcendent ideal understood as a God who grants and graces this impulse’.

Not everyone will concur. Some may feel that perhaps Franke has avoided tackling issues that demand clear‐cut resolution. Many, however, will agree with him that the boundaries between literature and revelation should be kept open, and will sympathize with his wish to remain aloof from ‘divisive disciplines’. There is certainly much to be commended in Franke's book. First, when presenting the Bible as literature, he does not transform the sacred into the secular but instead demonstrates the potential of literature as a means of disclosing the sacred. Second, he offers a reading of the Bible independent of both traditional exegesis and secular literary ideologies. Finally, his account of the numinous presence in the literary genres of the Bible is appealing. Readers interested in the approach to literature and theology exemplified by Romano Guardini, Karl Rahner and Michael Paul Gallagher will enjoy this book.