

# Reviews

**THE SOCIAL VISIONS OF THE HEBREW BIBLE: A THEOLOGICAL INTRODUCTION** by J. David Pleins *John Knox Press, Westminster, 2001. Pp. xii + 592, £30.00 pbk.*

It was only after reading this book that I began to appreciate its title. Few titles catch so well what the book is about. It is a social-scientific study that seeks to recover the social world that produced the Hebrew Bible. According to Pleins, the Bible contains a variety of competing social viewpoints; it has 'social visions' rather than one social vision. His study is on the Hebrew Bible: readers will not find any treatment of the deuterocanonical books of the Catholic or Orthodox canons. I suspect too that Pleins prefers the term 'Hebrew Bible' to the traditional 'Old Testament'. Finally, he describes the book as a theological introduction. His social-scientific analysis concerns the Bible's ethical or social justice 'visions'—this is the theological element. The textual basis for the analysis is the whole of the Hebrew Bible. However good the analysis—and this is a good book—one can, in a single volume, only introduce the reader to such a vast amount of material.

A particularly good thing about this book is that Pleins nails his colours to the mast on the very first page of the first chapter: "It is these [sc. social justice] conflicts that drive the production of the biblical text". As he notes (p. 16) this is not a new theory but it is a very contemporary one. There have been any number of sociological analyses of the Hebrew Bible in recent years. Indeed, the approach has given new life to historical criticism which had been reeling from the slings and arrows fired by literary critics at its traditional areas of focus—form criticism, tradition criticism, redaction criticism. The perceived strength of sociological analysis is that it can explain the different viewpoints in the biblical text without having to round up the usual suspects responsible for them—tradents, authors, redactors, and so on. According to the literary critics, there were so many suspects that, in most cases, it was better to drop the case. Sociological analysis claims that it does not so much look for individual authors and redactors as the kind of social situation that produced this or that kind of text. According to the sociologists, research has shown that rivalry and competition are basic ingredients in the development of a culture and its ethos. Given the diversity in the biblical text, surely this is what also 'drove' its production.

Pleins offers a test case (Jeremiah 22:13-19) to demonstrate the need for this kind of analysis and then surveys a number of major figures in the discipline in order to formulate an approach that will respond authentically and effectively to the biblical text. In this, he is well aware of the hypothetical nature of the analysis, the danger of forcing the text to fit the theory, and the unavoidable need to rely in many areas on the work of others.

As to the biblical text itself, Pleins, in sequential sections of the book, examines the Pentateuch as law, narratives, the prophets, and finally the

poetic (Psalms, Song of Songs, Lamentations) and wisdom literature. He keeps a sharp eye out for what texts say about social justice issues, especially treatment of the poor. His work is careful and well documented but suffers from the inevitable limitations of a one volume introduction. There is a vast amount of text to be covered, many issues have to be set aside and, despite his evident knowledge of scholarship, it is difficult to do justice to all the competing opinions about a text. Reviews suffer from similar limitations, and I can offer only a few examples from Pleins's analysis to illustrate my point. He provides sweeping and suggestive interpretations of the 'grand narratives', but such sweeping views cry out for closer analysis. Hopefully, this will be available in other works. He accepts the existence of pentateuchal sources (J, E, P) but proposes they were post-exilic reactions to the Deuteronomistic History (pp. 26-27). In the light of his claim that "Only a recovery of Israel's past will illuminate for us what these scriptures were about" (p. 521) it is surprising that Pleins stakes so much on an area of Israel's past that is hotly contested in contemporary scholarship, namely the documentary hypothesis. It was also surprising to read Pleins's interpretation of the Deuteronomistic History's account of the reign of Josiah (2 Kings 22-23). He believes the author must have been perplexed to admit that, despite Josiah's thoroughgoing reform, Judah was doomed to destruction. He seems to opt for a unified reading when the text contains strong evidence of conflicting viewpoints within the deuteronomistic camp. Along with a number of contemporaries, Pleins thinks that most of the Bible was produced in the wake of the exile. As a general comment, one wonders how much this view is shaped by the theory rather than by the text; the post-exilic restoration must have been a time of intense social conflict, just the kind of situation—according to sociological theory—that produces rival responses.

Current biblical scholarship of the liberal critical kind likes to point to diversity within the Bible. The attempts by Eichrodt, von Rad and others to write a unified theology of the Old Testament are now judged to be noble failures. Nevertheless, the desire for unity and coherence is a powerful one and I think Pleins's book is another, somewhat different, manifestation of it. Instead of finding unity and coherence in a theology of the Hebrew Bible, he finds it in a theory that explains the Bible's diversity.

This book is an important one, not so much for its conclusions as for the questions it raises. Thus, does one need to establish the social setting of biblical texts in order to appreciate their diverse and conflictual nature, or can much the same be achieved by a competent literary reading of the present text? This question becomes more acute given the difficulty of trying to recover Israel's past. Granted the Bible's diversity, what motivated those who brought its competing viewpoints together to form the canon? Did they see an overarching unity that escapes us? Was it simply to preserve ancient traditions? If so, were the ones preserved seen to provide a sensible range of views for resolving issues? Others were excluded. Finally, how do we use the competing views of the Bible? Pleins's point that the Bible provides no easy blueprint for today is a telling one. How then do we use its conflicting views to resolve our conflicts in a way that is authentically biblical?

MARK A. O'BRIEN OP