

BOOK REVIEW***Liturgy and Biblical Interpretation***

by Sebastian Selvén

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From the Invocation to the Benediction, the beauty of a liturgical service is often overlooked by many who view it as a quaint remnant of the past. However, for the participants, it is more than a procedure for worship culminating in the Holy Eucharist. The liturgy serves as a hermeneutical tool to teach how to interpret the Bible by emphasizing specific, essential elements of scripture. Despite its various forms throughout the world, the liturgy is an unbroken historical bond used by believers from the early church to the present for worship and understanding.

For the Christian sociologist, the hermeneutic aspect of the liturgical tradition is significant. Denominational interpretations of the Bible define how denominations approach society and culture. Furthermore, the liturgical tradition includes a variety of human expressions such as words, architecture, choreography, and music. When used in the liturgical form of worship, the Bible changes for both the participants and the text itself. Such changes have a lasting effect. As Selvén observes,

Liturgy is not a commentary...It has led people to vandalism, rebellion, and war. In less fraught times, it can still instill feelings of wonder, solemnity, or other parts of human emotion, in a way that few biblical commentaries can. It has also had a significant role in many cultures, being publicly enacted in centrally located churches and synagogues.

Many debates have been funneled into liturgy, as during the Christian Reformation. Then and now, politics, theology, social dynamics, and many other aspects have been tied to liturgy.

In his intriguing and concise work, *Liturgy and Biblical Interpretation*, Selvén inspects the nature of liturgical practice in the Jewish and Christian traditions, noting the differences and similarities, and quickly turns his focus to the uses of Isaiah 6:3 as an exemplar: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” He reveals how this verse was utilized and understood by Judaism and Christianity respectively, and its continued influence in liturgical practice. For those unacquainted with the debates within Judaism regarding this verse, Selvén provides a succinct, well written summary. For example, Selvén’s analysis of the appearance, role, and function of seraphim and cherubim is fascinating. Discard the tiring images of plump baby cherubs and flowing white robe-crowned winged angels, because

Selvén's analysis is rich with understanding and implication. For the Christian scholar, the angelic representation is thought-provoking, raising questions about the influence imagery has on the church. The *quedeshot* and the *sanctus* are an angelic liturgy where the angels call in unison, "praise- *Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh*"—holy, holy, holy. What is holiness, and how do we understand and define it? Selvén does not leave the reader wondering, providing ample discussion on Jewish and Christian perspectives. His analyses are well documented and kindle a desire in the reader for further research.

In what is perhaps the most intriguing chapter of *Liturgy and Biblical Interpretation*, Selvén considers the problem of the Divine presence. Primarily the accounts of Isaiah 6:3 and Ezekiel 3:12 are applied as Selvén describes the problem of God's existence in and out of the physical realm and the role of the Temple. How the liturgical traditions responded is considered with great detail. Selvén notes that "The biblical and Jewish ambivalence described above undergoes an enormous transformation (not to say transubstantiation) in Christian worship. Which in its medieval shape rallies many earlier Christian practices and theologies to point out exactly where God is present: in the Eucharist" (97). While the Reformation theologies regarding the Incarnation and Real Presence are discussed lightly, the emphasis is placed upon the liturgical questions raised. After all, as Selvén reminds the reader, "My aim has not been to rip off accretions to reach a pure original meaning of the biblical text. Rather, I have tried to catch biblical scholar's 'mid-flight' to demonstrate how liturgy plays a significant role in how we interpret the biblical text" (127).

To that end, Selvén has succeeded by providing a fresh and exciting topic for Christian sociology. He stimulates questions about the role of liturgy in modern Christianity. When many denominations have discarded traditional liturgical practices for service programs, contemporary praise band performances, testimonials, and such, one wonders what hermeneutic skills are taught. What role does liturgy have in the daily life of the members of liturgical churches? Could the lack of tradition be a cause for the membership decline among specific age groups? Perhaps it is time for a reevaluation of the significance of liturgics. The liturgical traditions have sustained Christian worship through tumultuous times with its transcendence, radiant simplicity, and authentic merit. It could once again be called upon again to serve a struggling church.

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