

Book Review

When Prayer Takes Place: Forays into a Biblical World

J. Gerald Janzen; edited by Brent A. Strawn and Patrick D. Miller
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This long and slowly argued book requires a long and slow read, but it is a rewarding one. Janzen models the virtues of patient attention to textual oddities, particularly when propelled by a good and theological question, which is effectively: What is going on when we pray? More specifically: How does scripture help shape our understanding of what is going on when we pray?

The book collects together nine previously published Old Testament papers, and adds a few more, some reflections on method, and then some New Testament chapters too. Editors Strawn and Miller have drawn together some fascinating material here, and evidently brought out of Janzen a willingness to rewrite and refashion separate pieces into a coherent whole. The collection was originally published by Wipf and Stock in the USA in 2012, but arrived as a UK publication at the very end of 2017. I hope this review will draw it to a wider attention for those whose interests combine prayer and ministry on the one hand, and openness to where scripture might speak, perhaps unexpectedly, on the other. I shall not review all seventeen of the pieces found herein, but pick out some highlights while giving a sense of the overall book.

The various introductory orientations (from author and editors) set us up for some discursive explorations of the mysteries of how to talk of the reality of God in and among human activities, and of the real experience of prayer in our 3D world (or in fact 4D, including time). Part I then offers four chapters of 'orientation', and

helpfully indicates the kinds of enquiries found here. A study of the burning bush and Moses seeks significance in the burning of the bush beyond its attention-getting element, and locates it in a promise to Israel — burning under oppression in Egypt — that it will not be consumed. A study of the divine name (YHWH) argues that it is a self-identification undefined or qualified by any other force. A helpful study of ‘What does the Priestly blessing do?’ argues that Num. 6 offers ‘a mediated renewal of God’s cosmos-ordering performative speech’ (in Gen. 1; p.44). A fourth piece draws on Moltmann and others to suggest that we pray in the space God makes for us in God’s creation by his act of divine self-withdrawal.

Part II unfolds over 150 pages, and offers seven extended studies of specific Old Testament texts. Hannah’s prayer in 1 Sam. 2 is read as self-address. The other six pieces explore aspects of existential reality in the Psalms, typically focusing on a single verse or phrase or even word. Janzen is trying throughout to probe into what happens when we are engaging with God. A good example is his helpful reading of Ps. 23.6, traditionally rendered as dwelling in God’s house ‘forever’; although the Hebrew idiom is ‘for length of days’. Janzen rejects the similarity of these two phrases, but not because the Old Testament could not have talked about ‘forever’ had it wanted to. Rather, a careful reading of the phrase in other occurrences suggests instead a kind of heightened experience of God that puts normal time on hold, and creates a sense of days that go past their expected length of experience. This kind of argument is typical of the book. In my judgement: he is in general convincing, always illuminating, but arguably at least could have been more concise in taking the reader to all the experiential points of the compass that he wishes to visit.

After this the book unwinds in a somewhat leisurely fashion even by the standards of Part II. Part III collects just two previously published pieces on the prophets (Jeremiah and Habakkuk) to explore similar issues. Part IV is a single 60-page chapter on method, indebted to Richard Hays’ work on textual echoes, and recasting this as resonance. Janzen’s discussion is deeply enriched by thoughtful reading of Coleridge and others (apparently this piece has roots in a long-abandoned research project on Coleridge and the imagination), and then explores Proverbs 8 and Col. 1 in intertextual resonance. It is all interesting, though I did wonder quite

how much further than Hays it gets us. The sustained example also explores relatively well-trodden ground, though it is none the worse for that.

Part V offers three New Testament studies that further the argument, though rather notably the book is without a conclusion or final overview. Romans 8 and its meditations on prayer is a frequent dialogue text throughout the book, including here in a chapter that begins with prayer 'in secret' in the Lord's prayer. But the real pick of these chapters is the closing one entitled 'Redeeming the Expression "Redeeming the Time"'. Quite simply, Janzen argues that this phrase in Eph. 5.16 means what it says, as translated in the KJV: the days are evil, so buy back the time and use it for good. This conflicts with most modern translations, which go for an idea of making the most of the time afforded in these evil days. One thing that is evil, says Janzen, is that the days offer no time to do good, because they belong to the enemy. One route to this wholly plausible reading is via the only other occurrence of the phrase in the Bible, in the Greek LXX of Daniel 2.8, where Nebuchadnezzar's magicians seek to 'redeem the time' given to interpret the king's prayer. Daniel is the one who successfully 'buys it back' in Daniel 2, and he does so by praying to God. This chapter is a masterclass in what the whole book is aiming at: letting the biblical text set the agenda for thoughtful reflection on prayer and the spiritual life.

I learned a lot from this book. Mainly I learned it on specific verses and interpretative issues, although the overarching focus on how biblical texts attest to reality in life with God is certainly helpful. Some of the more philosophical and psychological digressions are interesting, but whether they actually do the work of illuminating the text was slightly less clear to me.

I suspect the book is too long and detailed to benefit many of those for whom the spiritual realities of prayer are part and parcel of their daily work. But its ideas are of profound practical relevance regarding how the whole of scripture testifies to engaging with a realm that is not mappable in 4D reality, and which though it is unseen is of great significance.