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Systematic Theology

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Systematic Theology, Vol. 1, The Triune God

Robert W Jenson

New York: Oxford University Press, 1997

244 pages, \$87.50 Hardcover

Systematic Theology, Vol. 2, The Works of God

Robert W Jenson

New York: Oxford University Press, 1999

380 pages, \$96.50 Hardcover

These two volumes run in tandem. Jenson has assembled a system of theology that is the culmination of a lifetime of reflection on the basic doctrines of the faith as they impact Western Protestantism. The first volume, *The Triune God*, is rooted in God's Triune identity, elucidating a theological stance that Jenson has always embraced. The second volume, *The Works of God*, outlines God's activity in the world. Jenson has tried to map out an ecumenical theology, drawing upon the classic texts from which the western tradition has emerged.

Jenson begins with the most basic of theological questions: Who is God? As he notes, this question assumes the existence of God, an assumption for which he makes no apology. "[God is whomever] raised Jesus from the dead." Likewise, he connects the agent of Jesus' resurrection in a circular chain of arguments with "the God of Israel, whom Jesus called 'Father' and to whom the disciples wanted to pray" (42) and "...JHWH, who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (44, Exodus 20.2). Thus, "'the one who rescued Israel from Egypt' is confirmed as an identification of God in that it is continued 'as he thereupon rescued the Israelite Jesus from the dead'"(44).

However, if, as Jenson argues, God is adequately identified only by reference to Jesus, the one he called Father, and the Spirit which proceeds from them both, are Jews not adequately related to God if they do not relate to Jesus? Conversely, can Christians adequately relate to the same God as the Jews without the underlying reference to Israel? It is difficult for many churches that have affirmed the on-going Jewish tradition as a sibling faith, to say both that God is the God of Israel and God is Trinity, and both are found in the human being named Jesus.

The ecumenical ramifications are obvious. As Jewish-Christian relations are touch-and-go, the affirmation of the God of Israel revealed as Trinity becomes a theological and political minefield. Jenson offers little by way of a solution except to affirm that "God is a God identified

by and with the events of Israel's history" (71), which cuts to the very heart of God's being. According to Jenson: "Israel [can even say] to God: 'You have redeemed *yourself*...' What the Lord does to Israel he does to himself, in that the *Shekinah* shares Israel's *lot* and the Lord's *being*...He is God himself as a participant in within Israel's story, who is nevertheless related to God as the one who sends him and who determines Israel's story. (76)" "The narrative identification of God by his involvement with Israel displays a mutuality of *personae* whose differentiating relations are between God and Israel and somehow between God and God...God is identified *with Israel* in that he is identified *as* a participant *in* Israel's story within him" (76-77).

Since, according to Jenson, God's identity is wrapped up in God's relationship to Israel, he asks the question, "since JHWH is identified as the God of Israel, how was he God before there was Israel? For Israel knew that her beginning had a date within history, and thus Israel acknowledged a history of humankind and of her God before there was an Israel"(48). Jenson offers this solution: "...the people of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob were understood to have lived in continuity with the pre-Israel history of humankind, and they, Israel came to say, had been Israel before there was Israel, an Israel preexistent in the *promise* of Israel"(49). Jenson's christology flows from his Israelology.

For the Christian reader, Jenson's perspective creatively roots Christian identity within the framework of God's identification with Jesus as a Jew and Israel's participation in the life of God. But, as mentioned earlier, this stance offers little by way of reflection on the current status of God's covenants with Israel. If Jenson is looking to create an honestly ecumenical theology (as he sets out to do), he needs to pay greater attention to the political implications that his Israelology seems to ignore.

The Works of God, the weightier of the two volumes, explores God's activity in the world. Jenson reflects on the character of creation (Part IV), the nature of creaturely existence (Part V), the church as God's presence in the world (Part VI), and the Fulfillment (i.e., eschatology; Part VII).

Clearly, Jenson has no love for creation-centred spirituality. While he affirms human beings as created in the image of God, he charges humanity with "worshipping the creature rather than the creator" (112). He makes this indictment with the most inflammatory of rhetoric. For example, Jenson states: "Recent waves of 'creation spirituality' are simply apostasy to paganism. And it is precisely such unguarded, even

unargued, judgment that is required of the church.” His position wouldn’t be so troubling if he named names. Instead he lobbs this grenade and runs, failing to offer any constructive reflection on how the scriptures or the tradition call us to faithful stewardship of God’s creation. He pays lip-service to humanity’s care-taking role and western civilization’s role in destroying the planet, yet he offers nothing by way of useful or thoughtful ways the church can care for creation. In an age when the environmental crisis plays a central role in the public consciousness, a rigorous engagement with this issue would be more helpful than a discussion of angels (see pp.117-119 for Jenson’s angelology, quite possibly the weirdest three pages in the book).

Given the inter-church dialogues and statements that have emerged over the past decade or so, Jenson’s ecclesiology is worth noting in particular. While his theology stays decidedly within the constructs of classical Protestant orthodoxy (with some curmudgeonly asides and footnotes) his ecclesiology re-affirms his Catholicity. His love for the episcopate is very evident from the following two statements: “Let all obey the bishop as Christ Jesus obeys the Father.” “The bishop is the christological focus of the congregation’s unity.” [235] As a pastor, I found the power he offers to the pastoral office more than disconcerting. He refuses to accept the church as “[‘merely’] a creature of the gospel” and pushes for a more “Triune” (read: episcopal) identification as a christological sign of church unity in the world.

In both volumes, Jenson draws heavily from biblical sources, supplementing them with both classic and modern texts. His prose style is very readable (but I did need to keep a dictionary handy) and he provokes the reader to re-think the faith in light of the on-going discussion of the role of the church and where God is working in the world. While his arguments made me angry at times, he also made me think. These volumes stand out as a reference point in the way “do theology” as a parish pastor.

I would recommend these volumes to any serious student of theology. Pastors would do well by having both volumes on their shelf for reference and scholars would benefit by his treatment of the classic themes of theology. Jenson has a lively theological imagination that engages the doctrines of the faith with a pedagogic flare. Before tackling these volumes I suggest reading his chapters in *Church Dogmatics* as a point of entry.

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