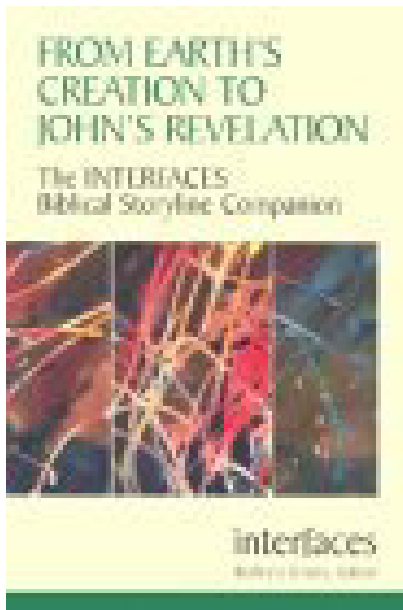


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**Green, Barbara, Carleen Mandolfo, and Catherine M. Murphy**

***From Earth's Creation to John's Revelation: The INTERFACES Biblical Storyline Companion***

Interfaces

Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press/Michael Glazier, 2003. Pp. v + 68. Paper. \$7.95. SBN 0814659586.

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This small book is nonetheless a breathtaking enterprise: the presentation of the whole panorama of the Christian Bible within less than seventy pages that will take only a few hours to read. The most important key word in the title and subtitle is, of course, “storyline.” What is at issue here is a brief retelling of the biblical storyline that stretches from the creation of the world in Genesis to the book of Revelation. Let us ask what this is good for after presenting how this works at all.

The book is part of a new series (Interfaces, edited by Barbara Green) that will introduce the Bible to a nonscholarly audience with the help of persons from the Bible. As a “companion,” the retelling of the biblical storyline provides the background information in order to place all these biblical persons in a chronological matrix. The intended readership of the book and the series is described on page 1: since too many people enjoy the biblical stories as children and reject the Bible when grown up, this book seeks to help people to return to the Bible as adults, “aware as you are now of the complexities of human communication and relationship.”

Although admitting that the majority of the Bible came into being roughly “around the middle of the first millennium B.C.E.” (2), the retelling opens up a timeline from “before 1000 B.C.E.” to the “late First Century C.E.” This timeline does not refer to the origin of

the texts but rather to the narrated events and the time they are supposed to have taken place, mostly according to the innerbiblical chronology. Hence, the interest is not to present what actually happened in history but rather to sum up how the Bible orders and anchors its narratives and messages in a stream of time.

In order to make unmistakably clear that this is not a fundamentalist approach to rewrite history according to the Bible, but to work out the underlying storyline concept in the composition of the whole “Book,” an interesting literary device is used throughout this “companion.” In the context of creation, on page 3 “Lady wisdom” is introduced: Sophia, divine wisdom, was present at the moment of creation, according to Prov 8 and Wisdom of Solomon. Hence, the whole biblical narrative is presented from the (fictional) viewpoint of “Lady Wisdom”: “I am Sophia, divine Wisdom, asked to be your guide here, since I was there from the start and have always been a presence since creation. Welcome!” This fictional point of narration occurs on almost every page: The strange “I” is referring to “Lady Wisdom,” who tells us the storyline of the Bible from an overall viewpoint (see, e.g., on page 4: “My role in the story [of the flood], at least as told later in Wisdom of Solomon, is to help Noah steer the ark through dangerous waters”).

The whole panorama of the Christian Bible is divided into thirty-one scenes, bundled in nine epochs with rather rough chronological borders: origins stories (= the Pentateuch), (re-)settlement in the land, the monarchic period, exile, postexilic early Second Temple Persian Judah, late Second Temple Judaism, the intertestamental period, and the New Testament period (mid-first century and late first century). Always in focus are stories and—most of all—persons who drive things down the timeline; hence, this “companion” is not a retelling of singular biblical books. This concept allows the authors to mention particularly the prophetess Huldah and to stress the “women stories” of the Bible such as Ruth, Esther, and Judith.

However, the concentration on biblical persons leads to the complete omission of the Psalms, which is a pity on the one hand but rather is a methodological necessity on the other: How and where would one integrate the Psalter in such a biblical storyline? If one associated it with David (monarchic period), what would one do with Ps 137, the “rivers of Babylon”? This text is explicitly mentioned in the context of exile. A book one might also miss is Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus), since other “Apocrypha” (or deuterocanonical books) such as Tobit, 1-2 Maccabees, Judith, and Wisdom of Solomon are explicitly mentioned and integrated.

The treatment of the New Testament is interesting and unconventional: First, in the “Intertestamental Period,” Sophia in Wisdom of Solomon and Jesus of Nazareth are juxtaposed in one “era.” The “New Testament Period” itself focuses on three areas:

“Jewish Christianity,” represented by Matthew, James, and Jude; “Gentile Christianity” in two fractions: Mark and Luke on the one side, Paul and 1-2 Peter on the other. The Johannine corpus (“The Johannine Communities”) is presented as an “Alternative to the Great Church.”

Unfortunately some shortcomings and mistakes need to be mentioned: The book opens with two accurately drawn maps, but one wonders why only the “Journey of Nehemiah” and “The World of Numbers-Deuteronomy” (in this sequence!) deserve to be illustrated by a map (and it should be “EDOM, not “EDON,” in the second map [ix]). In addition, page 2 states, “The first [story of origin] runs from Genesis 1:1–2:4,” but it should read 2:3, since on page 3 the second account is correctly delimited as “Genesis 2:4–3:24.” (The distinction 2:4a and 2:4b goes back to source criticism, which is not at issue at all here, so one should accept the text-internal sign of segmentation, i.e., the *toledot*-formula in 2:4a, as an indicator to begin a new section.) Moreover, the psalm mentioning the topic of creation is Ps 104, not 105 (3). In most of the cases the retelling makes clear what goes back to the Bible’s position and what facts one can know from a historical point of view. However, when coming to Ezra-Nehemiah, one wonders how the clearly fictitious “edict of Cyrus” in Ezra 1 can be called “a fairly accurate version” (45) and how the highly complicated problem of the historical and chronological relationship between Ezra and Nehemiah can be downplayed (46). However, one also finds here (45) a very helpful explanation of the meaning and pragmatics of the long lists in Ezra 2 and Neh 7: the question is not how factual this list is “but rather what you can infer from the stress on lineage and bloodlines now in postexilic Judah.” These lists legitimize the returnees from the Babylonian exile as the “true Israel” superior to the “people of the land.”

Thus, the few remarks on shortcomings may not diminish the overall positive impression this reviewer got from this little book. It does not replace the reading of the Bible but invites one to such a reading—and aptly guides one where to begin and where to go on. Getting here the overall panorama, one will be better able to appreciate and understand the single stories and characters of the Bible. Consequently, the first audience will be laypeople interested in the Bible and looking for some help to get started (again and again). But this book is also a helpful bedtime story for a biblical scholar: From time to time one might start to forget the forest when seeing all those different trees. In other words, inquiring about every little detail of a single pericope is an important thing, but one should not forget to integrate this detailed reading into the whole thing called the Bible, which, in a sense, forms a larger unity shedding always an interesting light on the single text at issue. *The INTERFACES Biblical Storyline Companion* helps one in a fresh and unconventional way to grasp (again) the beautiful and sophisticated *arrangement* of the biblical messages that is indeed a message of its own.