



BRILL

## *Book Reviews*



Jason M.H. Gaines. *The Poetic Priestly Source*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015. Pp. xix + 525.

This book, a substantial revision of Gaines's 2013 Brandeis University dissertation, presents a systematic investigation of a novel idea: certain passages aligned with the priestly source in the Pentateuch (and perhaps also in the Hexateuch) are written in a rather poetic style, and consequently these passages constitute a self-standing literary work – the poetic Priestly source. The idea that certain parts of P may evoke some poetic qualities is not new, but this book provides the first attempt to form a methodology for critically assessing such impressions and to perform a wide-ranging application of that method. Whether or not the larger conclusions regarding an originally independent poetic Priestly source should ever prove correct, the results of this inquiry are compelling to such an extent that all further research into the Priestly narrative must now take this hypothesis into account.

The book is sold in both print and digital formats. Having seen both, I wonder if Fortress Press is actively trying to dissuade readers from their print offerings, for the quality of the printing and graphics in the hardcopy is quite poor, especially in comparison with the crisp display of the digital version. Also in the realm of appearances, I fear that the volume's sheer size, nearly 550 pages in total, may well be enough to ward off many would-be readers. Lest one be too quickly dissuaded by such heft, the book is well written with few errors of any import, and like many works that have their genesis in a Ph.D. dissertation, it can be successfully dissected into manageable portions.

The first chapter largely presents an overview of scholarly approaches towards Hebrew poetry from Lowth to the present day; those familiar with the literature may largely dispense with this chapter and appeal instead to the listing of poetic features in the appendix (pp. 464-67). Incidentally, the chapter is in fact a particularly well-constructed summary and I have successfully assigned it as a first introductory reading in my classes on Hebrew poetry. The broad strokes of Gaines's thesis are presented in Chapters Two, Three, and the

conclusion. Chapters Four, Five, and Six provide the detailed argumentation for the differentiation and extraction of the poetic Priestly source. Nearly 100 pages of bibliography, appendices, and indices occupy the hinter part of the book.

The crux of Gaines's arguments lies upon a distinction between poetic and prosaic material in the Pentateuch. Given the opacity of Hebrew verse structure, Gaines rightly admits of no definitive criteria for determining whether a given passage is poetry. Rather, he advocates for the use of a weighted accounting of the poetic features which he describes in Chapter One and enumerates in the appendix in order to situate passages somewhere on a spectrum between the two poles of poetry and prose. The result of this is that passages with many poetic features (especially those features that are more determinative) are more solidly poetic and those with fewer or none are largely prosaic. A simple and obvious proposition, but nonetheless necessary for his analysis, since his poetic passages in the Priestly sections of the Pentateuch do admit of fewer poetic features on average than other books of Hebrew poetry, such as Psalms.

So what mass of poetic features is necessary for a passage to round the bend from prose to poetry? "[A] line of poetry contains on average sixteen poetic sub-features; in comparison, prose sentences average only four ... other factors beyond the presence of poetic features contribute evidence in borderline cases, such as in verses with seven or twelve poetic elements" (p. 89). That being the case, the statistics alone are not definitive and the reader must also assess Gaines's detailed arguments for or against categorizing any given passage as poetic or prosaic. Generally speaking, Gaines evinces a good literary sensibility in such arguments, and I have found myself more often than not in agreement with his ultimate classification.

The main thesis of the book has implications for models of the literary development of the Priestly portion of the Pentateuch since it argues based on literary concerns that an older poetic narrative has been reworked through later prosaic additions. Gaines provides several examples of instances where his approach dovetails with other theories, such as the growing appreciation of wide ranging alterations in line with H, but also where it disagrees with ideas, such as the end of P<sup>g</sup>. In this regard, Gaines wonders if the end of P might actually be found in the poetic passage Josh. 21:43-45 (but no other part of Joshua belongs to the poetic Priestly source), thus anticipating further questions about the development of the Hexateuch, etc. These and larger issues related to Pentateuchal development will certainly be destined for further debate and reflection. Whatever may be said of those matters, I do think that at the very least the core of the thesis must stand: a significant portion of the Priestly

source contains material in an elevated, rather poetic, diction in marked distinction to other more prosaic material.

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