

Craig G. Bartholomew, *The God Who Acts in History: The Significance of Sinai*

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Ben Fulford

Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Chester, Chester, UK (b.fulford@chester.ac.uk)

This book is a study in special divine action and the interpretation of biblical texts with respect to the Sinai event narrated in Exodus 19–40 in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. While the Sinai theophany was of considerable importance to several major figures in pre-modern Christian tradition, its significance has been eclipsed, for the most part, in debates about faith and history in modern Christian theology by a focus on Jesus' ministry, miracles and resurrection. It is therefore welcome and of great interest that in this book Bartholomew raises the historicity of Sinai and the significance of its rendering of the God of Israel as a question of importance for Christian theology.

Sinai has, of course, remained of enormous importance to modern Jewish scholarship, as Bartholomew shows. One of the merits of the book is its engagement with Jewish scholars to broach and explore the central themes of the book, and that Bartholomew resists the temptation for a Christian thinker to move quickly to Christian reflection on the Christ event as a way of resolving the theological questions raised by Jewish thinkers. The central motivating question here is the puzzle of why several prominent Jewish biblical scholars (and also several notable Christian exegetes) affirm the fundamental importance of the Sinai event for Israel and the Hebrew Bible, yet are agnostic about whether it actually took place. As Bartholomew rightly notes, this raises the questions of whether the historicity of Sinai matters; whether the question of its historicity can be bracketed from any appropriation of the narrative; and how we should assess its historicity, if it is important (p. 8).

Bartholomew also draws on Jewish interlocutors to outline alternative approaches to these questions. Benjamin Sommers represents a participatory view of revelation as dialogue which makes use of historical criticism as hermeneutical tool and takes account critical and moral issues raised by a close reading of the texts. Here biblical texts are part of the wider Jewish tradition which responds to the eternal, non-verbal revelation of the transcendent God, which evokes them and imbues them with the sense of divine command. Bartholomew stresses Sommers' debt to Maimonides' rationalist negative theology and finds a different approach exemplified by Judah Halevi and Michael Wyschogrod. Halevi represents for Bartholomew a welcome assertion of God's vocal, historical self-revelation to Israel at Sinai, an event interrupting natural laws, and fitly communicated in anthropomorphic, sensory and narrative terms, and its primacy over reason and philosophy. Wyschogrod similarly emphasises the historical election of Israel and YHWH's freedom, as Lord of language, to reveal Godself through language. Likewise, in respect of Christian theology, Bartholomew agrees with Colin Gunton's critique of Thomas Aquinas' 'classical theism' as neglecting the Old Testament for Greek philosophy and so producing dualistic oppositions of God–creation, immanent–transcendent (the Aquinas recovered by scholars like Burrell,

Levering and others is barely recognisable at times here). In Gunton he finds a view of God's perfections as knowable in God's acts, in the divine economy, narrated in scripture and describable in human language empowered by God.

At various points in his argument, Bartholomew argues that historical-critical approaches to biblical narrative assume a philosophical naturalism indebted to Spinoza and Kant, as made explicit by Sommer but often not considered by other biblical scholars. Over against those assumptions, Bartholomew draws on a range of sources to sketch an account of special divine revelatory action like that portrayed in the Sinai traditions. Such action must be understood against the background of Karl Barth's account of God's providential preservation, accompanying and ruling of creation. In that context, Bartholomew forwards (but does not clearly explain) Alvin Plantinga's conclusion that special divine action is consistent with the laws that science describes. He endorses Christoph Schwöbel's account of revelation as a species of God's sovereign action whereby God discloses God's identity through historical action and its narrative representation, to human recipients, in an efficacious, enlivening, sanctifying manner. Broadly similar theological work has been done elsewhere (e.g. by Murray Rae), but its articulation in application to the Sinai traditions seems a distinctive contribution to recent debates about faith, history and theological interpretation of scripture.

These elements constitute the theistic paradigm Bartholomew brings to the Sinai narratives. Bartholomew briefly makes the case, in effect, that the coherent literary meaning of the Exodus traditions, the Sinai events and the name YHWH are such that their significance for Israel and the world in biblical traditions requires that the revelation of YHWH, the holy, transcendent Creator of all, took place in theophany and spoken law. He defends the historicity of this event of Special Divine Action, notwithstanding its theological literary rendering, in part by appeal to his theistic paradigm, in part in terms of the similarities between the covenant and theophany and parallels in the ancient Near East, and by appeal to the unique distinctives of these stories against that background: what else could account for their distinctives, but the events narrated?

Bartholomew covers a lot of ground in this argument, working rapidly through the myriad voices he discusses. It reads like a prolegomenon to a future larger work (to which he refers). In part the result is that one wishes at least some steps in argument toward the end of the book could have been laid out in greater depth, with more extensive discussion of alternative views. One suspects the full complexity of those source, literary and historical critical issues, and how one's view of divine action bears upon them, needs fuller exploration. Above all, the book raises but does not address how Bartholomew's theistic paradigm relates to typical patterns of modern historical judgement and their assumptions about the variegated homogeneity and interconnected nature of historical events (as analysed by Ernst Troeltsch and Van Harvey, for example), and how that works out for making judgements of historical probability about God speaking at Sinai.

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