

## Book reviews

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Helen Oppenheimer, *On Being Someone: A Christian Point of View* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2011), pp. 225. \$29.95.

In this follow-up to her 2006 volume *What a Piece of Work: On Being Human*, Helen Oppenheimer revisits questions with which she has been engaging across her long career. In particular, this book reprises themes from 1973's *Incarnation and Immanence*: what is it to be an embodied person? How should I understand myself as simultaneously a discrete individual and embedded in webs of community? What difference does it make if this community exists and develops within the love of God? It would have been instructive to see closer criticism of the more recent debates in the field which feed into Oppenheimer's own work. Links with some of this scholarship are pointed up briefly, but fuller treatments of them – and accounts of where Oppenheimer parts company from them – would go far to help readers less conversant with the field to contextualise her work.

*On Being Someone* ranges widely – which makes the book richly textured, drawing in literary and other allusions, but sometimes renders its trajectory slightly oblique. It is divided into three sections, on Humanity, Divinity and Generosity. In the third and richest of these, Oppenheimer concludes that hospitality to other human beings – broadly understood as a proper recognition of their personhood – is appropriate precisely because it foreshadows and participates in God's bounteous eschatological welcome of all. This links back to the first, long section on Humanity, in which specificities of hard ethical cases are contextualised in a Buberian account of others as 'Thous' (which Oppenheimer usefully complicates, noting that there are some persons not easily categorised as either 'It' or 'Thou' who nonetheless have their own dignity). With her usual generosity, Oppenheimer refuses to caricature either 'pro-life' or 'pro-choice' positions in the abortion debate, but nonetheless holds that a complex account of when and how life begins is the only one which can do justice to the ambiguities surrounding beginning-of-life issues both within biology and throughout the Christian tradition. Indeed, she argues, 'The belief that the soul develops gradually is as responsible a position as the all-or-nothing stance that abortion kills a child' (p. 80). In this way, Oppenheimer's detailed study of abortion becomes synecdoche for her broader account of personhood: 'Mattering does not have to be an all-or-nothing notion. To take seriously

how special people are does not mean thinking of their significance as an indisputable claim arising instantly, all complete, at a particular moment' (p. 90).

In addition, Oppenheimer asserts that human beings' worth exists irreducibly in spite of, and not in exclusion from, their sinfulness and unworthiness. Her humanism and broad church Anglicanism combine to form a deeply dignified account of persons. 'Being someone', and affirming the 'someone-ness' of others, means holding human worthiness and unworthiness in tension without erasing either. As a result, despite our lack of desert, 'Human beings can be ministers of grace and take part in redeeming one another. Reconciliation has a foothold in human nature . . . Finite and precarious though human value is, what God has created is not a sham' (pp. 200–1). God is genuinely pleased by the efforts of humans and our attempts at moral understanding and wisdom, just as a parent recognises even infant scribbles as valuable works of art.

I would have welcomed a closer account of disability in this volume, particularly the implications for Christian understandings of personhood on the existence of those people who are apparently entirely unable to relate to others because of severe intellectual disability. Is their redemption to be entirely eschatological? Oppenheimer's down-to-earth approach would have been valuable here. Nonetheless, the volume remains an accessible and robust engagement with what it is to be a person in Christian philosophical terms.  
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James Carleton Paget, *Jews, Christians and Jewish Christians in Antiquity*, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament*, 251 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), pp. 538. \$257.50.

This collection of articles ranges from short pieces, such as an essay on a sentence of the Epistle of Barnabas, to detailed surveys of literature on the question of definitions and identities. Nine of these essays have been recently published, but three are published for the first time in this volume, along with an introduction (chapter 1).

In this introduction, Carleton Paget notes the challenge of Boyarin's *Border Lines* (2004), and overall as one reads this collection, one cannot be unaware of Boyarin's hypothesis looming over Paget's industries of the past two decades. In fact, it sometimes seems that the unifying theme of the volume is that the essays all in some way may bear upon Boyarin.