

Review of Seizo Sekine, *Philosophical Interpretations of the Old Testament*. Translated by J. Randall Short, Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 458, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014.

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Philosophical Interpretations of the Old Testament provides a partial translation and supplementation of an earlier Japanese monograph by Sekine for a western audience. In his introduction, Sekine compares traditional historical criticism (including source criticism, form criticism, etc.) with philosophical interpretation, which involves “the fusion of horizons and in interpretive conflict” (11). He then sets forth the primary purpose of the book: to apply philosophical hermeneutics to the problems of monotheism in a contemporary context where the sole deity described by the Bible is seen by many as immoral, irrelevant, and philosophically incoherent.

Part one, “The Old Testament and Philosophy,” begins with chapter one, “Philosophical Interpretations of the Sacrifice of Isaac: Inquiring into the True Significance of the Akedah.” Genesis 22 has attracted a surprising amount of attention from a wide range of thinkers. Sekine begins with Kierkegaard’s reading of Abraham as one possessing commendable faith to do even the seemingly unethical, which Westermann critiqued on the grounds that the narrative highlights God’s goodness, not Abraham’s; Sekine finds Westermann’s reading dubious on the grounds that the actions of God in the story are hardly praiseworthy. Kant’s appraisal (and the similar suggestion by Buber), that Abraham should have questioned exactly which God was speaking to him, is dismissed by Sekine as historically anachronistic. Levinas found it significant that Abraham was able to hear the voice forbidding him to sacrifice Isaac even after having committed to killing his son on the basis of a voice, while Derrida’s most crucial point concerns how the response to the “wholly other” (God) involves the renunciation of all “others” (Isaac). After reviewing Miyamoto’s interpretation (which focuses on the corporate personality of Abraham and Isaac), Sekine dismisses all of these readings as unworthy, since they fail to solve the abhorrent behaviour of both God and Abraham. Sekine then provides a short excursus considering various theories of compositional layers in the narrative, and engages in an imaginative exercise of reconstructing the dialogue that must have unfolded among the parties. Sekine’s conclusion to this chapter chides biblical scholars for being generally unwilling to ask the uncomfortable questions this narrative raises about the character of God, who, in Sekine’s opinion, irrationally puts Abraham and Isaac to the test even in the face of their continual “self-negation” (68). His solution to this dilemma is to adopt a “panentheistic” perspective, in which, “the absolute being embraces within himself relative beings who negate himself, and he is relative to them” (69).

Chapter two, “The Paradox of Suffering: Comparing Second Isaiah and Socrates,” seeks to explore avenues for understanding theodicy in the Old

Testament beyond the usual conversational partners of the broader prophetic corpus and the death of Jesus in the New Testament. Sekine's analysis of the "servant songs" of Isaiah makes strategic use of Weber's interpretation of theodicy in the prophets and draws out the fact that the meaning of the servant's suffering—the substitutionary atonement he accomplished—was only clear after the servant's death. Socrates, in contrast, trusted in rationality and did not fear death (while for the servant, death was ugly and seemingly senseless). In light of the fact that suffering was nothing more than the "achievement of egoism" for Socrates (84), the apparently meaningless death of the suffering servant takes on the radical character of "the ultimate dynamism of conquering egoism" (85).

In chapter three, "Reconstructing Old Testament Monotheism: A Dialogue between Old Testament Studies and Philosophy," Sekine seeks to "deconstruct" the problematic aspects of monotheism while retaining the aspects that possess "revelatory power" (90). He begins noting that historically, monotheism has often led to inappropriate levels of human self-confidence and the justification of colonization and exploitation. Reviewing the Old Testament presentation of God, Sekine notes that God is depicted as guiding Israel in military endeavours and using foreign peoples to discipline Israel, both of which are balanced by Qoheleth's reduction of God from an author of world events to one who provides immanent pleasures. He then returns to advocating the panentheism of chapter one in which the only coherent presentation of God as absolute means God's being contains self-negation; this concept is then said to be useful for enabling humans to understand the atonement as the rejection of egoism.

Part two, "Old Testament Thought and the Modern World," begins with chapter four, "Modern Aspects of the Old Testament Understanding of God: Qohelet, Schoenberg, Jung." Here, the complaint of Qoheleth against the prosperity of the wicked is juxtaposed with the apologia for idolatry that is Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* and also with Jung's scathing evaluation of a God who blames Job for what, in fact, God did. Sekine also offers some reflection on what believers can learn from these critiques.

Chapter five, "Towards Regenerating Ethics: Seeking an Ordered Path of Joyful Coexistence," begins with a discussion of postmodern responses to unethical behaviour. While it may be natural to respond to a devastating war crime with a mixture of empathy and anger, postmodernists would often prefer to critique attempts at instilling value as simply being ways to preserve the status quo. Sekine begins his response to this postmodern posture by noting that the Old Testament may be said to reject murder on two major grounds, or orders: creation, or the principle that all "has been given us in advance by something that absolutely transcends us" (141), and salvation, or the "insubstantial magnetic field of love" (143) which draws all away from egoism. As a means for following these two "orders," Sekine suggests seven paths: religion, philosophy, and science as the basis of proactive education; law, politics, and art as a means of rehabilitating the broken; and "the art of discovering good things" (156), or thankfulness, as a means of inspiring people to joyful coexistence.

Part three, "The Prophets and Soteriology," begins with chapter six, "A Genealogy of Prophetic Salvation: Isaiah, Second Isaiah, and Jeremiah." Here, Sekine traces Isaiah's suffering servant and Jeremiah's new covenant as two innovative means of salvation. In chapter seven, "The Prophets and Deuteronomism: The Book of Jeremiah," he notes the multiple proposals that

have arisen regarding the passages about true and false prophecy in Jeremiah being the products of later additions by Deuteronomic redactors. Sekine then isolates the “new covenant” theme in Jeremiah and examines its authorship and its continuity and discontinuity with the theology of Deuteronomy. He concludes by summarizing the main differences between the thought of the authentic passages of Jeremiah and those of the Deuteronomistic editors: the latter envisioned a works-based salvation and a God who operated in terms of moral causality, while the former proclaimed the people’s drastic need for divine mediation.

Part four, “Old Testament Studies in Japan,” contains only chapter eight, “Old Testament Studies in Japan: A Retrospect and Prospects.” Here, Sekine gives a history of major research accomplishments by Japanese scholars in Old Testament Studies and then proceeds to offer some thoughts on what this enterprise could look like in the future. He suggests that the most promising avenues of inquiry may be found by letting current societal and ethical issues relevant in Japan set the agenda.

The use of modern and postmodern philosophical categories as a means to interrogate the text has been relatively underutilized in Hebrew Bible studies, in contrast to the vast literature that has accumulated under this umbrella in New Testament research, and this volume does much to make up this disparity. One observation, however, would be that Sekine’s greatest strength—his leveraging of the controversies relevant to Japanese thought (such as the summary of Japanese critiques of monotheism on pp. 90-92 and discussion of supposed ethical decay in Japanese society on pp. 134-35)—could potentially also be a factor limiting dialogue with scholars from other backgrounds. While it is valuable for non-Japanese readers to be acquainted with the questions and assumptions Sekine seeks to address, some of his argumentation may fail to land with the intended effect with other audiences. For example, his advocacy of pantheism would likely be rather dimly received by some members of a western audience, as the necessarily hasty philosophical support he provides (primarily his claim that the concept of a being that is simultaneously absolute and personal is incoherent) does not interact sufficiently with the standard arguments for (or against!) traditional monotheism. Additionally, his assertion that traditional monotheism is no longer tenable due to some of the actions of its proponents could likely be challenged on the grounds that plundering and egoistic behaviour is hardly confined to monotheism. However, these shortcomings in no way detract from the immensely stimulating read that is *Philosophical Interpretations of the Old Testament*.



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