

What is it to be the people of God in the Ancient Near East? A review of SandyJo Rogers' PhD thesis *A Fresh Start Comes from God: Theological, Historical, and Sociological Background of the Clean-Slate Acts of Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15*

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Review

Defended on May 11, 2020 at the Theological Faculty under exceptional circumstances due to the measures taken to slow the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, SandyJo Rogers in her PhD thesis explores the theological foundation of the people's statuses in the Ancient Israel and Judah and their relationship to God through their organisation as a society. In contrary to many theological authors, SandyJo Rogers does not question the truth of the related events nor focus on dating the studied texts (chapter 5) but on the socio-cultural background of the society's organisation. Rogers focuses brilliantly on the sociological, cultural and theological background of the clean-slate acts of the Hebrew Bible, i.e., the Year of Jubilee in Leviticus 25 and the *Šemittah* Year and the Law of Slave Release in Deuteronomy 15:1-18. Rogers focuses on the Near-East tradition by comparing those clean-slate acts from the Hebrew Bible with existing edicts promulgated by diverse Kings, especially of Amīšaduqa and fragments of an edict from Samsuiluna (chapter 3), both from the Old Babylonian period, as well as with Neo-Assyrian edicts (chapter 4), to reflect on the broader Ancient Mesopotamian context. In Rogers' study, the socio-economic context is well researched and presented; including how the studied Laws and Acts directly influence a household's economy, as well as the servant-master relationships, be it on organisational or social levels. In a clearly structured text, the researcher shows how Deuteronomy 15 and Leviticus 25 form the idea of society and sharing as well as God's justice. Through those acts, God is placed not only as the God of the people, but also as the God of the Earth and of time, a fair God in treating fellow believers. After asserting general tendencies of the research and linguistic aspects of the ancient texts discussed, the author describes the spiral in which subjects of the kings and of God fall into slavery, from bad harvests to loans, taxes and "corvée" (an unpaid labor exacted by a feudal lord) all of which can result in indebtedness leading to loss of land and then loss of freedom (chapter 2). Rogers focuses here on the issues of loans and debt-slavery, yet she shows the ways out of it, showing the 7-years rhythms following which it is possible for a people of Israel to be freed. This is for instance the case of the Year of Jubilee in Leviticus 25 which follows a rhythm of seven times seven years, e.g. a 49 years rhythm; in the fiftieth year a jubilee year shall

take place, where the fields should be left to rest and slaves released. The exhaustive nature of the research concerning states of slaves and in peculiar the clean-slate acts must be underlined: for example, the clean-slate acts in Nehemiah's 5:1-13; insights of slavery in Egypt and the Exodus event complete the overview of the act of slave-release in the Ancient Near East cultures. Rogers also shows how the Kings used theologies to strengthen their powers, using slaves-release edicts to ground their authority. This shows the symbolic values of the studied Laws and their half-secular, half-religious status. Comparing the texts, Rogers shows that the King's edicts also play a theological role, as those are written in the name of Gods, but that the biblical texts go beyond this, as kings no longer act as mediators but rather the acts come directly from God. The clean-slate acts are thus a political and a social act; the Hebrew Bible follows the near-eastern traditions, which is innovatively shown by Rogers. The author interrogates the role of theology and justice in the Ancient Near East and discusses justice and the place of social and economic *equality* in the past. Particularly new and specific to this PhD research is the reflection on the very same definition of stately justice and of society, as well as on a society's cohesion. Those lessons from the past may be mirrored on today's societies, where the lack of cohesion and citizenship might be criticized especially in the shed of anti-pandemic protests whereas the author shows that Ancient Near East citizens accepted their fate and duties in the name of God and of the society's cohesion. Through her work, the author questions the very same idea of equality in the society and by doing so she throws a modern light onto ancient societies and their economic and social organisations by showing a commonality in questions of that time's justice with today's society. Through her analysis of biblical clean-slate acts, especially of the Year of Jubilee and the *Šemittah* Year and the Law of Slave Release, it is made clear that the people of Israel are called to be active participants in blessing and providing justice for the community, thus enacting God's will and God's justice, hence *being* the people of God.

References

Rogers, SandyJo (2020) *A Fresh Start Comes from God: Theological, Historical, and Sociological Background of the Clean-Slate Acts of Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15*, dir. Prof. Andreas Schüle, Theological Faculty, Leipzig.