

BOOK REVIEWS

Roger Burggraeve, SDB, *Each Other's Keeper? Essays on Ethics and the Biblical Wisdom of Love*, Thrissur: Marymatha Publications, 2009, Pages: 208, ISBN-13 978-81-87906-04-9

In his book *Each Other's Keeper? Essays on Ethics and the Biblical Wisdom of Love*, Prof. Emeritus Dr Roger Burggraeve, SDB, moral theologian at the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium reflects on the relationship between biblical thought and Christian ethics following the footsteps of biblical exegesis expounded by Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, which is a groundbreaking and a passionate work in the field of Christian ethics exploring the rich, novel, and varied significance of the sacred Scripture for Christian living.

Prof. Burggraeve confesses that “classic historical-philosophical exegetical investigation” of the Scripture did not satisfy him. His search “for something more meaningful, something beyond the analytical approach to the texts” began with the reading and study of Levinas. According to the author, *Each Other's Keeper?* is a continuation and culmination of his passionate philosophical and reflective search for something more meaningful in the Bible. He outlines the two ways of reading the Bible in the line of Levinas. The first one consists in “appealing to the tradition” and the second consists in “reflective and philosophical reading of the Bible.” This approach to the Bible

facilitates in making the anthropological, ethical, and metaphysical insights available in the text accessible to each and every thinking person. It involves in taking the biblical thought to “the level of discussion and interpretation” in order to reveal the “intrinsic meaning and truth value” of the text. To present and to get the readers engaged in the original dialogical context of the text is the key to this hermeneutics. It is in view of reading and interpreting the Bible in such a way that the thought about humanity, the world, history, God, good and evil and the future and the meaning of life can today still pass on orientations and perspectives for a contemporary humane civilization.

Each Other's Keeper? is an invitation to enter into biblical text and to engage in a dialogue with “the Voice of the transcendent Infinite One in the text.” There is a challenge of going beyond the external identity to the internal experience and identity of one’s faith through an encounter with the divine Other. In other words, this approach emphasizes the traditional experiential content and the philosophical interpretation of the Bible. The author summarizes this unique manner of thinking in the words of Levinas, “the wisdom of love at the service of love.” It is interesting to notice the direction Prof. Burggraeve gives to the insight of Levinas, From the ‘love of wisdom’ to the ‘wisdom of love’.

Prof. Burggraeve examines and interprets four topics in this book. They are: (1) the narrative of Cain and Abel on murder and brotherhood (Gen 4:1-15) confronted with the narrative of Abraham’s humility and intercession for Sodom (Gen 18:16-33); (2) the narrative of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37) and the heteronomous responsibility for the

other; (3) the narrative of the rich young man (Mt 19:16-19; Mk 10:17-19; Lk 18:18-20) and the prohibitions as paths to freedom and love; and (4) the story of Jonah (Jon 1-4) and the human difficulty to forgive in contrast with the disproportionate gratuity of divine mercy.

In agreement with the four topics, the book has four chapters: Chapter 1: Am I my Brother's Keeper? On the Extent and the Soul of our Responsibility; Chapter 2: The Bodiliness of Love. The Narrative of the Good Samaritan gives to Thought on our Responsibility for the Other; Chapter 3: Paths to Freedom and Love. The Narrative of the Rich Young Man gives to Thought on the Bipolarity in Ethics between Prohibition and Taste; Chapter 4: Mission Impossible. The Narrative of Jonah gives to Thought on our Difficulty in Forgiving and the Extravagance of God's Mercy. In addition to these chapters, the book has a fitting Introduction and a thought provoking Afterword: Love Sets me on the Path to God. The useful bibliography on the works of Levinas and other authors makes the book more research friendly. The Foreword by Tony Neelankavil and the six pictures of Sister Françoise Bosteels have added colour to the book.

The book is narrative and descriptive in style; hence the reading of it is interesting and involved. The philosophical and reflective reading of the biblical narratives opens up a new horizon to do ethics and to be ethical in Christian life. *Each Other's Keeper?* is a free and faithful reading and reflection of the texts, inviting the readers to be creative and critical. The conclusions to the chapters are simple and profound, highlighting the ethical import of the biblical narrative under consideration. Every chapter has a conclusion which offers a challenging insight having the quality of an adage. For example, the conclusion of the first chapter is

entitled, “Everyone for all, in the name of God who is for all.” The third chapter is concluded with the title, “Ethics as vocation.” Finally, the fourth chapter has the following concluding phrase, “To Forgive is both divine and human.”

The challenging question raised by the author, *Each Other’s Keeper?* is answered by himself elsewhere, “Everyone for all, in the name of God who is for all” (p.45). This insight and interpretation seems to be the key to the ethics of love. In making this point, Prof. Burggraeve argues philosophically and reflectively, “Only in the surrender to the boundless love of God are we made capable of that which we must do without our being able to do it. And it is precisely through this surrender to God’s love, which ‘has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us’ (Rom 5:5), that we in a divine way are able and allowed to be human and to love”(p. 195).

The book is the fruit of a long cherished and sustained search of the author for “something more meaningful, something beyond the analytical approach to the texts of Scripture.” It is a telling example of the resourcefulness of the narrative method, which, in itself, is ever old and ever new, challenging the world vision of all who read them. This is a work on God’s love, the wisdom of love, the ethics of love, which is inspiring, interesting and insightful in doing ethics and being ethical for our times. Indeed, its reading is beneficial to both scholars and students of Christian ethics.

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