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Review of 'The Grace of God and the Grace of Man' by Azzan Yadin-Israel

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Azzan Yadin-Israel

*The Grace of God and the Grace of Man: The Theologies of Bruce Springsteen*

This book is at one and the same time both traditional and innovative. In essence, it is an analysis of theological language and tropes in the lyrics of Springsteen’s extensive catalogue of songs, with little reference to their musical context or how they are received by his audience when listened to in recorded or live versions. However, this study brings a deep knowledge of Jewish and Christian ideas to Springsteen’s work, and Yadin-Israel is not only prepared to disagree with other commentators about what the lyrics mean – he is also willing to disagree on one occasion with Springsteen’s own interpretation.

*The Grace of God and the Grace of Man* is relatively short, with nine concise chapters (two of which have an excursus developing ideas further). These are divided into three sections: Part 1, ‘Early Works’; Part 2, ‘Sin, Grace, and the Struggle Within’; and Part 3, ‘Springsteen’s Midrash’. It is engaging and easy to read but that does not mean it is in any way lightweight. As the author admits, this project is a departure from his usual academic work, which involves teaching about rabbinic literature, the Dead Sea Scrolls, medieval Jewish Philosophy and Plato. The book has its genesis in a series of seminars he offered in 2013 and it feels as if his text has not strayed too far from those origins, which (for me, anyway) is part of its appeal.

In Part 1, Yadin-Israel identifies Springsteen’s early work as running from his very first songs through to his third studio album released in 1975. He argues,

The albums up to and including *Born to Run* contain a critical and a constructive argument: a critique of traditional religious symbols and institutions, alongside alternative, non-traditional moments of grace and worship. These culminate in *Born to Run*, which affirms the redemptive power of this world and holds it up as an alternative to traditional religion (80).

The relative theological coherence of Springsteen’s early work becomes more diffuse in his subsequent songs, according to Yadin-Israel. Therefore in Part 2 he draws out three recurring themes from the artist’s later catalogue, devoting a chapter each to ‘sin’, ‘grace and redemption’ and ‘the struggle within’. He believes that in Springsteen’s fourth studio album, *Darkness at the Edge of Town* (1978), the artist adopts a narrative style that ‘resonates with the Hebrew Bible’s combination of minimal emotional description and geographic...’

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specificity’ (154). This constitutes a poetic turn, which means that the characters in Springsteen’s later songs are less able to recognize and deal with the challenges they face.

The final part of the book is Yadin-Israel’s single chapter on ‘Springsteen’s Midrash’, exploring overt biblical images and language in four songs from his later work: ‘Swallowed Up (In the Belly of the Whale)’, ‘Into the Fire’, ‘Adam Raised a Cain’ and ‘Jesus Was an Only Son’. Taking just one example here, Yadin-Israel contends that ‘Adam Raised a Cain’ is an allusion to a father beating his son with a cane and that the true axis of original sin is not Adam and Eve – rather ‘[i]t passes from Adam to Cain, fathers to sons in an endless chain of anger and violence’ (174). I remain unconvinced the lyrics can fully bear this interpretive load but it does provide a good illustration of Yadin-Israel’s innovative approach to Springsteen’s songs.

In conclusion, the author states that his goal ‘has been to demonstrate the existence of a theological dimension in Springsteen’s work, and to argue that we ought [to] conceive of this dimension in the plural form, not as Springsteen’s theology, but rather as his theologies’ (179–80). Yadin-Israel acknowledges his book is ‘unfinished’ in the sense that he has not catalogued or discussed every Springsteen song that has a religious reference. And also, we may add, Springsteen continues to write and record, so who knows what further theological ideas might appear?

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