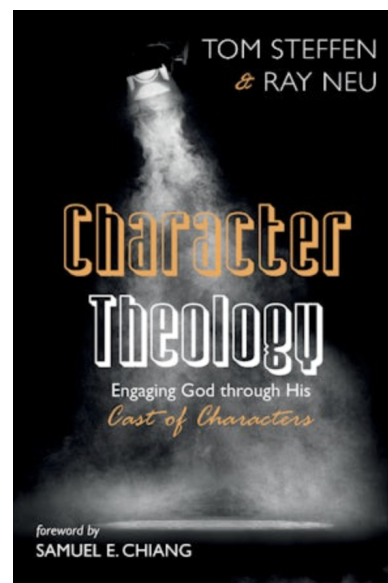


Steffen, Tom & Ray Neu. *Character Theology: Engaging God Through His Cast of Characters*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2024.

Reviewed by Cameron D. Armstrong, IMB Field Personnel, Asia Pacific Rim

What does the oral nature of Scripture mean for Bible interpreters? How can Bible teachers move from a mere explanation of God's word to an experience of the Grand Storyteller himself? Why might shifting our hermeneutical traditions become necessary in our postmodern world? In *Character Theology*, Tom Steffen and Ray Neu answer these questions by making the case for heart-level engagement with biblical characters to experience the Chief Character, Jesus. Breaking new ground, Tom Steffen, orality scholar and Biola University intercultural studies professor emeritus, teams up with Ray Neu, Spoken Worldwide's Director of Orality Coaching. This scholar-practitioner duo delivers an argument and template for doing character theology.



Steffen and Neu divide their book into two parts. Part 1 develops several elements that compose character theology, which they define (in chapter 1) in simplest terms as "engaging God through 'reading' biblical characters in the context of the story" (10). Such a task calls for understanding the various types of characters (chapter 2) presented in the Bible, including animals, spirits, and "personified entities" like rainstorms (47). In Steffen and Neu's words, "Bible characters leave behind a trail of breadcrumbs that lead to theology and ethics the Author-author wishes recipients to appropriate" (56). Orality (chapter 3) and oral hermeneutics (chapter 4) are essential in the

interpretation task. Steffen and Neu call the omission of orality in biblical narrative interpretation the "big forgot," meaning theologians forget that the words of Scripture were first transmitted by, for, and through oral societies. Discussing through character-centric questions (chapter 5) how characters change and develop enhances our understanding of God, even as we identify with the characters.

Part 2 of *Character Theology* brings the concepts taught in Part 1 to life. Ray Neu (chapter 6) details the reactions of three "Engaging Bible Characters (EBC)" groups, made up of a Filipino group, an African group, and one in Florida, USA. As Neu facilitated each group through the entire story of Jonah in a 90-minute session, deep transformational responses followed. In Chapter 7, Steffen interviews Neu about these EBC experiences, including how he, as the storyteller, was personally affected. The book concludes with a summative chapter that calls readers to start such EBC groups and drive the conversation forward.

Three noteworthy strengths stood out in *Character Theology*. First, the transparency of the authors in detailing their personal shift from textual hermeneutics to oral hermeneutics that calls for "trekking" (149) into a Bible story with all senses engaged is quite moving. Steffen and Neu are not afraid to say they missed the mark in their early years working among oral peoples. Second, the authors helpfully expand readers' understandings of what makes up a biblical character, and then model how pinpointing character development leads to not just discovering but also experiencing the Author. Third, this reviewer will not soon forget the challenge to unlearn the gut reaction of Westerners to flattening a biblical narrative into a pithy one-liner proposition. Instead, seekers ought to be free to find unexplored beauty in the multidimensional nature of biblical characters, all of whom are included with intention.

One weakness of the book is the quick flip from theory in Part 1 to participant responses in Part 2. While Steffen and Neu offer multiple rich reactions to Neu's facilitating the three EBC groups, the authors give

little attention to the research design. I found myself asking questions such as: How large were the groups? Why were these populations chosen? How did the storying process differ from other models, such as Chronological Bible Storying or Simply the Story?

Yet this weakness by no means detracts from the book's powerful message. The message remains that theology formed through the oral exploration of biblical characters in stories empowers, deepens, and transforms hearts. The authors' journey, the expanded understanding of biblical characters, and the challenge to unlearn unhelpful Western perspectives contribute to a transformative message. As Steffen and Neu point out,

Stories show rather than tell, enact rather than explain, illuminate rather than spell out, demonstrate rather than define, embody rather than conceptualize, encounter rather than detail, exhibit rather than exhort, suggest rather than state. Stories thereby intentionally leave much to the imagination and heighten emotions within the decoding community. Stories, first and foremost, speak from the heart to the heart. Stories exchange human experiences, offering a possible reimaged world. Stories create within us an insatiable hunger for more stories. Got stories? (30)