

Jaco J. Hamman, *The Millennial Narrative: Sharing a Good Life with the Next Generation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019), 205 pp.

The Millennial Narrative is intended as a resource for pastoral leaders in the Christian tradition to guide them to partner with young adults in the millennial generation (those born between 1980 and 2000). Often not drawn to the ethos of traditional Christian churches, millennials include large numbers of ‘nones,’ namely, the religiously unaffiliated frequently characterized as “spiritual but not religious” or, as Elizabeth Drescher puts it, the “free-range faithful.”

The author, Jaco Hamman, an ordained elder in the Presbyterian Church (USA), is the director of the Program in Theology and Practice and an associate professor of religion, psychology and culture at Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville. He describes himself as “a White South African.”

Hamman holds a Ph.D. from Princeton Theological Seminary (2000) and is a co-founder of Our Place Nashville, which partners with other organizations to provide “Friendship Houses” for adults with developmental disabilities. Hamman bases his narrative on the book of Joel in the Hebrew Bible, whose theme of hope, he believes, is “the story today’s young adults need to hear” (p. xxii, emphasis in original). The prophet’s primary aim in the first part of the book is to reconnect a people devastated by drought and a plague of locusts (referring literally to destructive insects or metaphorically to invading military force[s]) to God, and in the second part Joel emphasizes God’s salvation, understood both politically and spiritually.

The author reinterprets Joel’s narrative as a short story about a person who experiences the locusts of life (losses, deprivation), mourns these losses, seeks healing through the discovery of a compassionate God, and participates in God’s work of restoration. Each chapter in the book explores sequentially a passage in Joel and applies it to the contemporary scene of millennials. Action verbs serve as chapter titles: recognize (Joel 1:1–12), gather (1:13–20), discover (2:11–14, 18–27), receive 2:28–32), be accountable (3:1–17), and restore (3:18–21). (The chapter divisions correspond to those in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible rather than to those in the Hebrew Bible, which has four chapters; in either case, the content is the same).

After an introductory section of vignette(s), each chapter unfolds with an analysis of the pertinent passage from Joel—regularly, Hebrew terms are named and explained—followed by contemporary examples, a reflection coauthored by a millennial, an exploration of five practices related to the

subject (for example, showing empathy, accountability, bracketing, transparency), and final thoughts on putting the theme into action.

I'm struck by the parallel style between Joel's narrative and that of Hamman's. Both authors draw upon an abundance of sources to illustrate their theme, giving their respective narratives the quality of an anthology. Hamman has clearly done his homework; he lists over a thousand entries in the bibliography and the footnotes fill more than thirty pages. From a stylistic perspective, the reader may find the recurrent, often numbered, lists, steps, questions, and recommendations—while helpful—to be tedious.

Hamman touches on the theme of theodicy lightly (pp. 9, 60). The issue is not just why a compassionate God would allow the locusts (p. 65) but, more startling, why such a God would be “at the head of his army” of locusts (Joel 2:11). What is the role of God in natural disasters or, on an individual level, in the personal losses experienced by millennials? Joel does not blame either of these on moral failure, whether the infidelity of a people or the sin of the individual. I wonder how Hamman would handle this theme in his conversation with millennials. On two other topics, the author suggests that “many millennial leaders are priests to their peers” who assist others in finding the sacred in the ordinary (p. 43), and he opines that “sin . . . and the need for personal salvation are themes and a language whose time may have passed” (p. 119). Regarding the latter, I wonder whether such an assessment is premature.

Incidentally, the book of Joel has an uncanny relevance on a larger scale to what is presently unfolding on national and global levels. Joel portrays cataclysmic events that rocked the Judeans; today, we are hit with the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, the raging wildfires in California (I am writing this review in southern California in September 2020), the parade of hurricanes descending upon Louisiana and neighboring states, and the drought in the West. Joel announces a reversal of fortunes brought about through the saving acts of God. This is itself a source of much hope, even as the immediate future seems far from certain.

Pastors and community leaders who face the challenge of engaging the millennial generation will find several helpful tips in this resource. It may bring them a sense of renewed hope regarding how to connect with young adults who place high value on relationships and coming together, although such gatherings usually do not take place in a traditional church setting.

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