

Book REVIEW

Jonathan Weiner, *His Brother's Keeper; A Story from the Edge of Medicine*, (HarperCollins, 2004). ISBN 006001007X

—Reviewed by Ralph D. Winter

Weiner already is justly famous (Pulitzer Price and all that) for his book *The Beak of the Finch*, which is an exploration of the Darwinian process. Elegant, crafted prose characterise his writing style. As Writer-In-Residence at the Rockefeller University, which is devoted to the “edge of medicine,” Weiner brings to his task outstanding technical resources as well as superb reconstructions of actual dialogue.

The book jacket succinctly sums up the nature of this true story:

Stephen Heywood was twenty-nine years old when he learned that he was dying of ALS—Lou Gehrig’s disease. Almost overnight his brother, Jamie, turned himself into a genetic engineer in a quixotic race to cure the incurable. *His Brother’s Keeper* is a powerful account of their story, as they travel together to the edge of medicine.

The book brings home for all of us the hopes and fears of the new biology. In this dramatic and suspenseful narrative, Jonathan Weiner gives us a remarkable portrait of science and medicine today. We learn about gene therapy, stem cells, brain vaccines, and other novel treatments for such nerve-death diseases as ALS, Alzheimer’s, and Parkinson’s—diseases that afflict millions, and touch the lives of many more.

To do this book, to record actual conversations, Weiner had practically to become another member of the family. It is both thrilling and foreboding to be introduced into the inner sanctum of medical research and science through the actual blow-by-blow events in this tumultuous saga.

There are a number of good reasons to bring this book to the attention of our

readers. The author is Jewish, some of the main characters are nominal church-goers, but theology or the purposes of God are not featured at all. Yet the pervasive influence of conventional Christian theology is evident. I speak of what might be called the Augustinian pendulum swing away from Zoroastrian dualism (two gods, one good and one evil) to a neoplatonist perspective that has God doing everything, an evil intelligence effectively absent.

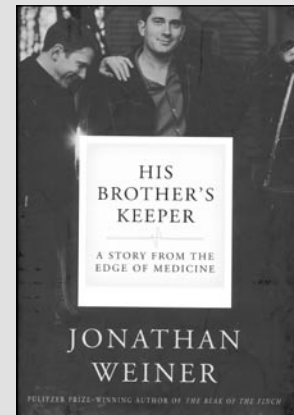
Thus, revealingly, at one point the diary of the pregnant wife of the dying man records, “Dear God—why are you killing Stephen?”

This is a question readily answered in terms of the purposes of God. “To underscore the shortness and uncertainty of life.” “To draw people closer to Him.” Etc. But, at the same time we need to ask whether in fact Stephen’s death really is the direct result of a divine decision or the result of Satanic evil initiative that has resulted merely from God conferring on angels and men freedom of will (thus allowing for rebellion).

If the latter—if the cause is Satanically inspired—then a whole new set of questions emerges: “What may God be expecting us to do to defeat the works of Satan in this case?” “How can we encourage the necessary research to defeat this particular malady?”

Curiously, the entire book is the story of a mad dash to the laboratories to defeat this particular malady. But this motivation is not inspired by any very visible theology or mission vision. Furthermore, and, as the book vividly describes, there is mixed into altruism a huge amount of personal interest, financial gain, fame, etc.

Again and again this book-length dramatic scenario reveals the basically financial considerations and lumbering bureaucracies which prevent the pharmaceutical industry from going after anything that is not certain to turn a profit and soon. Note that this is not something that is to be bewailed, it is not a call for the scolding of doctors and pharmaceutical



companies for doing only what they are paid to do. Even the federal government is mainly working indirectly for the pharmaceuticals.

Rather it is a call for a totally different support system. This is where the world of the “non-government organizations” should come into the picture. People who support missions don’t expect to get their money back. Missionaries work on problems which at least in the early days don’t pay their way. The Howard Hughes Medical Institute does not depend on grants from pharmaceuticals to tie its hands and guide its selection of projects, but very little can be compared to the HHMI.

Instead of railing at the medical industry and the pharmaceutical industry for focusing on people who are already sick rather than working strategically for the understanding of the origin of disease, what is needed is a radically different mechanism of advance.

Historically, nothing compares to the steady, intelligent, compassionate nation building of the missionary movement. Currently nothing compares to its fairly immediate potential. Missions could decide to work toward the destruction of the most virulent disease germs in the Name of Christ and for the glory of God. They could, if (and only if) the Evangelical movement can somehow rise above and get beyond a major barrier reflected in this woman’s cry “Dear God—why are you killing Stephen?” That barrier, that blindness is the result of the Augustinian aberration regarding the recognition of various forms of evil to be deliberately fought.