



Reviews

SEX, WIVES, AND WARRIORS: READING BIBLICAL NARRATIVE WITH ITS ANCIENT AUDIENCE by Philip F. Esler, *Cascade Books*, Eugene, Oregon, 2011, pp. xi + 408, \$ 41.33 pbk

When I was at school, an important element of the lessons then known as ‘Scripture’ was what was usually introduced as ‘background’. By this was meant relevant historical and related matters that were known from sources outside the Bible which might be closely related to the familiar text. They not only illuminated some otherwise mysterious elements but, more to the point, they lent a greater credence to the historicity of what was written.

It shows how far we have come in the business of biblical interpretation that Esler has managed to write a work of ‘background’ so radically different from the previous paradigm that not only is he more or less careless about how historical the narratives that he is analysing may be, but in some respects he succeeds in making them live in a hitherto unsuspected manner. As with some of his previous publications, he illustrates here the approach for which he now has an international reputation of drawing on the methods and insights of the social sciences—and anthropology in particular—which enable us to read familiar tales with fresh appreciation.

Two lengthy introductory chapters set the methodological bases for the readings that will follow. In my opinion this is a tactical mistake. They are the toughest chapters to read and may well put off the intelligent lay readers whom Esler has partly within his sights. The first chapter, indeed, seems to me more or less unnecessary in the context of this book as it discusses who reads biblical narratives and why. It also includes a brief survey of the seven basic plots into which Christopher Booker thought he could reduce every form of story; several of these feature prominently in the following analysis. The second chapter introduces an understanding of social anthropology of the ancient Mediterranean world, with particular reference to family issues (which stretch much wider than our nuclear family, of course); oft-cited but rarely understood pairings such as honour and shame or patron and client, and a range of related matters such as group orientation and limited good, are introduced and explained.

It is true that all these will be of great importance in the chapters that follow. However, it is usual for Esler then helpfully to reiterate the matters that he has here introduced at such length (approaching a quarter of the whole text). His book would have been more inviting if he could have got us into his informed story-telling very much quicker, with, perhaps, an epilogue or appendix for the technical issues which, as a scholar, he is anxious to expound.

The essential point that all this amounts to, as Esler emphasizes on a number of occasions, is that for his purpose it does not matter whether the stories as told in the Bible are historical or not. They were, however, told in a world where these social structures and conventions were taken for granted, so that we cannot do them justice if we try to read them through the lens of modern Western values. So his research is in that sense historical, even if the narratives may or may not relate closely to the events of history as such. And on this basis he proceeds to work through eight narratives, demonstrating time and again that sometimes the whole narrative structure and sometimes a particular phrase

or even single word has point and significance that previous commentators have usually overlooked or misunderstood. Under the heading of wives we have the stories of Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) and of Hannah (1 Samuel 1–2); under warriors we find Saul (1 Samuel 8–31), David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17), David's rise to power (1 Samuel 19–2 Samuel 5), and Judith; finally, under sex we have David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 10–12)—curiously the one that seemed to me to be least illuminated—and Amnon's rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13). So this is a spicy selection, and Esler's good writing style makes the reading fully absorbing.

It is obviously not possible in the space of a review to pick out all the details which make these narratives meaningful as we learn to read them, so to speak, with the eyes of an ancient Israelite. For me one of the most successful chapters was that on Hannah, with her husband Elkanah and his other wife Penninah. The family dynamics here are obviously something quite outside our modern experience, but Esler draws on anthropological fieldwork undertaken among Palestinians in the 1920s and 1930s to make sense of many aspects of the relationships and their interactions in 1 Samuel 1 in ways which render the text intelligible even to those of us who thought we were very familiar with so well-known a tale. The order of narration, the location of the scenes and the details of the dialogues fall into place in a wholly fresh manner.

Esler insists from time to time that his work is intended to reach further than simply explaining a narrative more adequately than before. He claims in addition that his method has significant theological pay-off. He does not go into this in much detail, however, so that this twenty-first century reader, at least, was left wondering how far this was determined by market pressures. Of course, for committed Christians and Jews the narratives of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament are an integral part of our inheritance in the faith; to that extent they are inevitably theological. But readers who expect to find here an immediate contribution to their systematics will be disappointed. But not really; for anyone who approaches these narratives with that sort of expectation will be shutting themselves off from the riches that they have to offer in terms of human beings in real life—made all the more real by Esler's insights—as they struggle in their relationships with all their joys and heartaches, sometimes in contact with the divine and sometimes less so, but always recalled in a manner that causes us to reflect more profoundly on the path through life that neither then nor now is guaranteed to be smooth.

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CAPTIVE TO THE WORD: ENGAGING THE SCRIPTURES FOR CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION by Miroslav Volf, *Eerdemans, Grand Rapids, 2010, pp.viii + 180, £ 11.99 pbk*

A new essay collection by such a reliably high calibre thinker as Miroslav Volf is always a welcome addition to a body of work. Collections like these enable the reader to see the 'working out in the margins' of the manuscripts that become the author's books. Observing the development and exploration of ideas is both fascinating and informative as a lesson in the pursuing and structuring compelling work. This is a summary collection of previously published essays which, by being united under one title, will hopefully reach a wider audience. The final essay was written exclusively for this collection (and is markedly relevant given that its topic is economics) and there is a lengthy discursive introduction which argues the case for why Scripture should be read theologically.