

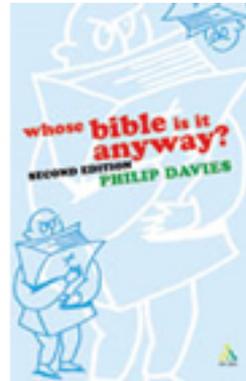
○ GOLDEN OLDIES

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George Aichele reviews:

Shimon Bar-Efrat's *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series; 70. London: T&T Clark International; 2004. pp. 295. ISBN 0567084957). And;

Philip Davies's *Whose Bible Is It Anyway?* (Second edition. London: T&T Clark International; 2004. pp. 159. ISBN: 0567080730).



Anyone who studies both 'critical theory' and 'the Bible' (however we define either of those polymorphous multiplicities) knows that the interfaces between them are rarely obvious or well-mapped. Those of us who have been doing this thing for some time recall nostalgically the appearance of certain books or articles, like flares in the night, offering much-needed concepts and techniques or suggesting possibilities that had previously been unthinkable. No doubt each scholar has her or his own private reserve of special texts of this sort, although some might be acknowledged by nearly all: for example, Roland Barthes's *S/Z*, Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse*, and Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. These books opened theoretical and practical possibilities for alternative readings of the Bible. Yet other texts were significant because they actually began the process of such 'other' readings: for example, Frank Kermode's *The Genesis of Secrecy*, Mieke Bal's writings on the Bible, and some early essays by Barthes, Derrida, Julia Kristeva, and Umberto Eco.

Some of these texts have outlived their value, and we honor them as pathbreakers but no longer consult them or teach them to our students. Others, however, have achieved a sort of 'classic' status and they remain not far from our fingertips, to be read over and over again, consulted as references, or taught to others. This review acknowledges the re-release to two such texts, each of them by a biblical scholar bringing what were then new critical perspectives to the Bible. Shimon Bar-Efrat's *Narrative Art in the Bible* was published in 1989, and Philip Davies's *Whose Bible Is It Anyway?* was published in 1995, both of them by Sheffield Academic Press. Both books now appear under the T&T Clark imprint, a result of the recent acquisition of both

of those presses by Continuum. It appears that Bar-Efrat's book has simply been re-printed unchanged; Davies's book has also not been revised but is called a 'second edition' because his essay, '*Life of Brian Research*' (originally published in J. Cheryl Exum and Stephen D. Moore, editors, *Biblical Studies, Cultural Studies*, Sheffield Academic Press; 1998) has been appropriately added to it.

Bar-Efrat focuses on 'formal and structural aspects' of narrative, as opposed to 'facts, plot-contents or motifs' (p. 10). It is these formal and structural factors, he claims, that determine the story's meaning and properly ground its interpretation. Following a brief preface and introduction, five chapters discuss narrator, characters, plot, time and space, and style. The sixth chapter presents a detailed analysis of the narrative of Amnon and Tamar in 2 Samuel 13, which serves as an extended example of all of the techniques at work together, although numerous other brief examples are also given in the prior chapters. The book concludes with a bibliography and indexes of biblical references and of subjects.

Bar-Efrat's book is vintage 'biblical narratology', and like much early narrative criticism of the Bible, it is strong on Bible and weak on theory. One searches the book in vain for explicit reference to Chatman, Gerard Genette, Gerald Prince or other theorists, although one senses them lurking in the background – for example, Bar-Efrat mentions technical terms such as 'implied author' (p. 14) or 'flat' and 'round' characters (p. 90), but without identifying a source. On the whole, however, the book is relatively free of such technical jargon, and when these terms do appear, they are simply and clearly explained. In addition, this book offers a wealth of examples of specific narrative techniques at play in many parts of the Hebrew Bible, but with special attention to Genesis and 1 and 2 Samuel. As a result, the book is particularly useful to introduce those who may already be somewhat familiar with the Bible to basic concepts involved in reading it as narrative, although they are left hanging if they want to pursue such concepts much further.

Davies's book consists of seven loosely-related chapters (including the new addition), plus a bibliography. In contrast to Bar-Efrat's book, theory plays a large part in this book, especially in the first three chapters, and Davies draws upon Althusser, Foucault, Habermas, Marx, Ricoeur, and Weber in his wide-ranging discussions. The last four chapters feature readings of specific biblical texts, including Genesis 1-3, the Abraham stories, psalms of lament, Daniel (especially chapter 7), and the gospels.

Davies presents an argument for biblical studies as a 'secular discipline' (p. 7), and this book is in effect his (negative) response to 'biblical theology'. His goal is to 'liberate' the Bible from the constraints of purely confessional study – that is, to reject the claims of anyone, but especially Christians, to exclusive 'ownership' of the Bible. A central concern of his is the role played by the canon in controlling the way the various biblical texts are read. Davies helpfully examines differences between Jewish and Christian understandings of 'canon', the relation between canon and codex, and the impact of printing on the Bible. Another concern is the relation between religious institutions (especially churches) and educational ones, and whether believers (as 'insiders') have some special right or privileged access to the meaning of the Bible, as opposed to various 'outside' readings of it. Davies is one of very few who have been willing to address this last topic head-on, and his comments are still very much worth reading (or re-reading).

Although the matters discussed in these two books are quite different, their simultaneous re-publication and respective importance invites some comparison between them. Davies's sensitivity to questions of ideology and the construction of meaning contrasts sharply to Bar-Efrat, for

whom the biblical texts tend to speak clearly and univocally. For example, according to Bar-Efrat, narrators may be overt or covert, but the possibility of an inconsistent, ignorant, or deceitful narrator is not considered. Nor is the possibility of multiple, inconsistent readings of the same story. In Davies's terms, Bar-Efrat's reading is an academic one, but it seems to be that of an 'insider'. Although the tension between literary reading and historical reading is explicitly addressed in his brief introduction and may lurk in the background of each chapter, Bar-Efrat does not consider ideological factors in reading at all. Nevertheless, narratological readings of the Bible often serve as covers for conservative theological interests (i.e., for 'literalists' who have realised that straightforward historical reference is untenable) – the kind of interests that Davies brings to light.

However, despite his own insightful and sharp criticisms of 'canonical criticism' (especially that of Brevard Childs), Davies seems unwilling to take the next step – i.e., to abandon the canon altogether. It is clear that he would like to do this (p. 12), but it is not clear that he has done so. Even his reading of the Monty Python movie suggests as much, since Brian's 'life' is after all a kind of harmonisation of the gospels, albeit a satirical one. But then perhaps none of us is yet entirely free from the canon. Such a move would itself be 'confessional' – perhaps too confessional for Davies, even though the confession involved would very likely not be a Christian one. Davies is well acquainted with postmodernism, but he remains committed to something like an Enlightenment notion of disinterested knowledge – not in relation to interpretation of the biblical texts themselves, certainly, but in relation to the distinction between church and academy and the binarism of confessional and nonconfessional reading.

Bar-Efrat's book is probably the more 'dated' of these two, and more thorough treatments of narrative criticism, applied to a wider range of texts, are available. Nevertheless, his narratological insights remain valuable, and his own writing style is accessible to a wide range of readers. Indeed, both of these books are very reader-friendly, but Davies appears to be addressing a more advanced scholar. His book is as timely and controversial now as it was when he wrote it, and if you haven't read it yet, you should.