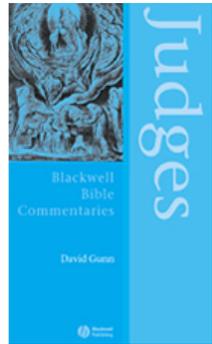


○ REVIEW OF DAVID M. GUNN'S *JUDGES*

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R. Christopher Heard reviews David M. Gunn's *Judges* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; London: Blackwell, 2005).



Throughout the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries, commentaries on biblical books emphasised the compositional history of the biblical text – that is, they focused on questions of how the text reached its final form, and what it might have meant to its author and earliest readers. David Gunn's *Judges*, and the Blackwell Bible Commentaries series of which it is a part (the first, in fact, to treat a book from the Hebrew Bible), take a different approach. Volumes in this series begin with canonical text and move forward, exploring what each biblical book has meant to, and how it has been used by, readers through the centuries.

The long introduction to this volume – not to be skipped – does much more than simply preview the plan of the book. Gunn does indicate the volume's scope and focus, but also takes readers on a whirlwind tour of the impact on popular reception of the book of Judges wrought by printing, illustration, rising literacy, Orientalism, and sermons. In this way, the introduction functions both like a miniature of and an overture to the rest of the volume.

Gunn organises the commentary proper by treating each of the main characters (or clusters of characters) in Judges. Within each chapter of the commentary, Gunn begins with a summary of the relevant section of Judges. Gunn then surveys prior treatments of that section, dividing these surveys into ancient and medieval reception on the one hand and early modern and modern reception on the other. Modern reception, of course, includes modern scholarship. Each chapter reflects Gunn's undertaking of a remarkable amount of spadework. To be sure, Gunn attends to commonly cited sources such as rabbinic and patristic writings, midrashes, commentaries by scholars from the Reformation forward, and artwork from synagogues and recognised masters. Yet he also introduces readers to receptions of Judges that they might otherwise never encounter, such as opera, illustrated Bibles, sermons, popular-level church teaching materials, children's Bibles and Bible story books, and even – for Samson – comic books and Hollywood movies.

All of this makes for a sometimes sober, sometimes whimsical, sometimes disturbing, sometimes delightful, and always enlightening journey through the centuries alongside all manner of Bible readers. Aside from a few oblique comments, Gunn tends to content himself with *describing*,

rather than *evaluating*, the interpretations and representations of Judges that he surveys. Gunn also refrains from making any large-scale generalisations about those interpretations and representations. This commentary thus is largely a descriptive, almost encyclopedic project. Various readers will no doubt evaluate this feature of the commentary in various ways. Some readers will thank Gunn for marshalling all this data without trying to tell them what to think about it; others will wish that Gunn had done more to draw together common threads running through the interpretations he surveys.

By the very nature of its genre, this volume does not present an overarching argument. Therefore, a couple of examples – selected not for any inherent prominence in the commentary, but rather as a reflection of my own interests – must suffice to give readers of this review a sense of the sort of thing they will encounter in the book. As the father of two young boys, my attention was particularly drawn to Gunn's treatments of various children's Bibles and Bible story books. The book of Judges is, of course, extremely violent from the very beginning, a feature of the book that has proven something of a challenge for producers of children's Bible-based literature. In his survey of interpretations on Judges 1–3, Gunn charts, all too briefly, the disappearance of Adoni-bezek from treatments intended for young audiences. Ehud and Eglon, too, tend not to appear in children's Bibles and Bible story books; when they do, the scatological dimensions of the story are either suppressed entirely or dramatically toned down. Similar trends can be observed in the treatments of other stories from the book of Judges. There seems to be wonderful raw material here for interrogating modern ideas about the Bible and its value for children (addressing, for example, the implicit debate in the history of this genre over whether it is better to teach children the 'raw', uncensored Bible stories, to teach them 'sanitised' versions thereof, or simply to ignore the offensive passages). Unfortunately, Gunn does not address these larger issues, though given the size of the volume as it is one can hardly blame him.

For me, one of the most enjoyable parts of the book was the chapter on Samson. Modern cultures have produced so many artifacts related to Samson that Gunn is able to have a field day with them. Rarely do readers read commentaries for the pictures, but that might almost be the case with Gunn's chapter on Samson. Gunn deftly handles a wide variety of not only literary, but also artistic and cinematic, representations of Samson in this chapter – certainly this is the first commentary I have read that took seriously a comic book or a song by the Grateful Dead. Any attempt to summarise the chapter here would under-represent its richness.

Some readers will no doubt fault Gunn for focusing too narrowly on Western, especially English-speaking, reception of the book of Judges. Gunn deals with this matter straightforwardly and unapologetically in the introduction to the book: the narrow focus, Gunn writes, is simply more manageable than a global one. Insofar as the volume as it stands weighs in at over 300 pages, readers can surely accept the limits that Gunn has placed on his study.

Gunn has attempted a large feat here – to provide readers with a meaningful survey of over 2,000 years' worth of reception of the book of Judges – and has succeeded admirably. Hopefully, other volumes in the Blackwell series will live up to Gunn's example. This is an engaging and enlightening commentary that deserves attention from anyone interested in the history of the interpretation, use, and influence of the book of Judges.