

Review of Keith Bodner, *1 Samuel: A Narrative Commentary*. Hebrew Bible Monographs 19. Sheffield Phoenix Press 2009.

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It is not too bold to claim that the narratives in the book of 1 (and 2) Samuel are high points in biblical literature. As such, new readings that treat the text with literary and narrative sophistication are always welcome. Keith Bodner's narrative commentary is just such a treatment. In essence, Bodner's commentary is an extended literary reading of the narrative in 1 Samuel. He engages the text chapter by chapter, with each chapter of the biblical book receiving a chapter in the commentary. On the one hand, this lends an obvious sensibility to the organization of the book. On the other hand, being a literary reading, this leads to some slightly awkward divisions, because as any attentive reader well knows, the chapter divisions of the biblical book are not always the most obvious literary divisions. Bodner, however, is able to overcome this somewhat by referring forwards and backwards to previous and following sections.

The commentary is accessible to readers who have little or no knowledge of Hebrew. He engages mostly with the English text (NRSV) though it is obvious that Bodner himself is engaging with the Hebrew, and the use of English is for his readers' sake. Bodner is also adept at interacting with the Greek text, not only in the instances of major variation (e.g. 1 Sam 17), but also smaller instances of textual difference (e.g. 1 Sam 6:19). However, Bodner's preference for referring primarily to English translations sometimes causes confusion. For example, in commenting on 1 Sam 5:8, Bodner notices that the RSV (following the MT) has a different reading than the NRSV. The reader of his commentary is left to wonder why the NRSV has another reading, because the fact that it is following the LXX is not mentioned. However, these instances do not often detract from an otherwise very accessible discussion.

Bodner's reading of the text is characterized by insightful and interesting narrative observations. Since his main goal is a narrative commentary he is frequently aware of significant wordplays and the connections of each textual unit to the larger narrative context. Again, though his discussions are very accessible, he uses some technical language, most notably Bakhtinian terminology, which is not always carefully defined (Bakhtin, though clearly present, does not make it into the bibliography). For the most part, however, this does not detract from the worth of the discussion.

One final element of Bodner's commentary is worth mentioning: its style. It is written in a conversational and very engaging tone, but more than this, it is laced with witty humor. For example, when Bodner notes that Nabal spelled backwards is Laban, he comments that "At a minimum, such nomenclature presents the reader with the very real possibility that Nabal is about to get fleeced" (p. 261). While one may question the validity of Bodner's inference here, he is noticing a possible element in the text that is worth pondering. This style of readable prose with entertaining wit and humor made reading this commentary engaging.

Reviewing a commentary is a difficult task and one wonders what the most helpful way to give readers a feel for the commentary might be. It may perhaps be helpful to offer a brief engagement

with a particular sample of Bodner's discussion of the text. We will look at his reading of 1 Samuel 16.

Bodner begins his discussion of ch. 16 by noting its connection to ch. 15. Not only does it begin by referencing the events of ch. 15 (YHWH's rejection of Saul) but it also advances that story. Bodner notes that Samuel's angry reaction in 15:11 doesn't elicit a divine rebuke. By contrast, in 16:1 God appears annoyed with Samuel, as seen by the rhetorical question "How long will you be mourning for Saul?" Bodner confirms the divine annoyance in this phrase by comparing the question "How long?" here with the use of the same question from Eli to Hannah, whom Eli presumed drunk in 1 Sam 1:14 (pp. 166-167). After this exchange, YHWH tells Saul that he has seen/provided a king for himself. Bodner notes that the Hebrew word "see" (*r'h*) "is a keyword in this chapter, and one senses that it has to do with spiritual perception and discernment" (p. 167). This is certainly true in this narrative, and Bodner will unpack it as he moves along through the text.

Bodner then goes on to discuss the exchange between YHWH and Samuel. In his discussion he notes that Samuel's reluctance to obey can be seen as reasonable, but can also be seen as a dangerous defiance of the deity. Bodner concludes that "the portrait of Samuel in this capstone episode is not flattering. No doubt this is intentional, and, in the end, a more complicated portrait of Samuel emerges than is often acknowledged" (p. 168).

YHWH responds to Samuel's hesitance by instructing him to disguise his reason for going to Bethlehem by bringing a heifer and telling everyone he has come to sacrifice to YHWH (1 Sam 16:2). Instead of getting sidetracked by discussions of YHWH's involvement in a deception, Bodner instead notices the literary irony between this act and Saul's failure at the sacrifice in Gilgal (1 Sam 13). He notes that Saul's "downfall is precipitated by a faulty sacrifice, and now his replacement is covertly anointed by means of a sacrifice" (p. 168).

After arriving in Bethlehem, Samuel comes to the house of Jesse and is introduced to his sons. A key feature of this narrative is Samuel's positive reaction to Jesse's eldest son, Eliab. Upon seeing Eliab he assumes that this is YHWH's anointed. YHWH reproaches Samuel by saying that he does not look upon outward appearance but upon the heart. Bodner discusses this scene by noting the important theme of the prophet's failure to see rightly, comparing Samuel to Eli who had similarly failing eyesight. But in regards to the meaning of the phrase "YHWH looks upon the heart" Bodner remarks, "In the context of 1 Samuel, my guess is that heart refers to chosenness, and sometimes, God's choice is hard to see" (p. 170). In this instance Bodner's argumentation is somewhat opaque. His argument appears to be based on the common scholarly understanding that the phrase, "a man after [YHWH's] own heart" in 1 Sam 13:14 is referring to YHWH's choice rather than to David's character (cf. pp. 123-124). However, this line of reasoning is not expressed and the reader is left to wonder what "in the context of 1 Samuel" may mean. Furthermore, this interpretation, while perhaps plausible in 1 Samuel 13, seems to go entirely against the grain of the present context. In 1 Samuel 13, the reference to heart could possibly refer to YHWH's choice. In 1 Samuel 16, however, the reference is quite clearly to the interiority of Eliab – and by inference David – and says nothing about YHWH's heart. It appears that Bodner's conversational style sometimes leads him to make statements that are not as supported as he implies.

Having gone through all of Jesse's sons Samuel asks if there are any more and finds that there is one last son among the flock. Here, Bodner's sensitivity to literary connections leads him to compare this scene, where David, the chosen one, cannot be found, to ch. 9, where Saul, the chosen one, also could not be found. Finally David shows up on the scene, and though Samuel had been chastised by YHWH for noting the outward appearance of Eliab, the narrator gives us an extended look at David's appearance. Bodner notes, "here is the paradox: God has just rebuked his prophet for being misled by outward appearance, yet here is his choice, a 'new kid on the block' who is pleasant of outward appearance" (p. 171). Though Bodner helpfully points out this issue, he leaves it and does not

discuss it further. This is another occasional feature of Bodner's discussions: important issues are sometimes brought up but not discussed further. This may frustrate some readers who expect commentators to make interpretive commitments, but this may well be intentional by the author in order to highlight areas where the complexity of the text seems to invite the reader to explore different possible readings, and rather than argue for one definitive reading, Bodner, like the text upon which he is commenting, leaves the interpretive decisions up to the reader.

On balance, Bodner's treatment of 1 Sam 16:1-13 is insightful. Its strengths are its presentation of significant wordplay and the interconnections between this narrative and the larger context of 1 Samuel. Any reader of this commentary is aided in engaging the text with creativity and literary sophistication. Though I have noticed some shortcomings and idiosyncrasies in Bodner's commentary, I must end this discussion with a hearty recommendation of the book. As a literary engagement with the text of 1 Samuel it is as good as anything that has preceded it and better than most. Bodner's careful and sometimes imaginative reading of the text is a great example of what engagement with biblical narrative should be. This book would make an excellent textbook for a course on Samuel or on Hebrew narrative.



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