

**Danna Nolan Fewell, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*.
New York: Oxford University Press, 2016**

Sarah Emanuel, Oberlin College

I had the privilege of participating in a doctoral seminar on the world of biblical narrative with Danna Nolan Fewell, the editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative* (hereafter *OHBN*), in spring 2015, just prior to the *OHBN*'s 2016 publication. While writing a book review for a faculty mentor may seem biased (and it is), such an endeavour enacts a primary focus of Fewell's volume: meaning, and meaning-making, is inherently bound-up in identity-formation—a biased enterprise if there ever was one—whether communal or otherwise: “[W]e,” in the words of Fewell, “represent our identities with the language of narrative.... We instinctively engage in retrospective representation and revision, bringing our past experiences [including past reading experiences] to bear on our present and to frame further future discourse about who we are. Telling and retelling, interpreting and reinterpreting, listening to new and familiar stories are all crucial activities for ongoing identity formation” (5).

So, what might this narration — this particular retelling (i.e., review)—have to say? In looking back on the course and, with it, reading the *OHBN*, I remain convinced that this anthology is one worth reading. Written with authority yet minimal jargon, the volume as a whole provides a compelling survey of current trends in biblical narrative criticism and is a welcome addition to both scholars and students interested in the interdisciplinary work of biblical studies. Not only does it provide overviews of various theories and themes in relation to the biblical field, but, in doing so, it also brings to the fore the many ways in which academic sub-fields, including those within biblical studies intersect. Throughout the volume's fifty-one chapters, which are divided into five parts (Overtures; Biblical Narratives; The Bible and Bodies; The Natural, Social, and Conceptual Landscapes of Biblical Story Worlds; and On Reading), ethical inquiry meets historical-criticism, theory meets practice, *Sitz im Lebens* meet reception histories. By focusing on the ways in which communities of biblical storytellers have responded to their own historical circumstances—and then investigating the ways in which those responses act on consumers of those stories (both in antiquity and today)—the authors of the *OHBN* illustrate both individually and collectively that the work of biblical narrative can indeed culminate in the reuniting of literary, sociological, and historical interrogation. A major premise of the book, in other words, is that biblical texts are at once historical artifacts which should be situated in their own historical contexts and also “living” texts that continue to construct communal identities in their afterlives. It is thus perhaps no wonder that Fewell introduces the project with the bold statement: “[T]his volume exemplifies [the notion that] ‘the art of biblical narrative’ now makes room for ‘the work of biblical narrative,’ namely, what biblical stories accomplish cognitively, socially, and

ethically, for good and ill, *both* as literary artifacts of the ancient world and as living literary specimens that continue to shape contemporary cultures and individual identities” (emphasis mine; 4).

The *OHBN* is crafted carefully, moving intuitively from narrations on the state of the biblical field to analyses of particular biblical texts. Stephen Moore’s contribution (Chapter Two), for instance, follows Fewell’s introductory chapter, and outlines in detail the trajectory of biblical scholarship in relation to notions of narrative. He even begins his essay asking the big question—what is “narrative?”—which is then followed by a meticulous overview of the term, including various “academic ideologies” of it (41). Essays such as Robert S. Kawashima’s “Biblical Narrative and the Birth of Prose Literature” (Chapter Three) and Austin Busch’s “New Testament Narrative and Greco-Roman Literature” (Chapter Four) add to Moore’s engagement, highlighting the ways in which narrative, including biblical narrative, functions as contextualized storytellings that are always already *in dialogue*. Stories communicate, this volume claims. They interact with readers, writers, and networks of textuality across social worlds. They also help *construct* those social worlds: “Undergirding this [anthology] is the obvious but often overlooked insight that narrated experience is inevitably social...[W]e tell stories to make sense of our lives, sense that is not always readily apparent” (9).

When it comes to making sense of particular biblical books (including the biblical lives and/or characters therein), the volume’s authors take into consideration a variety of theoretical lenses and methodologies. Issues of gender, sex, violence (including sexual violence), race, ability, age, and otherness (including animal otherness) are handled with particular sensitivity. On plotting bodies in biblical narrative, for instance, Jeremy Schipper (Chapter 33) reminds us that we, as readers, often insert ability and attractiveness into the Bible when there is often no indication that those types of bodies are there (or should be there). Similarly, contributors such as Kathleen Gallagher Elkins and Julie Faith Parker (Chapter 36) remind us that there are more than adults acting throughout the biblical canons. Children in the biblical world, they explain, are more prevalent than readers often recognize, and analyses of them can provide insight into the significance of a narrative’s agendas and ideologies.

While views to the Other are highlighted most acutely in the volume’s third part (The Bible and Bodies), such foci interact well with the volume’s fourth and fifth parts (The Natural, Social, and Conceptual Landscapes of Biblical Story Worlds; and On Reading). Here, the political and sociological worlds of the Bible, including the Bible’s afterlives, are evaluated. Displacement, trauma, and methods of survival are common themes, which not only adds depth to previous chapters on Otherness but also paves the way for contributions in the book’s fifth and final part on ethics. In the words of Gary A. Phillips, who offers a chapter on ethical reading practices in the volume’s fifth section: “Concurrent with [the anthology’s various] narrative turn[s] is an ‘ethical turn’ with similar extension across the disciplines and professions” (585). Taking into consideration the consequences of texts and their interpretations, Phillips maintains that the goal of an ethically-oriented reading is to jump into a text’s multifaceted web of signification without forgetting the faces of its Others (e.g., the differently abled; the sexually violated; the children; the displaced; the traumatized;

etc.). Because biblical narratives, like all narratives, ask us to consider what is right, what is wrong, who is in, and who is out, it is often up to us, writes Phillips, to push against the Bible's grain — to unpack more than just the texts' implied notions of "what is" or "what should be," but to also consider, in response, how those implied notions might act on real readers.

The issue of genre, too, is handled with sensitivity and a general openness. It seems to be the case that this volume, perhaps in line with the communicative work of biblical narrative, understands the category "narrative" as extending beyond "the tidy borders implicit in the stock phrase 'the narrative books of the Bible'" (27). Paul's letters, for instance, are included within the Bible's narrative world; Paul, too, is seen as (to quote Johnson-Debaufre) "a man of story" (362). In other words, just as the canonical and extra-canonical Gospels co-gestate stories of many Jesuses, so too do the letters of Paul co-construct a story of many Pauls. Thus even though Paul (and "Paul") is/are writing letters, asserts Johnson-DeBaufre, the fact remains that those letters are painting images of a "storied perception of reality," including a storied perception of a multifaceted Pauline "self" (363).

To be sure, some chapters are more adventurous than others. And, given the extent of diversity among authors (the volume, alongside balancing methodological interests and textual foci, does especially well showcasing the work of scholars from a variety of institutions, positionalities, and rank), the politics of narration could have been highlighted more readily. If, for instance, identity-formation is such a part of narration—both in the telling and the listening of it—how might understandings of our own identities impact the work of biblical narrative? Does it? Should it? What might we gain—and, consequently what might we lose—when/if we claim our own subjectivities in the exegetical process? Do our positionalities impact our use of theory and, in turn, the ways in which we co-construct our own narratives (e.g., our own biblical analyses, which, surely, can be read as stories also)? I would have liked to see questions such as these considered more skilfully, perhaps in the book's final sub-part, which is indeed scant in chapters compared to its other sections. Additionally, given the volume's dialogical stance and openness toward crossing boundaries, views to extra-canonical materials would have surely been concurrent with its theoretical turns.

These critiques, of course, are not to say that the *OHBN* shies away from dialogue. At the outset, as we have seen, the volume recognizes the multivocality of meaning, and asks questions pertaining to the transmission of thought between texts, contexts, and interpretive histories. In doing so, however, it highlights contextualization. Biblical *Sitz im Lebens*, in other words, remain a focus throughout the book's sections, even when contemporary critical lenses, including poststructuralist deconstructionist views, are implemented. I suspect, furthermore, that there is reason for this. As noted to above, a major part of the *OHBN* project is to put into conversation traditional historical-critical inquiry with contemporary critical concerns. The ethical implications of this intersect cannot be overstated. Put simply, in an age of "alternative facts," readers of narrative, including biblical narrative, are having to negotiate the limits of openness. While we might do well to suggest that texts and interpretations of texts are always already unfinished and therefore infinite—indeed, open to alternative and equally "factual" possibilities—those texts

and interpretations still affect real readers. A productive parallel example to this from within the biblical field can be seen in historical Jesus scholarship. For while historical Jesus exegetes have certainly leaned into and even celebrated the fact that, throughout the Bible, many Jesuses abound, considerations of him (them) have also often been simultaneously grounded in history, because, if not, Jesus can be (and has been) used to do and say anything.

What else, you might ask, makes this collection of stories one “worth telling or worth reading in this particular location at this particular time?” (10). In the spirit of the volume’s own socio-narratological framework—its understanding that we as storytellers and story-listeners are collectively constructing meaning—I suggest reading it, and narrating answers for yourselves.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)