

Ellen F. Davis, *Opening Israel's Scriptures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 451. ISBN: 9780190948948  
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Ellen Davis's *Opening Israel's Scriptures* is a gift to both the Church and the academy. In this volume, which covers the whole of the Old Testament (arranged roughly according to the structure of the Hebrew Bible), Davis turns her pen to addressing important themes in almost every book of Israel's Scripture. She does this by tackling contemporary questions about the environment or how to grapple with the history of slavery, for instance. Though Davis makes it clear that this is a work of 'practical theology' it remains also 'a work of critical biblical interpretation for contemporary readers' (pp. 1, 2). She treats each biblical book as a united whole and is willing, moreover, to read each in view of the wider canon of Scripture (p. 5). In short, the book is a 'sustained practice of contemporary theological exegesis' (p. 1).

Davis is an erudite scholar, but her prose is not wooden. Her writing is fresh and inviting, as she easily sifts through biblical and theological scholarship in a way that is accessible to graduate students beginning theological study of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, her target audience (p. 5). Certainly more seasoned scholars will benefit from her insights and, because of her style, even undergraduates should be able to track with her.

It is difficult to summarize this book or to point to a linear argument throughout the text. However, this book is more than a technical reference work that students might pull off the shelf now and then to look up the details of some arcane passage. Reading Davis might be better thought of as a way of taking soundings in the Old Testament, soundings that map out critical, theological, ecclesial, and pastoral questions. It is best read chapter by chapter, taking 15 or 20 minutes for each.

There are various highlights throughout the text. One is Davis's treatment of Gen. 2.4–11.32, in which she gives background to the variety of sources in Genesis before naming the anxiety that such critical reading might induce in North American readers. Davis points to her Sudanese students as a way forward, noting that they expected various witnesses in the Christian creation story for they were part of a culture with several tribal traditions that each added complexity to their own multifaceted creation stories (p. 16). The problems that trouble North Americans, it turns out, are not problems at all for many readers.

Davis's treatment of Leviticus 16–27 stands out for its sensitive treatment of the land and its place within the life of Israel. There are resonances with Davis's earlier work *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge University Press, 2008). In this essay she weaves in theological reflection with the poetry of Wendell Berry, whose influence is felt throughout much of the book (p. 78).

With respect to the conquest narrative in Joshua, Davis questions the historicity of the narrative in the light of historical and literary evidence. She then turns to Origen to find some relief for the troubling details of the passage, trading physical enemies as metaphors for the spiritual life (p. 141). Though Origen's reading does not resolve the challenges of the text, it reframes the question the reader ought to be asking. Taking her cue from him, Davis suggests a good question might be 'What

happens if we as a believing community read the text this way?’ rather than ‘Did things happen this way?’ (p. 141).

While Davis covers many of the prophets in depth, her reading of Jeremiah is especially poignant. She writes of the way Jeremiah is the one who is ‘telling God the truth’, drawing from Brueggemann and Bonhoeffer to comment on the way that Jeremiah’s ‘prophetic laments represent moments in our life with God, moments of extreme fear and rage, such as the most faithful servants of God inevitably endure. In that sense, they tell the truth of our hearts to God’ (p. 288). These heartfelt cries to God are vital, ‘But like the psalms of lament, Jeremiah’s honest complaints should not be taken as doctrinal statements about how God really is’ (p. 288).

Davis’s treatment of the earthy poetry of Ecclesiastes and Proverbs aims to show its applicability *just because* of its ‘few specific theological assumptions and assertions’ (p. 336). This, along with its practical nature, appeals to people across faith traditions and even to those who remain uncommitted to any one in particular. Here Davis shows remarkable pastoral wisdom alongside her deep scholarship, writing that ‘Qohelet speaks directly of enjoyment rather than gratitude, but his emphasis on the givenness of things invites this inference: those who do not learn to be grateful for the stream of gifts that (sometimes) flows in youth will be unable to practice gratitude in old age, when the stream (usually) slows to a trickle’ (p. 345).

Each essay is insightful and valuable and easily stands alone. For those who wish only to spend time on essays that deal with particular passages or themes, the indexes at the end of the book will be a helpful guide.

While this book will no doubt find its way into the hands of pastors and seminarians across denominational lines, Davis is forthright about beginning her work from within the Anglican tradition (p. 2). She writes often of the history of the Anglican Church and of the ways her teaching throughout the Communion has brought deeper insight to her work. Moreover, her grasp of scholarship from across traditions situates her as a model Anglican interpreter. It is her generous ecumenical reading that brings various voices into conversation with Scripture that ensures more than a narrow appeal to a niche Anglican enclave. Her rootedness *in place* as an Anglican, however, does not stop her reaching beyond ecclesial lines so that this book will be a blessing to the Church catholic.

If the Enlightenment divorced biblical studies from the life of the Church, Davis’s career in general and this book in particular, are about sewing them back together. The shortfalls of such a project may lay in its lack of systematicity and inability to foster detailed scholarship on particular passages for the sake of comprehensiveness. For this reason, the text might not be as useful to biblical scholars as those who straddle somewhat the academy and the Church, but even for more technical scholars, it will be a breath of fresh air.

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