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Davies, Philip.
Whose Bible Is It Anyway?

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Here we have an urbane, entertaining, irreverent manifesto for a militantly secular "biblical studies." The ostensible opponent is "confessional" studies of the Scripture. The latter are not genuinely academic because they impose the interpreter's own beliefs, and perhaps the official orthodoxy of some religious body, on the text. They are essentially solipsistic. Biblical studies, on the other hand, should not assume the truth of the text and should offer all interpretations as rational arguments for the judgment of other scholars. Scholars who happen to be believers could participate only if they check their beliefs at the door.

Davies is particularly turned off by religious doctrines masquerading as scholarly proposals and scholars who claim that only theological interpretation truly understands the text. As an example of the former, he singles out B. Childs's concept of "the Canon." Although "canon" is a fact of textual history, it has no normative significance for historical interpretation. Scholars who privilege those inside the tradition are guilty of excluding important voices in the discussion of the truth and meaning of the text.

The book consists of relatively independent chapters; it reads like a collection of essays that re-enforce but do not build upon each other. Hence, each calls for a separate assessment. The paragraphs above summarize the lead essay; the rest of the essays display the scholarship Davies advocates. The first of these, "What is a bible?" is an historical-critical reply to Childs. The Jewish tradition developed a "canon"--an official list of sacred books--long before it bound these books together in a codex, while the Christian church began binding sacred books together early, but with considerable variation in content and order. The upshot is that there are "bibles," but no Bible or common Canon.

It seems to me that we are revisiting the medieval debate between realists and nominalists, with Childs on the realist side--the idea of canon is foundational--and Davies on the nominalist. Each conveniently ignores the scholarly and religious practices that lend support to the opposing position.

The next two chapters offer readings of Genesis narratives that "invert" pious and theological interpretations. The story of creation and fall teaches the reader to be suspicious of the deity and of the male bias of the narrative. The story of Abraham is a poker game between "Yhwh" and the human protagonist: Abraham can win as long as he pretends that his god is winning.

These "readings" strike me as a mode of satire designed to unsettle the truth-claims readers have historically found in them. They raise the question of what is going to count as biblical scholarship. J. Miles offered his satirical work, *God: A Biography*, as literature, but Davies is seeking to legitimize satire as a mode of scholarly discourse. I can just imagine what my teachers would say. There is a humanistic value at stake in attending to the claims ancient texts are making about what is true and good: to learn the possible truth other eras have to communicate. Davies's charge that theological interpretation is solipsistic is a case of the pot calling the kettle black. Likewise his question about the ethics of pious interpretation.

Davies's essays on individual laments and the book of Daniel are different. His account of laments is a quasi-Marxian analysis: the lamenter had to pay the hierarchy, his/her oppressor, to pray to God for deliverance from oppression. Such an argument offers grounds for debate. Likewise, his very interesting reading of the apocalyptic visions at the end of Daniel (chapters 7-12): the all-determining sovereign steps down and multiple powers take over. This occasions an autobiographical reflection at the end that fits the classical rhetorical appeal to *ēthos*.

The book can best be understood as an argument in favor of keeping "emic" and "etic" interpreters together in the same discipline. If we are compelled to talk to each other, learn from each other, argue our cases before each other, hire and fire each other, teach religious and irreligious students, we can avoid solipsism and fulfill our responsibilities to our ancestors as well as our own generation. (9/96)