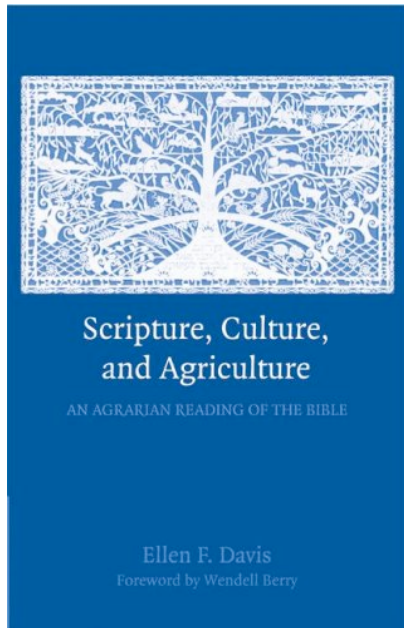


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**Davis, Ellen F.**

***Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible***

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For anyone who believes that the Old Testament is a powerful voice in support of our sustainable use of the planet's resources (which some deny) but is dissatisfied with current attempts to demonstrate that (e.g., the very tired "stewardship" idea), Ellen Davis's *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* is your answer. This is a triumphantly novel and successful work of scholarship that on the all-important question of our relationship to the earth allows vast sweeps of the Old Testament to give vent to its deep intelligence and profound moral insights that were always available if only someone asked the right questions.

In research as in life, fortune favors the bold. In a manner closely cognate with the work of those critics who deliberately employ areas of the social sciences as heuristic frameworks within which to question biblical texts in fresh and socially realistic ways, Professor Davis has turned to agrarian theory, typified in the work of Wendell Berry (who has written a foreword to this volume) and other writers, such as Wes Jackson and Bruce Colman. An agrarian approach insists that we have been given the land to care for, in an attitude of reverence and humility before it. It brings out the importance of our connection with and memory of particular localities from which we draw the sustenance we require. Above all, it stresses that we must use the earth sustainably, by not compromising its means of

sustaining itself. It sets up the ideal of the small-holder closely connected with the land and farming in a diversified way in sharp contrast with the large-scale industrialized farming of agribusiness, heavily dependent on fertilizer and single cropping, remorselessly driving down the nutrient levels in the land and leading to depopulation of rural areas. As Davis states in her first sentence, “Agrarianism is a way of thinking and ordering life in community that is based on the health of the land and of living creatures.” Agrarianism is a perspective for undertaking exegesis, not a distinct method.

The particular point of connection (an extremely rich one) between agrarian ideas and the Old Testament is that its texts comprehensively assume an agricultural setting where small farmers on the difficult and often marginal lands of the Judean hill country had to work in closest harmony with the cycles and rhythms of nature to survive. In addition, the relationship of ancient Israelites to God presupposes his granting them the land while standing behind its proper use. One of the most impressive features of this book is how much of the text Davis relates to this setting and to this outlook. Adopting an agrarian perspective has sensitized her to look for, and so frequently to find, textual data that speaks to these concerns in highly developed ways. It enables her to rediscover the Old Testament as a source of astonishing richness for stimulus, reflection, prayer, and action on the main issue of our age.

The basic pattern of the chapters is for Davis to establish a dialogue between particular aspects of agrarian thinking and critical reading of selected texts to stimulate new interpretation, both historical (enriching our understanding of what these texts meant for their original audiences) and theological (setting out the powerful claims they make on those with a particular regard for the Old Testament or traditions derived from it, Christians, Jews, and Muslims especially).

I can only give a flavor of her argument. In chapter 1 she begins with the need to open our eyes to what we are doing to the fertile earth, at a time when the technology of the information age has reduced our ability really to know the natural world through direct experience. This leads to a consideration of how the prophets instructed our weak religious imagination through “visual enhancement,” including seeing a world rendered a barren waste (Jer 4:23–26), in a manner alarmingly close to the results of strip-mining for coal by mountain removal in Appalachia. Similarly, Isa 24:1, 3–4 brings out the horror of the destruction wreaked on the earth if we break the covenant. If we undergo the pain of seeing, we can then help our communities to “re-member” themselves, to work together for their own wholeness and that of creation.

In chapter 2 Davis goes a long way to substantiate her claim that by reading the writings of contemporary agrarians we can become better readers of scripture. The initial idea is

that an agrarian approach foregrounds the view that agriculture has “an ineluctably ethical dimension” (22). In this perspective, the purely monetary factor driving agribusiness whatever ecological damage it causes is ethically problematic. The biblical picture of how we should be tied to the earth emerges in passages such as Ps 85 and Deut 11:10–12. Many parts of Hebrew Scriptures articulate a clear message about our respect and care for the land and conversely about its destruction (28).

In chapter 6 Davis focuses upon local food economies that characterize the small-scale farming practiced by ancient Israelites and modern agrarians and their intimate care of the land, which in its diversified cultivation can actually produce a higher total yield per acre than industrial-scale single cropping. Smaller farms also lead to more vibrant local communities. She shows how in the Hebrew Bible the word *nahala* stands for a complex of ideas to do with land possession, including the inner spirituality of a particular place, where farming was conducted in fragile ecological spaces. “The kindly use” of modern agrarians is cognate with the seventh-year “sabbath-ceasing” (Lev 25:4, 5; 26:34) that powerfully underscores the fact that the land belongs to God. This chapter also contains a fine interpretation of the story of Ahab and Naboth’s vineyard (1 Kgs 21) as illustrating the clash between an economy for Israel based on local subsistence and a state-controlled economy producing surpluses of particular crops. Psalm 37, Davis argues, represents God’s restoration of the correct order.

Chapter 8 deals with the responses of Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah to the latifundialization of land in Israel and Judah in the eighth century B.C.E., which led to land previously devoted to subsistence cultivation being turned over to grain, cattle, wine, and production for export to generate income to support the wealthy lifestyle of the urban elites. Here she offers a fascinating comparison between this prophetic corpus and the role Celtic poetry is playing in the resurgence of local community land ownership in Scotland. While the situation in the eighth century B.C.E. has been well traversed by researchers like Marvin Chaney, Davis makes many new contributions. For example, she highlights Amos’s concern for the fertile soil, with *adama*, “arable land,” occurring ten times. She also argues against readings of Hosea that interpret his work as an attack on religious leaders devoted to fertility cults rather than as concerned with the proper relationship to land, in as much as the priests are critiqued for their involvement in commodity agriculture. Thus Hos 9 shows “a seamless blending of the themes of sexuality and eating, of offspring and harvest, of love and worship and economics and international politics” (135).

Like many powerfully original contributions to biblical interpretation and theology, this fine book leaves one inevitably asking, Where do we go from here? The obvious route lies in the stimulus Davis provides to introducing Old Testament insights into the practical

task of humankind embracing more sustainable forms of agriculture. Davis is not antiscience; frequently she refers to scientists who work in ways sympathetic to agrarian concerns. This is important because the maintenance of healthy ecosystems is now of intense interest to a growing number of scientists around the world. The example Davis cites of how New York authorities sensibly decided to rehabilitate the land from where a large proportion of the city's drinking water was derived rather than install expensive filtration equipment is also being mentioned in ecosystems science conferences. At the same time, governments with trade and aid programs for developing countries are increasingly discovering that it is essential to encourage local, small-scale initiatives if investments are to be effective. The exciting prospect that emerges from this is the generation of a fruitful dialogue between the agrarian biblical interpretation Davis has pioneered and these new developments in science and development assistance. Such dialogue could bring together specialists and the wider population, to assist us all better to understand the issues and to enlist support for their solution by situating them within a biblical context that now emerges as superbly productive of insight and reflection. I look forward eagerly to a major international conference on the theme "Ecosystems Science and the Agrarian Bible: Exploring the Synergies to Build a Sustainable Future."