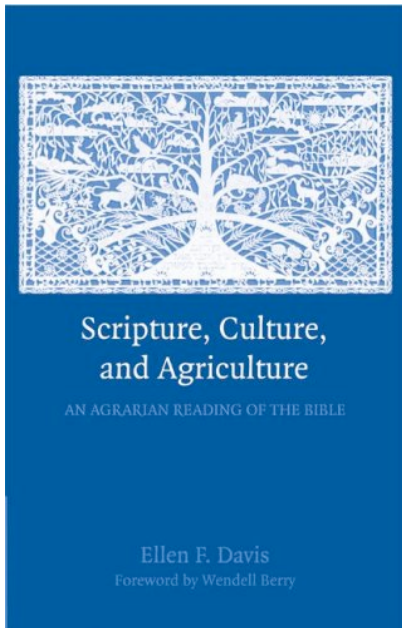


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Davis, Ellen F.

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

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Ellen F. Davis, professor of Bible and practical theology at Duke Divinity School, has written a short book focusing on the uses of and importance of land in the biblical text. She examines the theology and ethics of land use and of present-day industrialized agriculture. Consider it a modern-day wake up call as loud as a cymbal crash.

Many times while reading this work, I wondered if my emotions of alarm resembled those King Josiah expressed when he was told that the book of the law had been discovered during temple renovations (2 Kgs 22). After reading the book of the law, Josiah saw that he and his people had sinned; he humbled himself and changed. Davis writes that her research (and the writings of others) trumpets warnings that likewise present uncomfortable choices: we as global citizens must change the way we do life's most basic work, agriculture, or face the consequences.

Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture contains nine chapters. In chapter 1 Davis reminds readers that the Old Testament advocates a kindly use of the land so that succeeding generations likewise may continue to use it. Other chapters look at the wilderness economy and provision; the wholesome materialness of Leviticus; the idea of the economy as part of the covenant and the covenant as the basis for the local economy; the

splendid poetry of Israel's agrarian prophets; the choice between wisdom and sloth, a choice defining the character of one's work; and the integration of the land and the city.

Davis (1) defines agrarianism as "a way of thinking and ordering life in community that is based on the health of the land and of living creatures." She immediately adds that this definition is frequently "out of step with the prevailing values of wealth, technology, and political and military domination." Those advocating agrarianism often are marginalized in favor of what seem to be higher returns on land and monetary investment. Davis, a self-styled convert to agrarianism, confronts this type of thinking in reasoned, gracious, and hard-hitting ways.

Davis's book "explores the agrarian mind-set of the biblical writers by bringing Israel's Scriptures into sustained conversation with the works of contemporary agrarian writers" (1). She relies heavily on the insights of Wendell Berry, whom she describes as a poet, farmer, essayist and fiction writer; Berry wrote the book's foreword. Throughout this work, Davis challenges the global dominance of corporation-controlled agriculture; her book calls this reliance on "specialists" both illogical and dangerous.

In her study, Davis follows accepted standards of exegesis: she pays close attention to the words, rhythm, diction, and poetry of a text; reads a text within its larger literary context; and looks at, when possible, the geographical, social, and historical circumstances and conditions related to a text (3). Significantly, she adds that her intention is to read the biblical text in a way conducive to the knowledge and love of God; in this she follows Augustine's interpretive principle (3).

Davis believes that the Bible is "incredibly relevant *in vision and principle* for grasping opportunities and obligations to make the whole earth and its bounty serve the welfare of the entire human family" (4, emphasis original). She points to the Bible's daily relevance and sometimes its ho-hum ordinariness. The Bible addresses the concerns of ordinary people—those who are not rich and yet must eat. Very often the people to whom the Bible speaks are those who are not well fed and are not fat; they are the ones wondering about their next meal and the next agricultural season. Davis also reminds the New Testament community of the "agrarian perspective that dominates Israel's Scriptures" and adds that "only a thorough understanding of how Israel represents the human place in the created order can enable Christians to delineate a responsible vision of what participation in the renewal of creation might mean" (7).

She believes that "contemporary agrarian writers may help us re-member a way of life that honors the wholeness of creation" (21). In addition, she immediately argues that reading new authors "can make us better readers of Scripture" (22). Contemporary problems

associated with the land are depletion of water resources, desertification and soil erosion, and contamination of water services by fertilizers and pesticides (23).

Throughout much of Scripture, there is an agrarian mindfulness that the land—a particular land, my land, and our land—is inseparable from the concept of self—both individual self and community self—before God. Even more specifically, land is the earnest of the covenant, the tangible sign and consequence of God’s commitment to the people of Israel (40). Therefore, exile means landlessness. Landlessness means an identity crisis. Over and over again Scripture ties self concept and community identity to the land. Israel must never forget that land is YHWH’s gift.

Following the work of philosopher Erazim Kohak, Davis argues that humans now have an ecological crisis because we have not perceived creation—God’s creation—as good (46). The paradox facing global citizens is that, because humankind’s activities have created substantial changes to the ecosystems, these same ecosystems now require—paradoxically—increasing human involvement. Outside the focus of Davis’s book is an extensive how-to of sound and responsible human and industrial involvement in this fixing process.

Davis believes that the chief cause of land degradation in recent history is increased world population; humans tally more than 6.5 billion. The way the earth’s land has been able to feed this growing population is through committing untilled land to agricultural use (139).

Davis ties in what she calls the character of work to the land. It would seem that the character of the worker, according to biblical texts, affects the quality of the work (144). The Bible encourages its readers and hearers to work wisely, absolutely to stop working on the Sabbath, and to participate in community worship. Harmony then prevails. The community then observes the cycle of the seasons and respects the land’s needs.

Davis writes extensively about the Prov 31 woman. While this unnamed, middle-aged paragon certainly is a capable wife, she is more accurately described as a woman of valor. The poem, Prov 31:10–31, focuses on the woman’s ability to “run a prosperous agrarian household” (147). Davis argues against Joseph Blenkinsopp’s interpretation of the poem as a *petit bourgeois* portrait of an ideal wife (149). The poem, while celebrating a *hayil*, a valorous woman, primarily is the Bible’s most extended description of the regular activity of an ordinary person (148). This unnamed woman makes the routine life of a farmer exemplary. In addition, the poem that concludes the book of Proverbs successfully challenges the economic status quo by convincingly presenting a woman who successfully manages a family farm—possibly amid pressures from imperial powers. Davis sees the

poem as siding with the family-based economy against larger outside forces (154). Furthermore, the magnificent poem shows that the woman “is a consummate practitioner of the economies of permanence as Israel understood it, maintaining the integrity of her household, and keeping her family on the land” (154). Significantly, this woman eats not the bread of sloth (Prov 31:27); she counters the destructive forces of idleness and laziness in the world. The depiction of her life “asserts that good work is even more powerful” than sloth (154).

Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture does not forget the city. Davis, however, does not advocate that everybody must return to the land. Along this line, Davis makes an interesting link between the city of Jerusalem and the Song of Songs. Could the young woman’s voice be the voice of Jerusalem? After all, she is described in city-like terms: her neck is like the tower of David (Song 4:4).

Davis also examines Ps 8, a hymn celebrating the created order. Wisely, Davis notes the skill of the Hebrew writer. The psalm speaks of the workers of iniquity; eventually they are destroyed forever. In the meantime, however, the fool and the dull person and the workers of iniquity can do a lot of damage. It is an open question, Davis asserts, as to “how much destruction of God’s finely wrought work they may accomplish before they perish” (65)—and if God allows for his creation to be permanently destroyed.

Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible is an excellent book. Davis’s voice is not whining or strident, although at times she has harsh words. Her book contains forty pages of notes. The print is readable and the page-weight good. There are ample margins for scribbling notes.

A reason I like Davis’s book so much is that she both challenges and humbles me. In addition, she writes well, very well. She has greatly enlarged my way of reading the Hebrew Bible. I hope this book finds its way to organizations like ADM, Archer Daniels Midland, the massive seed, food, beverage, and industrial and animal feed company; to the Hyde Family Foundations, a foundation geared to the development of Memphis, my city, and to other, similar city-based foundations; to those advocating small garden plots in cities; to others promoting local produce from acreage surrounding a city; to the desk of Tom Vilsack, Secretary, U.S. Department of Agriculture; to multiple desks at USAID (Agency for International Development); to Al Gore, winner of the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize.

In *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, Davis writes with the determination of a recent and new convert. She describes herself currently as hopeful (about agricultural change) but not yet optimistic (5). Her study has revealed to her how vast and current are the resources

within the Bible in terms of procedures and practices “for addressing the problems we face”; her study also has shown her how much “good work is now being done to slow destruction, cultivate new habits of mind, and clear some paths into a wiser future.”

Davis’s trumpeting insights and research now join those other soloists working on so many fronts the world over. May global citizens quickly become an orchestra in which they work, play, and live in harmony with the earth and each other.