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In the student evaluation survey at the end of a class on hermeneutics I once taught, one student answered every question with “it’s complicated.” Although this probably says more about my teaching than the subject, there is nevertheless an element of complication in all rigorous reflection on what it means to read and engage with texts. One would be forgiven, therefore, for coming away from reading Douglas Earl’s *Reading Old Testament Narrative as Christian Scripture* with the feeling that it’s complicated. What Earl offers in this book is a rich, sophisticated, and self-admittedly “jagged” presentation of what it means to engage Old Testament narrative as Christian Scripture. It is not a presentation of a method but a demonstration of a practice.

After a substantial prologue in which Earl discusses a number of hermeneutical issues, especially the emphasis of the world of the text, he begins a series of case studies in engaging Old Testament narrative. Chapter 2 is a study of Gen 34, the rape of Dinah, specifically explaining why it has generally failed to have much Christian significance. Douglas starts with Sternberg’s claim that the literary presentation of this text views Simeon and Levi’s actions positively and Jacob’s inaction negatively (40). He then utilizes neo-structuralist analysis to suggest that Gen 34 as a myth functions on a symbolic level to stress the issues of ethnic separation and endogamy. Earl argues that the reason that this story has not found
Christian significance is because these issues “are not part of the Christian worldview” (57). He hints at how this story might find Christian significance in a canonical context and within a post-Christian culture, but that discussion is saved for further reflection on this story in a later chapter. This chapter is also the place where Earl engages most clearly with Old Testament narrative as narrative.

Chapter 3 is a study of the conquest in Joshua, focusing especially on the term ḥērem. Earl’s approach to understanding the biblical portrayal of ḥērem is to note that texts that use this term in reference to the destruction of peoples, namely, the conquest account in particular and the DtrH in general, utilize this term and this concept as something that is constrained to a mythic past. It is never present. Thus for Earl, “in the Old Testament ‘literal’ [ḥērem] only exists in the world of the text … and it is appropriate to seek its significance in symbolic, existential and rhetorical terms” (86–87). Earl especially notes the way a literal reading of ḥērem is complicated by the presence of Rahab in the story. Despite the tendency in Christian tradition to read Rahab as a model convert, the story suggests to Earl that it is “not about the conversion of the outsider, rather it is about the conversion of the insider” (94). So although Earl admits that at a narrative level the conquest story is problematic, he argues that one can find theological significance in it at a symbolic level as it becomes a picture for challenging Israel’s view of its boundaries and identity. This approach raises a number of questions. First, if one is not convinced by the historically minimalistic view of the conquest, as Earl is, the ethical problem of the narrative level of the story remains problematic. Second, even if one accepts Earl’s two-level reading of this story, the ethical question remains of just how comfortable we should be with offering a positive symbolic reading of a story as a way to move past the horrific narrative level. In other words, should the horrors of the conquest as a story still be seen as an ethical problem for a Christian reading even if we can find symbolic significance to the story?

Chapter 4 discusses the Joseph story in Gen 37–50. After surveying some of the reception history of Joseph and Gen 37–50, Earl identifies three problematic texts: Joseph’s marriage to the daughter of an Egyptian priest (Gen 41:45); Joseph’s swearing by the life of Pharaoh (Gen 42:15); and his purported practice of divination (Gen 44:5, 15). This study helpfully highlights how different textual horizons and contexts nuance a reading. In the narrative context of Gen 37–50, none of these three texts appears to be problematic. However, when read in the context of the text of Genesis as a whole, Joseph’s marriage to the daughter of an Egyptian priest sits uncomfortably with the rest of the patriarchal tradition, which stresses endogamy. When read within the wider Old Testament context, Joseph’s marriage, his swearing by Pharaoh’s life, and his possible practice of divination sit very uncomfortably with what might be termed normative Old Testament religion. In light of these observations, Earl suggests:
The goal of theological interpretation then is not that of seeking to identify and develop the “most probable” construal of a text within its own horizon per se, but rather that of developing possible readings of a text within its own horizon that appear probable in light of the horizon of the canon and tradition of reception in a way that is fruitful for growth in faith, hope and love. (138–39)

The idea that Christian interpretation ought not to be about finding the most probable reading but rather the most useful possible reading will likely trouble some readers and is perhaps not the most helpful way to construe what Earl is after. However, the insight that a text when put into different contexts within the canon has the potential to take on added or nuanced meaning is a helpful insight. It is this canonical context that has normative authority and a revelatory function for the Christian interpreter.

Chapter 5 is a study of the David story. Earl’s proposal here is to engage with the issue of minimalism from a theological perspective. He begins by surveying John Van Seter’s thesis that suggests two variant traditions within the David story, one a positive Deuteronomistic presentation of David and another, which he terms a saga, that is a negative spin on David meant to satirize the positive portrayal. Much of Earl’s interaction with the David story is helpful. He highlights the complexity of the narrative portrayal of David and a possible ambiguous reception of David as character in the gospels. He notes that, on the one hand, the Gospel of Mark seems at least to qualify or possibly object to the concept of a Davidic Messiah, while, on the other hand, Jesus in Mark 2:23–27 appears to cite David’s actions in 1 Sam 21:2–10 approvingly, when a reading of those actions in their own context may suggest that they are a criticism of David. Earl uses the example of the David story as another example where the author’s likely original intention—a negative assessment of David in Van Seter’s David saga—is not particularly helpful in a Christian context and suggests again that a useful Christian reading strategy is one that seeks the most beneficial possible reading. It must be said that Earl is aware of the potential for his strategy to be something of a wax nose. He notes that this approach is a particular reading strategy and that others are on offer. Since he is concerned with a Christian reading of these texts, he uses work by Paul Ricoeur and Rowan Williams to suggest that for Christian engagement revelation is essentially what is generative to our experience. This strategy will be criticized by anyone not convinced by Van Seter’s historical proposal of a David saga, and it will likely not be helpful to readers who are less convinced by such a reader-oriented hermeneutic. However, once again, Earl’s interpretive observations are insightful, and he rightly notes the significance that canonical context and the place and perspective of the reader plays in the interpretive process.

Chapter 6 takes the opportunity to revisit the narratives of the rape of Dinah and Rahab and the conquest. The purpose of revisiting these narratives, which have already been
studied, appears to be to take the opportunity to apply some of the insights of the previous chapters to these stories. Thus Earl starts the chapter thinking again about Ricoeur’s hermeneutics and the issues of a text’s “potential horizons.” He suggests that “it is a theologically fitting possible reading of a given text as mediated through tradition that may be understood to be ‘revelatory’ to a reader in a particular context” (184). He examines the rape of Dinah story by engaging in the debate between Meir Sternberg’s reading and the reading of David Gunn and Danna Fewell. He then revisits the possible construals of Rahab’s story. In both instances, Earl’s assessment of the interpretive options is that Christian interpretation of these stories is concerned with the best possible readings. This concern with multiple possible readings of a biblical text is perhaps “a way of reconfiguring the traditional Christian understanding of multiple senses of Scripture” (197).

In chapter 7 Earl examines the story of Ruth and how it might inform contemporary ethics. The primary aspect under investigation is the relationship between Ruth and Naomi, which in traditional Christian interpretation would be understood to be a committed familial relationship but in which “a lesbian or bisexual reader is likely to find evoked … a model of [a lesbian or bisexual] relationship” (230). Earl’s point here is that the book of Ruth “neither promotes nor rejects lesbian or bisexual relationships per se” (231) but that such interpretations are made on other grounds. While this point is doubtlessly contentious, Earl’s main hermeneutical point that “Old Testament narrative can confound our expectation that scriptural narrative should offer a map that straightforwardly shapes our ethics” (232) is a helpful one.

Chapter 9 discusses the legitimacy of the relationship between Gen 1:26 and Trinitarian theology. In this chapter Earl notes the likely interpretation of Gen 1:26 in its original context as God addressing a heavenly court. He discusses the reception history of this verse, especially as it is reflected in the general Western and Eastern traditions of the Christian church. Finally, he discusses what relationship such symbol-laden or metaphorical language ought to have on our understanding of ontological reality. His concern is that a Christian approach to biblical narrative probably ought not to think of Gen 1:26 as a text upon which one can “hang” the doctrine of the Trinity, but that texts like Gen 1:26, the incarnation, the history of theological reflection, all generate a doctrine like the Trinity. Thus, a “doctrine of the Trinity is a kind of hermeneutical key that emerges to make sense of such testimony” (266).

The final substantive chapter is one that assesses whether the concept of salvation history is a useful one. After a relatively detailed survey of proponents of salvation history, the problem that the origins of the Pentateuch (esp. the relationship between Genesis and Exodus) pose to such a salvation history, Earl proposes that such a narratival reading of the Old Testament may yet be a beneficial reading strategy, even if it is no longer retained as a
historical basis for Israelite religion. Such a use of salvation history is something of a via media between an “overconfidence of the modern era as regards certain understandings of history and truth” and “a rejection of postmodern pessimism or postmodern relativism” (319).

The final chapter is a defense of Earl’s admittedly jagged proposal for reading the Old Testament as Christian Scripture. For Earl, engaging in Old Testament narrative calls for “considerable flexibility in hermeneutical strategy” (322–23). He is wary of turning any of the interpretive tools that were demonstrated in this book into an overall reading strategy or ideology for appropriating Old Testament narrative as a whole. The need for this slightly apologetic chapter is apparent in the fact that this book is less of an introduction and more of an exploration of what it means to engage with Old Testament narrative as Christian Scripture. However, I am in agreement with Earl that it is in many ways a more helpful book for that.

Ironically, my major criticisms of this work highlight the fact that there is substantial truth to one of Earl’s major contentions: that of the importance of the place and perspective of the reader. Ultimately, Earl remains more convinced of certain minimalistic readings of the Old Testament narrative than I do. He remains more convinced of the usefulness of a more reader-oriented hermeneutic than I do. In places he finds a sharper difference between the most textually probable readings of Old Testament narrative and the possible readings that a Christian interpreter may find most useful. For readers seeking to engage seriously with theological interpretation of the biblical narrative, especially as construed within recent hermeneutical strategies and in light of the recent movement of theological interpretation of Scripture, this is a rich and thought provoking work. The emphasis on the importance of different reading contexts—historical, literary, canonical, and so on—is important and well demonstrated. Even readers who disagree with some of Earl’s assumptions will find much insight in every chapter and be required to rethink their approach to reading Old Testament narrative as Christian Scripture.