

BOOK REVIEWS

Ellen F. Davis, *Opening Israel's Scriptures*

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The chapters of Ellen Davis' *Opening Israel's Scriptures* follow a roughly similar procedure. She begins with overview: a sketch, a précis of a given biblical book's main concerns, oftentimes with some comment about its placement within the canon. After that, she homes in on a specific passage, or several, from that book. These feature as block quotes, indented from both the left-hand and the right-hand margins, and with paragraph spacing between them and the main text before and after them, such that a little moat of white space surrounds them on all sides. Italics frequently mark significant words within the block quotes, and bracketed transliterations give access to the Hebrew roots underlying. So, for example, Leviticus 19:9 appears thus:

When you harvest the harvest of your land, do not completely harvest the *edge-growth* [*pe'ah*] of your field, and the gleaning harvest do not glean ... For the poor and the sojourner you shall leave them; I am YHWH your God.

And, directly after that comes another translation from later in the same chapter (v. 27): 'You shall not round off the *edge-growth* [*pe'ah*] of your head, and do not spoil the *edge-growth* of your beard.'

On the bottom side of the moat, exegetical commentary then ensues, in this case: 'Every time the farmer feels the rough edges of his face or views the part of the field he has intentionally not reaped, he may be reminded of ... their interdependency and common dependence on the grace of God' (p. 77). The overall visual effect is to centre these biblical excerpts-in-translation, and to draw the eye with their special orthography. This is very much to the point: translations – fresh, original translations, always the author's own – form the backbone of *Opening Israel's Scriptures*. Davis' introductory chapter says as much, and in the same place notes that 'many of my students have commented that what first awakened their exegetical interest in exegesis was hearing me do "live translation" [in class]' (p. 6). One of her book's principal gifts is to put readers in the same position, permitting us to watch an experienced and skilful translator at the top of her craft. I myself, hardly a Hebrew novice, oftentimes started with delight at the connections Davis draws or the insights she finds. The example from Leviticus above, that the same Hebrew word describes the 'edge-growth' of fields and faces, was but one among many.

But *Opening Israel's Scriptures* is not a translation proper, nor is it a commentary. It names Robert Alter as an inspiration, but not on account of his recent translation of the Hebrew Bible. Rather, he is listed in first place amid several recent practitioners of 'close reading' (p. 2). This latter is the exercise that Davis' book chiefly pursues: attentive,

targeted exegetical forays, built from her translation. At the same time, the book is not utterly seriatim. It aims at comprehensiveness, beginning with three chapters on Genesis and ending with three chapters on Ezra-Nehemiah and 1–2 Chronicles, the final entries in the Jewish canon; only a couple of the Minor Prophets are omitted. In addition to covering the whole canon, *Opening Israel's Scriptures* also includes devices that typically belong in an introduction to the Hebrew Bible. A glossary at the back of the book explains specialised terms, such as 'Deuteronomistic History' or 'tradent', which appear in bold typeface in the book's body chapters. Occasional excurses summarise the state of the art in historical-critical scholarship. So, for example, 'The Big Upheaval: Canaan in the Thirteenth Century', sandwiched between exegetical chapters on Joshua and Judges, for two and a half pages addresses the emergence of Israel from Canaan, with endnotes citing Israel Finkelstein and Mark Smith (p. 147); or again, the chapter on Esther and Daniel starts with a one-page preface describing these writings as 'diaspora tales', ironic and grimly humorous forms of historical fiction (p. 376).

Davis' volume is thus introductory without being an introduction per se and exegetical without being a sustained or full-blown work of academic exegesis. Its other distinguishing factor besides close readings and artful translations is its overall *practical* intent. Davis herself uses this adjective repeatedly in her introduction, and indeed claims of the book that 'it is a work of *practical theology*' (p. 1), a discipline embedded in her own academic appointment (she is the Amos Ragan Kearns Distinguished Professor of Bible and Practical Theology at Duke University). The word encodes a number of qualities. The first and broadest is accessibility; Davis' chapters are short, her prose is clear and winsome, and her interests are existential, not technical or historical. This is a book that a first-year seminarian could pick up and profit from, and that because, as Davis acknowledges, 'many or most' of the questions that *Opening Israel's Scriptures* entertains were initially posed to her by first-year seminarians (p. 5).

Secondly, the practicality of Davis' work lies in its engagement with contemporary and real-world issues – and not narrowly theological or ecclesial ones, either. The person and profile of God and the mission of the church are never far from Davis' deliberations, but her chapters also maintain a pressing concern for the whole earth community, human and non-human, in our present moment of degradation and crisis. Her close readings of, for example, texts from Genesis focus on limits: the Sabbatarian limit on labour in Genesis 1, and the limit on consumption in Genesis 2 (eating from the tree), which the first humans violate; eating, overconsuming, is our paradigmatic sin (p. 21). Davis' reading of Leviticus similarly accents 'eating within limits [as] a fundamental way that the people Israel, and humans altogether, are to honor God' (p. 70).

The last practicality of *Opening Israel's Scriptures* consists in its range of interlocutors. A cloud of witnesses and conversation partners ensure that Davis' interpretations keep contact with the life of faith lived in front of the text. Davis' students and partners from her teaching in South Sudan make repeated appearances; so do rabbinic commentators, medieval Jewish scholars and modern Jewish luminaries (Davis intends, after all, for the book to be used 'both by Jews and Christians', p. 1).

In sum, *Opening Israel's Scriptures* offers a readable, engaging and canonically rangy collection of theological close readings. I suspect that they would spark enthusiasm for Israel's scriptures as a textbook for a first-year seminary course, in complement to the usual more workmanlike, historical introduction.