
Review of Greger Andersson, *Untamable Texts: Literary Studies and Narrative Theory in the Books of Samuel*. Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 514. New York/London: T&T Clark, 2009.

Benjamin J.M. Johnson, Durham University

In the world of biblical literary criticism scholars like Robert Alter, Meir Sternberg, Adele Berlin, Shimon Bar-Efrat, Yairah Amit and J.P. Fokkelman would be considered among the dream team of biblical literary critics. It is therefore no small undertaking to take them all to task as Greger Andersson does in this book. The main thesis of this book is in two parts: First, Andersson argues that biblical literary critics, though they claim to offer literary interpretations, do not interpret the Bible as having a literary *raison d'être*. Second, biblical literary critics assume (at least in practice) that they can apply their theories to the text to produce new meanings (see p. 1). To prove this thesis Andersson offers four substantial chapters looking at various aspects of the “tripartite dialogue” between biblical texts, their interpreters, and the theories of narrative espoused by those interpreters.

In the first chapter, “Poetics and Interpretation”, Andersson examines why literary theorists or “experts” in biblical poetics, who “should explain why readers have interpreted a particular narrative in such and such a way” instead “tend rather to suggest *new* readings and thus aspire to be able to tell what these texts *actually mean*” (p. 9, italics original). He spends some time critiquing such scholars as Robert Polzin, Walter Brueggemann, and J.P. Fokkelman, showing that each of these interpreters, at different times, offer interpretations that are not deeper or more sophisticated readings based on their poetic expertise, but rather “new” readings that are contrary to common readers’ basic understanding of the text. Andersson argues that common readers have a spontaneous intuition about how to read a narrative text and what such a text is trying to communicate. Thus, any supposed “literary” reading that offers an interpretation different than a common reader’s intuitive understanding of a text must show clearly how their interpretation is justified by signals in the text. As for the interpreters under examination, Andersson finds them wanting. For Andersson, literary theory or narratology is important but should play a more limited role as a “memory of readings” (p. 69) which we can bring to a text but never force onto a text.

In chapter 2, “The Sense-Governing Intent”, Andersson examines how biblical scholars “understand the ‘nature’ or ‘character’ of the narratives in the books of Samuel” (p. 80). He examines a basic understanding of the narratives of the books of Samuel as well as several more detailed examples of specific texts, including the story of David and Bathsheba. In his reading of the literary critics’ interpretations of these texts, Andersson concludes that while biblical literary critics regard biblical narrative as having literary traits their main “sense-governing intent” is rather to convey narrative information (p. 116). Andersson regards these two models as separate. In the one, which he describes as Fohrer’s model, the biblical texts are literary signs pointing to a real historical referent. In the other, which he describes as Alter’s model, the biblical texts are themselves the referent and object of literary study rather than signs pointing to something else. He suggests that when biblical literary critics do not recognize that these two models are different they oscillate between the two and often propose what Andersson regards as “disquieting” interpretations.

In the third chapter, “Storytelling: Sense and Reference”, Andersson examines “the relationship between the interpretation of reference and meaning (sense) in biblical narratives” (p. 129). He begins by discussing the three different notions of reading narratives which he defines as historical,

aesthetical and phenomenological. Historical interpretation simply assumes that the text is referring to an event and that interpretation is about recovering the event. Aesthetical interpretation treats the text as the prime object of interpretation and interprets not a world or storyworld but the motifs that are expressed in the story. He can thus describe this method of interpretation as being like a painting. The phenomenological method reads the text in order to understand something about the storyworld the text represents. Thus, the text is not the meaning itself, but instead refers to a greater storyworld. Andersson can thus compare this method to looking through a window.

Having made these distinctions between the various methodologies, Andersson goes on to examine several interpretations that he finds “disquieting”. In other words, interpretations that seem to be rooted more in the supposed theories of the interpreters than in the leading of the text. A key example of this is the idea of gap-filling. Biblical literary critics often find much interpretive information in supposed gaps in narratives that the reader is supposed to fill. Andersson points out that this assumption assumes the phenomenological notion of reading, where literary texts really refer to something other than themselves. The problem with this is, according to Andersson, “how to explain that some gapping is relevant and some is irrelevant” (p. 152). The argument in this chapter is that an aesthetical reading of literary narratives is the best method for reading according to the rules which are valid for the narrative genre which Andersson describes as “storytelling”.

In chapter 4, “Two Nodes: Narrators and Perspectives”, Andersson turns his attention to two case studies in literary interpretation: 1) the idea of narrators and 2) the use of perspective, point of view or focalization. His rationale for this chapter is that many of the issues that have been discussed so far in the book come into focus in these two case studies. In regards to narrators, Andersson discusses common narratological views of author, implied author, narrator, narratee, implied reader and reader. After a long discussion of the uses of these concepts in biblical literary criticism, Andersson argues, appealing to his aesthetical approach, that ordinary readers do not ponder the role of the narrator but instead direct their intention “at the motifs and the composition that are presented to them” (p. 230). Thus, it seems that Andersson's aesthetical approach sidesteps many of the author and narrator issues assumed by many biblical literary critics. In regards to perspective, Andersson discusses the ways that literary critics commonly discuss perspective and argues, again appealing to “common readers”, that the biblical writers did not use perspective to undermine the narrative but to gain an empathetic following of the reader (see p. 245).

Andersson ends his study with a final chapter, “Interpreters, Theories, and Texts”, which functions as a summarizing and concluding chapter. He ends as he began, by calling biblical literary critics to be more consistently *literary* in their study of these texts, by arguing that these texts must be given their own say and not forced to fit some model or literary theory, and by appealing to the literary intuitions of the “ordinary reader”.

In sum, Andersson has offered a careful and challenging critique of much modern biblical literary criticism. One cannot read this book without being challenged to be more careful and consistent in the interpretation of biblical narrative. His criticisms of many biblical literary critics strikes this reviewer as correct and called for. However, at least one question does arise repeatedly in reading this work. Andersson frequently appeals to a “common” or “ordinary” reader's interpretation of these narratives like a trump card. He can thus critique a literary critic's interpretation based on it being counter to a supposed “ordinary” reading of the text. While I find many of these instances appropriate critiques, I find myself wondering about the use of a supposed “common” reading that is so obvious to Andersson. It seems more likely that even common readers would offer a multiplicity of interpretations of biblical narratives, and appealing to a self evident natural or common reading is more difficult than Andersson implies.

This minor criticism should not detract from the worth of this book. Andersson has offered a great resource to those who wish to take the biblical narratives seriously as literature. His book,

while dense, is well written. Furthermore, he has greatly aided the reader by summarizing and repeating thesis statements throughout the book. I highly recommend anyone interested in the literary criticism of biblical narrative to engage with Andersson's study.