REVIEW OF PAMELA TAMARKIN REIS' *READING THE LINES: A FRESH LOOK AT THE HEBREW BIBLE*

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Edgar W. Conrad reviews Pamela Tamarkin Reis' *Reading the Lines: A Fresh Look at the Hebrew Bible* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002. 227 pages).

Reis' book is a collection of her previously published articles in journals such as *Judaism*, *Conservative Judaism*, *Vetus Testamentum*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* and *The Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society*. The importance of bringing these articles together in a single volume is that it provides the opportunity to examine as a whole Reis' distinctive approach to interpreting the Hebrew Bible. Reis was not trained as a biblical scholar, and she understands that her 'Fresh Look at the Hebrew Bible' results from her interpretive approach unencumbered by the baggage of traditional biblical studies, which is concerned with source analysis as a solution to what appears as contradictions, redundancies and other apparent anomalies in the text.

I enjoyed the excitement that Reis brings to her study. While she refers to herself as an amateur rather than a professional biblical scholar (p. 14), her readings are a welcome addition to the plurality of approaches to interpreting the Bible now evident at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This book blurs the distinction between professional and amateur and challenges the master narratives of biblical scholarship that have stifled meaning by asserting a kind of *wissenschlaftlich* singularity of interpretation.

She explains her approach on pp. 9 and 10:

> Though my perspective is literary rather than religious, I, like the midrashists, … try to notice and account for every gap, redundancy, or seeming non-essential in the text… [The Bible's] artistry dazzles and absorbs me irrespective of its underlying philosophy. When I am seized by an idea and study the passage in question, I read and reread it over and over again. I try to sensitize myself to

> every word that is there but should not be. I look at midrash on the passage to see if they noticed a problem that I have missed, but I do not try to read 'in' to the book; I try to read 'out' of it, to see what the writer, by the exercise of his craft, intended the close reader to see.

Reis begins each chapter by locating the particular pericope she is interpreting in a setting – usually an academic class, seminar or bible study group – in which a professional biblical scholar offers a traditional biblical studies answer to a difficult problem. She disagrees with these traditional answers, which normally resort to a source critical explanation. For example, in chapter 3, 'Take My Wife, Please: On Unity of the Wife/Sister Motif', she challenges the notion offered by a biblical scholar at 'a lunch-hour, non-denominational Bible class' that the Pentateuch is the result of multiple redactions giving rise to contradictions, discrepancies and redundancies. She says that in the course of the sessions she wanted to say on many occasions,

> 'Wait, wait, don't dismantle that. Don't you see the intricate pattern there?' I did not say it, however, because I did not see the intricate pattern myself; I just knew there had to be one. It seemed to me unlikely that the inconsistency or the contradiction or the repetition, upon which the teacher pounced, had escaped the notice of the author, redactor, first readers, and centuries of later readers and was detectable only by the literati since the nineteenth century.

By allowing the reader a glimpse into her personal experience when she encounters a mystery in the text, she reveals those often unspoken dimensions of self identity that contribute to the construction of meaning. I came to imagine Reis as Miss Marple, a sleuth looking for clues that the professionals fail to see. She relentlessly takes the reader through her detective work (see p. 94) in solving the case in order to prevent additional source critical textual mutilations and murder.

Some of her readings will generate controversy, especially in those situations where the character normally understood to be a victim becomes the perpetrator: Jephthah's daughter is understood as a spoiled child who far from being powerless manipulates her father into ensuring her a 'life of comfortable independence' (p. 130) and Tamar is not raped by her brother Amnon but 'engages willingly in incest' (p. 195).

While Reis has developed her own approach to interpreting the Hebrew Bible and has exposed problems with the historical-critical approach, she does not sufficiently locate her readings within the larger scene of biblical studies as well as literary and critical theory at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Her exposé of the problems of source critical analysis is not new; she is one voice in a growing crowd, which is, however, largely ignored in this book. Hence, her portrayal of the professional scholar becomes a caricature.

She makes a number of assertions that are unsubstantiated:

- Her recurring declaration that there are 'no mistakes in the Torah' (pp. 4, 9) or that 'the author made no mistakes' (pp. 17, 30, 150) is a presupposition that many would find difficult to endorse. While she says that her approach is literary rather than religious (p. 9) and that she is not a religious fundamentalist (p. 27), her attribution of an error free text gives the biblical text a unique and undefended status.

- Her statement that she attempts to read 'out' of the book and not 'in' to it (p. 10) shows little awareness of the recent discussions of the role of the reader in interpretation.
- On a number of occasions she speaks of the 'artistry' of the text (pp. 9, 20, 38, 63, n. 17, 70, n. 4, 134). Nowhere, however, does she indicate how a reader is to come to recognize this artistry. In Chapter 6, 'The Bridegroom of Blood: A New Reading', she reads so much 'in' to the thoughts of Moses and Zipporah that the story becomes a new story and the 'artistry' appears to have more to do with the reader/interpreter than the author/redactor.
- Often she appeals to the Bible's first readers (p. 19, 37, 89, 94, 95, 96, 134, 173). Who are these 'first readers'? The audience for whom the scrolls were first written? The audience who first read these texts as a Bible? The artistic intention of the original authors and the thoughts of the first readers are no longer available for scrutiny as Reis herself recognizes (p. 134). To appeal to first readers to substantiate an argument and even at one point to identify their theology (p. 96) is problematic.

I am drawing to attention those aspects of her discussion that I think undermine her own arguments. I agree with her definition of what constitutes a convincing interpretation. She says on p. 14, 'What makes an interpretation tenable is not the reputation of its author but the quality and convincingness of its supporting evidence. An exegesis is authoritative to the extent that its arguments are compelling'. When she says there are no mistakes in the Bible, that she is only reading 'out', that she has identified textual artistry and that she can speak confidently of the first readers, she is both concealing her own input into interpretation and is making her own arguments less persuasive.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book and recommend it to others. I think that many of the articles in this book could be incorporated into required reading for undergraduate courses. The articles will provoke discussion on how meaning emerges in textual interpretation.