

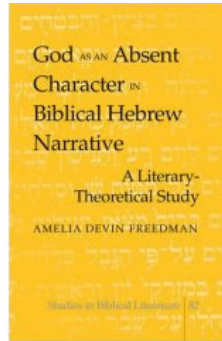
○ REVIEW OF AMELIA DEVIN FREEDMAN, *GOD AS AN ABSENT CHARACTER IN BIBLICAL HEBREW NARRATIVE*

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Scott Elliott reviews Amelia Devin Freedman's *God as an Absent Character in Biblical Hebrew Narrative: A Literary-Theoretical Study* (Studies in Biblical Literature 82. Hemchand Gossai, ed. New York: Peter Lang, 2005. Pp. xvi + 230. ISBN 0-8204-7828-8).



The problem Amelia Devin Freedman sets out to examine is the way in which the character of God goes missing in the Hebrew Bible. In lieu of God, writers provide stand-ins (e.g., angels, divinely appointed human beings), or else conjure up God's presence by some other means (e.g., the narrator speaks on behalf of God, human characters talk about God). Freedman asks, 'What methods can modern readers use to understand the character of God, who is both the single most important character in HB narrative and absent from the majority of it?' (3). The author selects narrative criticism, reader response criticism, intertextuality, and feminist literary criticism as four methodologies that, in her judgment, either help readers make the most of the limited information provided by the text, or else authorise readers to supplement the information provided with additional information drawn from other sources. Freedman presents each method in turn, reviewing and commenting on the work of various scholars associated with the approaches that interest her. In the course of her critique, she analyses the pros and cons of each method, and offers brief demonstrations of sample biblical texts being read through the theoretical lens under discussion – the 'Joseph narrative' (narrative criticism), the 'succession narrative' (reader response criticism), the Book of Esther (intertextuality), and the Book of Ruth (feminist literary criticism).

Early in the book, Freedman offers the usual caveat that 'modern Western interpretive techniques must be applied to ancient non-Western texts with caution... because there is no assurance that these texts have the same conception' of certain contemporary concerns (e.g., genre, purpose, audience, etc.), particularly those of a more literary and theoretical nature (3). This unnecessary proviso is based on problematic presuppositions having to do with things like authorship and intentionality, which persist in the field of Biblical Studies – presuppositions that the readers of *The Bible and Critical Theory* are unlikely to share. Freedman could well have dispensed with

such a qualification, particularly since she does such a fine job of simultaneously drawing upon and critiquing historical methodologies throughout the book (though she never entirely shakes off historical concerns; see e.g., 139, 144, 148).

In her analysis of narrative criticism, Freedman sharply (and I think quite rightly) criticises scholars such as Alter, Sternberg, and Bar-Efrat for confusing ‘God as a biblical character with God as the extra-textual object of their own faith’ (32). Interestingly, whether intentionally or not, this confusion seems to be reflected later in the stance taken by one of the author’s imaginary readers fabricated for use in her presentation of reader response criticism (82). Her modern reader is said to distrust Nathan and his characterisation of God in 2 Samuel 12:1-15a. The question is whether the reader does so because of her distrust of prophecy and prophets, or because she has an alternative view of God, who therefore is no longer a literary figure within the narrative but an entity outside of the text. To a point, I think this lies at the crux of what Freedman aims to investigate: the very existence of literary characters, let alone the degree to which they are present or absent from the story, is heavily dependent upon and entangled with the reader. Hence, literary characters are always already outside of the story. At the same time, however, characters are fully delimited and determined by the stories that contain them, i.e., they are both constructed in and through the narrative and also subjected to a narrative plot from which they cannot escape.

Reader response criticism, according to Freedman, ‘contends that readers may bring their individual background knowledge, attitudes, and the like to a biblical text in order to understand God’s sparse characterization’ (69). There are two problems in this summary. First, readers do what Freedman describes as a matter of course, not because a particular method permits them to do so. Secondly, readers are still limited in some way by the materials provided by the narrative to which a given character belongs. To whatever extent readers fill in the gaps necessary to ‘flesh out’ a character, criticism calls for investigation into what other factors contribute to the determination of how those gaps are filled.

This is precisely where intertextuality comes into play. Freedman distinguishes between two types of ‘intertextuality’. There is the dominant approach to (or understanding of) intertextuality in the field of biblical studies, influenced by historical-critical methodology, which she labels (following Ellen van Wolde) ‘the intertextuality of text production’. In sum, it has to do with intentional allusion on the part of an author. Alternatively, there is ‘the intertextuality of text reception’ which has to do with intertexts that the reader draws upon, either consciously or unconsciously, in her production of literary meaning. In my opinion, we should abandon altogether any use of intertextuality to refer to intentional allusion. Such use is simply too narrow and unhelpful. Freedman’s ‘intertextual reading’ of Esther vis-à-vis *Chaereas and Calliroe* is justified on the basis of similarities in plot devices, characters, and settings (108). Hence, it is very intentional and controlled. She comes to the very interesting conclusion that ‘the amount of divine presence and involvement in each text correlates with the main character’s level of assertiveness’ (117). In making such a suggestion, however, another intertext emerges: namely, the Western myth of the self-reliant individual.

Intertextuality is one of the most fascinating concepts of literary theory, but I disagree with Freedman’s decision to present it as a method. She contends that intertextuality ‘is arguably more useful than any other literary method... because of the high degree of agency it provides the reader for the creation of literary meaning’ (104). Alas, it is not a method but rather a consequence

of language and textuality. Furthermore, like reader response criticism, it does not authorise the reader to do anything so much as allow critics to analyse what readers do naturally.

This brings us to Freedman's chapter on feminist literary criticism, which makes it clear (perhaps unwittingly) that literary characters are primarily textual functionaries. The close relationship between ideological criticism and the sort of feminist criticism espoused by Freedman serves to position characters as discursive instruments. Characters are incapable of ever translating perfectly into persons. When this is taken into account, any analysis of God as a literary figure will be something much more complicated than attempting to understand a character's rationale for wandering off.

The title of the book, though intriguing, is ultimately misleading, as Freedman does little to actually investigate the character of God and the implications of that character's absence throughout much of the Hebrew Bible. She offers us some stimulating possibilities, to be sure; but I would have liked to read more on what she personally makes of this curious feature of the text.

A more pressing question for me is to what extent, or in what way, can a literary character actually be 'absent'? Could one argue that, within the context of any particular story, a character is either present or non-existent? And while it is one thing to read a particular book of the Bible as a coherent whole, what changes when we read the entire Hebrew Bible as a coherent whole? While it may be true that this is precisely the way most readers approach the text (i.e., as one continuous story), doing so changes significantly the nature of various matters discussed in this book. In fact, it is *only* when the Hebrew Bible, as we have it, is read as a single story that God (or any other character for that matter) goes missing.

Finally, I think it is important to recognise and articulate the similarities and differences between (i) purely literary characters (i.e., those entirely fabricated), (ii) historical persons (or non-specific, non-individuated groups) characterised within a narrative framework, and (iii) divine entities, which enter a text with certain shared beliefs attached to them, but which then are textualised and characterised within a narrative framework. These sorts of distinctions are still lacking in narratological studies of biblical texts.

My criticisms notwithstanding, I found this to be an engaging book, and would not hesitate to recommend it. I am appreciative of Freedman's effort to equip non-professional readers with methods that better enable them to reflect on this curious phenomenon in the Hebrew Bible, though it remains to be seen how successful she'll be in that endeavor. Most readers would never be aware that such a problem even exists had it not been occasioned by such methods in the first place.

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