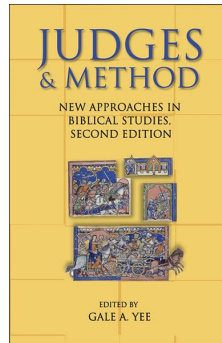


○ REVIEW OF GALE A. YEE, ED. *JUDGES & METHOD: NEW APPROACHES IN BIBLICAL STUDIES*. 2ND ED.

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Peter Miscall, Denver, CO 80222



The first edition of *Judges and Method* appeared in 1995 as an introduction to new critical methods for reading the Bible. Since yet newer methods have appeared in the intervening years, a new edition of the text is called for. The original essays have been reworked and updated: ‘Narrative Criticism’ by Richard G. Bowman, ‘Social-Scientific Criticism’ by Naomi Sternberg, ‘Feminist Criticism’ by J. Cheryl Exum, ‘Structuralist Criticism’ by David Jobling, ‘Deconstructive Criticism’ by Danna Nolan Fewell and ‘Ideological Criticism’ by Gale A. Yee. Three new essays have been added: ‘Postcolonial Criticism’ by Uriah Y. Kim, ‘Gender Criticism’ by Ken Stone and ‘Cultural Criticism’ by David M. Gunn.

In her introduction Yee briefly discusses the historical-critical view of *Judges* as a work compiled over a period of time and included in the Deuteronomistic History and contrasts this with the literary readings that regard the book as a unified whole. She notes that the variety of methods of the present collection both fit with and contrast with these approaches in differing modes and to differing degrees. Each author in turn discusses how their particular criticism fits into the wider setting of contemporary biblical studies. The book of *Judges* is chosen as the focus text because it is not as familiar terrain as, say, *Genesis* or *Samuel* and because it is a rich and difficult text offering much for any approach, traditional or new, to show its worth.

Each essay has the same general layout: a description of the criticism as it has developed beyond the confines of biblical studies, then discussion of its relevance and application to the Bible and finally application of the method to a chosen text from *Judges*. The bibliographies for further study mirror this layout: general works on the method followed by those with particular application to biblical texts. The collection provides both excellent introductions to each criticism, in general and in particular, and a wide range of insights into the book of *Judges*.

Narrative criticism analyses the literary features and structure of the present form of the text to determine an interpretive focus for the narrative. The critic focuses on literary elements such

as the narrator, point of view, plot and character in the reading process. Bowman discusses the use of the phrase 'the Lord is with [someone]' to reveal a conflict between human action and divine presence.

Social-scientific criticism expands concern with historical context to include factors such as, one, the functioning of families, both nuclear and expanded, and the roles of kinship and marriage in this functioning and, two, the impact of the specific social and class structure of a given society. Steinberg is concerned with the major negative implications for Abimelech's standing in Shechemite society (Judges 9) of his mother's reduced, 'incorrect' status.

Feminist criticism begins with 'the concerns of feminism as a worldview and as a political enterprise' (p. 65). It employs no one approach and can focus on either the biblical text itself or on the wide range of existing readings and commentaries. Analysing how and why women are cast into a subordinate role in text or commentary can suggest strategies to counter that subordination now and in the future. Exum reads the final chapters of the book of Judges to reveal the sweeping violence against women, including dismemberment and rape.

Structuralism begins in linguistics with the awareness that we perceive reality through systematic relations. A literary text makes sense in the relation of its parts and levels to each other and to other literary texts that fit or contrast with it. Proponents of structuralism have often made positivist claims for the method as a sort of 'science of literature,' but Jobling stresses that structuralism is a mind-set and a congeries of methods. He analyses three 'fords of the Jordan' incidents to highlight the text's struggle with Israelites outside the land and non-Israelites inside the land.

Deconstruction, so often the bad guy in literary and biblical criticism, reveals that 'a text does not manifest one incontestable meaning' (p. 116) because texts can differ within themselves. Tension and incompatibility of meaning and function are within the text itself and not just in a plurality of reading methods. Such challenges to textual stability and clarity explain much of the general unease with deconstruction. Fewell offers a multiple reading – she presents four translations – of the episode of Achsah in Judges 1:11-15 to illustrate this unsettling effect.

Ideological criticism builds on literary, historical and social-scientific methods to read biblical texts both extrinsically, in terms of the society that produced the text, and intrinsically, in terms of the text's content and rhetoric. The text is thereby anchored, both in what it says and in how it says it, in the society that produced it. Yee reads Judges 17-21 in the context of 'the time of King Josiah as a literary production of the pre-exilic Deuteronomist' (p. 157) and as a defense of Josiah's centralisation of royal power.

Postcolonial criticism emerged in the last generation to highlight and to question the dominance of Western epistemology that can view non-Western peoples and their modes of thought, logic and interpretation as inferior and superstitious. The dominance usually goes unnoticed and has corrosive effects on all involved, both coloniser and colonised. Like feminism, postcolonialism employs any method that will aid in bringing such colonialising thinking to light and can deal with the biblical text itself and with any other study on it. Kim focuses on the issue of 'us' and 'them' in Judges. Judges wants to legitimise the conquest of a wicked 'them' by the righteous 'us' but is never able to keep the lines between coloniser and colonised clear.

Gender criticism is an interdisciplinary undertaking that explores concepts such as man and woman, male and female and masculinity and femininity in their cultural and social functioning and not as referring to stable, natural categories. Gender criticism overlaps feminism, lesbian

and gay studies and queer theory. It studies not just man-woman distinctions but also distinctions such as the 'ideal man' and 'ideal woman' over against other 'ordinary' men and women. Stone uses Abimelech's story to reveal the 'un-manning' of the character who is placed in a series of other unmanly men such as Saul, Jonathan and the Benjaminites.

Cultural criticism 'is an interdiscipline or a cross-discipline or a multidiscipline' (p. 202). Culture is a social glue holding people together and giving them language, behaviour and such by which they share values and life in general. A cultural critic can employ any approach or body of knowledge to discern how the Bible has been used at different times in history and not just in the limited senses of the history of interpretation. The critic looks closely at categories such as sermons, illustrations in bible histories, public and private art and movies. Gunn studies a group of illustrations and readings of the sacrifice/execution of Jephthah's daughter and shows that such illustrations became unacceptable by the late nineteenth century because of changes in social attitudes toward the display of human pain and suffering, even of criminals.

Exum defines feminist criticism as 'remarkably pluralistic and diverse' and notes that it 'encourages multiple, even contradictory, readings of the same text' (p. 68) and for me the phrases capture my main reaction to the collection as a whole and to each essay in it. Not one of the writers seeks to describe a criticism that has only one focus and one clear method; there is pluralism of criticisms but also a pluralism of approach and of critics within each criticism. Narrative and structuralist criticisms would seem to have the best claims to a unified method but any such claims quickly dissolve when a narrative or structuralist critic is faced with specific decisions about focus – character, plot or theme; surface or deep structure; actantial model or semiotic square – and application to the text in question. Jobling stresses that all models for reading and interpretation have limits to their application and that the work of a structuralist is 'to make the work *your own*' (p. 112; authors italics). A critic should start with the techniques and readings of others and then develop them into her own. Finally and as I have already noted with feminist and postcolonial criticisms, the criticisms apply, in varying degrees, to the study both of the biblical text itself and of the many ways that the Bible has been perceived and analysed. These can be studied together or in separation.