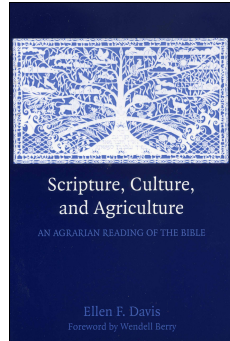


○ REVIEW OF ELLEN F. DAVIS, *SCRIPTURE, CULTURE, AND AGRICULTURE: AN AGRARIAN READING OF THE BIBLE*

(NEW YORK: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2008)

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This book by Ellen Davis, Professor of Bible and Practical Theology at Duke Divinity School, invites exegetes and students to look at the Bible (primarily the Hebrew Bible) in a new way. It is also a deeply political book, in the best sense of *politikos* – it concerns “living in a community” (LSJ, s.v.). Davis calls all readers of the Bible to approach it first as an agrarian text, a text that speaks from and to the concerns of the land. Then she calls her readers to respond through action in their care for the land and its food-systems. Making the argument that we are all connected to the land through our food, she calls for a re-thinking of the notion of community both in the biblical texts and in our own time.

Davis uses the word *theoria* in its sense of “to see, observe” to describe her project. She intends to see all the texts of her analysis through agrarian concerns. As part of her heuristic of reading, she engages the work of farmer-writer Wendell Berry (who also wrote the foreword) with her readings of biblical texts. She also uses cases of contemporary agrarian activism and thought to illuminate her readings of biblical texts. As such, I found her exegetical approach to be very congenial, as it is similar to my own. Those readers who expect a more “traditional” scholarly exegetical approach may find the work disconcerting, but they should persevere through their disconcertion to find the real exegetical insights of the book.

After a brief Introduction, the main part of Davis’ discussion of her *theoria* may be found in the first chapter, “Rupture and Re-membling,” and the second, “Reading the Bible Through Agrarian Eyes.” In the first chapter, she sketches out the intense inter-relationship of the land with the covenant between God and humanity as seen in the Bible. She highlights the fact that the covenantal language in biblical texts is intimately connected with remaining *in the land* and with the land’s fertility and productivity. By emphasizing the land/earth/soil imagery in selected texts, she calls attention to the neglect of the earthiness of the texts and their imagery in biblical scholarship. In the second chapter she explores the interconnection of ethics and reading, pointing

out that in modern American (probably Western more generally) culture there is a divorce between food production and value-judgements. By exploring contemporary writings on agrarian thought, she is able to show the connections between these writers and the agrarian ethic of biblical texts. She sees four primary connections: 1) the land comes first, and has “expectations”; 2) acceptance of ignorance as primary to the human condition; 3) a modest materialism of meeting material needs with humility and reasonableness; and 4) the value of land is not monetary. The rest of the book is a series of readings of biblical texts that emphasize one or more of these connections.

The third chapter, “Seeing With God: Israel’s Poem of Creation,” is an exploration of Genesis 1. Davis performs a particularly acute analysis of Gen 1:28 (“...fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over...” [NRSV]). She argues that subdue/conquer (*kbš*) and dominion/mastery (*rdh*) are used ironically, since the rest of the biblical story of the land shows that Israel lost the land due to its abrogation of its covenantal obligations. The fourth chapter, “Leaving Egypt Behind: Embracing the Wilderness Economy,” is an exploration of the marginal wilderness experience recounted in biblical texts that have their setting in the wilderness. By focusing on the stories of manna, Davis is able to show that restraint in the collection of food is linked to an understanding of food as gift rather than product. The double-ration for the Sabbath is a concrete example of the goodness and gift of God through the land.

In the fifth chapter, “A Wholesome Materiality: Reading Leviticus,” Davis focuses on the Priestly material as studied by Milgrom and Douglas in order to emphasize the connection of the ethical with the practical obligations. She uses this insight to analyze genetic modification of crops: the mixing of genetic material from vastly different organisms. Genetic instability and ownership are among the issues she interrogates from the levitical perspective. She also discusses the levitical food regulations as “a primary communicator of the covenant,” and thus holding an ethical obligation to holiness; this she compares with the industrial scale of food production in North America.

The sixth chapter, “Covenantal Economics: The Biblical Case for a Local Economy,” examines land tenure, both ancient and modern. Theoretically based on contemporary analyses of agrarian systems and the biblical legal texts concerning land, Davis suggests that the “biblical ideal” is healthy local economies with local food economies, as expressed by the Hebrew word *nahala*. This “possession” of land is not so much possession as tenure conditional upon care. She then goes on to analyze 1 Kgs 21, the story of Naboth’s vineyard, as a story of two competing economies: the traditional local one as represented by Naboth, and the newer imperial one as represented by Ahab. Ahab seeks to break the local land economy; implied is the comparison with modern North American systems of land tenure. The critique of Ahab and his ilk is found in the seventh chapter, “Running on Poetry: The Agrarian Prophets.” This analysis of prophetic texts (particularly Amos and Hosea) focuses on the moment when the local small farmsteads were under threat from imperializing tendencies of large estates, absentee land-holders, and conversion of small-scale subsistence plots to specialized commodity production. Davis’ reading of Hosea’s sexualized imagery is particularly interesting: she makes the link between sexuality, food, worship, economics, and politics. Sexual love and farming she sees as linked in Hosea (particularly Hos 9).

In the next chapter, “Wisdom or Sloth? The Character of Work,” Davis turns to a discussion of wisdom texts, and particularly Prov 31:10-31, the praise of the *ešet-hayil*, which she renders as “valorous woman” rather than the “capable wife” of the NRSV and NJPS. She sees the poem

not as a sort of bourgeois male fantasy but as a depiction of a woman running the family farm in the face of increasing Persian imperial encroachment on the traditional land tenure practices, and in the face of the men of the family being away from the farm as part of conscripted labour forces.

The final chapter, “The Faithful City,” examines the role of Jerusalem and urban life in an agrarian reading of the Bible. Davis reminds us that most “city” dwellers in the ancient world actually farmed plots outside the city; there was not necessarily the disconnect between rural and urban life that we see today in North America. The relationship between the city of Jerusalem and its surrounding villages is described using the mother-daughter metaphor in biblical texts. The cities that are marked for destruction in these texts are those that live parasitically off the land, not returning benefits such as protection from natural catastrophe or housing artisans who provide services to farming people. Davis reads a variety of texts, from Micah to the Song of Songs, to show that the biblical writers sought a healthy, holy, whole city of Jerusalem, part of its local agrarian economy. She uses modern examples such as the reclaiming of abandoned parts of Detroit as farmland as a way of looking at this kind of wholeness. The book concludes with a short postscript.

While I am in basic sympathy with Davis’ *theoria*, I wondered about the relationship between an agrarian reading and a reading of landlessness as discussed by Daniel Smith(-Christopher) in *Religion of the Landless* (1989). If the biblical texts are saturated with agrarian thinking, how does that thinking relate to any notion of exile or the landless? An exploration of these issues would have strengthened the book – I searched in vain for any mention of Smith(-Christopher)’s work. (As an aside, there is no works cited list, and the index only locates authors mentioned in the body of the book, not in the endnotes; there is no convenient way to find what works are cited.) Another area that would have benefitted from further discussion is the change in land-tenure ideologies/theologies over time. Davis seems to suggest that all biblical texts share the same basic agrarian outlook. Perhaps this could have been treated as a hypothesis to be tested, rather than a fact to be uncovered. *Are* all biblical texts the product of agrarian thinking?

Ecological hermeneutics has recently become a focus of some interest. There are points of contact between ecological hermeneutics and agrarian thinking that could have been explored in this book – both are concerned with care of Earth, for instance. Davis makes some reference to the work of Norman Habel, but not to the broader project of ecocriticism. Perhaps that is another book entirely, but some discussion of the relationship between these two Earth-centred hermeneutics would have been welcome.

Davis intended this book to be the start of a conversation in biblical studies (p. 5). Thus the book should not be read as attempting to be the final word on the subject. I hope that the conversation continues! This is a lucid, wide-ranging, and thought-provoking book that should be read by everyone in biblical studies, and should be assigned as a textbook in courses on biblical methods, Torah, prophets, and ecological hermeneutics.