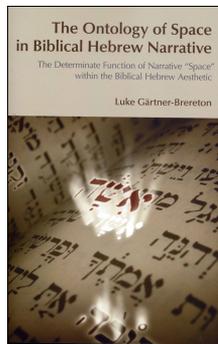# REVIEW OF LUKE GÄRTNER-BRERETON, *THE ONTOLOGY OF SPACE IN BIBLICAL HEBREW NARRATIVE: THE DETERMINATE FUNCTION OF NARRATIVE 'SPACE' WITHIN THE BIBLICAL HEBREW AESTHETIC*
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In *The Ontology of Space in Biblical Hebrew Narrative*, Luke Gärtner-Brereton contends that the topographical spaces within biblical Hebrew narrative have a much more important role to play than as mere backdrops against which biblical stories are told, or as locales where characters perform their respective parts. Instead, he argues, our way of thinking should all be turned on its head: narrative spaces are themselves one of the primary structural determinates of biblical Hebrew narrative. In many cases, therefore, a reading which focuses on the spaces within the biblical narrative may account both for the manner by which the plot will unfold and for the actions of its characters. Furthermore, despite the widespread embrace of literary approaches in contemporary biblical scholarship, Gärtner-Brereton maintains that practitioners have failed to appreciate a central distinction in the deep structure of Hebrew narrative: the 'ontological' or 'cosmic' value it accords to space.

These contentions are supported by discussion of a small selection of biblical narratives, on which he offers brief and limited comments: Jacob at Bethel (Gen 28:10-22), the Creation accounts (Gen 1-3), Cain and Abel (Gen 4), Jacob and Esau (Gen 25, 27), and – in a somewhat more extensive fashion towards the end of the book – the book of Ruth. Gärtner-Brereton does not claim to provide a systematic examination of biblical Hebrew narrative or any 'comprehensive hermeneutical approach to the HB'. Instead, the book's stated method is to suggest an alternative approach to the text which provides 'some basic coordinates' for a narrative-space-centred reading of biblical narratives, which might fruitfully be taken up in a more developed form. To this end, the work is largely theoretical in approach, drawing inspiration from an assortment of literary or biblical theory, which Gärtner-Brereton treats in rapid, and often fleeting, succession.

Chapter One introduces Vladimir Propp's influential *Morphology of the Folktale*. Following Pamela Milne, Gärtner-Brereton recognizes that the very 'scientificity' of Propp's approach – which entails a 'firm connection to a strictly defined object of study, and thoroughly deductive method' – together with the specificity of Slavic fairy tales themselves, makes it impossible to simply apply Propp's model or even his developed method to the HB (18). If this is the case, the lesson surely to be drawn from Propp's methodology is the need to apply an approach tailor-made to the specifics of the HB itself, developed via an exhaustive and close reading of the specific functions of biblical Hebrew narratives – rather than superimposing any standards from outside the text. But instead of deriving the aesthetic 'core' of Hebrew narrative from at least a preliminary examination of biblical Hebrew narratives, Gärtner-Brereton claims to detect the structural core of biblical Hebrew narrative from a broad perspective, which he only outlines theoretically without supplying convincing evidence. He briefly introduces two theoretical comparative methods: Frederic Jameson's 'transcoding' and Walter Benjamin's 'interlinear translation'. Although he claims that the interlinear approach in particular 'serves to highlight strong aesthetic differences between Slavic fairy tale and biblical Hebrew narrative' (22), it is difficult to understand how he has detected these differences from a mere outline of theoretical approaches. What makes this chapter even more puzzling is that he introduces these theoretical approaches only after agreeing with Louis Althusser's criticism of interdisciplinarity – which rejects the use of methods developed specifically for objects studied within other disciplines – for, in the current work, 'interlinear translation' is itself taken from its primary application in basic translation and applied secondarily to narrative interpretation.

The same problem arises in Chapter Two, when Gärtner-Brereton addresses the differences between two imagined totalities, Hebrew and modern narrative – making an analogy with the role of space in, respectively, stageplay and cinema. While the analogy is somewhat useful, rather than explicating it with regard to any of the extensive work on space in theatre and film studies, Gärtner-Brereton chooses to make a single comparison between two of Alfred Hitchcock's films, *Rope* (adapted from a stageplay) and *North by Northwest*. The central thesis of the second chapter is that '"space" occupies a concomitant [*sic*] position within Hebrew narrative, to the "journeying vector" of the Proppian fairy tale' (30; by 'concomitant position ... to' he seems to intend 'corresponding position ... to': cf. pp. 107; 4; 6). The thesis is initially evaluated in an inadequate, three-page discussion of the narrative of Jacob at Bethel, which comprises Chapter Three.

Gärtner-Brereton then makes a well supported criticism of the tendency of some literary critics to exaggerate the Bible's level of sophistication and to ignore its specific structural 'aesthetic' (in particular, the stageplay-like use of space). But without the groundwork in specific biblical texts, the criticism loses much of its potential force. There is, further, little engagement with recent narrative theory outside of biblical studies, where useful discussions of the determinate role of narrative space are available, such as those offered by Gerhard Hoffmann or Susan Stanford Friedman.

Chapter Four examines the ideological basis which underlies the value given to space in the HB. Gärtner-Brereton utilises Regina Schwartz's 'principle of scarcity' to conclude, 'it is possible to identify a single structural category which undergirds the biblical text – namely the divide between those who are "in" and those who are "out"' (61). Then, drawing on Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of 'scarcity' from *Critique of Dialectical Reason,* and applying it to the HB, Gärtner-

Brereton asks whether Yahweh is the very '*embodiment* (and indeed guarantor) of the "law of scarcity" within the biblical text' (64). For Yahweh sets up the conditions of scarcity in his primordial separation of chaos from order and in his separation of the Garden of Eden from the 'fields' outside. And Yahweh later maintains the law of scarcity via the exclusivity required by Torah. Chapter Five examines how the spatial opposition of 'Garden' and 'fields' drives the plot and determines character function throughout Genesis. This provides a long-awaited test for his theories – although coming at this stage of the book, without due consideration of possible alternative ideological foundations, and employing only a few examples, Gärtner-Brereton's argument never overcomes the spectre of circularity.

Gärtner-Brereton's spatial interpretation of the book of Ruth in Chapter Six provides a more detailed and more satisfying example of how a reading centred on narrative space – in particular on the movements between 'legal' and 'illegal' spaces – might demonstrate the manner by which spaces generate plot developments and characterisations. It is questionable however whether the so-called 'archetypal' illegality of the 'field' (of Moab; of Boaz), supposedly established in Genesis, would in fact apply to Ruth. The analysis would be more convincing if *centred* on the structural particularities of Ruth, although Gärtner-Brereton does go on to supply a detailed discussion of the book's particular use of narrative space. In addition, while Gärtner-Brereton plausibly contends that the term 'field' links Moab and Boaz's field together as dangerous spaces within Ruth's narrative, 'fields' and 'tableland' are such interchangeable biblical commonplaces for the geographically flat Moabite plateau that it is difficult to see how any archetypal danger would attach to the term 'field' itself (as distinct from 'Moab').

Speaking more generally, while the limitations of the enquiry are stated from the onset, the book's various statements regarding worldview and deep narrative structure tend to reach beyond what its methodology supports. The terminology used throughout the book of 'the Hebrew aesthetic' and 'the Hebrew *Weltanschauung*' is singularly unfortunate, especially given the historical consequences of stereotyping Jewish cultures. As the analysis of biblical Hebrew narrative is acknowledged to be preliminary, and based only on a few selections from the available corpus, the book does not contain a sufficient basis for defining the worldview or aesthetic of an entire people – nor does any book. Moreover, the object of study is limited to the particular aesthetics of *narrative* within the books of the HB, not 'Hebrew aesthetics' as a whole. It also ignores the great variety of viewpoints present within the HB, and beyond, in extra-biblical literature, not to mention the whole of material culture. The generalizing description implicates Gärtner-Brereton in the Orientalism which, as James Crossley demonstrates in *Jesus in an Age of Terror,* still plagues biblical studies. Although there is only limited use of Hebrew in the book, I counted 18 errors. As one notable example, the table on p. 29 reads *wywb* instead of *wyšb* (row 1, col. 3), *ḥśrh* instead of [Recombine]

ḥśdh (row 2, col. 2), and *knʻn* instead of *hwʼ* (row 4, col. 2; to agree with the English translation); there is a stray *hatef-qames* in row 4, col. 1 (which should be a forward slash); and two citations are missing in row 1 (Gen. 22.9 and Gen. 22.19).

The book does provide the intriguing suggestion that space could be generative of biblical Hebrew narrative in a way that has not been fully appreciated before. This would be worth following up in a more thorough and more focused study.