

## The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Narrative

Keith Bodner, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Narrative*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2025. 330pp. \$23.95. Paperback. ISBN: 978110881028.

*The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Narrative* is another entry in the long-running and well-respected Cambridge Companions series. By virtue of being in this series, this volume brings with it considerable expectations. It more than meets them in terms of quality, rigor, and contributions to the field. Keith Bodner's edited volume consists of sixteen chapters by seventeen renowned scholars, like Tremper Longman III, Rachel Gilmour, Marian Kelsey, Raj Nadella, and Lynn H. Cohick. The book is a worthy addition to the narrative critical methodology of biblical studies. It offers a refreshing collection that, according to Bodner's introduction, emphasizes "textual analysis and close readings that illustrate the workings of biblical narrative." Its straightforward approach belies a wealth of imaginative work deeply rooted in academic ingenuity and textual rigor.

This high-quality, well-organized book is like other edited volumes built around specific methodologies, like the Method series from Fortress Press, *To Each Its Own Meaning* from Westminster John Knox, and Cambridge's own *Methods in Biblical Interpretation* series. Anyone interested in seeing and reading what narrative criticism looks like in practical implementation beyond theoretical speculation would benefit from this assortment. The book would fit within an advanced undergraduate biblical studies course and would be at home in seminary and graduate school settings as well. An intrepid, studious pastor could also use it to sharpen their biblical toolkit, though the average parishioner may have difficulty connecting with most chapters. What makes this collection unique is its focus on narrative critical approaches paired with how each scholar manages this methodology. Narrative criticism can become monolithic and stale in less qualified hands, but Bodner's guidance highlights the continued vigor present throughout the discipline.

Each chapter offers a unique approach to specific stories, themes, or motifs appearing in books from the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. The book's goal is to show new paths for interpretation in addition to offering a practical introduction to the narrative critical method. The difficulty of such an approach lies in deciding on what to focus on within each biblical book. Yet this may be the book's greatest strength. Each scholar employs the narrative critical methodology, but each outcome is unique. Such raw creativity wedded to scholarly acumen is encouraging for the future of the field. Each chapter opens with an overview of scholarship surrounding the book in question. This overview becomes the foundation to push interpretation further in compelling and engaging ways. For example, Longman's "The Literary Worlds of Genesis" chapter rejects uniform interpretations and argues for accepting Genesis as polyvalent in both structure and meaning. Similarly, Adriane Leveen notes the possible presence of parody in Exodus. People who compiled these sources were people, meaning they understood subtlety, levity, and the efficacy of satire, irony, and exaggeration. Leveen then suggests the deity learns about mercy and compassion when dealing with unruly Israelites instead of "punishing rage." Matthew Lynch tackles one of the less popular biblical books with Chronicles, going as far as to say the Chronicler's work is ripe for discovery. Granting space to a neglected piece like Chronicles reinvigorates questions of how and why some books get more public traction than others. Rachelle Gilmour's work dares readers to look beyond the facile animosity between the Northern and Southern Kingdoms present in Kings. Doing so illuminates similarities held between the two kingdoms as a point of division: they dislike each other because they are each other. David Barr's Revelation chapter reconsiders how scholars engage intended audiences to contemplate the consequences of putting a book like Revelation into circulation throughout the

early Christian world. Contemporary readers benefit from hindsight and a wealth of scholarship around these venerable writings. Asking us to consider what made books like Revelation compelling enough for early audiences to spread it across entire continents nearly 2000 years ago offers a fresh way of reading them now.

Despite the creative possibilities scattered throughout, conclusions veer toward apologetic acceptance more than daring possibility. For example, many chapters default toward reading biblical texts to affirm traditional theological notions of divine sovereignty and omnipotence. Theologies found in a text often reflect individuals doing the reading, which is both positive and negative. Narrative critical readings illuminate what is on the page as well as what the reader brings to it. Some offerings enumerate this interpretive matter better than others.

Some declarations feel hyperbolic or stagnant in their approach. Stephen Chapman's claim that the Samuel narrative is "a cornerstone of Western civilization" as well as "a crucial scriptural text for the Christian tradition" feels excessive. Samuel is indeed a significant achievement in ancient literature, but saying its stories carry essential influence among contemporary norms seems excessive. Similarly, Laura Hasler's Daniel and Esther chapter brushes up against a unique approach to how these books engage empire, only to remind more seasoned readers of Anthea Portier-Young or Danna Nolan Fewell. This is not to say that said chapters lack in quality; the opposite is the case. Both Chapman's and Hasler's work are exceptional contributions to the discipline. Books like this have the potential to try innovative approaches and test accepted boundaries. Seeing a doubling down on accepted norms feels like a missed opportunity. It is possible that not every book's narrative wraps up in a neat, tidy conclusion. Considering how these ancient texts may raise more questions than answers could be a bold step forward for a field continually called into question by non-academics.

Another deficiency is the type of scholars published. There is a lack of voices of color in the work, making this companion strikingly closer to a reread than a refresh for seasoned biblical scholars. And yet, one must remember this constitutes the reality of biblical studies in the current moment. The uniformity of scholars across the field is disappointing, and this companion represents the field as it is, not as one would hope it could be.

And yet, Cameron Howard's work on Joshua and Judges fulfills such an approach. Howard suggests Joshua and Judges carry inherent ambiguity, a bold move from the traditional narrative critical standpoint. Engaging the Bible's inherent polyvalence allows interpreters to read it anew and seeing such an approach get a book-length collection is a welcome departure from unilaterally focused reading. This is not to say the selections are hit-and-miss. An authentic collection accommodates multiple perspectives and presents none as normative. *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Narrative* does that and then some. One gets the feeling from reading each author that not only would they be open to fruitful, lively discussions about their work, but that they would welcome it. Herein lies the book's intrinsic additions to the field: narrative criticism is not about amplifying one interpretation over and against others. What defines the method is a profound curiosity toward investigating what a text can mean. Biblical authors and redactors wrote and worked with care, and their efforts warrant careful time and focus from interpreters. The contributors employ tremendous respect for their respective biblical books, creating space for innovative approaches without discounting what precedes.

The book's scope, depth, and breadth make it highly recommended for university libraries, academic theological libraries, personal pastoral libraries, and seminaries and divinity schools. It offers an accessible snapshot into the current state of narrative biblical criticism while also compelling the reader to consider what else may be possible. It is a rousing success and does exactly what it sets out to do: offering a variety of interpretive possibilities built upon sound research, experience,

and multiple perspectives. Bodner's editorial work is quite impressive, as he aptly unites otherwise disparate outlooks into a cohesive application of narrative criticism.

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