

The Bible as Theatre

By **Shimon Levy**. Brighton, U.K.: Sussex Academic Press, 2002. Pp. 264 ISBN: 1898723508 (Pbk. \$69.50).

In 1947, Harold Ehrensperger was one of the first scholars to explore the connections between drama, the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, and religious practices in his book *Conscience on Stage*. Although he concentrated more on the use of drama in the church rather than drama in the Bible, he started a scholarly dialogue that has continued with this new contribution by Shimon Levy entitled *The Bible as Theatre*. According to Levy, the idea for the book began in 1995 as a seminar at Tel Aviv University entitled “Bible and Theatre” and culminated in the current offering of a theatrical “reading” of several Biblical stories.

The central premise of the book is that the Hebrew Scriptures contain numerous stories that are highly theatrical as well as dramatic. In the preface and introduction, Levy makes note of the influence on his thinking by several scholars who, over the past thirty years, have explored the numerous dramatic aspects of these stories. Levy then notes that no one has specifically done a reading of these stories from a theatrical viewpoint, which is exactly what he does in this work organizing it into five distinct parts, each building on the previous. In his preface and introduction, Levy acknowledges his dependence upon the theatrical and performance theories of such writers as Victor Turner, Richard Schechner, Christopher Innes, Peter Brook, and Jerzy Grotowski as well as Jewish scholars Meir Sternberg, Uriel Simon, and Nisan Ararat. He then makes a detailed explanation of how he developed his ideas and theories, and launches into a strong argument that the story of Samuel’s initiation offers great theatrical possibilities, a theme he develops in the chapters to follow. He concludes the book with one of the most famous stories of the Hebrew tradition: David and Bathsheba.

In Part I, “Samuel’s Initiation and the Possibility of Biblical Theatre,” Levy explores the theatrical elements in this story of a young boy’s initiation into the Jewish priesthood. He notes that a central problem with the story is the representation of God in a corporeal fashion, a notion that seems to contradict the second commandment. He then argues that this particular story offers a strong metaphor for God as “sensually and physically unimaginable, yet with varying degrees of, ‘presentness’ ” (Levy 6) a central tenet of the Jewish faith and later developed into the personal religion of Christianity. For

Levy, God is pictured in this story as an active player in the plot, a major character in the play.

Having laid a strong foundation for the possibility of theatrical elements in an early Hebrew narrative, Levy moves in Part II to a view of what he calls “Female Presentation: Oppressed and Liberated” recognizing the many and various views of women in the Hebrew Scriptures. He then notes that the stories he is discussing were all written “by men, in a male-dominated society” (7). Yet he goes on to acknowledge that these particular male writers offered “a highly critical attitude toward [the culture’s] own moral as well as emotional standards” (7), a stance somewhat contradicted by most biblical scholars.

The chapters in Part II offer some of the more controversial elements of Levy’s book. After acknowledging that some scholars believe the Jewish Scriptures are not kind to women when compared to the more enlightened western view of women’s rights, Levy finds within the stories of Deborah, Ruth, Esther, and the concubine of Gibeah a highly sophisticated portrayal of women by ancient writers who, Levy holds, have some strong “pro-feminist” views. If the reader accepts Levy’s premise that a theatrical reading of the biblical stories offers greater insight than a traditional reading, then Levy’s argument becomes interesting and even compelling. Readers who are familiar with a more traditional approach to biblical interpretation will find that Part II contains some troubling views of the Bible. One example is found in the chapter dealing with the Prophetess Deborah. Here Levy (understandably) proposes that Deborah represents an “agricultural and idyllic” (58) view of Israel compared to a more un-moveable “iron” presentation of the Canaanites, a somewhat theologically questionable interpretation. Then in his discussion of Tamar, Levy’s theatrical reading offers some rather questionable ideas about Tamar’s intentions and Judah’s emotional state, which at best deny God’s active participation in the process. Given that, Levy is first and foremost a theatre scholar whose viewpoint offers the reader some wonderfully refreshing ways of looking at stories that have been either overlooked or ignored by Christians and Jews alike.

In Part III, Levy juxtaposes two passages that seem to be in opposition. The first is a “feminine” view of romance found in *The Song of Songs*, chapters 4 and 5. And the second is a male view of a “bad” woman portrayed in *Proverbs* 7. Levy’s point is that the *Song of Songs* dialogue presents a personal, yet practical view of romance by illustrating how one’s words of love can be as effective in communicating affection than engaging in specific romantic actions. The *Proverbs*’ depiction is an educational theatre lesson with a decidedly negative, though humorous, approach to how not to be romantically involved. The teacher explains to his students that engaging in promiscuous activities can lead one to a life of misery. Levy sees a bit of humor in how the teacher implies that the sensual desire is the woman’s fault because she is doing the tempting through her actions.

In Part IV, Levy really shines with his theatrical reading of the Bible’s stories. He looks at four Hebrew prophets by focusing on the prophets’ activities rather than prophecies they profess. This section offers the most satisfying theological interpretations in the book because Levy offers an interpretive insight that is refreshing and extremely interesting. In this chapter Levy is able to show that traditional interpretations accepted by most biblical scholars about how to interpret the prophecies of Elisha, Jonah, and Ezekiel can be both confirmed and more deeply informed through his “theatrical” reading of these

prophets and their stories. Chapter 8 presents an interpretation of the prophet Elisha and his relationship with a Shunamite woman, which delves into the subtext of the story as revealed in the movements and actions of the characters. Levy's insights offer the biblical scholar a great deal to think about and give the theatrical scholar some satisfaction that the ancient Jews may have had a sense of the dramatic seldom credited to them. Levy's conclusions about the Jonah narrative (chapter 9 "Jonah: a Quest Play") shows that a single human being standing in conflict with an omnipresent and omnipotent God can be far more dramatic than one could possibly imagine. Then in chapter 10 ("Ezekiel: the Holy Actor"), Levy explores several possibilities of the theatrical through the use of holy spaces and the sanctifying of holy places with the presence of God through His "holy" actors.

In Part V, "Leaders: A Theatrical Gaze," Levy attempts to inject some recent feminist criticism to explain the necessity of God using Moses and David as visible metaphors for the very heart and intentions of the Almighty. Levy does not hold a feminist view of Scripture, nor does he carry these theories beyond this specific discussion. But in chapter 12, he compares David and Moses to Jehu, one of the most vicious and bloody rulers in Jewish history, whose actions were considered by God (and thus by Jewish tradition) to be blessed since he rid the nation of Jezebel and the priests of Baal. Levy's point seems to be that the biblical writers were well aware of the popularity of stories about powerful generals engaged in bloody wars. As an apt conclusion, Chapter 13 is a theatrical interpretation of the story of David, who is referred to as a "Man after God's own heart," and Bathsheba, the woman whose husband David had murdered. In Levy's estimation, this story is the best example of a theatrical story in the Bible. In this final chapter of the book, Levy brings together "all the various theatrical components previously dealt with separately or in various combinations" (11). He calls this story "a superbly designed five-act drama" (11). Levy explains his approach by stating that even though biblical stories can be interpreted simply by looking at the text, they "can also benefit from a medium-oriented theatrical approach aimed at explicating the text, even if it is not meant for actual presentation" (235).

From the standpoint of a student of biblical interpretation, this book offers some highly creative and interesting views of some often overlooked passages in the Old Testament (the Christian term that Levy inexplicably uses to refer to scriptures in a Hebrew context). His theatrical interpretations open the possibilities for re-interpreting these stories and posit the possibility of non-standard insights that could easily enlighten the inquisitive mind. His understanding of ancient Hebrew history and culture inform his theatrical study and training in such a way as to give him a distinctively Jewish, yet strongly dramatic methodology for interpreting these ancient stories. But, if one is a student of theatre and/or performance theory, this book will offer very little in the way of exciting insights and new approaches to the study of dramatic texts. Most of his theatrical insights are obvious and apparent to any cursory reading of the biblical text once the reader grasps what Levy is doing. The first chapter was exciting in seeing how Levy finds the dramatic in these ancient stories. But, with that introduction completed, the rest of the chapters become predictable and quickly read.

The one truly refreshing, though very brief, view that Levy offers in this study is his extremely skillful approach to seeing the performative aspects in the stories. Many

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books and articles have been written analyzing the dramatic elements in various literary and historical writings, but few scholars have shown the exciting insights that Levy presents when he is discussing just how a particular text could or would have been performed before an audience. Although the reader will probably want more explanation as to how or why this speculation is important to his interpretations, Levy fails to look any deeper than simply positing the speculations of theatrical production possibilities and a brief explanation of how it might be done. The scope of Levy's book seems to be limited to exploring and speculating briefly on those aspects, thus limiting the depth of the discussion. This writer wanted to know more about both his interpretations and how he would more specifically view these passages as producible theological theatre. Perhaps, that subject will be addressed in a future treatise. Nevertheless, this reviewer considers Levy's book a welcomed addition to the world of theatrical and dramatic scholarship and comes with the recommendation that it is well worth the time to read.

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