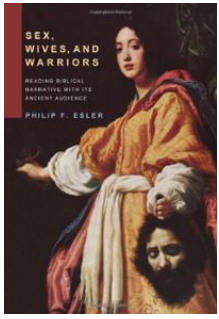
Sex, Wives, and Warriors: Reading Biblical Narrative with its Ancient Audience, by Philip F. Esler



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This book has been a long time in the making. The chapter on the madness of Saul, for example, was presented during a conference on Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies at the University of Sheffield in 1997 and published soon afterwards; three other chapters (those on Hannah, Judith, and David and the Ammonite war) were published during the early to mid-Noughties. Other significant elements of the

book will also be instantly recognisable to those familiar with Esler's extensive publications, echoing his long-standing commitments to the social-scientific interpretation of the biblical texts (e.g., *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul's Letter* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003]) and to the need for the interested modern interpreter to read these texts in ways directly affected by such interpretation (e.g., *New Testament Theology: Communion and Community* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005]). Here Esler attempts to offer a specific model of reading Old Testament narratives for a variety of contemporary audiences and defines it, both explicitly and implicitly, over and against other "competitor" forms of interpretation.

Two opening chapters set the scene for what follows. First, Esler discusses how a variety of reading communities should read the Old Testament. He provides a fourfold categorisation of Bible readers (see below), created by distinguishing between two groups (A, C) of religiously motivated readers—lay people and professionals—and two further groups (B, D) reading for non-religious reasons—again divided into professionals and others.

These groups are graded for population size, with A—"practicing Christian and Jewish lay people" (5)—being the largest and D—"professional people reading for non-religious reasons" (6)—being the smallest. It is telling that Esler's B group of lay non-religious types includes only those curious about the scriptures and those who are no longer committed to them, whereas it is group D—the mixed bag of professionals—which includes the creatives, the artists, the film-makers, the composers, and the journalists; as we will see later, this decision about taxonomy has significant consequences. When Esler turns to discuss how these four groups of readers should interpret the texts, he argues that theistic readers (A, C) should be seeking to encounter meanings that are close to those that were experienced by the original audience in their socio-historical context; they will then, he claims, experience these traditional yet fresh readings of the narrative as "readjustments of the collective memory" (10) rather than as mere textual reinterpretations (an experience which Esler relates to his own personal childhood experience of bible study; 10–11). He goes on, however, to suggest that such readings can also be usefully encountered by the non-religious groups (B, D) as an educative intercultural message delivered from the past, which discloses "more ample possibilities for being human" (11). These messages are not to be related to the historical events behind the texts, however, but to the narratives as interpreted within their earliest history, and the chapter concludes with a technical discussion of "story elements and story structures" (27–34).

A MODEL OF READERS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Readers for Religious Reasons

	A.	**C.**	
	Practising Christian and Jewish lay people	Believing Jewish and Christian biblical critics	
		Believing undergrads and postgrads in biblical studies	
		Priests, ministers, rabbis	
		Believing artists, composers, etc.	
Non-Professional Readers	**B.**	**D.**	**Professional Readers**
	One-time Jews and Christians	Agnostic/Atheist biblical critics	
	Curious people and searchers	Comparative lit critics and students	
		Literary critics and art historians	
		Artists, filmakers, composers, journalists, etc.	

Readers for Non-religious Reasons

Table after Esler, p.4.

Second, and having thus justified its necessity (to his own satisfaction, at least) in chapter 1, Esler provides an anthropological account of the original context of the Old Testament texts, briefly setting that methodological approach in historical context before focusing on the "usual suspects": the "material conditions" of villages and families; the group-oriented nature of the ancient Israelites; their notions of honour and shame; the competitive, agonistic nature of their society; the concept of limited good; the presence of patrilineality, patrilocality, and polygyny; and the broad political and socio-economic structures of Israel, focusing on the elite/non-elite divide. (Later chapters will expand on these as and when Esler deems it appropriate.) A

discussion of the extent to which Israel was a high-context culture, able to express a complicated message within a few words, completes the chapter.

Taking as his key themes wives, warriors, and sex (with the latter being demoted inside the volume's covers for some unexplained reason from its alphabetical primacy in the title), Esler then offers three "Parts" under those headings, containing eight studies of individual texts in total, each of which reads the relevant text against its ancient socio-cultural background. For Wives, we have the stories of Judah and Tamar (Gen 38) and of Hannah, Peninnah, and Elkanah (1 Sam 1–2); for Warriors, Saul (1 Sam 8–31), David and Goliath (1 Sam 17:1–18:5), David, Banditry, and Kingship (1 Sam 19:1–2 Sam 5:5), and Judith the Female Warrior (thanks presumably to Esler's use of the Catholic canon); and for Sex, we have David, Bathsheba, and the Ammonite War (2 Sam 10–12), and Amnon, Tamar and Absalom (2 Sam 13). A brief epilogue completes the volume.

I will leave it to other readers of the book to critique Esler's individual readings within the eight textual chapters (four of them, of course, have already been available for some time). All that I wish to say about them in a review in *Relegere* is that they illustrate very clearly the point that I was trying to make in my essay on the state of the discipline of New Testament Studies (and thus Biblical Studies more widely) about the virtually mandatory discussion that any contemporary historical-critical interpreters must offer about a text's ancient audience, their context, and their expectations (cf. "Hope for a Troubled Discipline? Contributions to New Testament Studies from Reception History," *JSNT* 33 [2010]: 207–220). I'd also throw into the mix here Peter Oakes's *Romans in Pompeii: Paul's Letter at Ground Level* (London: SPCK; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), which seeks to view Paul's letter though several distinct pairs of eyes, each of which is generated from the kinds of historical data employed by Esler. The present volume is a prime case of a work in the historical-critical mode which can be justifiably categorised as an exemplary work of a certain kind of reception history; Esler is trying to capture the dynamic between the text and its (first) audience and their context, before exhibiting it for others. To my mind, Esler's discussion of the historical context may on occasions feel a little too thin for his readings to be secure—or indeed "fresh"—in the long term, and it is also the case that there have been plenty of critiques of the usefulness of notions like "limited good" in the recent past. But it is also often true that the best readings of any given text have had a bad habit of preceding their full theoretical justification. His other readers can decide such questions for themselves.

More of a reason for me to offer a review of Esler's book in *Relegere* is that his work also exemplifies the persistent desire of some in the guild—a powerful many or a decreasing minority, depending upon your viewpoint—to highlight and seek to validate an extremely narrow band of meanings for a biblical text. Despite the longevity of the growth of some of the Old Testament texts, the assumption that a primary reading community can somehow be identified and raised up as the pristine interpreters whom modern readers should emulate is highly prevalent, especially among those historical critics affected by certain theological dispositions. Esler argues (or perhaps better, asserts strongly) that each of his four groups of readers would best encounter the Bible through his reading approach. For the religious, this involves taking part in a tradition of reading in which their scriptural texts are re-incorporated into the community's corporate memory in fresh and invigorating ways. For the non-religious, this is the method by which they will encounter "more ample ways" of being human. My problem with this type of argument is that it raises two distinct and problematic issues because of its general unwillingness to allow other biblical interpreters to exist alongside it unmolested.

The first issue relates to the taxonomic decision through which Esler's artists were collected together as a distinct group of professionals. Such figures are clearly no longer being allowed to encounter the text as eclectic and creative amateurs in their own right. In Esler's view, these individuals are in fact better characterised as people who simply do not realise what the Bible that they hold in their hand can offer them; he seeks "to explain [to them] how Old Testament narrative, understood in the manner set out in this book, has a richer capacity to stimulate their creative instincts than they may have anticipated" (6). It is this view on the narrow meaning and its efficacy which also drives his claim that his approach offers "more ample possibilities" to be human. Ironically, a narrow band of meaning is being said to provide greater variety and richness than a consideration of the interpretive history of the text as a whole can do. It should be clear that I have no problem with Esler claiming that such a narrow focus certainly offers "additional" possibilities; only by denigrating the creative capacities of a Michelangelo, a Laurence Stern, or a William Blake, however, could I even begin to agree that the possibilities for consideration of what it is to be human offered by/through the original meaning (or something like it) were *more ample* or *richer* than those offered by the multitudinous historical traditions that have treasured and used these texts. I just can't do it.

This leads directly to the second issue. Esler's readings are perhaps all well and good, informative and challenging to modern readers of almost any ilk, but they were simply not available to most of the multitudes of earlier readers—whether religious or non-religious, lay or professional—who have used these texts over the last two thousand years; did they really not know what it meant to think profoundly about the nature of humanity? We in the modern Westernised world are seemingly doomed forever to an existence haunted by the readings suggested by a historical consciousness which is in fact totally alien to those interpreters whom we often condescendingly term pre-modern. I am convinced that it is fallacious—and for Esler and his Catholic religious tradition, bizarrely self-defeating—for us to argue/assume that our historically contextual fixation on specific forms of meaning which (almost) ape the readings of the ancients somehow means that we have found the one and only entryway into insightful biblical meaning. Here a second point raised in the *JSNT* essay rears its head. Meanings can be defined as good or creative or important by things other than the canons of the modern anthropological study of the ancient world. Yes, that approach may give us insight, but it is certainly not the only, or even best, route to it; any one churchperson who insists that it is has basically accused their deity of gross negligence, it seems to me! It would befit a volume such as Esler's if it exhibited a deep sense of humility, did its own thing, and let the audiences that it has tried to corral decide upon the validity of its story accounts. The idea that an audience of interested onlookers such as artists, film makers, and so on, cannot decide on what is or is not to be a creative use of a biblical story would be puzzling, were it not so laughable. Creative biblical interpretation—whatever it may be!—does not belong to a guild at all; arguably it never has. Those historical critics who accept the arguments of my *JSNT* article that their work is a form of reception history (e.g., Larry W. Hurtado, "On Diversity, Competence, and Coherence in New Testament Studies: A Modest Response to Crossley's 'Immodest Proposal,'" *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 2 no. 2 [2012], 353–64 [361–62]) would do well to remember that I also argued that what is really important is often not what we moderns think it is. Expecting others to agree with our assessments of what is important usually leaves us only looking rather foolish, especially if we persist in asserting or arguing for it forcefully. I cannot deny that I would like more books like this one to be published, but I do not need future versions to commend their methods as valid for all and sundry. Offer me a reading and I will happily judge its place and rightness. If I can

do that, then so can many, many others, especially those creative users of the Bible whose interpretations often make ours look dull by comparison. The historical-critical guild does not own these texts or necessarily read them best; it should grow up, realise it, and wind its neck in a bit.

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