Green, Barbara

King Saul’s Asking

Interfaces


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An opening volume of a new, six-volume series of biblical interpretations edited by Green, this book is essentially a scaled-down and popularized version of her monograph (How Are the Mighty Fallen? A Dialogical Study of King Saul in 1 Samuel [JSOTSup 365; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003]) that was published almost simultaneously with it. The two books cover the same ground (1 Samuel plus 2 Sam 1), employ the same exegetical instruments (those developed by the twentieth-century Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin and refined in recent Western scholarship), and pivot on the same thesis (the discussed biblical text is an antimonarchic “riddle” originally propounded for the exilic or early postexilic Israelite/Jewish community).

The distinctiveness of the reviewed volume lies mostly, if not exclusively, in the format and style of the presentation. First, apart from a few scattered comments it relegates theoretical concerns, such as Bakhtin’s concepts of genre, varieties of discourse, and answerability and Sandra Schneiders’s biblical spirituality, to a few pages in the introduction (xiv–xxi). Second, although Green often deviates from the order of the biblical text, otherwise her discussion is predominantly linear, with digressions limited to a bare minimum, controversial issues ignored or glossed over, and references to fellow scholars largely confined within terse footnotes. Third, she clearly seeks the readers’
Immediate involvement in the discussion, at some points (e.g., on 59) going as far as addressing them in the second person and explicitly inviting them to ponder and formulate their own response to the Bible. All this helps Green to place the book within the reach of those audiences that may experience severe difficulties trying to grapple with the longer, more “scholarly” monographic version. Judging by this reviewer’s experience with undergraduate students, most of them will still find the book too challenging (contrary to Green’s expectation expressed on ix–xi). At the same time, it may prove intellectually adequate and rewarding for other groups of readers, including seminary students, clergy, and laypersons with strong interest in the Bible and its modern and postmodern interpretation.

Basic strengths and weaknesses of Green’s reading of 1 Sam 1–2 Sam 1 have already been addressed in the RBL review of her monograph (http://admin.bookreviews.org/pdf/3269_3679.pdf); it thus appears advisable to concentrate here upon the methodological issues involved in her treatment of the biblical text. Since these issues defy clear-cut solutions, their discussion will of necessity be less about questioning Green’s approach than about pointing to viable alternatives and more about asking questions (something that according to Green is “the most fundamental thing” accomplished by her book [119]) than about providing definitive answers.

Let me begin with what may be termed the problem of interpretive horizon. Ostensibly, Green’s objective is to explore “the story of King Saul . . . which unfolds in the biblical book of 1 Samuel” (xiii); however, her reading begins not at 1 Sam 9:1–2, where Saul and his family are first introduced, but rather at 1 Sam 1:1. As a result, two out of the book’s eight chapters deal with texts that never mention King Saul (1 Sam 1-7). It is, of course, possible to argue, with Robert Polzin and several other exegetes, that the texts in question can be interpreted as a prologue of sorts to Saul’s story, insofar as they introduce Samuel, the “maker” of both Saul and his nemesis, David, and heavily bear on the subject of the monarchy in general. However, Samuel is totally absent from 1 Sam 4:1b–7:2, and explicit mentions of the monarchy in 1 Sam 1–7 are less numerous and much less conspicuous than in Judg 17–21. Why not begin the discussion of Saul’s story with the latter fragment, seeing especially that its political philosophy seems to be at odds with the antimonarchic thrust that Green discovers in 1 Samuel?

A weighty consideration in favor of the interpretive horizon chosen by Green is that it partly coincides with the boundaries between biblical books. Yet the hermeneutical value of these boundaries is uncertain at best. As far as Genesis–Kings is concerned, “books” belong on the level of the canon rather than the text proper because none of them displays any element (such as superscriptions) that could be interpreted as an invitation to read it separately from what precedes and what follows. In other words, the received Genesis–
Kings presents itself as an integral, if enormous, literary entity—as demonstrated, inter alia, by the ease with which Green crosses the boundary between 1 and 2 Samuel to include the first chapter of the latter in her reading. It is possible, of course, to claim that it is partly or even entirely up to the exegete to decide which texts to discuss and which to leave behind the brackets. But would Bakhtin examine, say, books 3 and 4 of The Brothers Karamazov without adequate reference to the balance of the novel? Would it not be more consistent with his outlook to consider the “story of Saul” not as a literary entity in its own right but as an element of a much larger narrative?

A related issue is that of the narrator’s discourse and its layout. Green skillfully, often brilliantly, analyzes the speech of the biblical characters, complete with its form and content, but for the most part fails to engage the narrator to an equal, or at least similar, degree. In a sense, she discusses what Saul and others say and do as though it were happening in front of her eyes when in fact it is reported, in a structured and (potentially) meaningful way, by a third party. She notes, for example, that the concluding verses of 1 Sam 14 summarize Saul’s reign, “almost as though it were over” (53), but does not even consider the possibility of this being the narrator’s way to indicate, without compromising the text’s basic continuity, that the “story of Saul” does not extend beyond this chapter and that what follows is largely about David. There is no arguing that the exegete is under no obligation to embrace the interpretational framework traceable in the narrator’s discourse. But would it not be more “Bakhtinian” to recognize the narrator as a legitimate and significant intermediary and/or interlocutor than to talk to the story’s characters over his or her head? And would a reconstruction of Samuel’s stance on the monarchy in Israel become less plausible if it took into consideration the overall organization of the book’s account of Israel’s first two reigns?

The problem of preconceived notions is arguably the most sensitive of those discussed here because it reaches to the core of Green’s reading of Samuel. Her insistence upon viewing Saul rather than David as a stand-in for the Israelite monarchy in general obviously clashes with the book’s portrayal of the latter as the founder of the only dynasty that can boast an “eternal” divine commission to rule over Israel (2 Sam 7). This insistence should then come from a different source, such as the Christian, especially Catholic, tendency to ignore, or at least to sideline, the mundane political aspects of the messianic expectations associated with the Davidic line. To be sure, in and of itself it is perfectly legitimate to see David not as the paradigmatic Israelite monarch but as an ancestor, even a precursor, of the universal savior. But perhaps in a study that is not exclusively addressed to Christians, it would be more appropriate to refrain from imposing this interpretational framework upon the book of Samuel?
Finally, a few words need to be said about the Bible’s hypothetical sociohistorical matrix, also known as *Sitz im Leben*. Green ascribes the “story of Saul,” without much discussion, to an exilic or early postexilic Deuteronomist. Like any attribution of a biblical text, this assumption is of necessity speculative and even partly circular, insofar as available information about the exilic and early postexilic Israelite/Jewish community mostly comes from the Bible itself. There is little doubt that Green is nevertheless entitled, *qua* exegete, to construct the author of the biblical text complete with his or her sociohistorical milieu. What bothers this reviewer is that her construction, while virtually indistinguishable from that prevalent in the synchronic/literary-critical scholarship of the past two decades, poorly fits in with the main thrust of the “story of Saul” as she sees it. Deuteronomy’s political philosophy is by no means antimonarchic: the book explicitly permits the addressees to set a king over them, albeit with a limited economic, political, and military clout (Deut 17:14–20). If the “story of Saul” nevertheless portrays the monarchy as “a failure-not-to-be-repeated” (119), what kind of Deuteronomist is its teller? And how can a literary-critical, synchronic study be so dependent on one of the most fundamental paradigms of historical-critical, diachronic exegesis that Green is nevertheless eager to count this teller with the Deuteronomic/Deuteronomistic cadre?

Serious as they are, the issues discussed here do not affect the reviewed book’s potential appeal to its prospective readership, for the simple reason that they are of much greater concern to biblical scholars than to the lay audiences that constitute the bulk of this readership. Even if Green’s scholarly methodology is vulnerable, she still has much to offer these audiences as a powerful writer, engaging interlocutor, and resourceful exegete with a keen eye for detail. That alone provides the reviewed book with a sufficient raison d’être.