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**Bodner, Keith**

*1 Samuel: A Narrative Commentary*

Hebrew Bible Monographs 19

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To review any work involves some assessment of who it is aimed at and what it intends to achieve. For biblical commentaries, these goals and target audience are often described to the reviewer by the publisher, and within the guild we know what to expect from each established commentary series. Keith Bodner's commentary on 1 Samuel stands alone: it is not part of a commentary series and so does not need to conform to a standard format imposed by the series. The work itself offers some, though perhaps conflicting, clues.

It was first intended for the series Readings (vii), which explains the lack of what the series description for the Sheffield Phoenix website calls "the paraphernalia of traditional criticism." While volumes in the Readings series often deal with detail of the Hebrew expression of the texts commented, Bodner wants his commentary to be accessible to readers with no knowledge of Hebrew (2). However, the reproduction of Hebrew expressions from time to time suggests that a more academic audience is also envisaged.

The commentary contains little of the traditional introductory matter, just eight pages. The bulk of the book comments on 1 Samuel chapter by chapter, with each chapter briefly introduced, then broken into sections of one or a few verses for comment. The straightforward style is enriched with pithy contemporary expressions and an ear for vivid detail. As readers of Bodner's *David Observed* will expect, this lively language often

gives expression to a quirky humor. In this commentary, such humor is so pervasive that sometimes it reads more like a transcription of an oral presentation than a traditional print text. So in comment on 17:1–3 we read: “Evidently there is a brief respite from the torment of Saul by the evil spirit. This must be something of a relief, although Goliath will prove to be a capable surrogate over the next forty days or so.” (177) While entertaining, this is hardly a close reading of the text!

The arrangement of the commentary, with so little introduction (either to the commentary or to each section), on the whole works well, though sometimes it seems to break down, as when Hannah’s song needs substantial introduction in the comment on 2:1 (presumably there was not space in the chapter introduction to say what was needed). The text is not interrupted to explain technical terms, yet the lay reader should have little difficulty following when such terms are used (e.g. “implied author”), since the overall simplicity of language allows reading of the flow of comment, despite any small failure to catch the full depth of what is said in the detail. The work has an index of biblical references and also one listing authors cited but no thematic index.

Elements of the poetics of biblical narrative are introduced as they are found. So the importance of a character’s first words is introduced (with a quote from Alter) in comment on 9:5 (81–82), then sometimes a reminder is offered, as when at 14:1 Jonathan’s first words are also notably significant (131). This means that the book may need reading sequentially at least by students (and other readers whose lack of Hebrew is matched by a lack of previous study of biblical narratives). While well-suited to a didactic text, this sits uncomfortably with the habitual usage of the genre “commentary.”

Sensitivity to wording and to intertextual echoes is a particular strength of Bodner’s. Attentive comment on echoes of wording, both within 1 Samuel and more widely across the Hebrew Bible, is frequent. So, for example, the motif of asking (שאל) is traced through the book. Puns are noted, even when they seem not to play a meaningful role in reading the text, as at 16:23 (175). However, there are times when the English translation seems to weigh unduly in the interpretation. For example, in 1 Sam 16:16 לָטוֹב לְךָ is rendered “feel better” in most English versions, but in other places the construction is more often rendered “be well” (see LXX). When discussing 16:16, Bodner makes a point of the comparative nature of this expression but does not explain why one might prefer a comparative translation here (172–73). In a similar way, perhaps, the significance of the use of פֶּיִן “vial” in the anointing of Saul and of Jehu (the word is not used elsewhere) may be diluted by the focus on the English pun “vial treatment” (presumably intended to be heard as “vile treatment”), which has no basis in the Hebrew usage.

The slender introduction provides little of the traditional orientation to the book or to the particular approach to be used in preparing the commentary. This may make reading difficult for the readers apparently envisaged. The notion of “character zone” (the term was borrowed from Bakhtin by Polzin and others) provides a particular focus of Bodner’s reading, yet it gets merely one clause of explanation in the introduction (7), after which readers are expected to understand for themselves. On the other hand, as befits a work aimed at nonspecialists, “foreshadowing” (despite being a term in common usage outside biblical or even literary studies) is defined carefully (86). Bodner made significant use of ideas from Bakhtin in his *David Observed*, so if this work were considered another monograph, such an omission might be understandable; it is less so in a commentary presumably aimed at less specialist readers (see 2). Indeed, the commentary is something of an oddity in the Sheffield Phoenix list, for it is clearly aimed at nontechnical readers, while the press targets a specialist market.

Other scholarship is referenced in the commentary basically to acknowledge quotations. Often interpretative decisions are taken without the evidence or argument on which they are based being stated. As a result, the commentary flows freely but leaves a critical reader stifled of means to engage more deeply with the reading proposed by the commentary.

The style is fluid and engaging, though at times the desire to play with words or to engage the reader’s imagination seems to conflict with the (presumed) goal of offering a “commentary” on the base text. On the other hand, perceptive attention to the choice of words and to the use of unexpected or strange expressions in the Hebrew text is a great strength of the reading offered. So in 9:18–20 Saul’s somewhat strange question on meeting Samuel (unknowingly) “Where is the seer’s house?” is shown to have much more powerful overtones than one might think. When it is asked of Samuel (the poor quality of whose sons has been the presenting cause of the request for a king in 8:1–5) by the apparent divine choice for the role of king, this wording is not merely strange (notice that the girls have just intimated to Saul that Samuel is only visiting the town); it is perhaps hurtful to the prophet.

This ambiguity of syntax may be powerful in developing our sense of the tense relationship between the prophet and the (future) king. However, should discussing this possibility be allowed to squeeze from the commentary all mention of how Saul is characterized in this episode (the book is, after all, called a *Narrative Commentary*, and characterization is a significant aspect of narrative poetics). Indeed, the very question that stimulates the discussion of dynasties also helps suggest to some readers that Saul is perhaps a few donkeys short of a full herd, for the girls have informed him that the population has left the city for the high place, where they expect Samuel (who is in the city) to come immediately, saying: “now go up, for you will meet him immediately” and

indeed conclude “As soon as you enter the town, you will find him.” In this context, to ask the old priest where the seer’s house is seems to present Saul as at best slow on the uptake.

This is a small example of a difficulty with the format; although named a *Commentary*, this work reads more like a retelling of the narrative with some asides to explain the reading offered. In many ways, this is closer in genre to Reb Zalman’s masterly readings of Ruth ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FKR5YWbs60](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FKR5YWbs60)) than it does to a commentary.

The humor that laces Bodner’s presentation is ubiquitous. It will therefore be either a delight or a pain to the reader, depending on one’s own sense of humor and sensibilities. Many will enjoy the suggestion that “students of comparative linguistics may note some syntactic affinity between the speech patterns of Nachash and certain Pirates of the Caribbean” (103). However, on turning the page, Bodner suggests that Saul’s dispatch of brutally butchered oxen may be an echo of the terrible episode of the Levite’s unnamed concubine (in Judg 20), using language of “severance packages” to refer to her butchered body; at this point my sense of humor rebelled.

So, overall this reading of 1 Samuel is itself an easy read: it contains frequent perceptive new ideas, in particular concerning textual echoes that impact on our understanding of this narrative as part of a wider canon or a local story as part of the work. As a genre description, “a narrative reading” would fit better than “a narrative commentary,” for the work is not at its best when approached for the tasks where one habitually turns to a commentary. It will thus be a stimulating companion to studying 1 Samuel, but it will not be of much help to a student seeking to come to grips with scholarly study of the book. If it were a paperback priced at textbook level, rather than that of a hardback monograph, I would consider it as the textbook for a course on biblical narrative that I will be teaching next year.