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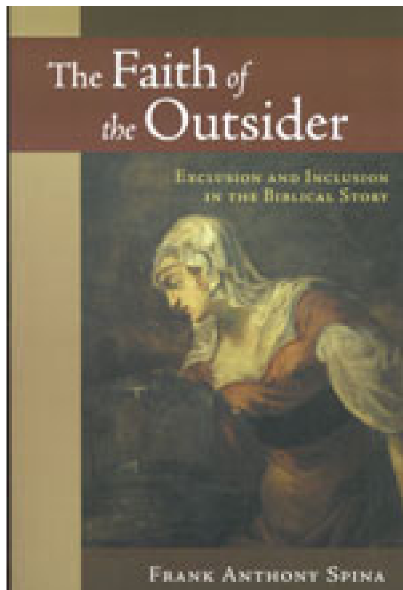

Spina, Frank Anthony

The Faith of the Outsider: Exclusion and Inclusion in the Biblical Story

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005. Pp. x + 206. Paper. $16.00. ISBN 0802828647.

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Frank Anthony Spina's new book is a close reading of six stories from the Hebrew Bible—those of Esau, Tamar, Rahab, Naaman, Jonah, and Ruth—and one from the New Testament—the story of the "woman at the well" in John 4. The stories are presented in the order of their appearance in the Hebrew Bible (so that Ruth is the last of the six; whereas the "index of Scriptural references" follows the order of Christian versions, with Ruth following Judges). The author begins his introduction by stating the importance of his theme: "God's formation of the community through whom the restoration of humankind would be accomplished is arguably the most prominent and pervasive feature of the Old Testament metastory. This election resulted in the people who were (eventually) called 'Israel' " (1). Anyone who does not belong to this community is an outsider, and outsiders are the heroes of the stories dealt with in this volume. Later in the introduction (10) the author notes that stories about outsiders can be found throughout the Hebrew Bible: the first two he deals with come from the Torah, the next two from the Former Prophets, the fifth from the Later Prophets, and the sixth from the Writings. We might add that there seems to be no particular reason for his choice of these stories rather than others of the same type, such as those of Hagar, Jethro, Zipporah, the Gibeonites, and Jael.

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The author is professor of Old Testament and biblical theology at Seattle Pacific University in Seattle, Washington, as well as a clergyman who provides a list (stretching to no fewer than eighteen lines) of the churches where he has spoken on the theme of "the faith of the outsider."

Spina's literary analyses derive some of their power from the comparison between the outsider and "insider" characters in the same story. Two such comparisons are reflected in chapter titles: "Rahab and Achan: Role Reversals" and "Naaman's Cure, Gehazi's Curse." Two other chapters, those on Esau (juxtaposed with Jacob) and on Jonah (contrasted with the sailors and people of Nineveh), also present such contrasts. If the last three of these seem obvious, since they involve characters in the same story, the first, between Rahab and Achan, is a fresh literary aperçu (made by L. D. Hawk, as Spina acknowledges, and other scholars), because they do not figure in the same story but only the same book, Joshua. In all these cases the author displays the good qualities of the outsider, which are generally superior to those of the insider.

Consider the main thrust of what he has to say in the illuminating chapter on Rahab and Achan. He begins by underscoring the prominence of the insider/outsider theme in Joshua as compared to other books of the Bible. He then proceeds to discuss the story and right off the bat presents his conclusion that Rahab is not just one of the common folk but "a virtual *representative* of these outsider inhabitants" (54). He attempts to support this statement by pointing to the "Canaanite" nature of the encounter with her, referring to her profession and the sexual connotations associated with her name and with the verbs that describe the spies' arrival at her house. He also notes her statement that "the Lord has given you the land" (Josh 2:9)—the land and not just Jericho. In his interesting analysis he points out how her declaration of faith is compatible with Israelite beliefs not only in its content but also in its wording. He finds her language so impressive that he claims that she sometimes evinces greater faith in the Lord than even Joshua does. Another interesting passage deals with the "red rope district." Here Spina notes the polysemous nature of *tiqwāh* (2:21), both "cord" and "hope": "a wonderful pun: 'the rope was her hope' " (63). In the scarlet cord that Rahab is to hang from her window during the Israelite assault, he sees "one more sexual allusion," but not all his proofs are convincing.

Spina next turns to the incident of Achan, which he sees as the polar opposite of the story of Rahab. He notes the language used to describe the Israelites' reaction to their first defeat at Ai (Josh 7:5), which refers to the "melting" of the people's heart. This term brings to mind Rahab's report of the reaction of the inhabitants of the land in their terror of the Israelites (2:11). As a consequence of Achan's sacrilege, the Israelites' status is inverted and, writes Spina, "Israel has become Canaanite" (67). This is an interesting reading for which various proofs can be alleged, including the use of the word *ḥerem*

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("ban") to describe the Israelites themselves (7:12). Spina sees this as an important moral and theological lesson: it is not one's origins that determine one's destiny, but one's *conduct.* Rahab provides hope to all outsiders, whereas Achan casts a heavy burden of responsibility on all insiders.

Spina's notion that people are judged on their actions and that the Israelite Achan, who sinned, is punished severely, whereas Rahab the outsider is rewarded, is significant. At the same time, we should not lose sight of the fact that even a sinner remains "an Israelite who has transgressed" and does not necessarily turn into a Canaanite.

Spina's desire to demonstrate the Bible's favorable attitude toward the outside is evident throughout his book. Near the end of his discussion of Jonah he turns to the background for Jonah's resistance to a divine pardon for the people of Nineveh. He begins with tentative language: "It is not clear whether Jonah would have been less angry had he preached a similar message to Israelites." A few lines later, however, he insists that "Jonah seems to reflect the view that when Israelite prophets speak of or to outsiders, judgment and only judgment is the proper content of their message. A gracious and forgiving God is presumably fine for insiders, but anathema for outsiders" (113).

Here Spina is, in fact, assigning a *national* motive to Jonah's opposition to divine compassion. This view was propounded by the talmudic sages and was adopted by several medieval Jewish commentators. But the real question—for scholars interested in the plain meaning of the text—is whether it has any basis in the biblical text. A fine answer has been provided by one of the best contemporary commentators on Jonah, Uriel Simon:

> This view has no substantial anchor in the text. Its keystone—the prophet's willingness to give his life rather than expose his people's stubbornness to God and man, or in order to prevent the salvation of the power destined to destroy Israel—is simply not to be found in the book. … Jonah does not symbolize Israel, and Nineveh does not symbolize the gentile world. What is more, the people of Israel and the kingdom of Assyria are not even mentioned in the book. (*Jonah* [JPS Bible Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1999], ix, x)

Readers are referred to Simon's carefully argued exposition in order to understand just how problematic this interpretation is. Simon prefers to explain the prophet's resistance as a consequence of the particular zeal of Jonah (and I would add, son of Amittai—formed on *'emet* "truth") for absolute justice. In this reading, Jonah's recalcitrance has nothing to do with the ethnic origins of the Ninevites.

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Spina's repeated emphasis on the individual as representative of the collective contrasts with Simon's statement that "Jonah does not symbolize Israel." For example, with regard to Achan and Rahab Spina asserts that "most important, however, is the fact that Achan is presented as the quintessential representative of Israel, just as Rahab has been presented as the quintessential representative of Canaan" (64); or, again, "Achan's actions symbolize the whole community's action" (65).

Spina reads the biblical stories with great sensitivity and is very good at picking up literary nuances and their significance. I will offer two brief examples from the story of Naaman (2 Kgs 5): (1) He notes the difference between Elisha's reference to "a prophet in Israel" (5:8) and the maidservant's to "the prophet in Samaria" (5:2). (2) He interprets *wayyāšob beśārô* (5:14) to refer not only to a medical cure—the healing of the flesh—but also to a spiritual one—repentance by a human being.

To facilitate smooth reading, most of the notes are relegated to the back of the book. If I understood the system correctly, the occasional footnotes are mainly clarifications of terms and concepts, while the endnotes are references to the scholarly literature. But the latter are presented in what strikes me as an unfriendly format: not with reference numbers but as text keyed only to the page in the main text. For example, three notes on pages 161–62 refer to page 17, one of them is a direct continuation of a note on page 16, and a fourth is said to refer to pages 17–18. But when reading the text one never knows when there is an attached note (given the absence of note numbers); and even when one finds a note it is not always easy to know precisely what on the page is being referenced.

In the asterisked footnote on pages 1–2 the author renders the first part of the Hebrew Bible as the "Law." Later, in the asterisked footnote on page 10, he discusses the issue and notes that the Hebrew word "Torah" actually includes much more than this. Even if the author believes that the first note was not the appropriate place for this point, but only the second, the former should refer readers to the latter.

In conclusion, this is a book that reflects a deep and sensitive reading, with the focus on the biblical attitude toward the outsider. Even those who do not agree with every detail of Spina's analysis or the thesis itself can benefit from the discussion of the topic and his attention to the finer points of the stories.

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