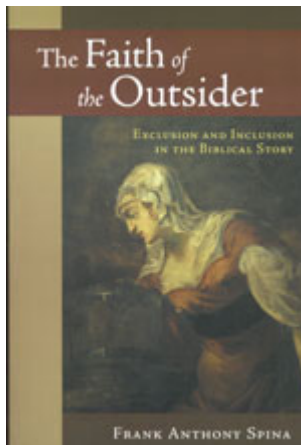


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**Spina, Frank Anthony**

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

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005. Pp. x + 206. Paper. \$16.00.  
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To be honest, after my first reading of this book, I was both totally disappointed and absolutely determined not to mince words when reviewing it. However, I did not start writing immediately but decided to put the book aside for a fortnight while I tried to discover what went wrong: What did I expect of this book in general? How did I understand its title, and thus what did I expect in particular? Why were those expectations not met? Did my disappointment result primarily from the views that I hold on the topic “insiders–outsiders in the Bible”? Moreover, was it my fault being much too tied to my own tastes as far as method and writing style are concerned? Finally, who is this book written for anyway? With all of this in mind and resolute to exclude any personal bias on my side I started a kind of *relecture* of *The Faith of the Outsider*, which leads me to offer the following review.

As indicated by the long list of churches and congregations provided in the book, Frank Anthony Spina, professor of Old Testament and biblical theology at Seattle Pacific University, Seattle, Washington, and an associate priest at St. Margaret’s Episcopal Church, Bellevue, Washington, has spoken extensively to church study groups, which motivated him to write a book about this topic (ix). Basically, the seven chapters of this book are “the culmination of over a decade of lecturing to university students and numerous lay or clergy groups” (ix). In all likelihood, these addressees should be taken as the intended readership of the book as one assesses its content.

In his introduction (1–13) Spina defines what he is going to write about as well as how and why he is going to do so. He writes that “Israel’s exclusive divine election is replete throughout the biblical tradition” (2) and that this is the main emphasis most narratives

portray while telling about the story of God and his people. By selecting certain individuals, such as Abraham and Sarah, and/or Israel as the chosen people and thus as “insiders,” others automatically become “outsiders,” those who are not singled out and elected. It is correct to emphasize that “it would be a mistake to construe Israel’s exclusive election as a function of its superiority” (5), because, as we all know, there are occasions where “the ‘chosen people’ are described as being totally undeserving of any special divine favors” (7). Theologically speaking, it might be questionable simply to claim that Israel “did not necessarily deserve to be God’s exclusive people (nor did anyone else ‘deserve’ such a designation!)” and at the same time repeat the fact that “only Israel was the chosen people of YHWH” (8). Such an assertion requires a longer explanation. Be that as it may, Spina chooses six outsider stories from the Old Testament (ch. 7 deals with the woman at the well) in order to demonstrate that

the outsider stories provide sophisticated insights into that Old Testament theme. Such stories prevent the exclusivity theme from being construed as a one-dimensional, simplistic feature of Old Testament theology. Instead, these stories enhance the exclusivity theme by making it possible for us to view it from a variety of angles, by illustrating its multivalent character, and by demonstrating how rich and complex the Old Testament’s view of grace truly is. (11)

In this work, well-known characters are treated next to lesser-known ones. Spina starts with Esau (ch. 1; 14–34) and Tamar (ch. 2; 35–51), both taken from the book of Genesis. Then follow Rahab and Achan (ch. 3; 52–71) and Naaman (ch.5; 72–93) from the Former Prophets and Jonah (ch. 5; 94–116) from the Latter Prophets. The final Old Testament outsider story is that of Ruth (ch. 6; 117–36), from the Writings. Finally, chapter 7 is about the woman at the well (John 4). It is to be noted that some of the outsiders become part of the insider group by their acts (Esau, Tamar [by marriage], and Achan), whereas the others from the Old Testament are real outsiders, foreigners who are not part of Israel. Each chapter presents an eloquent retelling of the relevant main narrative with Spina’s comments interwoven in it.

It is needless and inappropriate for a review to address every single detail that could be raised as a point of controversy. It is sufficient here to concentrate on one chapter—chapter 1: “Esau: The Face of God”—to demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of Spina’s display of the outsider topic. Readers are provided with numerous of details that usually might not catch their eyes. The account is written in an attractive style, which offers a good read. However, here and in all the other chapters Spina’s method is not adequate because it lacks a clear circumscription. Granting that for modern readers and churchgoers Esau might be *the* outsider in the Bible, one may still ask whether this modern-reader perspective is really appropriate for a complex textual tradition like that of

Jacob and Esau. Is it really true that Esau is depicted in a bad way, as “lacking not only in etiquette but in virtue,” someone who “foolishly cedes his sociolegal rights and squanders his future” (17)? Such readings can be regarded as anachronistic (at least on the same level as the usage of “Old Testament” or “Bible” for the Scriptures of Jesus’ day, something Spina tries to define as anachronistic; see the note on 139), because Spina judges Esau against the background of what is regarded as polite and educated today. But what about Jacob and Esau’s contemporaries? Were not Jacob’s betrayal and flight more appalling in their eyes? And how—to remain on a synchronic level of reading—would an ideal and thus fictitious reader understand the text? Moreover, the Jacob-Esau tradition was written down by the side that succeeded; to be more precise, what we find in the Bible are stories according to the view of those whose traditions survived (see, e.g., the pejorative sections about Samaria or the negative judgments on several kings). Would it not be more appropriate to talk about winners and losers instead of insiders and outsiders, if we keep in mind the reception of the Jacob-Esau traditions? Even if Esau/Edom became the “bad guy,” his name additionally becoming the denomination of a certain region, in poetry he also symbolizes loneliness and exclusion and is someone who deserves compassion, occasionally even similar to Ahasver, the legendary wandering Jew. Besides, where does Spina draw his conclusion that “Jacob the insider saw God’s face so clearly in the face of his outsider brother Esau” (34)? Again, this sounds like solving a problem in a more harmonious way than is done in the text itself.

Even if the stories themselves are enlightening as they are presented, above all due to the fact that Spina focuses on characters usually not in the spotlight, critical and informed readers may ask themselves why Spina has chosen exactly these outsiders, as well as what turns them into outsiders. For instance, for whom is Jonah an outsider, and/or according to which criteria can he be called so? It is true that we learn from the text that Jonah was regarded by others as an outsider and was sent by God to the people of Nineveh (i.e., non-Israelites), thus in to Spina’s view to outsiders. But were not prophets—of course, Jonah is a specific case—always treated as outsiders by their contemporaries, even if we today regard them as insiders, and thus did they not feel as outsiders among those who were to be called back to the path of God? All this should be sufficient to point out the methodological problems of Spina’s work.

The book comes with explanatory notes (160–89), which are really rewarding, as they do show Spina’s skill in weighing the pros and cons of certain issues, something that is not all that evident in the previous chapters. Also included are indices of names and places (190–92), subjects (193–94), Hebrew and Greek terms (presented in transcription; 195–96), and scripture references (197–206).

This book is clearly not written primarily for scholars and those familiar with the tradition behind and reception of biblical texts. As the often overexplanatory notes clearly indicate, the audience addressed must be the interested layperson or cleric who wants to find ideas for a lecture, Bible study group, or sermon. Only such an audience would need clarifications in footnotes such as, “*Torah* is conventionally translated ‘law.’ This is certainly acceptable, since the *Torah* (Pentateuch) contains the many laws that are part of God’s covenant with Israel (Ex. 20 through Num. 10:10). But *Torah* also means more than ‘law.’ It means ‘teaching,’ ‘instruction,’ ‘story,’ and ‘narrative’ ” (10). Similarly, Spina somewhat pedantically attempts to define terms in other notes (see, e.g., the notes on 1–2, 101, and 143–44). What is more serious is that the insider-outsider motif does not really hold the individual chapters together, because it often remains a matter of interpretation whether the characters singled out are really outsiders and, if they are, which perspective we as readers might choose. Finally, Spina does not succeed in pointing out what impact those outsiders truly have on the insiders, something he could have avoided by adding an eighth chapter with conclusions drawn from the previous outsider stories.

To come to an end and to return to the introduction of this review, this book deserves to be read by its intended audience, above all students, laypersons, and clerics interested in a narrative presentation of stories about biblical characters usually not in the spotlight. For them, the methodological and interpretative shortcomings may not be that serious. Personally, I regard the title of Spina’s book as misleading, since the motif of outsiders is more complex than that depicted by these few stories and with the help of these characters. Further, “Exclusion and Inclusion in the Biblical Story” does not necessarily refer primarily to individuals in the Old Testament but at the same time should include the struggle early Christians had with pagan, syncretistic, and/or heretic groups (see Paul’s enthusiastic phrasing against pseudo-teachers and misguided missionaries or the warnings in 2 Peter; however, again it is a matter of perspective who then is to be regarded as syncretistic or heretic). Even after a rereading I still do not see what the impact of the potential outsiders on the insiders should be, and I must stick to my reservations as far as method and criteria are concerned.