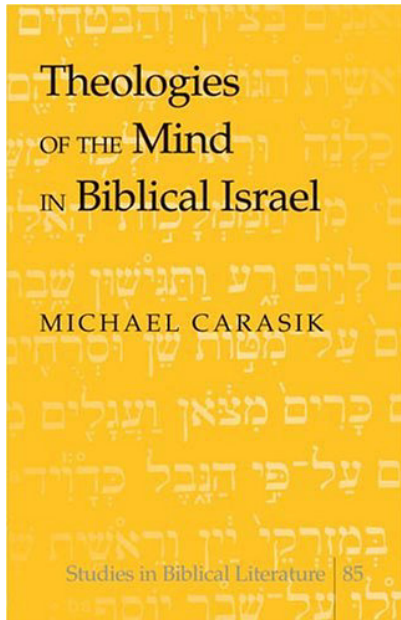


RBL 08/2007



Carasik, Michael

Theologies of the Mind in Biblical Israel

Studies in Biblical Literature 85

New York: Lang, 2006. Pp. 263. Cloth. \$68.95. ISBN 0820478482.

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Philology has fallen on hard times in mainstream biblical studies. It may have itself to blame. James Barr's thoroughgoing critique of its specious appropriation for theology has left many justifiably skittish about employing it to any significant effect. At the same time, interest has shifted to new approaches and methodologies. Now, it is not uncommon to hear the plaint that students lack sufficient Hebrew skills.

Michael Carasik, in his wonderful study, *Theologies of the Mind in Biblical Israel*, gives us more than sufficient reason to take words seriously again. Barr pointed to the way in which linguistic data could be misused but never denied altogether the significance of philology for theology. Cognizant of Barr, Carasik rejects using “phrases and passages” to “reveal *how* their authors thought” but still finds a use for them in “telling us *what* those authors thought” about the process of thinking (9). The Israelite mind may have been much like our own, but their *theories* of cognition could differ. With substantial chapters on Proverbs and Deuteronomy, Carasik demonstrates that inquiry into the semantics of the mind can produce a deep account of a biblical work and its theological content. How biblical authors conceive of and discuss perception, education, memory, thought, and creativity—the semantic fields of which receive extensive treatment in Carasik's work—

helps explain those authors' overriding preoccupations and strategies. All of this strikes me as quite new and exciting; Carasik has helped refresh philology.

He has also embarked upon a massive undertaking, perhaps more massive than he allows for. One result is that the book and even individual chapters do not argue for a single, central thesis but are rather a collection of insights (often extremely interesting ones) organized around verbal roots and basic cognitive functions. This makes the book difficult to review in its full richness, so what appears below will be reactions to specific points raised by Carasik. The introduction to the book sets forth one theme as dominant, that proper knowledge originates in the divine realm and not with human creativity, but that only recurs from time to time throughout the rest of the work. The greatest clarity comes in the last two chapters, where Carasik distinguishes between and places within a chronological framework Proverbs, with its focus on the acquisition of wisdom as an *object*, and Deuteronomy, with its focus on *processes* of thinking.

Two overall assumptions permit the broad scope of *Theologies of the Mind*. Carasik denies that the hardwiring of the Israelite mind was fundamentally different from our own, leaving open the possibility that their *construction* of the mind might differ. But it does not. At least, these differences do not emerge in sharp relief in his account. In particular, his exposition of ancient anthropology does not present any serious alternative to the Western world's thoroughgoing construction of thought as interior. Ultimately, this allows Carasik to rely on standard translations of most mind-related terminology.

Related to this point is what strikes me as a certain conservative quality to Carasik's exegesis. Carasik prefers to draw conclusions on a statistical basis. For instance, he concludes that "knowledge" (דעת) in ancient Israel was deemed to be of or from God, because most attestations of the term present it as such. This type of data can be problematic in light of the inadequacy of the biblical canon as a representation of ancient Israel's complete literary and certainly linguistic output. Sometimes counting can stand in lieu of a fresh consideration of the relevant terms and biblical passages. Indeed, it is the labor-intensive work of careful but creative exegesis that best grounds the surprising results that philology sometimes produces. But this arithmetic emphasis probably should be seen as a necessary concession to the book's being a *survey* of a vast number of terms, which itself has other distinct advantages to be discussed at the end of the review. Together, these two issues, hesitant anthropology and exegesis, account for most of the divergences, alternatives, and questions that I raise in my discussion below.

Carasik maintains that the Hebrew verb ידע corresponds closely to the range of meanings evinced by the English verb "to know" (17–32). This assertion is very difficult to assess, but evidence of some problem with it may be seen in Carasik's dismissal of Walther

Zimmerli's radical claim that יָדַע in Ezekiel, found in the formula "know that I am YHWH," does not depict a deep psychological process but rather a concrete moment of recognition in the face of dramatic divine intervention. I think Zimmerli's thesis may have something to it, but I would like to consider it using a simpler example from Leviticus: "You must dwell in booths for seven days ... in order that future generations may *know* that I provided the children of Israel with booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I the LORD your God" (Lev 23:42–43). What relationship between ritual and knowledge is intended here? One possibility, the standard suggestion, is that the annual performance of the booth ritual ensures that a steady awareness of God's salvific act is maintained. But that scarcely seems necessary and suggests that any given yearly performance of the act bears little significance at all. Another option entails a subtly distinct theory of knowledge, one that understands יָדַע first and foremost as an act of recognition (whose effect lingers)—a sort of punctuated or refreshed knowledge—rather than as a general state of knowing and that grants the ritual a role beyond the mere description of past events. Each year, dwelling in booths *calls to mind* the fact of God's salvific act and *makes manifest* his revealed power, "I the LORD your God." In this account, the people's response, יָדַע , moves much closer to Zimmerli/Ezekiel's notion of "recognition" and away from anything that can be represented adequately with English "know."

The supremacy of sight over sound is a biological fact, according to Carasik, and sight, not sound, as some would have it, is the most significant source of perception in the Bible (32–43). It escapes me how to make a proper determination in this matter or even what one might look like (sound like?). I do think hearing was very important in ancient Israel, and my hunch is that it was more then than it is today—if that is even a meaningful statement. The transmission of knowledge depended upon it much more exclusively. It is surely no small thing that revelation, from Sinai to other prophetic oracles, was almost invariably an oral utterance, whereas today Scripture is experienced primarily in a visual form. (Of course, that probably indicates only that sight was considered a more intimate act and therefore an impossibility vis-à-vis God in most cases.) Why does Carasik shy away from acknowledging the robust role of hearing in ancient Israel? The somewhat strange terms of the discussion—a battle of the sense perceptions—sometimes skews his exegesis here. In Gen 18:21, God tells Abraham that he will descend to *see* whether the complaints he has *heard* arising from Sodom and Gomorrah are indeed true. As Carasik writes, "seeing is believing," and he takes this as a sign of the supremacy of sight (40). But this passage is also an eloquent witness to the limitations of vision. In the anthropomorphic pretense of this passage, God *cannot* see injustice from on high. Sight fails or produces ambiguous results in cases of distance or obstruction. But even from afar, an inarticulate cry of pain is more or less comprehensible. When sound attracts the

deity's attention to Sodom, he enters the city to investigate and to see things for himself. Both senses seem equally necessary to the narrative.

Carasik has an interesting observation about three terms related to education (למד, אלה, רסר); they can be used in the sense of restraint, particularly of animals (47–50). This suggests a “concept of learning” that is “neither the acquisition of information nor the fulfillment of the learner’s full potential as a human being—two functions schooling is often claimed to have in our own society—but the restraint of animal-like behavior, the training or, not to put too fine a point on it, the domestication of the one who learns to follow a certain path” (49–50). This is a fine formulation and the sort of comment that could prove helpful in grappling with the differences between biblical anthropological perspectives and our own. In the current context, however, Carasik cannot develop it sufficiently. One cannot argue from suggestive etymologies to theological conceptions—the warnings of Barr overtake us here. This thesis now would have to be tested through a sustained exegetical consideration of biblical passages relevant to education.

I think that the biblical word לב, commonly translated as “heart,” may be more problematic than is commonly thought. Most scholars will deal with its difficulties by telling you that it has multiple meanings. Carasik seems to understand it, as the seat of thought, to be equivalent essentially to the head or mind in modern parlance. This is important, because for Carasik the presence of לב is one of the chief ways of marking the pure *interiority* of thought in ancient Israel: ancient Israelites thought silently to themselves but chose to depict their thinking with the *metaphor* of speech. They certainly had loquacious minds; *real* speech leaks out from them all the time! “Keep your mouth from being rash, and let not your *heart* be quick to bring forth speech before God” (Eccl 5:1). Again: “My mouth utters wisdom, the utterance of my *heart* understanding” (Ps 49:4). One more example: How did Rebecca come to be told that Esau was plotting to kill Jacob? The source was again the leaky “heart”: “Esau said in his *heart* [usually translated ‘to himself’], ‘let but the mourning period of my father come, and I will kill my brother Jacob’” (Gen 27:41). Yet Rebecca comes to hear of this “inner” speech. Many more examples could and should be adduced to complete this argument, but it seems clear that לב is a Hebrew equivalent of neither “heart,” nor “head.” The possibility of a radically different ancient Israelite understanding of the thought process still remains.

Carasik’s book is one of the most thought-provoking that I have recently read. I can permit myself only one more comment, concerning what he terms the psychological commands found in the book of Deuteronomy. Here I will only assert that I believe William Moran was on the right track in understanding “love” in the book of Deuteronomy primarily in behavioral rather than internal, emotional terms (“The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy,” *CBQ* 25 [1963]:

77–87). I believe his insight still requires further expansion; Carasik’s work, along with an insightful and highly significant recent article by Jacqueline Lapsley (“Feeling our Way: Love for God in Deuteronomy,” *CBQ* 65 [2003]: 350–69), represent movement in the opposite direction.

This is a wonderful book and really a masterful achievement. It is not the last word on most of the topics pursued precisely because it opens up and defines so many fruitful avenues of inquiry. It collects earlier scholarship and key passages from all over the Hebrew Bible and classifies them into compelling categories in a fashion that will facilitate research in this important area for years to come. It leaves hardly any area of biblical studies untouched, and I think everyone with an interest in the Hebrew Bible should read it, whether out loud or silently to themselves.