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Davies, Philip, ed.

Yours Faithfully: Virtual Letters from the Bible

BibleWorld

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I am going to resist the temptation to cast this review in the epistolary style used in Professor Davies's edited collection. I cannot resist the temptation to remark up front that this book probably should never have gone past the ebullient stage in a pub when some colleagues thought this biblical riff would be worth preserving in print. At best it is worth the pleasure it has given the letter writers. As a reader, I found myself puzzled by the term "collection." There seems to be no unifying element to this collection, no logic behind the letter writers and the recipients (not all women writing to men, younger people to older, pagans to prophets). I suspect that the contributors chose their own pair, and the results are predictable. Davies tap-dances quite skillfully around this issue (Why letters at all?) by giving an introductory *raison da lettre*, more a justification than a true explication. Davies's introduction promises more than the book delivers.

The letters follow a canonical order, but there is little attempt to channel a character, to speak through his or her scribe. Nor is there any connection within the collection to jump from one twosome to another. For example, what would Abraham say to David about the concept of trophy wife? If we are creating midrash, how might David respond to Joe Heller's bawdy march through the king's marital and extramarital life. Don't any of these characters itch to declaim about the proliferation on both sides of the pond of

unchallenging TV series about biblical figures, in which the characters are obscured behind the resonant voices of Charlton Heston and Richard Kiley or the buttery primness of Jeanne Simmons? Fun *entre nous* humor for the guild might leaven the letters: What about a letter from Joshua to Aaron complaining that they have been left out of the Greatest Heroes of the Bible series. Who was behind that A&E-produced selection? Why didn't the two of them make the final cut?

Humor, sassiness, and new combinations of biblical voices do not seem to be part of this letter-writing campaign. Precisely because the letter-writers are scholars, they have a hard time abandoning scholarship, as though they fear a letter of reprisal from a colleague who will quote an Akkadian foretext. Thus, the purported letters are really written from scholar to scholar, not from character to character. While the scholarship is meticulous, rarely does the passion of the contemporary writer come through. At the end of her letter from Absalom to his father David, Athalya Brenner hints at a political connection between their ancient struggles and the contemporary scene in the Middle East. I longed for more of these connections, rather than the use of contemporary slang as a way to remind the reader that we are not in the ancient Near Eastern world. Sadly, we forget the possibilities of *ab-shalom*, the father of peace; we dwell on the plain readings, trying to reconnect with distant passions.

Perhaps it is my own weariness with recounted dried-out historical events that the words of Ahithophel, Ahab, Haggai to Zechariah and response had little interest for me. While I was eager to read what the Big Fish said to Jonah, he sounded more like a scholar than a troller of the deep. I was interested in my own quickened heartbeat when I began the letter of Jesus to his mother, perhaps because there is a Jesus voice already implanted in my head, while I confess to an absence of the voice of King Ahab. As my undergraduate students feel that their role in class is to protect God from me, I may be reacting to this letter in the same manner, finding its voice from the grave more thick-tongued than tongue in cheek.

Within the collection there are letters that claim a midrashic intention of filling in the gaps, the "what I wish I'd said." Thus, we have Sarah writing to Abraham and again to Rebecca. There is intimacy and a stronger note of voice in the letter from the older woman to the younger woman (Vicki Jensen). One can sympathize with Sarah's recounting of her terrified scream that could not reach her husband and child on Mount Moriah. The reader feels the horror of that unheard scream, that never-to-be-forgotten picture. Within the fluffing of women recountings, Jensen does a good job also of giving us a sense of Sarah's success in the harem of the pharaoh. In contrast, Esther's letter to her dead *imah* reveals a somewhat smug-sounding use of sex toys and potions for pleasuring the king (an unusual confession to one's mother, I would think).

There are two very funny pieces that will delight any overburdened academic who is used to dueling with editors and publishers. One is a light confection written by Philip Davies, Yvonne Sherwood, and Alastair Hunter, a list of rules for prospective biblical authors. Just the sort of banter to amuse a reader who has trudged through the book. The second letter has fortunately been retrieved from the writings of Roman editor Publius Philostratus, an editor who toiled unheralded at *Lux Gentilibus*. This letter could have been written today, particularly to the some of the writers of this collection, “Your work shows promise, but also some signs of immaturity.” Philostratus writes in a gracious manner, not giving in to what must have been daily irritations from reading the slush pile. Could this ancient remnant be the earliest piece of publishing boilerplate?

So after all this crabbiness, dear reader, you must be wondering why I am wasting your time at all. There is one letter that proves the possibility of this project. Yvonne Sherwood’s meditation of Isaac to Abraham bridges the gap between then and now brilliantly. Clearly aware of the writerly difficulties in being there and living here, Sherwood writes with the depth of Kierkegaard, the relish of the midrashists, and the cadences of a poet. Sherwood does not pretend to be living in an ancient desert, nor does she keep her main character ignorant of all the midrash that has piled up from his morning on Mount Moriah. Isaac knows everything that Sherwood can pour into him. Thus the letter carries the world within its prose, rather than the narrow focus of a biblical narrative unit. This letter alone is worth reading, rereading, and sending to your own friends.