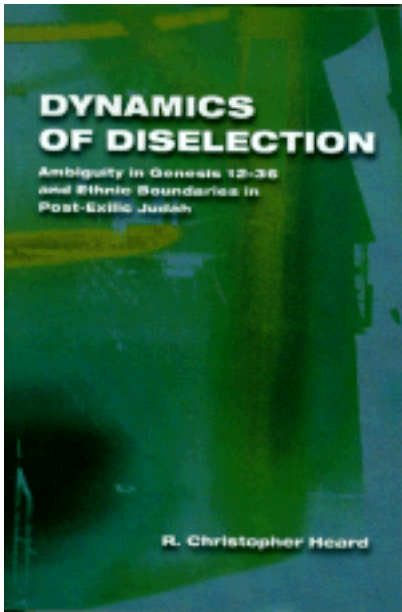


RBL 02/2004



Heard, R. Christopher

Dynamics of Diselection: Ambiguity in Genesis 12-36 and Ethnic Boundaries in Post-Exilic Judah

Semeia Studies 39

Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001. Pp. xii + 212. Paper. \$29.95. ISBN 1589830016.

Phillip Michael Sherman
Candler School of Theology
Decatur, GA 30329

Heard's work weaves together a number of different approaches to biblical texts: literary-aesthetic readings, feminist-advocacy, and sociological analysis. He deploys these various methods for a singular purpose: to explain the ambiguous narrative presentation of certain "dis-elect" characters in Gen 12–36 and to place their dis-election into a particular sociohistorical setting. As in much recent work on the book of Genesis, this sociohistorical setting is Persian period Yehud. Heard argues that the exilic "elites" who returned under the missions of Ezra and Nehemiah utilized the patriarchal narratives in Gen 12–36 to legitimate their claim to be "true" Israelites, the true inheritors of the land. Those peoples around them—the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites—are portrayed as the dis-elect "Other." The ambiguous presentation of the dis-elect—Lot, Ishmael, Esau, and (in a slightly different fashion) Laban—serves to further the ideal of endogamous marriage among the exilic elite.

The bulk of Heard's work focuses on close readings of specific passages dealing with the relationships between Lot/Abra(ha)m, Ishmael/Isaac, Jacob/Esau, and Jacob/Laban. This centerpiece of Heard's work is also his strongest, most compelling section. In each chapter Heard reads the text closely and uncovers an ambiguous presentation of the dis-

elect character that complicates the reader's encounter with this "Other." In every case the biblical narrative is clear on the dis-elect nature of a particular character; it is not clear, however, that this dis-election is a function of any action taken or not taken by the character. Lot is not to inherit the promises given to Abraham, for example. Lot's exclusion from these promises is not *necessarily* the result of any flaw in Lot's character. Lot may or may not be presented in a positive light. Individual readers make this determination based on how they interpret the data present in the narrative. The same situation holds true for all the characters analyzed in the central section of Heard's work. According to his reading of the patriarchal narratives, there are two ways of being: within the covenant lineage of Abraham and outside of it. One's location within or outside of this lineage does not, however, depend on anything other than the will and choice of Yahweh. Heard asserts that such a view of "covenant" would have been particularly useful to those espousing it because such a claim is virtually impossible to challenge. Esau may or may not be a "good" person. The will and choice of Yahweh are still supreme.

One of the most entertaining aspects of Heard's literary reading of these biblical texts comes from his culling of all the relevant commentary literature on these narratives. He is able to demonstrate the reality of the ambiguity he posits simply by pointing to the cacophony of the commentators. If luminaries such as Gunkel and von Rad, Speiser and Westermann disagree over basic characterization issues, surely ambiguity must be present in the narrative. In addition, he is able to uncover shockingly sexist views held by some interpreters! (For example, Wenham comments that the narrative presents Lot in a sympathetic fashion because "he was a husband who did not enjoy whole-hearted support from his wife" [56 n. 19].) At times Heard almost seems to lapse into what David J. A. Clines has termed "metacommentary." The reader learns not only a great deal about how the patriarchal narratives can be read but also how particular commentators have (mis-) read them.

Heard concludes by suggesting that the narrative presentation of Laban is different from the other three dis-elect characters. Laban is an "outsider" from the very beginning. He notes that Laban is portrayed as a provider of "legitimate" wives for the true Israelite. The reference to Laban can plausibly be read, according to Heard, as a sign for the need to send to Mesopotamia for a spouse who is also from the exilic group. The focus is on avoiding marriage to any woman who is from the "people of the land." (It should be noted, however, that following the "covenant" between Laban and Jacob in Gen 31, no descendant of Jacob's ever returns to Paddan-Aram for a suitable spouse.)

I have one over-riding critique of what is an otherwise well-written and compelling work. The two arguments that make up the thesis of this work—that certain characters are

presented in an ambiguous manner in Gen 12–36 and that such ambiguity served the interests of the dominant social group in Persian period Yehud—do not finally cohere. It is not entirely clear why the author(s) of Genesis would choose to present their dis-elect characters in such an ambiguous light. Why *not* be more direct? Heard claims that Gen 12–36 is simply a more irenic presentation of the same basic ideology presented in Ezra-Nehemiah with regard to “foreign wives.” One is left wondering why the author of these narratives felt the need to be so peaceable. Furthermore, no attempt is made to explain how the texts in Genesis would have been read and by whom they would have been read in the Persian period. This is no small question. If one wishes to assert that a text was written to advance a particular ideological perspective, one must also attempt to demonstrate that the text (the physical object) was capable of executing its intended function. Phrased differently, how did Gen 12–36 actually perform the function that Heard wishes to claim for it? Who was reading it and in what context?

Finally, most of the evidence Heard presents from commentators pointing to the ambiguity of characterization in Gen 12–36 comes from the modern period. There are a few brief references to ancient Jewish readings (e.g., *Bereshit Rabbah*’s reading of Gen 22:1). While Heard does a fine job of presenting the genuine ambiguity present in these texts through purely literary analysis, the ability to point to both ancient *and* modern readers struggling with the same issues would have strengthened his case considerably. Perhaps the ambiguity he notes is only a function of the way moderns read texts. It is fair to question whether or not anyone in the ancient world would have experienced these texts in an equally ambiguous fashion.

The three approaches that Heard enumerates at the opening of his work are unevenly applied. He proves himself to be a master of close literary readings; his work is certainly worth consulting for this reason. I was less persuaded by his sociological analysis. In many ways the social setting in which he places his reading of Gen 12–36 seems secondary to his literary readings themselves. These reservations aside, Heard posits an interesting thesis and provides a number of thoroughly enlightening readings of the patriarchal narratives along the way. One certainly leaves this work with a stronger sense of the role of the reader in the construction of textual meaning.