

Book Review: Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture – An Agrarian Reading of the Bible¹

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Despite having been in print for some time this book warrants a visit for those of us attempting to re-frame our theology around Kenarchy, especially where a Christological hermeneutic has provoked a new understanding of God's character. With a foreword by Wendell Berry, it bodes well for readers seeking a clearer understanding of how the Bible might influence our economic and ecological responsibilities. This collection of nine essays, beginning with the current ecological crisis, then addresses seeing with agrarian eyes, creation poetry, wilderness economics, re-reading Levitical law, covenantal economics, agrarian poetry, work, and city. This review will focus on the early chapters to introduce the book and its themes.

Ellen F. Davis is the Amos Ragan Kearns Distinguished Professor of Bible and Practical Theology at Duke University, North Carolina. Her deep knowledge of Hebrew and Old Testament Scriptures sets the background to her premise that, *"the message of the earliest prophetic writers of the Bible was distinctly Agrarian."* She opens with the following;

*"Agrarianism is a way of thinking and ordering life in community that is based on the health of the land and living creatures. Often out of step with the prevailing values of wealth, technology, and political and military domination, the mind-set and practices that constitute agrarianism have been marginalised by the powerful within most "history-making" cultures across time, including that of ancient Israel. The sheer pervasiveness of their appreciation and concern for the health of the land is the single most important point of this study."*²

Indeed, her contention is that the Old Testament Scriptures were written for an agrarian people and unless we read them with 'Agrarian Eyes', we will fail to truly understand their meaning. Familiarity with contemporary agrarian writings helps with biblical interpretation, often seeing things afresh that one might otherwise have missed. The biblical writers had a relationship with place and recognised how fragile their existence was.

*"They [the scriptures] reflect the narrow and precariously balanced ecological niche that is the hill country of ancient Judah and Samaria ... The Bible as we have it could not have been written beside the irrigation canals of Babylon, or the perennially flooding Nile ..."*³

Davis sees Moses' instructions to the Israelites in the wilderness (Deut 11:10-12) as brilliant agrarian rhetoric, exhorting the Israelites to understand that their land is blessed precisely because of its fragility, which necessitates and therefore guarantees God's unwavering attention.⁴

She goes on to describe four ways in which contemporary agrarian thinking highlights biblical thought about land care:

¹ Ellen F. Davis. *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture – An Agrarian Reading of the Bible*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

² Ibid. 1.

³ Ibid. 26.

⁴ Ibid. 27.

- 1) The Primacy of Land - land is not an inert object, but a fellow creature that can justly expect something from us whose lives depend upon it.
- 2) Wisdom & Informed Ignorance – the western worldview is that we can learn enough to bend nature pliantly to run the world. The fear of YHWH leads to a critical appreciation of both the world and ourselves, the necessary condition for reading the world accurately. Sages see agriculture as a primary means by which God’s wisdom is needed by humanity (e.g. Proverbs instruction for farmers 24:27, 24:30-34, 27:23-27).
- 3) A Modest Materialism – how can we meet our material needs, in the present and for the indefinite future, without inflicting damage? The Israelites had a much less favourable situation, never having enough water or land to waste. They survived by becoming intimate with their land, learning to meet its expectations and needs, passing on that knowledge to the next generation.
- 4) Value Beyond Price – *“In any economy with a long-term future, the price of land is not an essential matter. Indeed any culture with a long-term future must understand that the value of land is not monetary”*⁵. There is no record in ancient Israel of voluntary selling of land on the open market. Rights to land use may be temporarily sold off, but they revert to the original family every 50 years. There is no permanently landless underclass in Israel.

I found the third essay, Seeing with God: Israel’s Poem of Creation, immensely valuable. Having attempted using Kenarchy to better understand the apparent command to subjugate the earth⁶, I am inspired by Davis’ view that the creation story is a liturgical poem and as such it gives form to a certain way of seeing the world. Her knowledge of Hebrew also counters the commonly held translation of “Dominion over”, arguing it is much better interpreted as “exercising skilled mastery amongst” the creatures⁷. A most basic understanding of the verb used is not to rule, but it denotes the travelling round of a shepherd with their flock. The closing of Genesis 1 makes clear that food is for the eating by both humans and the creatures. The moral imperative is that everyone has to eat, and everyone does not just mean humanity. Mankind appears into an extant created order, which has been blessed to be fruitful and multiply. To exist as bearers of the divine image (which incidentally is mentioned three times in Gen. 1 and only twice more in the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures), we are called to exercise skilled mastery whilst preserving the blessing already bestowed upon the Earth and the creatures.

In the next essay, Leaving Egypt Behind: Embracing the Wilderness Economy, Davis offers insight into the cultural shift needed for the Israelites to recover from a toxic exploitative culture of consumption towards becoming an agrarian people once again. The Exodus 16 account of the Manna is one in which the people are given an opportunity to be free of the sickness of Egypt. To move away from Empire, where wealth flows upwards, to emerge as a people exhorted to cultivate a radically different way of living in community on the land. The ban on short-term left-overs epitomises the difference between the wilderness economy and that of Egypt, which had many grain silos. The prohibition on saving food means no tent can become a silo, the camp cannot become a storage city.

⁵ Ibid. 39.

⁶ Winter, M. D. *Kenarchy as a counterpolitical resource: re-imagining our understanding of land and nature* (2020, The Kenarchy Journal 1 (4): 46-61).

⁷ Davis, 2009, 54-55.

The entire book offers a fresh approach to reading Old Testament Scripture, a counter-narrative for our time, highlighting the differences between agrarianism and our destructive, exploitative industrial economics.