

**Eleonore Stump and Judith Wolfe, eds. *Biblical Narratives and Human Flourishing: Knowledge Through Narrative*. Routledge Studies in Analytic and Systematic Theology. Routledge, 2024. x + 223 pp. \$152.00 (hbk); \$45.59 (ebook).**

Craig G. Bartholomew  
Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology

Recent decades have seen a truly remarkable flourishing in Christian philosophy and I take it that this book is a fruit of that renaissance. Readers should see chapter 1 by the editors for their take on what has led to the sort of work we find in this book. The work is in the analytic tradition but refreshingly attends to biblical *narrative* as a source of philosophical insight. Biblical narratives are here read *for* philosophical knowledge about human flourishing. And the result is a very rich and rewarding collection of short chapters—keeping chapters to a reasonable and relatively consistent length is great for the reader and the student—by a range of authors, both Christian and Jewish, almost all philosophers as far as I can see.

Many things are done with the Bible nowadays in the academy, not least ideological readings that are intentionally deconstructive rather than constructive. The authors of this book are experts and rigorous but the tone is overwhelmingly *constructive*, which I find refreshing. The book is dedicated to Robert Alter, the distinguished Jewish literary scholar who with Meir Sternberg and others played such a central role in the 1970s onwards in the recovery of the Bible as literature. This book leans on that work in that unlike too much biblical study, it does not devote endless energy to the origins of texts and the sources and traditions underlying them, but gets on with reading the Bible as the literature that it is, in this case for philosophy. Biblical narratives are here leveraged for philosophical insight but inevitably such readings also cast their light backwards on the interpretation or exegesis of the Bible, often yielding surprising and fresh insights. The result is that a veritable feast is served up for the reader. This book will serve academics, instructors, and students well.

The book is divided into three sections: biblical narratives and human flourishing, biblical narratives and human flourishing in relation to God and others, and biblical narratives and human flourishing in the midst of disorder and distress. The division is useful but by no means absolute. What I enjoyed about the book is that some biblical narratives are discussed by more than one author, for example Jonah and Genesis 22, the *Akedah*. This provides one with a look at how different philosophical approaches read such texts similarly and differently.

It is not possible—much as I am tempted—to engage with each chapter in the detail they deserve. Thus I will confine myself to areas that have drawn my attention and then make some more general comments at the end.

Intriguingly, two chapters in the book—chapters 2 and 12—deal with the small book of Jonah in relation to the theme of the meaning of life. Elsewhere Eleonore Stump has also

attended to Jonah. Having long neglected this theme, analytic philosophers have rediscovered it in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Aaron Segal and Godehard Brüntrup independently attend to Jonah through the lens of the meaning or lack thereof in life and come to similar conclusions, albeit with Brüntrup taking a more psychoanalytic approach. In both cases, to generalise, meaning is recovered through expanding one's interests to include those of God.

Both readings strike me as legitimate and very interesting but Segal asserts that "I think the book [of Jonah] is centrally concerned with whether our lives have meaning" (9). Having worked fairly extensively on Jonah, I cannot think of an exegete who would make this claim. Tangentially, yes, but centrally, no. The two readings easily reduce Jonah to being about *the individual's* quest for meaning—a quintessentially modern move—whereas, in my view, ancient Israelites hearing the story would soon realise that Jonah is a symbol of them as a people and that the key question is whether or not they will come around to God's radical compassion for Israel's great enemy Nineveh, a capital of Assyria, or whether they will remain within the view that God's blessing should be for Israel and his judgments for her enemies. Read thus, Jonah is a geopolitical bomb, not least in the times in which we live. Thus, in terms of philosophy and flourishing, Jonah can and should be read for international relations as much or more than for the particularly modern question of the meaning of life.

Stump's reading of Ecclesiastes is delightful and sparkles with insights. Although not engaged with, it was Michael Fox's work on Ecclesiastes that generated a real breakthrough in reading the book as a narrative with different voices interacting. Stump follows this approach and reads Ecclesiastes in line with the minority view that Ecclesiastes ultimately affirms hope rather than despair and that his journey through despair to hope and joy is instructive for flourishing. I have defended and developed such a minority reading in detail elsewhere. Where I found Stump particularly helpful is in her philosophical evaluation of the reasons Qohelet gives for his *hebel* (vanity) conclusions, which she evocatively understands as "who cares?" It is in her analysis of the deficiency of Qohelet's reasons for his despair that I would love to have heard more. Her analysis of pride—I would speak of human autonomy—is acute and refreshing, as is her invocation of seeing life as "gift" as the solution.

Josef Stern, Sharon Krishek and Patrick Zoll all attend in their chapters to Genesis 22, the *Akedah*. Stern provides us with a creative and interesting reading of Genesis 22 through the lens of Maimonides. I found the exposition genuinely informative but the reduction of God speaking to Abraham reasoning seems to me to subvert divine action. In his *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition* (2018), Benjamin Sommer very helpfully sets out in detail what this sort of approach means for reading the Sinai narrative. However, at the heart of the debate is whether or not God can speak. If as do I, one asserts that God can and does speak, then this changes how one reads these narratives and the lessons one takes from them.

Krishek engages critically with Kierkegaard's approach to Genesis 22 in relation to Lazarus dying and returning to life. Her stress on the earthiness of life and existential faith are important insights. Zoll also attends to Genesis 22 in the context of his chapter on "Why God Does Not Share His Secrets With us" in dialogue with Aquinas on John 15:14–16 and then a rereading of the narrative of Abraham through this lens. The theme of pride—cf. the chapter by Stump—resurfaces here. Attention to Aquinas on friendship enables Zoll to develop a sophisticated and accurate, in my view, reading of Genesis 22.

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Seachris and Goetz (2016).

Samuel Lebens uses the philosophical concept of exemplification to wrestle with the apparent contradiction between the disconcerting life of Jacob and the celebration of his truthfulness. Through this he proposes what we might call a “thick” account of truthfulness.

Tamra Wright’s and Ian Gamse’s chapter on animals in Genesis is fascinating and timely, exploring what it might mean to act responsibly for the world, including animals, as humans. Their rereading of the Noah story in the light of contemporary concern for animals, noting correctly that the permission of Genesis 9 follows Noah’s sacrifice at the end of Genesis 8, is insightful and potentially very instructive. It opens a way towards a more humane animal ethics.

Using insights from Michael Polanyi, Darren Sarisky revisits the distinction between God’s transcendence and immanence along non-contrastive lines, opening up a fresh way for relating creation and participation, focused on John’s Gospel. Mark Wynn foregrounds the fascinating questions of why the risen Jesus was often not recognised by his disciples. He attends to the Emmaus narrative and to bodily comportment as a key to recognition. Trust and spiritual imagination play an important role in recognising the risen Christ.

Prayer does not always survive well when analysed by philosophers. Simon Oliver and Judith Wolfe go a long way towards rectifying this through attention to prayer in the narrative of Daniel, using insights from Aquinas and Jean-Louis Chrétien. They open up the complexity of prayer as both hermeneutical and eschatological, using Chrétien’s concept of “anthropophany”—the manifestation of the embodied human person to God and self—to show the vital importance of prayer for human flourishing.

Last, but by no means least, is a profoundly moving chapter by Alison Fitchett-Climenhaga and Nevin Climenhaga on the way in which a Rwandan Catholic shrine, through its various stations, narrates the good news of Jesus in and to a context underwritten by horrific genocide. Station 3 of the shrine depicts Jesus in the tomb with the weapons of genocide at his feet. In this chapter we are introduced to the redemptive role of visual narrative amidst the extremities of the human condition.

Many collections of essays are uneven. Not this one. Different views come to the fore often in relation to the same biblical narrative, but I found each chapter informative and illuminating. This is a fine collection and one has no hesitation in highly recommending it. It needs to be closely attended to, widely discussed, and to become a means for far more of such rich, creative work. It certainly achieves its goal of showing how philosophical attention to biblical narratives contributes to our knowledge about human flourishing.

Of course, any reviewer must also offer a critique! Mine is more of a comment than a critique. Sadly, philosophers, theologians, and biblical scholars are generally not trained for this sort of work, moving as it does back and forth between Bible and philosophy. We are much the poorer for this but it also heightens our sense of the achievement of the authors in this book. At the same time, I am struck by the scant reference to the best biblical studies work on the narratives attended to. This may say more about biblical studies than Christian philosophy, but I do think that somewhere in the ecology being opened up, rich biblical study needs to be brought more strongly into the mix. Perhaps this is a next stage in this exciting development amidst analytic philosophy.

## References

Seachris, Joshua, and Stewart Goetz, eds. 2016. *God and Meaning: New Essays*. Bloomsbury.

Sommer, Benjamin. 2018. *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition*. Yale University Press.