

## BOOK REVIEWS

Humphreys, W. Lee. *The Character God in the Book of Genesis: A Narrative Appraisal*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2001. x+284 pp.

W. Lee Humphreys is professor of Religious Studies at the University of Tennessee. He has authored *The Tragic Vision and the Hebrew Tradition* (Fortress, 1985) and *Joseph and His Family: A Literary Study* (University of South Carolina Press, 1988).

While extensive discussion occurs about the human characters in the Genesis narrative, scholars are reluctant to discuss God as a literary character. Humphreys attempts to fill this gap. Following recent developments in literary theory, he engages the “God of the text, a figure made of words” (3), employing a “first-time reader” approach and following the Genesis narrative sequentially because he sees the character of God in a “process of becoming” (19).

Using Robert Alter’s “Scale of Means,” a tool that evaluates how narrators present characters, Humphreys claims that God is basically characterized through His actions and speech. Both are seen in the Genesis narrative. For example, in chaps. 1-4 the character God is a sovereign designer, creating and designing the world. He speaks and acts as a royal and is effective in varying roles such as struggling parent (2:4b-3:24), disciplining father (chap. 4), designer and sustainer (chaps. 5-9), and even as a jealous God (chaps. 10-11). As judge, He acts in both “punitive and preventive ways” (76) as demonstrated in the episode detailing the Tower of Babel.

The core of the book deals with God in relation to the Patriarchs. With regard to Abraham, the character God is depicted as a sovereign patron (Gen 12-14; 16-17; though His patronage is challenged in chap. 15). Further, He is judge of all the earth (chaps. 18-19), deliverer (chaps. 20-21), and savage (chap. 22), demanding the sacrifice of Isaac—a test that brings tension between God and Abraham—and, thus, leads the former into silence thereafter. Although much of what Isaac is told (chaps. 25-27) is an echo of what God had earlier promised Abraham (160), the character God is a deliverer and sovereign patron. With regard to Jacob (chaps. 28-36), the character God is portrayed as a sovereign patron, judge, and opponent. Curiously, it appears that Jacob forces God into fulfilling His promises according to Jacob’s designs (201). In the Joseph cycle the character God is silent patron (chaps. 37-41), as is evident from the unfolding scenes of Joseph’s life. God is also Joseph’s providential designer (chaps. 42-50) leading to his exalted

position in Egypt. There is a marked gradual disappearance of God by the end of the Genesis narrative.

The final chapter of the book pulls together all the aspects of the character God and then turns to specific literary perspectives of characterization. Humphreys asserts that while the character God is basically understood through His actions and speech, there are instances where His appearances, feelings, and thoughts come to the fore. As such, He is a “full-fledged” character in Gen 2-36 and an “agent” in Gen 37-50.

The numerous endnotes (257-271) and bibliography (273-281) complete the book and demonstrate the author’s engagement with scholarship.

Several factors commend this book: (1) the logical flow of thought throughout; (2) the emphasis that in Genesis God is not an absentee God as some suppose that He is; (3) the level of engagement with the narrative is generally impressive, especially in the many thought-provoking questions; and (4) besides investigating significant Hebrew words that enrich the scope of his research, Humphreys also studies some concepts against their ANE background. As such, *The Character God in the Book of Genesis* makes a significant contribution to the literary approach of studying the Hebrew Bible.

However, the work is not without some concerns: (1) Genesis was not written for the sake of literature; hence, engaging it in this direction may be disturbing to some people with strong religious convictions; (2) sometimes the author turns from his central focus and dives into details of the narrative, making the character God appear as a minor theme; and (3) at times Humphreys emphasizes the complexity and becomingness of God more than the text requires.

Despite these reservations, the book makes it clear that God is the central figure in Genesis. For this reason, I recommend it for readers interested in literary studies of the biblical narrative. Students of Genesis may find this book valuable.

Daniel Bediako

Strobel, Lee. *The Case for a Creator*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004. 340 pp.

Lee Strobel is a legally trained investigative reporter who documents his spiritual journey from atheism to faith in God. He has written several award-winning books, including *The Case for Faith* (Zondervan, 2000) and *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary* (Zondervan, 1993). He has also been the teaching pastor at Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago and Saddleback Valley Community Church in Orange County, California. With such a background one can readily note that Strobel’s writing is done with the intent of presenting compelling evidence in order to prove his case so that the ordinary citizen will be educated and at the least, think seriously about the issue at hand.

Strobel describes himself as once being defiant and combative against claims for creationism and a Creator. Having studied evolutionary theory, he was