Esler is Emeritus Professor of Biblical Interpretation at St Mary’s University College, Twickenham, London, and was principal of St. Mary’s when this book was published. His several books have tended to apply social-scientific approaches to NT studies. The present volume does the same for a handful of OT narrative texts.

A seventy-six page introduction provides two admirable summaries. The first summary traces the history of academic treatment of biblical narrative. Esler promptly distances himself from “other approaches currently in vogue in the scholarly marketplace that are not concerned with reading for original meaning….” In contrast, he offers “a particular answer to the question of how we should read these narratives—in particular by seeking to understand the meanings they would have conveyed to their original audiences in ancient Israel” (3). This section’s overview of scholarship will strike many readers as tedious; the non-specialist could skip this section and move more quickly to the “sex, wives, and warriors” promised in the title.

The introduction’s second summary treats the historical and, especially, the social contexts of OT narrative. Here Esler hits his stride as he lays a foreshadowing foundation for his use of sociology in interpreting narratives. He singles out the following categories for special mention: families and villages; group (as opposed to individualistic) orientation; honor and shame; challenge and response; limited good; patrons and clients; patrilineality, patrilocality, and polygyny; agrarian socioeconomic structure; and high-context cultures. Knowledge of some of these categories (e.g., honor and shame, patrons and clients) is commonplace among scholars of either testament. In contrast, other categories are infrequently encountered outside sociological circles and therefore give the reader high hopes for finding new insights in Esler’s interpretations.

Chapters 3–10 are interpretations of eight OT narratives. Two chapters fall under the title’s category, “wives.” Though six of eight narratives Esler treats are from the book of Samuel, the first is from Gen 38, “Judah and Tamar.” One example of the sociological approach is notice given to the text’s comment that Judah named Er (Gen 38:3) while Judah’s wife named Onan and Shelah (38:4–5). The sociological category spurring this attentiveness is the above-mentioned high-context culture: “to understand what happens in the narrative, we have to read the brief account of these births quite closely, paying careful attention to every detail in this text from a high-context culture where compression and understatement were the rule” (87). The text is indicating that Judah was “mainly focused on his firstborn” and had a “direct and interested role … in that first birth” (88), a “predominant concern for his firstborn” (90).

The next investigation of wives concerns Hannah and Peninnah (1 Sam 1–2). Here sociology again serves Esler well as he describes relationships between co-wives, sometimes called rival-wives, noting especially the potential strife caused when a second wife is procured to mollify the shame brought when the first wife has not borne children. Esler moves from this feature of polygynous marriages to the sociological category of challenge and response. When, for example, Peninnah provokes Hannah regarding her husband’s gifts of sacrificial meat at Shiloh, she seeks to gain honor by issuing a public challenge (1 Sam 1:6–7). Esler explains, “For Peninnah this was a glorious opportunity to take [public] revenge for the fact that at home Hannah, in spite of her having no children, was the wife whom Elkanah loved and probably the wife with authority” (127).

Four narratives fall under the title’s category, “warriors,” beginning with “The Madness of Saul, a Warrior-King (1 Sam 8–31),” then moving to David. David as warrior is the topic of two chapters: “David and Goliath (1 Sam 17:1–18:5)” and “David, Banditry and Kingship (1 Sam 19:1–2 Sam 5:5).” Esler has much to offer here, having published elsewhere on Mediterranean single combat. The reader dives deeply, for example, into the sociology of challenge and response, already introduced regarding the interactions of Hannah and Peninnah, and also into the sociology of sibling rivalry. Esler’s approach, however, is not exclusively sociological. An example of a literary insight is the connection drawn between Hannah’s song and David’s rise: “David is similar to one of the poor and needy whom Hannah had sung would be lifted up to sit with princes (1 Sam 2:8)” (200). Consider also a theological note: “The core of the message is that God will not be restrained by established social roles and institutions in effecting his purposes, especially to the extent that he means to raise the lowly…” (214).

Chapter 8 is “‘By the Hand of a Woman’: Judith the Female Warrior” and is the book’s sole excursion into the Apocrypha. A significant part of this chapter is a comparison of the narratives of Judith and David. Esler sees considerably more points of contact between these two warriors than he does, for example, between the oft-compared Judith and Jael. Of Judith,
Esler says, “Her story is really David’s played in a different key” (287). The most salient similarity shared by these two heroes is that each “is an utterly improbable savior of Israel...” (186–87).

Two of Esler’s interpretations fall under the book title’s category, “sex.” The book title begins, “Sex, Wives, and Warriors,” but the table of contents reorders this triad as wives, warriors, sex. Furthermore, the book is much more about warriors than wives and sex. Indeed, even these two chapters are more about warriors than sex. One cannot help but wonder, therefore, whether Esler’s original title was the present subtitle (Reading Biblical Narrative with Its Ancient Audience), and adding Sex as the title’s opening word was the publisher’s preference. In any case, the two main contributions of the chapter on “David, Bathsheba and the Ammonite War” are that Esler approaches 2 Sam 10–12 with an understanding of patrons and clients and with an appreciation for how the sometimes-overlooked Ammonite war—especially David’s surprisingly delayed reaction to the Ammonite insult—knits the several pericopes together. Concerning the former, “The details of the account [of Nathan’s parabolic accusation] make good sense within the framework of God as patron, Nathan his prophet as broker and David as client” (316). In this context, Esler again adds theological comment to his largely literary and sociological approach: “This element in the narrative discloses something fundamentally important about this divine patron—he has an abiding concern for justice” (317). In this, the shortest chapter, one small weakness of Esler’s book can be illustrated: Because he regularly gives careful attention to the fine details of the biblical text, it is all the more apparent when Esler himself is dismissive of some portion of text. Consider, for example, his surprisingly abrupt comment on 2 Sam 12:25: “Then comes the curious episode in the story when God sends Nathan to give Solomon another name, Jedidiah, meaning ‘Beloved of the Lord,’ even though this name is not used of Solomon thereafter” (319).

The final chapter is titled, “Dishonor Avenged: Amnon, Tamar and Absalom (2 Sam 13).” One of its contributions is a sociologically enhanced understanding of the sibling bond, including the strong bond of full siblings in contrast to children of co-wives in a polygynous system. While the obvious sibling relationships involved are among Amnon, Tamar, and Absalom, Esler also scrutinizes the role of Jonadab; though he is David’s nephew, he orchestrates Amnon’s opportunity to rape Tamar. Thus the breaches of family honor and group orientation are far reaching, shaming not only David’s immediate royal family, but also his family of origin. Another contribution of this chapter is its emphasis on the outrage committed against Tamar. Western readers will likely not overlook the physical and psychological pain resulting from Amnon’s crime, but these same readers would likely underestimate Tamar’s ensuing social and even familial ostracization. Simply stated, “to rape a woman is to deny her the prospect of a happy and honorable life.... A man who rapes a woman in this context will, in most cases, consign his victim to a form of social death” (344).

Esler’s work is indeed full of rewards for the scholar interested in OT narratives. His attention to original meaning will appeal to many, though his emphasis on meaning inferred by the original audience rather than meaning intended by the author will be met with mixed opinions. The book is heavy on narratives involving OT women, and will therefore be a useful resource for egalitarian scholars, especially those interested in literary and sociological interpretive methods.

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