

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Bible's Many Voices* by Michael Carasik. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2014, 365 pages. Reviewed by Simcha Rosenberg.

The purpose of this book is to demonstrate to those who have read the Bible only in translation that it actually speaks in "many voices." What is meant by "voices" here is different nuances of phrasing, style and emphasis that reflect different purposes, agendas and points of view. According to the author, these distinctive voices are often blurred into one through translating the Bible into archaic English. This attempt to preserve the majesty of the original text also creates a certain false uniformity. The author goes through various books of the Bible to point out subtleties, often lost in translation or overlooked through a surface reading, that reflect the different perspectives of the biblical books. Most of the "voices" represent different schools and ideologies: sometimes, as in the case of the Prophets, they are "real individual voices" (p. 208). This approach applies to the Bible the literary theories of a Russian philosopher and linguist, Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin's idea of "dialogic narrative" – where competing multiple "voices", none of which represent an absolute, monolithic truth, coexist to present a nuanced narrative – is very popular in certain circles of modern academic biblical scholarship.

A good example of different ideological voices is the author's discussion, in chapter two, of how David and Solomon are portrayed in Kings and Chronicles. The Book of Chronicles turns David "from a flesh-and-blood human being into a saint" (p. 73) by omitting the Bathsheba incident and emphasizing his role in making preparations for the Temple. Similarly, Solomon's many wives and later idolatry are left out of Chronicles. While these examples may be well-known, other differences that the author points out are less obvious. The Temple dedication in 1 Kings 6:1 is dated to *the 480<sup>th</sup> year after the Israelites left Egypt*, while in 2 Chronicles 3:1-2 the only date given is when Solomon began building the Temple, *in the fourth year of his reign*. The author explains that, by playing down the Exodus from Egypt, the Chronicler wishes to emphasize that "the Israelites have inhabited the land continuously since the time of Jacob" (p. 81). According to II Chronicles 36:20, exile in Babylonia affected only the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and Is-

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raelites lived in Canaan even during the period when (many) Israelites were slaves in Egypt (I Chron. 7:20-29).

Similarly, while readers of this journal may be familiar with the idea that the Bible uses imagery that consciously reflects or negates elements of the Mesopotamian *Enuma Elish* creation epic, the author not only maintains that this imagery is apparent in the Song of the Sea, but that references to a future Temple (Ex. 15:17) even parallel the end of the *Enuma Elish* account. There, after the god Marduk defeats the sea goddess Tiamat, the story concludes with the building of the Esagila Temple in Babylon, where Marduk is to be worshipped as "the great creator of all things" (p. 325).

Another particularly intriguing chapter deals with "Women's Voices." The author notes that in the Bible, dirges and lamentations were sung by women, and so it is reasonable to assume that women composed similarly themed sections of Psalms and Lamentations (p. 222). Through an analysis of their language and themes, he provides evidence that Ruth and the Song of Songs may have been written by women (pp. 222-231).

The author's homely, talkative style is that of a friendly college professor explaining the Bible to us on a long train journey. Sometimes, however, this style becomes rather too casual, as when he describes Jeremiah 26:17-19 as "easiest to imagine going viral on YouTube" (p. 202). He nevertheless explains various literary techniques that even some long-time Bible readers may not be familiar with, such as *merism* (p. 24), a pair of opposites that signify everything in between like "heaven and earth" (Gen. 1:1; Deut. 32:1); and *hendiadys* (p. 297), a phrase in which two words mean one thing, as in "he answered and said," or in which, to indicate that it is citing a verse from elsewhere, the Bible reverses the clauses (p. 38). On the other hand, providing a mnemonic to help one remember the order of the Pentateuch's five books (p. 133) clearly indicates that this work is not meant for scholars but for readers with some knowledge of the Bible who have had no contact with academic scholarship or in-depth literary analysis. If you have come across the term "Deuteronomist," but never understood what exactly this means and what would compel scholars to consider him a distinct "voice," this book is meant for you (pp. 92-93).

Michael Carasik translated the JPS *Miqra'ot Gedolot Commentator's Bible* series and there are accordingly many issues having to do with translation

that he addresses with considerable insight (pp. 24-27). For example, he tells us what the word *yibbum* actually means (p. 168) and how translating the Name of God in different ways has a different impact on the reader. To preserve the idea that when the Tetragrammaton is used in the Bible it refers to God's name, the author always translates it as YHVH (p. xii). He also pays special attention to the difficulties involved in translating such terms as *hevel* in Ecclesiastes (pp. 256-7), *satan* in Job (pp. 263-4) and *marshal* in Proverbs (p. 246).

With all this talk of different "voices," one might expect the Documentary Hypothesis to be emphasized on almost every page, but that is not the feeling one has when reading this book. The author states that his goal is "not to categorize texts according to the Documentary Hypothesis but simply to recognize the different biblical voices" (p. 147). Chapter 3, "Theological Voices," deals extensively with the differing theological views attributed to the authors of the supposedly different documents and, more confusingly, chapter 4, "Legal Voices," does the same for the commandments, but the author is careful not to alienate more traditional Bible readers. He notes that "it is not the historical origins of the sources that are important, but the various voices" that represent different ideas (p. 131). At the very beginning of the book, he explains that his discussion is meaningful also to those "who take the Bible to be God's word from beginning to end" (p. 15). He proposes that the different voices are so clear that God must be understood to be revealing His message "in differing human voices" (p. 16), an idea that seems akin to Rabbi Breuer's approach to understanding that the different purported authors of the Documentary Hypothesis represent the different ways in which God interacts with the world.

All in all, this is an interesting book that will open up a whole new way of reading the Bible to those unfamiliar with the Hebrew original or the close reading of contemporary literary scholarship, with insights for the seasoned Bible scholar as well.