



# Sex, Wives, and Warriors: Reading Biblical Narrative with Its Ancient Audience

*Philip F. Esler*

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Why and how should we read Old Testament narrative? This book provides fresh answers to these questions. First, it models possible readers of the Bible--religious and nonreligious, professional and nonprofessional--and the reasons that might attract them to it. Second, with the aid of Mediterranean anthropology, it sets out an approach that helps us to interpret a selection of narratives with a cultural understanding close to that of an ancient Israelite. Powerful stories, such as those of Tamar and Judah in Genesis 38, Hannah in 1 Samuel 1-2, Saul and David in 1 Samuel, David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 10-12, and Judith, burst into new light when understood in closer relation to their original audience. Interpreted in this way, these narratives allow us to refresh the memory that links us with pivotal stories in Jewish and Christian identities, they disclose more ample possibilities for being human, they foster our capacity for intercultural understanding, and they provide aesthetic pleasure from their embodying plots of great imaginative power.

"Esler shows us how to read afresh in the ancient narratives of the Old Testament. He shows us that these several plots of David and his traveling companions are saturated with old social habits and old cultural presuppositions that summon us to alertness and attentiveness. He offers us his deep learning of how stories work, how folk society functions, and how texts reveal and conceal. The outcome is a fresh invitation to textual materials that we thought we had long since mastered and exhausted. This is a welcome exercise in method that keeps its focus on plot and character in all their thickness."

-Walter Brueggemann

Columbia Theological Seminary

author of *A Pathway of Interpretation*

"Philip Esler has done much to make biblical scholars aware of social-scientific approaches. In this book he brings this perspective to a reading of Old Testament narrative texts, showing just how much social science can illuminate the Bible. The stories of wives, warriors, kings, and madmen are here read against the backdrop of the real society in which they were first told, and so become three-dimensional to the modern reader."

-John Barton

Oxford University

author of *Reading of the Old Testament*

Philip F. Esler is Principal and Professor of Biblical Interpretation at St Mary's University College, Twickenham, London. He is the author of *Conflict and Identity in Romans* (2003), and *New Testament Theology* (2005), and the editor of *Ancient Israel* (2006).

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