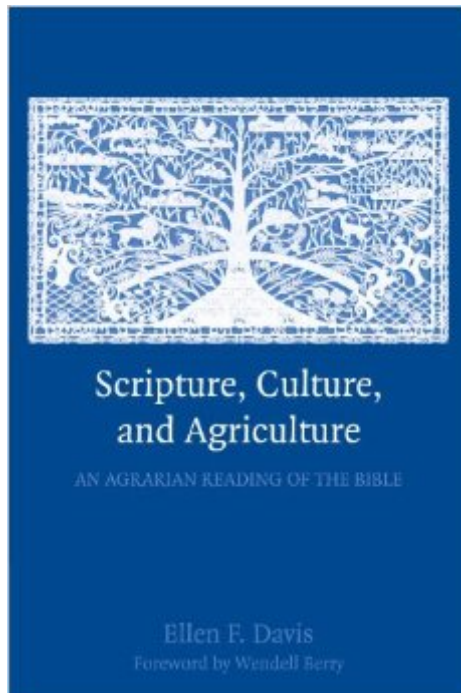


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Scripture, Culture, And Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading Of The Bible



Synopsis

This book examines the theology and ethics of land use, especially the practices of modern industrialized agriculture, in light of critical biblical exegesis. Nine interrelated essays explore the biblical writers' pervasive concern for the care of arable land against the background of the geography, social structures, and religious thought of ancient Israel. This approach consistently brings out neglected aspects of texts, both poetry and prose, that are central to Jewish and Christian traditions. Rather than seeking solutions from the past, Davis creates a conversation between ancient texts and contemporary agrarian writers; thus she provides a fresh perspective from which to view the destructive practices and assumptions that now dominate the global food economy. The biblical exegesis is wide-ranging and sophisticated; the language is literate and accessible to a broad audience.

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Customer Reviews

Ellen Davis has done with scripture what Barbara Kingsolver and Michael Pollan have done with our current food supply-- she has exposed the ancient roots that support small farms and intimacy with the land as the most secure foundation for a stable society and sustainable earth. The book, though somewhat technical in its Biblical scholarship, is interspersed with excerpts from modern writers and researchers (primarily Wendell Berry) in ways that illustrate the rich Biblical work, making it accessible for most any reader with a good foundation in Bible study. It would be excellent as a group study, and could be paired with one of the writers above or other current books on the

subjects of food security and land use ethics. Anyone who values religious roots and/or spiritual wisdom related to the use and care of the earth, and the role of the human species in it, will find rich ground to plow here. Davis shows not only that the Bible has a concern for the earth and the well-being of its creatures, but that this concern is central to the Israelites. She even finds this at the heart of the holiness codes in Deuteronomy, which readers often skip over to avoid boredom. In short, "Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture" makes it clear that the Bible's most ancient wisdom, in terms of food production and land use, was local, sustainable, and organic when local, sustainable, and organic wasn't cool!

Ms. Davis artfully weaves scripture through history, giving it relevance to our current state of industrialized agriculture. And it makes sense! She emphasizes over and over how bad things have happened throughout the millennia when humans have lost touch with the land and the source of their sustenance. And the poetry of Wendell Berry flows like a refreshing stream through her prose.

I heard Ms Davis on "On Being" and purchased this book based on that interview. I was not disappointed. My attitude toward food and farming has been marvelously in-formed, and this book has been highlighted, dogeared, and scribbled in more than any other modern work I own.

If you think the Bible is only concerned with "saving souls" you haven't been reading it the way many Jews and Christians from the past have. Davis makes the cogent case that the Bible is just as concerned with how we treat the land with how we treat our neighbor. She focuses mostly on the OT, but touches on the NT and brings home her argument with how it squares with contemporary agrarians. If you have any interest in Biblical exegesis, ag issues, or creation care, this is something you should invest in with your time and money.

Ellen Davis has deep insights and knowledge of both the most ancient Hebrew texts and modern environmental issues. Her clear writing and deeply ethical approach teach me something new on each page. It is engrossing reading.

The exegesis on Davis' book is excellent. I bought it because she ties her biblical scholarship to the present-day problem of global warming and that is what my Just Peace Steering Group is focusing on at this time. I am hoping to encourage my other book group to read this because they like challenging topics. She also focuses on how important the land was and is and explains the issues

Israel and Palestine have with giving up any of it. Like the book, the middle eastern problems today are equally challenging.

One might argue this book is simply an example of a modern reader-response hermeneutic. Rather than read the Bible through a paradigm of power, liberation, patriarchy, feminism, etc., Davis reads the Bible (or to be more precise, the Old Testament) through an agrarian lens. Thus, one's appreciation for her book is really dependent on 1) appreciation of that method of interpretation and 2) her lens of choice. But to leave it there would do Davis a great disservice. Unlike other similar methodologies, agrarianism is a topic native to the text. Davis takes great efforts in restraining from imposing a foreign element into the text. Instead Davis serves as an expert guide overturning rocks that have long lain dormant to the urban eyes. For example, in an agrarian reading of the Exodus, Davis compares the Israelites' experience of slaves in Egypt with theirs of pilgrims in the desert. In Egypt they served as food industrialists. They built storehouses to keep and store the excess of food they were forced to produce. In the desert they were fed daily manna from heaven. The Exodus text went to great lengths to remind that not only were they forbidden to save and store the manna, they could not do so even if they tried. For Davis, the Israelites were re-learning what it meant to be people of the earth. Food, a most basic element of human life, is not a commodity to master, trade, and sell. Instead it was a gift from God that illustrated both their dependence on God for life and provision but illustrated their existence as people of the earth. Throughout it all Davis ties together historical exegesis with an eye toward modern ecological issues such as hunger, exploitation of the land, the death of the small farmer, pesticides, and the growing lack of variation amongst similar crops. Whether or not you agree with Davis' conclusions will depend upon the reader. Yet all should agree she offers much to the discussion.

I'm not aware that this approach has been taken before--and it's so obvious and sensible. I also appreciate the frequent references to Wendell Berry who has so much of great importance to say about caring for the land.

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