

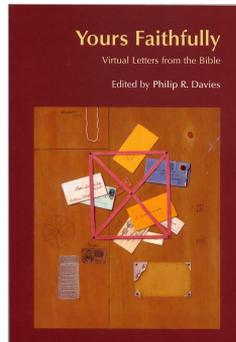
## ○ REVIEW OF *YOURS FAITHFULLY: VIRTUAL LETTERS FROM THE BIBLE*, EDITED BY PHILIP R. DAVIES

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David Jobling reviews *Yours Faithfully: Virtual Letters from the Bible*, edited by Philip R. Davies (London: Equinox, 2004. Xi + 160 pp. Cloth ISBN: 1-904768-31-8). Paper ISBN: 1-904768-32-6).



Collected here are thirty ‘virtual letters’, each purportedly written from – more or less – one biblical character to another. (‘More or less’, because one ‘writer’ is Jonah’s ‘big fish’ and some other writers or recipients are not exactly characters: one letter is from Nineveh to Judah, another from an ancient publisher to the author of Mark; one recipient is ‘the writers of the Books of Kings’). Twenty-two letters relate to the Hebrew Bible, eight to the New Testament. They are arranged (with the unexplained exception of #10) in canonical order. Several are provided with a spurious archaeological provenance, others with unletterlike footnotes or other apparatus. The book ends with a thirty-first letter of a wholly different kind – from a modern Senior Editor to the contributors to a projected collection, *The Bible*.

These letters are the work of 27 modern authors: George Aichele, Bob Becking, Ehud Ben Zvi, Roland Boer, Ian Boxall, Athalya Brenner, Mark Brummitt, Claudia Camp, Philip Davies, Diana Edelman, David Holgate, Alastair Hunter, John Jarick, Vicki Jensen, Julie Kelso, Lilian Klein, Stuart Lasine, Louise Lawrence, Jonathan Magonet, Julia O’Brien, Jorunn Økland, Bert Jan Peerbolte, Hugh Pypier, Roger Ryan, Yvonne Sherwood, Richard Walsh, and Robert Webb. The name of the ‘real’ author of a particular ‘virtual’ letter is not revealed until the very end of the book. This allows for an initial ‘anonymous’ reading, which I recommend, at least to those familiar with a number of these authors.

The most interesting thing for me about this collection is the completely different ‘takes’ that different contributors have on their task. The fundamental line of division is between those who write ‘with’ and ‘against the grain’ of their biblical text. It is a measure of the divergence in current biblical studies between these two basic attitudes that one is taken aback to find both represented

in the same book. Usually one finds them in separate camps, sometimes armed camps. I am often asked ‘what is going on in biblical studies’ – in my case usually by ministers guilty about failing to keep up with their ‘continuing education’ – and I am reduced to mumbling something like: ‘On the one hand, they keep on going like they always did; on the other hand, they have been utterly transformed’. I cannot think of a better book than the present one to put into the hands of such questioners, to explicate this rather unhelpful answer.

The experimental form of this book puts it, in one sense, wholly on the transformative side. It is only in a postmodern climate that such things are publishable. But *within* it, a great number of authors use the letter form to say things entirely compatible with what one finds in standard commentaries. This is done often creatively – to get more deeply into a character’s mind or to imagine the dynamics between two characters – but in a few cases rather colourlessly. These readings could be taken directly into a fairly conventional pulpit (I surmise that a few have come from there!) Other authors say things that standard commentaries would never say, precisely *because* they would never say them. These authors are in more or less explicit rebellion against the tradition of the standard commentary. They have found a variety of ways of expressing this rebellion in their other writings, but many find the letter form particularly apt to their purpose. These contributions are very varied, from serious and angry feminist response to extremely hurtful texts to sheer spoof, and everything between. Many – not just the spoofs – are very humorous, and the humour is almost always both funny and pointed, though here and there one catches a whiff of grandstanding for peers.

Almost any reader, then, will find here plenty of things to use or just enjoy. But by the same token, almost any reader will find some things offensive, pointless, or naive.

Having so far said nothing about particular letters, I break the rule with a comment on #2, ‘Isaac to Abraham’. This is a brilliant postmodern meditation on the Sacrifice of Isaac, but it seems to me to have strayed into the wrong book. It is longer than any three other letters put together, and probably has more stuff in it than any six. But, especially coming so near the beginning, it may bring to a halt many readers for whom the book is well-suited, and make them feel simply inadequate in the face of such learning. To those to whom I shall recommend this book – I have quite a few particular people in mind – I will give a warning to skip this piece and come back to it at the end.