

The Empty Men. The Heroic Tradition of Ancient Israel

Mobley, Gregory (2005)

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Although the phrase “empty men”, רֵיקִים רַגְלָיִם, occurs only three times in the Hebrew Bible (Jdg 9:4; 11:3; 2 Chr 13:7), it becomes an icon through which Gregory Mobley enters the heroic tradition of Ancient Israel. His hypothesis is that the Hebrew Bible, in various texts, hints at the existence of a culture (or, subculture) of crude warriors in Ancient Israel. Although their stories are still at the fringes of the biblical accounts, these heroic warriors were pushed into the background by (particularly) the Deuteronomistic editors in service of the lofty theological ideals of the sixth century BCE exilic context. Whereas this heroic culture, according to Mobley, had a very positive vibe to it, these warriors were turned into negative role models in the theological accounts of the Hebrew Bible.

Mobley’s purpose with his book is therefore described as follows: “The purpose of this book is to read portions of the Bible as adventure stories. It is an attempt to recover something never wholly lost but often neglected. It is an attempt to pull together disparate bits of evidence and reconstruct the outline of early Iron Age Israel warrior culture, and to analyze the conventions and appreciate the structure of biblical adventure stories. It is an attempt to isolate the heroic tradition of ancient Israel, as one might speak of Greek or Irish or Indo-Aryan heroic tradition, and to open this tradition up to comparisons with other heroic literatures” (p. 5).

Just when I started protesting in my mind against an author who wants to focus on violence, warriors, battles and rowdiness in a book on the biblical literature – as if we do not have enough of that in our present world – the author pre-empted this protest by expressing his feeling compelled “to declare his irenic intentions and append testimonies to (his) good citizenship” (p. 10)! And I forced myself to believe him. The reward was surprising!

In his second and third chapters Mobley introduces “Heroic culture” and “Heroic conventions”. In the former he spells out his usage of sources – from archaeology and extra-biblical materials, and in the latter he provides a description of the traits and characteristics of heroism that can be gleaned from hero stories in different cultures.

Mobley then picks three example stories from the book of Judges to illustrate his reading strategy, namely the narratives about Ehud, Gideon and Samson. His readings are certainly entertaining, highlighting many adventurous features of these narratives that are often overlooked. From the perspective of narrative exegesis one finds valuable material in Mobley’s discussions.

The book concludes with a chapter on “The Heroic Age”. Mobley indicates that the single, focussed tales of heroes in Judges are extrapolated in the Samuel books in the narratives about Samuel, Saul, Jonathan, David, Abner and Joab. However, the style changes now: “From a literary standpoint, the books of Samuel advance the Israelite heroic tradition from the episodic to the epic. The material is more complicated: its narratives more intricately braided, its character portrayals more richly ambiguous. The same repertoire of heroic motifs ... is being drawn upon in the stories about Saul and David but the medium has changed, and the terrain has shifted from the oral to the literary” (p. 228). Indeed, when read through Mobley’s eyes, the history of Israel is a messy and hurtful business (p. 13).

The book is written in a very accessible, yet scientific style. However, from a biblical studies point of view one could question his assumption that “the empty men” were sidelined and portrayed negatively by the Deuteronomists. The author certainly will find support for his reading of these figures in the canonical form of the text as negative role models in a time when Israel was prompted with the difficult historical question: “What went wrong that we lost the land?” But I think the situation in the Deuteronomistic History is even more complex. In my estimation these rowdy figures are not always portrayed negatively. To take one example: It seems to me that the violent end to Samson’s life is seen as a great victory for Yahwism! This narrative does not portray the figure of Samson as an indication how one should *not* act. To the contrary, Judges 13-16 tell us that good Yahwists may know that their God gives salvation from all those other bad nations and their mock-gods. This point of criticism might jeopardize the whole project represented in Mobley’s book.

I didn’t like reading this book. But in the end, this book opened a window for me on neglected and silenced characters – as a matter of discomfort, all of them are men! – in a manner that I would not have dared to read the biblical texts. According to Mobley, these characters were silenced in service of lofty, theological ideals. And suddenly, I recognized this reading strategy. I have seen it elsewhere where texts have been read against the grain in order to give a voice to the voiceless. In feminist and other liberationist readings, perhaps?

Strangely enough, I am deeply touched by Mobley’s attention to “the empty men”. I write this review a few days after Chris Louw, a well-known South African journalist, committed suicide. He was particularly well-known for his criticism against a generation of white men who came out unscathed by the apartheid regime – those men who vehemently supported the National Party government in elections, and condoned the apartheid government’s sending of young white sons after their school careers to “The Border” (at that time, the northern borders of South-West Africa – now Namibia – and Rhodesia – now Zimbabwe) to protect the bastion of Western civilization against the “black” (African) and “red” (Communist) dangers. Chris Louw was one of those sons. And he couldn’t stand it that this very generation of white men were supporting the new dispensation in South Africa after 1994 as if they never were part of the apartheid regime. Particularly because these young white sons of the apartheid regime have become – according to Louw’s estimation – “the empty men” in the new dispensation, a generation of white men who have to bear the sins of the fathers. Strangely enough, Mobley’s book provided me with vocabulary to honour “an empty man” such as Chris Louw.

This book does probably not offer very thorough-going, traditional biblical scholarship. But to all those who are prepared to be unsettled (which is absolutely necessary for all those other traditional biblical scholars out there), I recommend it strongly!