Reviews


The number of books published annually on the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament runs well into the hundreds. Given that most of the Bible preceded Judaism, is there anything to distinguish general scholarly books on it from those that may be said to fall specifically under the rubric of ‘Jewish Studies’? Although the correct answer is ‘not really’, it is a question at least worth pondering in relation to those briefly reviewed here.

One obvious possibility is to study a book or topic in the light of its subsequent reception in later Jewish sources, and this is most attractively undertaken by Koller in his book about Esther. Roughly the first half seeks to set the composition of the book (a subject complicated by the nature of the Greek versions) in its political context in the second half of the Persian period. His thesis is that it represented something of a polemic in favour of the continuing diaspora community against those who thought that the future of Judaism had to be related to a return to the land. This involves some imaginative historical presuppositions, such as the date of the book (which is far from certain) and the identification of the elements
whereby an older story was updated by the redactor who gave us what we now have. There is also careful and generally convincing use made of intertextual allusions. The result is attractive and the use of imagination in historical work should not be undervalued, but some, at least, of the presuppositions might have been justified rather than just presupposed. Thereafter, the reception of the book in later Judaism divides neatly into two phases, which dominate the second half of the work. Initially, evidence from post-biblical literature down to the fall of the Temple was generally hostile, since the political case that Esther is thought to make will obviously have been opposed by any who supported the centrality of the Temple, the primacy of Jerusalem, the continuing ideological importance of the land, and so on. Later, however, when Esther’s place in the biblical canon was assured and when the Temple and Jerusalem could no longer be so prominent, the Rabbis undertook what look to us now to be very fanciful exegetical moves to interpret Esther as supportive of a more orthodox position. One of the strengths of Koller’s work is that he is able to explain clearly how such moves could have arisen.

Another approach to our initial question has been stoutly taken over the years by Jon Levenson, who has not only vigorously exposed how Christian presuppositions have often dominated significant research in this field but who has also (and, when he started, somewhat unusually, though the situation has changed, not least because of his influence) pursued exegetical and theological interests that have specifically Jewish concerns prominently in view. It is thus very fitting that the Festschrift published in his honour should comprise essays which all (except, disappointingly, the contribution by James Kugel) discuss the biblical concept of election, whether in the texts themselves or (as in the case of Koller’s book) in reception-historical terms, both Jewish and Christian. The articles vary in style and approach: Randall Garr’s contribution, for instance, offers a verbal morphology of the verb ḥe’emin, ‘believe’, and what that might mean for the verb’s semantic content, with particular reference to the key verse Gen. 15:6 – a characteristically valuable and learned discussion which may well challenge the editors’ hope that this book will be accessible to lay readers – while others tackle questions of continuing wider concern, such as Walter Moberly’s attempt to show how the unattractive command of cherem, the ‘ban’, is transformed into a metaphor in Deuteronomy. Similarly, under reception history the material stretches from analyses of Tobit and other apocryphal texts through the New Testament (such as Mark Reasoner on Romans 9–11) down to Luther’s interpretation of the theological significance of God’s choice of Jacob over Esau in Genesis 25 (Brooks Schramm) as well as two discussions (one Jewish and one Christian) of the concept of theological election in the modern world. A number of the essays are by former students of Levenson, and the
eirenic manner in which the debate is conducted as well as the breadth of the topics grouped under the overarching rubric of election are a fine testimony to the significant impact that Levenson himself as well as his research has had.

With Levenson may be associated Joel Baden, another self-confessed Jewish scholar working in a predominantly Christian faculty (Yale, while Levenson is at Harvard) who has similarly written a book on a topic of major importance for Judaism, namely the promise to the patriarchs; indeed, the subject overlaps to some extent with that of election. Baden’s book has two major related aims. One is to use the various forms of the promise throughout the Pentateuch to support the view, which he has defended elsewhere and where he acknowledges his close association with the neo-documentarians of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, that the Pentateuch was indeed the product of the combination of four earlier sources. On the one hand he defends this against the fast-growing school represented especially, though not exclusively, in continental Europe, that has effectively overthrown this classical form of analysis in favour of other models, which I need not elaborate on here. On the other hand, however, the classical form of analysis tended to treat the promise as a series of later additions to the traditional sources, whereas Baden argues strongly that they are an integral element in each and that their varying formulations of the promise coincide precisely with each source’s wider agenda. Second, he makes the case that this helps us with a better informed exegesis of the Torah, since it has deliberately maintained each of these diverse yet in the longer run complementary points of view without trying to smooth over the narrower points of literary tension. He illustrates the results by consideration of several fundamental elements in the promise, such as the definition of Israel and the conditional or unconditional nature of the promise. If a gentile may be allowed to say so, the result seems to me very much in line with the nature of later Jewish religious writings and it seems well worth exploring further in relation to the ongoing debate between historical-critical and canonical readings of the text. The arguments for the integral nature of each formulation of the promise to its original source context will require careful testing, but for now we may conclude that this work provides a forceful challenge to a number of current trends in Pentateuchal criticism.

A third way of identifying a specifically Jewish component in biblical studies may strike some as prejudiced, but there are a few significant critical conclusions which seem to be especially strongly represented in the universities in Israel and which in some cases reflect the continuing influence of Yehezkel Kaufmann; the proposed pre-exilic date of P is perhaps the best-known example. In his massive commentary on Isaiah 40–66 Shalom Paul adopts another such minority opinion, namely that these chapters
comprise an authorial unity. This commentary is the English translation of an original two-volume work in Hebrew, and as I, along with a number of other commentators, pointed out then in reviews, this position really seems impossible to most other scholars to entertain for reasons which will be all too familiar to those who have studied Isaiah in any detail and which need not be rehearsed again here. Fortunately, however, this is not the main contribution of this commentary. Rather, Paul excels at detailed and technical philological and textual analysis, and it is for these types of exercise rather than broader historical and literary exegesis that his work will be valued for a long while to come. This does not mean that everyone will agree with all his detailed conclusions in the field, and it is regrettable that he often fails to attribute the positions he defends to those who originally advanced them, giving the work the appearance of much greater originality than it actually has, but his fluent expertise in Semitic languages (especially Akkadian, Aramaic and Ugaritic, as well as Hebrew) means that he generally marshals pertinent evidence that may not be accessible otherwise to all and his arguments always deserve the most careful attention. It is a translation from Hebrew that is to be very much welcomed.

Another book by an Israeli scholar which takes an independent critical line (though not one shared by Kaufmann or other colleagues of any persuasion) is the learned analysis of the book of Joel by Elie Assis. The bulk of the work is effectively a section-by-section commentary from which all will learn regardless of the particular standpoint from which Assis proceeds; in other words, by no means all his analysis would need to be changed even if we ultimately reject the date which he proposes for the composition of Joel and from which, quite naturally, his exegesis initially proceeds. Widely varying dates for Joel have been proposed over the years, but for several very good reasons a date in the late post-exilic period (probably fourth-century BCE) now commands a wide degree of support. Assis, by contrast, argues for a date during the exile itself, a suggestion for which he is able to cite only two predecessors, neither of whom has been picked up by others. His positive arguments for this opinion (mainly based on 4:1–8) do not seem strong to me, and unfortunately he does not deal with the major difficulty for any date prior to a relatively late one in the development of the Hebrew Bible as a whole. Joel is curious in that it cites other prophetic texts on a number of occasions, and more than a century ago G.B. Gray, in a short but totally convincing article, demonstrated that for a number of reasons it must be Joel which is citing others rather than the other way round. Such citation of scripture is itself something that we should not normally expect as early as the exilic period, but in particular one of the texts cited is Mal. 3:23 (ET, 4:5) at Joel 3:4 (ET, 2:31). At this point in his commentary Assis refers
to the similar expression at Joel 2:11, but he fails even to mention that the line in question is identical with the verse in Malachi, which is not the case with the verse earlier in Joel. Since he shows himself elsewhere aware of this phenomenon of citation and of Gray’s article (and others who have followed him since) it is a pity that he makes no attempt to counter this strong argument against his own position, as well as several others which may not be quite so strong but which also seem compelling to most other scholars. However, while it is thus difficult to accept his initial premiss, there remains much other analysis here from which we may continue to benefit.

I turn finally to a book which is not strictly about the Bible at all but about its historical and cultural setting as revealed by archaeology from the start of the exilic period down to the much later time of the Muslim conquest. This therefore fits my earlier criterion on Bible and Jewish reception, albeit translated into a different sphere altogether. Jodi Magness has an unrivalled reputation for scholarship in regard to the archaeology of this extended period and an ability to convey its results attractively to a wide audience, and both qualities are paraded here to good effect. The book is richly illustrated with black-and-white photographs and plans on almost every page, while the text is well written and broken up with occasional ‘sidebars’ (as she calls them, though they do not appear at the side of the page at all). More than half the book is devoted to what tends nowadays to be called the Second Temple period – a misleading term in itself, and not consistent with the usual way of determining major historical periods. Magness refers more correctly to the periods by the dominant imperial or local power (Babylonian, Persian, Hellenistic, Hasmonean, Roman, and so on) with special chapters devoted to such important topics as Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls, where her previous research has changed the way that we understand the topic, and tombs and burial customs, which have provided some of the richest collections of finds as well as stirring occasional controversy in terms of one or two of the inscribed sarcophagi. Though Jewish herself, Magness also gives us the benefit of a detailed survey of remains from the Byzantine period – largely Christian and too often neglected in such surveys of the Holy Land. So far as I am aware this book is without peer in what it sets out to do, and it should succeed admirably in introducing a wide readership to a field where it is often difficult to find reliable and up-to-date information in a digestible format. Apart from anything else, serious visitors to the Holy Land would do well to study it because so much of what she describes remains visible in the ground to this day.

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