

BOOK REVIEW

ELLIOT RABIN. *UNDERSTANDING THE HEBREW BIBLE*. NEW YORK, KTAV, 2006; 250 PP., INCL. SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY AND INDEX. REVIEWED BY DAN VOGEL.

This book is intended primarily for the uninitiated in the reading of the Hebrew Bible, and those with limited understanding of its complexities. Elliot Rabin, an astute, insightful, and erudite student of the Hebrew Bible, with a plain, unpretentious style, organizes his presentation around six genres of biblical literature: Storytelling, Law, History in the Bible, History of the Bible, Prophecy, Wisdom, and Poetry.

Strategically, he begins with Storytelling in the Bible as a way of painless, attractive entry into more complicated issues. Here, God does not appear as an Omnipotent Deity jealous of His status, distant from His earthly creations. Rather, Rabin focuses upon God as a character intimate with human characters, ready to listen to them and even to heed them: Abraham successfully negotiates on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah. Moses defends the recalcitrant Israelites.

It is the Law that catapults God and His Bible into universal significance, with insistence upon Monotheism always hovering behind the emphasis upon human ethics and individual responsibility. Even the laws of animal sacrifice, minutiae which make up so much of the Hebrew Bible, can be seen as an instrument of cleansing the polytheistic, avaricious societies surrounding Israel.

Rabin is excellent in the chapters discussing the literary sections of the Hebrew Bible – Storytelling, Prophecy, Wisdom, and Poetry. He details their literary techniques and highlights their qualities, and opines that for these sections alone the Hebrew Bible is worth reading. It is not doctrine but literature that makes it a great work. He analogizes this phenomenon with Shakespeare's body of plays and poetry: It is not the scanty knowledge of the author that counts, nor the persistent controversy over auctorial attribution, regardless of printed folios. There is no dispute about the greatness of the language, the drama, the poetry.

It is in the historical books of the Hebrew Bible where lies the problem of relevance. Science and historiography have cast doubt on the veracity of history in the Bible. With an amazing amount of research behind him, Rabin

courageously and neutrally confronts the fact that archeology has not (yet) found evidence of the very existence of major characters in the Bible, like the Patriarchs, or of a cataclysmic event, like the Exodus from Egypt. Rabin sketches in the troubling inconsistencies, the obvious anachronisms, the interweaving of Israelite legend with parallel myths of Ancient Near Eastern [ANE] civilizations. He is not loathe to display the "disgrace" of Israelite kings ignoring the ways of the Lord. Not one hero, not Abraham, or Moses, or David, or Solomon is perfect. Those troubled by all this might be helped by Jacob Milgrom's "According to the Law of Moses" (*JBQ*, January -March, 2004).

How is it that a book characterized by so many lacunae and inconsistencies could be written, canonized, worshipped, and emerge powerful enough to turn the whole polytheistic western world to monotheism and standards (though often violated) of human decency? How is it that the Israelite people, for whom this book was created, and by whom it was recorded, who Balaam said *lived apart, Not reckoned among the nations* (Num. 23:9) remains the only extant biblical people? Mark Twain's concluding question in his essay "Concerning the Jews" (1899) has yet to be answered: "What is the secret of [their] immortality?"

Though Elliot Rabin does not undertake to try, the neophyte, the knowledgeable, even the learned, all should read *Understanding the Hebrew Bible*. It will enrich their perception and their life. And it is simply a good read.



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