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Book review:

Brettler, Marc Zvi. *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel.* London and New York: Routledge, 1995.

First Published in:

Digest of Middle Eastern Studies 6 (1997), 70-75.



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he Creation of History in Ancient Israel

Marc Zvi Brettler

London and New York: Routledge Press, 1995.
254 pages. \$49.95 hardback (ISBN 0-415-11860-3).

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Biblical historians have reached somewhat of a theoretical impasse in recent years. Largely under the pressure of a radical skepticism, most popularly voiced by Philip R. Davies, Niels P. Lemche, Thomas L. Thompson, Gösta Ahlström, and John van Seters, many historians of biblical Israel who have been optimistic about their ability to uncover the historicity of the biblical historical texts have been forced either to concede that much of the previous scholarship on the subject displayed a romantic and often theologically motivated naïvete or to assume a rather defensive posture.¹ In this work, Marc Zvi Brettler attempts to forge a moderate position between these camps. On the one hand, he "questions the traditional assumption that ancient Israel and early Jewish religions...are based on actual events in history" (p. 2). Thus, he portrays the work of the more skeptical writers as having a positive impact with the benefit of consensus.² As he asserts: "the search for historical kernels dating from the 'patriarchal period' has been largely abandoned after the studies of John van Seters and Thomas L. Thompson" (p. 52). On the other hand, he cautiously distances his work from theirs, but curiously, only in a late footnote.

This is a departure from the radical skepticism of some



scholars (e.g., Thomas L. Thompson), who have recently suggested that biblical texts can only be trusted when they are confirmed by reliable, outside sources. I am suggesting instead that we must use the evidence at hand to inquire after the historical reliability of each text, and that there will be cases where we will affirm biblical traditions which do not have outside confirmation because the assumption that these traditions reflect some historical reality is the most suitable explanation of their existence in a particular form (p. 222, n. 53).

Thus, it is possible, according to Brettler, "to discover how the texts might have functioned in antiquity" (p. 1). Indeed, he maintains:

Though modern historians cannot always know whether the biblical historical texts are even attempting to describe the actual past, they must not give up, and must continue to apply the general criteria used by historians to decide which of the alternative reconstructions of the Israelite past best fits the evidence (p. 144).

After defining history, ideology, and literature, and noting the changes in approach to the historical material that have characterized the past few decades, Brettler posits four responsible factors for the production of ancient Israelite biblical texts: a use of typologies, the interpretation of earlier texts, literary shaping, and ideological influence.

Brettler then opens the book of Chronicles. In his opinion, since "its date is roughly known, we have contemporaneous texts which reflect the historical background of its author, and many of its sources are extant" (p. 21). Brettler is cautious to utilize only those texts in Chronicles "where we are relatively confident that the Chronicler has used earlier biblical texts in a form close to the extant Hebrew text (MT)" (p. 21). He selects 1 Chr 15:1-26 (with the exception of its lists) because it contains "sections that have (some form of) Samuel as their source, and others that do not reflect Samuel" (p. 26). After a close comparison Brettler concludes that the Chronicler altered certain details in the account of the ark's joyous procession into Jerusalem to conform with "common sense and ideology" (p. 45). He has changed the active party to the "secular leaders of the people under the influence of 1 Kings 8, and the nature of the sacrifice...to conform to the practice performed in the Chronicler's own time" (p. 34).

The Chronicler's patterning of the occasion upon previous and



contemporaneous events which is described at length (pp. 35-47), leads Brettler to discuss the wider issue of the Bible's employment of typology (e.g., Hezekiah's portrayal as a new Solomon and David's as a Moses *revivus*). Brettler's consideration of the literary evidence, such as typology is his most important contribution to the search for the historicity of biblical historical narratives. In the past, historians myopically ignored literary evidence deeming it irrelevant to the search for historical kernels. Therefore, Brettler's approach marks a significant and welcome departure. Moreover, Brettler goes farther by examining these typologies not merely as literary devices, but as vehicles for underscoring the political and religious importance of particular events.

From here he moves to an examination of Deuteronomy 1:9-18 and 2:26-3:7 by drawing on the models of textual reworking that he averred in Chronicles. The former text, Brettler argues, has woven together three sources: Exod 18:13-26, Deut 16:18-20, and Num 11:11-17. To Brettler these changes "were not merely linguistic or stylistic, for example, the changes in the role of Moses' father-in-law and in Moses' attitude toward Israel should be considered ideological" (p. 70).³ The conquest of Jordan (Deut 2:26-3:7), Brettler states,

had Num 21:21-35 as his main source. He omitted several sections, such as the poem preserved in Num 21:27-30...He brought it in line with his own terminology and ideology, especially regarding the *herem* laws as reflected in the *herem* text now found in Deuteronomy 20 (p. 76).

Thus, in a similar fashion does Brettler proceed to treat Judg 3:12-30, Samuel, and 2 Kings 17, always looking for typologies, the interpretation of earlier texts, literary shaping, and ideological influence.

While this work is innovative in suggesting new avenues for testing the historicity of the historical narratives and the methodologies used to arrive at a biblical history, it is not itself impervious to criticism. The methodology of this work can best be described as selective. For example, Brettler sees the presence in 1 Samuel 1-14 of both pro-Sauline and pro-Davidic pericopes as representative of an "ideological battle of David versus Saul, which began with the rise of David and continued into the post-exilic period" (p. 109), which leaves him with the uncomfortable mention of Saul as a wicked king in 14:47. As this goes against the grain of his reconstruction, he treats the contradiction as "a tendentious change by a late, anti-Saul redactor" (p. 109).

Similarly, the birth account of Samuel (1 Samuel 1), is marked



as "originally a story concerning Saul, as is made clear by the numerous etymological connections between the root ש'ל, 'to ask,' which is central to that chapter, and Saul's name (ש'ול)," (p. 109).⁴ Clearly there is wordplay involved here, but puns do not serve well as criteria for discerning presumed editorial layers of a text. In fact, these same puns might serve merely as a literary means of paralleling the characters. Indeed, pseudo-etymologies are common in the Bible (e.g., Noah from *naham* "comfort" instead of *nwh* "rest" in Gen 5:29),⁵ and there is no reason we should not see the same phenomenon at work in 1 Samuel. While it is reasonable to assume that a pro-Sauline sentiment continued through David's reign and beyond, perhaps with royal aspirations, (cf. 1 Chr 8:33-40 where Saul's continued genealogy clearly is important), I do not see how we can demonstrate this on the basis of a wordplay.

We also might question the utility of Brettler's use of midrashic and Talmudic traditions that reflect positively on Saul to demonstrate a Pro-Sauline contingent in pre-Talmudic times. While many of these texts doubtless reflect older traditions, and while the mention of Paul as a Benjamite in the New Testament (Philippians 3:5) has been suggested as evidence of a Pro-Sauline sentiment as late as the 1st century CE, the texts are not themselves without ideological recast, as Brettler admits (p. 111). Herein lies perhaps the largest problem for historians who emphasize the use of external sources as a more reliable means of confirming the historicity of a biblical event. Indeed, we have reason to be *more* skeptical of many outside sources, especially those from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. One example will suffice: the highly propagandistic Hittite and Egyptian records concerning the Battle of Kadesh (c. 1299 BCE) in which both nations proclaim victory! After all, as Brettler admits, there is "no distinction in form between a work which accurately depicts the past and a work depicting the past that has no historicity" (p. 138). This admission, therefore, would appear to render Brettler's approach to the historicity of the biblical historical accounts, a rather moot exercise.

Another example of Brettler's selectivity is his dismissal of scholarship that claims a northern origin for sections of Kings (p. 112). One would like to see this dismissal take the form of a refutation of the linguistic evidence for the northern dialect of certain pericopes in Kings, rather than that of a brief footnote (p. 208, n. 5). This criticism, of course, could be leveled at many biblical historians who favor non-empirical data such as the criteria of the theory of higher criticism over linguistic evidence. Yet, it is crucial that Brettler reject the evidence for the northern origins of certain sections of Kings since it



allows him to suggest that "the northern literature that reflected upon it (the northern exile of the 8th c. BCE) is no longer extant" (p. 112), and consequently, to see 2 Kings 17 as the work of Judean scribes. Brettler adds: "it is unlikely that a Judean editor would have incorporated a tradition that suggested that it was a shame that the north was exiled, because its inhabitants were pious" (p. 113). This leaves Brettler with no option than to treat the condemnation of Judah's sins in 2 Kings 17:7-13 as a "misplaced" text (p. 114). Similarly, since 2 Kings 17:16 mentions the making of molten calves, most scholars have seen 2 Kings 17:13-18 as a reference to the northern tribes. But since Brettler sees 2 Kings 17 as a composite work, he asserts that "this argument is of no value" (p. 121).

In addition, Brettler argues that we "must continue to apply the general criteria used by historians" (p. 144), by which he means the criteria of source criticism, to understand "the perspectives, dates, and provenances of this chapter's building blocks" (p. 119). It is surprising to see such an uncritical adoption of the documentary hypothesis in a work that devotes so much space to the forging of new means of historical criticism, especially in the light of recent advances in ancient dialectology and literary criticism. The faults with this methodology are apparent in Brettler's contention that the parallel language in various pericopes in Kings demonstrates inter textual borrowing. While the parallels often are striking, they simply might be expected idiom or a stylistic convention. Even if they are not, one cannot demonstrate that they are more than standard usage by assertion alone.

Similarly, Brettler's reliance upon the assumptions of higher criticism compels him to draw conclusions that might not be supported from a social or literary standpoint. For example, he cites the famous *atbash*⁶ in Jer 25:26 of *sheshak* for *Babylon* as "creating a problem within its chapter" (p. 128) because the unciphered "Babylon" appears elsewhere in Jeremiah and because Babylon appears to drink from its own cup after forcing other nations to drink. His "problem" with the text, however, assumes that the cipher served to mask the author's reference for fear of retaliation. Yet it now appears that the cipher served quite another purpose within the religious context of writing⁷. Moreover, Brettler misses the point here. It is precisely that Babylon will drink from its own cup. Not only is this metaphor associated with wrath (cf. Jer 49:12, Isa 51:17, Lam 4:21, etc.), but the passage demonstrates the *lex talionis* principle or "measure for measure" literary and theological device that Brettler cites elsewhere as evidence for redactional unity (pp. 99, 103, 120, 133).



Thus, while this work offers a fresh approach for arriving at the historicity of biblical historical narratives by considering the narratives' ideological and theological positioning, by positing new criteria for the application of source critical analyses, and more significantly, by incorporating a tandem literary analysis, the exegetical work upon which this examination rests is not sufficiently grounded in the cultural matrix of the text's own discourse, and, therefore, can be of little more assistance to the historian of biblical Israel than the work of the more radical skeptics.

Notes

1. For an excellent summary on the development of the minimalist school, see, Baruch Halpern, "Erasing History: The Minimalist Assault on Ancient Israel," *BR* 11/6 (1995), 26-35, 47.
2. On this last point I disagree with Brettler. I do not think the views of these scholars in any way comprises a consensus.
3. Here I have corrected Moses' to Moses'. This is a common typo in this section of the book. See, e.g., pp. 66, 67, 68, 69, 70 (2X).
4. The italics are the author's.
5. For other examples see, Johannes Fichtner, "Die Etymologische Ätiologie in den Namengebungen der Geschichtlichen Bücher des Alten Testaments," *VT* 6 (1956), 372-396.
6. A cipher writing in which the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet is read as the last, the second as the penultimate, the third as the ultipenultimate, and so on.
7. See, e.g., Scott B. Noegel, "*Atbash* in Jeremiah and Its Literary Significance: Parts I-III," *JBQ* 24/2-4 (1996), 82-89, 160-166, 000-000.