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Book review:

Brichto, Herbert Chanan. *The Names of God*. New York: Oxford UP, 1998.

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HERBERT CHANAN BRICHTO. *The Names of God: Poetic Readings in Biblical Beginnings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. Pp. xvii + 462.

Decades of literary approaches to biblical texts have taken their toll on the theory of Higher Criticism. As more scholars opt to treat the text "as we have it," regardless of what sources may or may not underlie its compositional history, source critics have become increasingly defensive in posture,¹ and while most literary critics would accept the notion that various sources underlie the biblical text, no scholar has attempted the theory's wholesale rejection. Until now.

In this bold and provocative work, the late H. Brichto builds upon the works of U. Cassuto (a lone voice in earlier decades) and G. Rendsburg,² and his own *Toward a Grammar of Biblical Poetics* (Oxford, 1992), in an effort to shift the institutionalized premises of biblical scholarship. Using Genesis as his case study, Brichto proceeds on "the assumption that the text is a harmonious whole, faithfully transmitted to us, requiring no deletions nor corrections, possibly not even of the vocalization transmitted to us by the Masoretes" (p. 172). Though Brichto's claim of a "single authorial voice," does not "rule out the possibility, or even the likelihood, that some of the Scripture's narratives may be the result of a collaborative effort" (p. 159), his treatment of Genesis is tantamount to positing a single authorial hand.

After examining Genesis' narratives, genealogies, and chronologies, as well as their poetic structures, Brichto avers that Genesis has a unified kerygmatic agenda, a single authorial voice that makes no attempt at historiographic reconstructions of Israelite history or ancestry. The biblical narrator is "altogether reliable in that he takes such pains to deny the reliability of that information" (p. 372). Thus, Brichto stands in opposition to what he calls "literalist" approaches to ancient texts:

When source-criticism goes hand in hand with the assumption or presumption that the stories were meant to be taken literally (i.e., as history, and not as fiction or metaphor), this combination of approaches induces rather strange twists and turns in the scholarly mind. (p. 114)

¹ See, e.g., Richard Elliot Friedman, "Some Recent Non-Arguments Concerning the Documentary Hypothesis," in Michael V. Fox et al., eds, *Texts, Temples, and Traditions: A Tribute to Menahem Haran*. (Winona Lake, IN, 1996), pp. 87-101.

² E.g., Umberto Cassuto, *La Questione della Genesis* (Florence, 1934), and Gary A. Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis* (Winona Lake, IN, 1986).

This approach, he adds, also pervades scholarship on Mesopotamian literature, thus preventing useful comparative inquiry. Readers are enjoined to re-evaluate so-called contradictions and to appreciate the sophisticated whimsy of Scripture. They should reject the proposed gap between ancient and present mindsets that precludes "any attempt on our part to decipher the meanings and relate to the communications of the ancients" (p. x). Only by positing a continuity in mindset, a "single notion of truth" (p. x), can we appreciate that Utnapishtim's boat and Exodus 3 are comedic in character, that the Gilgamesh Epic is a satire-critique of religion, and that "it is not the ontology of polytheism that Scripture condemns; it is its operation to the detriment of morality" (p. 162).

Central to Brichto's arguments is his assertion that the tetragrammaton is not a name, but a descriptive term that derives from the name of Israel's parochial god: "Except for appearances in the proper names of people, the name Yāhū all but disappeared from Israelite consciousness; replaced by a never-pronounced YHWH, a visual reminder of the one and only god's essence" (p. 33). It is not an earlier source that determines the usage of YHWH, but rather a particular literary context.

YHWH will appear in a context in which God is more personalized, individuated, and more intimate with his creatures . . . and more likely to appear in anthropomorphisms, while *God* is more abstract, more concept than person, less intimate, certainly never cozy. (p. 160)

As refreshing, and perhaps as overdue, as a deconstruction of the Documentary Hypothesis might be to some, the book does not entirely achieve its aim. While Brichto's rethinking of the theory's premises offers promising new directions for scholarship, Brichto does not adequately address the current, highly nuanced state of the theory, but instead focuses his attack on earlier source-critical scholarship, especially Speiser's commentary on Genesis. Since he is more concerned with the broader tenets of source-criticism, recent linguistic advances that undermine source-critical assumptions go unmentioned. Even the works of literary critics which support many of his observations are not cited. This results in a misleading monolithic portrayal of source-critical scholarship and casts his arguments in an idiosyncratic light.

Brichto's neglect of secondary literature,³ which also is reflected in the book's bibliography of only twenty-nine entries (including five encyclopedias and dictionaries), sometimes leads to the creation of straw man arguments. To cite one example, the chronological problem posed by night time and then sunset in Gen 15:5-12 forces him to perform poetic gymnastics in

³ Noticeably absent is any reference to the works of Meir Sternberg (except in the bibliography), Robert Alter, and Adele Berlin, much of which would lend support to Brichto's arguments.

order to make chronological sense of the pericope (pp. 204–210). However, simpler literary solutions in support of textual unity have been published.⁴

Perhaps the book's most noticeable drawbacks, however, are its broad claims about authorial intent, its acerbic tone, and its circular arguments. Readers are obliged to accept, based on Brichto's "poetic approach," his ability to perceive authorial knowledge, while other scholars are taken to task for their inability to see the obvious satirical intent of many scriptural passages. Brichto argues, "Did the author of the biblical flood story recognize—as modern scholarship as not hitherto done—that Utnapishtim's story in Tablet XI is a satire on the gods of paganism? . . . yes" (p. 161). Yet, he assumes that the Israelite writer knew the story of Utnapishtim in one of its present forms (whether in a Babylonian or Assyrian recension). The existence of Sumerian, Elamite, and Hittite variations of the story argues against this. Moreover, he provides no discussion of what constitutes satire or humor in Israelite and Mesopotamian society, or by what methodology we might come to know this.⁵

Similarly, since "monotheism has no need, possibly no room, for a name—proper name—for Deity" (p. 31), it makes little sense to Brichto to see Yahweh as a proper name. This circular argument is based on an implicitly modern Western assumption and does not take into account evidence for monolatrous belief in early Israel. In fact, the reader is left wondering why ancient monotheists would have no need for a divine proper name. In essence, Brichto asks readers to reject the axioms of source-criticism in favor of a new set of equally dogmatic and unprovable presuppositions.

Criticisms notwithstanding, I would suggest that there is indeed, much learned insight in this lengthy tome. Brichto does provide, for example, fascinating discussions of the literary interplay between the genealogies of Cain and Seth, and of how the statutes concerning servants and the law of the Sabbath elucidate one another, especially with reference to their shared conception of time. His erudition also leads him to question the mythological import of stories involving Og of Bashan, a subject not well covered in scholarship.⁶ Many other learned textual insights appear throughout and he

⁴ For a recent summary of the problem and its solution, see Scott B. Noegel, "A Crux and a Taunt: Night-Time Then Sunset in Genesis 15," in Philip R. Davies and David J. A. Clines, eds., *The World of Genesis: Persons, Places, Perspectives*, (Sheffield, 1998), pp. 128–135.

⁵ Here as well, Brichto could have availed himself of several works including Y. T. Radday and A. Brenner, eds., *On Humor and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield, 1990), and David Marcus, *From Balaam to Jonah: Anti-prophetic Satire in the Hebrew Bible* (Atlanta, GA, 1995).

⁶ See my "The Aegean Ogygos of Boeotia and the Biblical Og of Bashan: Reflections of the Same Myth," *ZAW* 110 (1998) 411–426.

does succeed in forging a greater consideration of the Bible's literary sophistication and intertextual unity. Thus, even though the overall goal of the book is not achieved, scholars should not throw the baby out with the bath water, as it were, but see in Brichto's erudition signs of a shifting paradigm. I suspect in the next decade that the methodology of source-criticism will undergo other full-scale attacks, argued from a variety of literary and linguistic perspectives. We can thank Brichto's work, whether accepted or not, for making the first bold steps, for which he doubtless will be remembered.

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