



Review: [untitled]

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YAIRAH AMIT. *History and Ideology: An Introduction to Historiography in the Hebrew Bible*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999. Pp. 127.

As its subtitle states, this book presents an introduction to biblical historiography. Amit begins her discussion by demonstrating “the importance of history in biblical literature” (pp. 11–19) and addressing the question “When did they [the Israelites] start writing history?” (pp. 20–33). In the following two chapters she surveys the books of Judges (pp. 34–41) and I and II Samuel (pp. 42–48) with an eye toward identifying the ways in which their authors express “tales about the relations of God and his people and divine interventions in human history” (p. 35). She then discusses I and II Kings and Joshua as expressions of Deuteronomistic history (pp. 49–72) and the first four books of the Pentateuch as expressions of a different, priestly ideology (pp. 73–81). The examination of specific biblical books continues with an overview of historiography in I and II Chronicles (pp. 82–98). At the end of the book, Amit returns to more general subjects with a discussion of “ideological writing as a historical source” (pp. 99–107) and concludes with an afterword on “history, ideology and narrative art” (pp. 108–115). The book ends with a bibliography (pp. 116–120), which will undoubtedly serve those who wish to study the subject beyond this introduction, as well as two useful indexes to the text, one of biblical verses (pp. 121–125) and another of authors cited (pp. 126–127).

Among the book’s strengths is Amit’s able presentation of complex, even contradictory material. Amit does a good job of showing the multiple historical perspectives present in the Bible, and thus avoids an overly simple, monolithic characterization of biblical historiography. Her discussion of I and II Samuel is especially noteworthy in this regard. In this chapter, she points to the “ambivalent or equivocal approach to monarchy” present throughout these books (p. 42). This ambivalence is demonstrated by listing instances of both positive and negative views of kingship within the book itself (pp. 43–46). Although Amit’s discussion continues to emphasize the anti-monarchic aspects of Samuel, the positive aspects remain in the picture. In this case, the complexity of opinion reflects the complexity of Israelite kingship, at once divinely ordained and of limited power.

Because this book is an introduction, one cannot expect it to cover all subjects in depth. Still, there are some areas in which a deeper examination might have been profitable. Amit makes some reference to the Babylonian chronicles as part of an attempt to contextualize the Bible within ancient Near Eastern historiography (pp. 21–22). This comparison leads her to draw a distinction between the writing of chronicles, in which events during a particular king’s reign are listed, and the writing of history as it appeared in

ancient Israel. Amit, however, does not discuss another important set of texts: the Assyrian annals, such as Sennacherib's campaign reports. These might also be considered part of the ancient Near Eastern historiographic scene, and are much more vivid than the dry lists in the Babylonian chronicles. Perhaps a different picture would have emerged had Amit included the Assyrian material in her comparison.

Another subject which Amit might have discussed further with some gain is the biblical presentation of history in non-narrative compositions. Amit mentions texts such as Psalm 78 (pp. 18–19) as an illustration of the importance of history. She does not, however, explore the psalm beyond this point. This psalm, along with other “historical” psalms, such as Psalm 105 or 106 (not mentioned in the book), might have opened another window onto Israelite historiography. They offer an opportunity to examine the implications of a poetic setting for history and its liturgical use in ancient Israel. In a similar vein, some discussion of the great historiosophic poem in Deuteronomy 32 might have served to complete the picture that this book paints.

Amit's presentation throughout the book is generally well-structured and clear. The reader benefits not only from this clarity of argument but also from the book's readable style, no doubt a result of its origin as a series of radio lectures for Israel's Broadcast University. Although I have not seen the Hebrew original of this book, it seems that not much has been lost in Yael Lotan's translation. For the student, Amit's book might serve as a guide to a reexamination of familiar biblical books. Using this book, the student will move beyond reading the Bible for its content and embark on a more critical examination of the narratives. He or she will learn how a particular story fits into the different perspectives on history contained within the Hebrew canon.

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