

NAHUM SARNA. *Studies in Biblical Interpretation*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2000. Pp. xxvi + 452.

Contemporary Biblical scholars know Nahum Sarna as one of the leaders who has set the course for the study of Hebrew Scripture in the second half of the 20th century. Moreover, he has been instrumental in making the Bible accessible to today's English-speaking public. He was a member of the Jewish Publication Society's Bible translation committee, and authored several works intended for the general educated laity, such as *Understanding Genesis* (1966) and a number of commentaries on books of the Bible. By including his collected essays in their "Scholar of Distinction Series," the editors of the Jewish Publication Society have accorded Sarna a richly-deserved honor.

Jeffrey Tigay's foreword precedes the essays and serves to characterize Sarna's life's work. These introductory remarks also introduce the reader to the methodologies that lie behind the essays but are not necessarily given deliberate expression in them. For example, Tigay singles out Sarna's "strong literary orientation," a characteristic approach which led him to a more integrated view of the biblical text (p. xii), as well as his productive use of comparison between the Bible and other ancient Near Eastern sources (p. xi). The foreword also provides a valuable biography which contextualizes Sarna's oeuvre and sets his place among the preeminent teachers of the Bible in the United States. Indeed, the fact that the foreword is written by one of Sarna's own students is a testament to his continued influence in the field.

The first of the four main sections of this book contains a set of ten "essays on biblical and related topics" (pp. 2-207). Apart from the first piece, which focuses on one specific divine appellative (pp. 3-11), these articles fall into two categories. One group surveys biblical subjects which go beyond one or two specific texts. In these essays, the reader gets an eagle-eye view of important questions in biblical religion and history. The second group contains essays on the history of biblical scholarship. Among these, the articles on medieval Jewish exegesis are particularly noteworthy. Sarna introduces such luminaries as Rashi (pp. 127-137) and Abraham ibn Ezra (pp. 139-159), and attempts to characterize the spirit that animated the Hebrew exegetical enterprise in the Middle Ages. These articles are valuable for more than their synoptic quality. Modern academic study of the Bible often ignores the wealth of scholarship available from medieval sources, but Sarna's articles give this often neglected subject its proper due.

The remaining three sections of the book contain seventeen articles, mostly on specific biblical passages, and are arranged according to the traditional Hebrew division of Scripture into Torah (i.e., Pentateuch; pp. 211-

267), Prophets (pp. 270–310), and Writings (pp. 313–429). Here, the reader finds examples of Sarna's exemplary philological scholarship used to elucidate various biblical texts. Scholars and casual readers alike will notice that the sensitive readings of the Bible itself are coupled with an impressively broad array of evidence, which is brought to bear on particular questions. A given article may include citations from Ugaritic, Akkadian, the Talmud, and medieval exegetes, while at the same time keeping abreast of the state of scholarship current at the time of its writing. Even when these articles take up complex, detailed subjects, they are written in a clear style that makes them accessible even to the nonspecialist. This clarity is emblematic of Sarna's writings, and probably has played no small part in the popularity of his work.

This collection concludes with a bibliography of Nahum Sarna's published writings (pp. 430–436). Strangely, it does not list the article "Abraham Ibn Ezra as an Exegete" even though this article appears in the collection. The reader has to refer back to the acknowledgments to find the article's original publication information (p. xxiv). On the subject of unfortunate omissions, one shortcoming of the publication format of this book emerges from comparison with the first volume in the "Scholar of Distinction Series," *Studies in the Bible and Jewish Thought* by Moshe Greenberg (1995). In the volume by Greenberg, the original year of publication appears together with each reprinted article just below the title, while in the present volume, it does not. Not having this information so readily available is inconvenient for those interested in pursuing previous or later scholarship on the subject, as well as for those who wish to study Sarna's development as a scholar. Readers are forced to turn to the acknowledgments or the bibliography to situate the articles in their chronological contexts. Another complaint, also technical, is that there is no complete list of abbreviations. This shortcoming, of course, renders many of the footnotes inaccessible to all but professional scholars who are well versed in the cryptic combinations of letters which represent the titles of the many journals which Sarna quotes.

The book concludes with two indexes, one of biblical passages cited (pp. 437–446) and one general index (pp. 447–452). Both are welcome additions to the book, especially the first, since it enables a reader to use this collection almost as if it were another Bible commentary.

Before the publication of this volume, a significant part of Nahum Sarna's contribution to the field of biblical and Jewish studies remained, as Sarna writes in his preface, "dispersed in learned journals and . . . not accessible to the intelligent and interested non-scholar" (p. xxii). Even scholars would have encountered some difficulty in studying those of Sarna's works that are contained in books now out of print and difficult to find. This book gives new life to the writings of a scholar of distinction, and it will be a welcome addition to the bookshelves of teachers and students alike.

