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Alan T. Levenson. *The Making of the Modern Jewish Bible: How Scholars in Germany, Israel, and America Transformed an Ancient Text.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011. xiii + 247 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4422-0516-1.

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Whose Bible?

Alan T. Levenson introduces his book by suggesting that its scope might be deemed "hubristic" and stating that it is "*not* an original piece of scholarship" (pp. 4, 5, his emphasis). One could say, therefore, that the book is self-reviewing, but the overly modest characterization does an injustice to a volume that is learned, informative, insightful, often entertaining, and occasionally (but constructively) annoying. The learning, culled from a wide array of primary and secondary sources, is placed in the service of an effort to "translate the findings of the academy for a wider audience"–an effort that succeeds admirably (p. 5).

Levenson's basic argument is that even in the disenchanted modern world, the Bible remains foundational for pluriform Jewish identities: for the secular nationalists who take the Bible to justify Jewish political autonomy or territorial claims as well as for the rigorously pious for whom the Bible provides the underpinning of halakhic observance. The fact that the Bible is foundational rather than normative for most Jews lends it resilience, malleability, and adaptability. Whether the Bible is taken to be of divine or human origin, read literally or metaphorically, understood as historiography or fiction, yoked to rabbinic commentary or sundered from it, there remains something "Jewish" about all the varied appropriations, and Levenson seeks to distill and describe that Jewish essence.

The "hubristic" scope of the work begins with a brief account of the Jewishness of Spinoza's biblical criticism, followed by more extensive discussions of German Jewish biblical scholarship from Moses Mendelssohn to Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig; the Bible as read by both secular and religious Zionists; and recent developments in modern North American scholarship. In his conclusion, Levenson asks, "Is there a 'Jewish School' of modern Bible study? " (p. 209). Beginning with the inarguable premise that "wrestling with the Bible … has been a constant in Jewish history," he contends that there are "four commonalities of the modern Jewish Bible that cut across era, denomination, gender, and country of origin" (pp. 210, 211).

In a forthcoming article (completed prior to the appearance of Levenson's book), I summarize the essential challenges to modern Jewish biblical interpretation in the form of two questions. "First: can the Bible be sacred and authoritative for Jews if it is a product of human history and culture? And second: to what extent is the Jewish interpreter constrained by or answerable to the authority of prior interpretation? "[1] These questions comport nicely with the commonalities that Levenson discerns: apologetic and polemical tendencies, occasioned primarily by the challenges posed by critical biblical interpretation and Protestant-dominated biblical theology; some effort to negotiate a relationship with the "canon" of traditional Jewish interpretation; continuing emphasis on the primacy of the Hebrew text of scripture, even in cases where translation is essential to the scholar's enterprise; and respect for the rabbinic dictum that Torah is multifaceted, allowing multiple approaches to the text to be sustained simultaneously.

To flesh out the definitive characteristics of the "Modern Jewish Bible," Levenson relies primarily on brief intellectual-biographical essays treating key figures in its development. Some of his choices are obvious, others less

so. In the section on German scholarship, he predictably emphasizes Mendelssohn, Samson Raphael Hirsch, and Buber/Rosenzweig, but also focuses on the brilliant but much less influential Benno Jacob. Although Levenson does not say so explicitly, his choices seem dictated in part for their impact on Nehama Leibowitz, to whom he devotes considerable attention (for example, he includes specific sections on Leibowitz and Hirsch, Leibowitz and Jacob, and Leibowitz and Buber-Rosenzweig), and whose importance he overstates, in my view. Levenson favors individuals who reached out to the wider Jewish community over "pure scholars" who wrote primarily for their fellow academics. In doing so, they fulfilled the most important goal that Moshe Greenberg, in his plenary address to the World Congress of Jewish Studies in 1981, set for the critical Jewish biblical scholar: to manifest "a sense of responsibility toward a community whose members, the scholars' brethren, await their disclosure to them of the Scriptural message."[2]

This preference has a tendency to skew Levenson's argument, however. He states, for example, that Leibowitz "almost single-handedly … restored the Jewish tradition of *parshanut ha-mikra* [medieval Jewish biblical interpretation] to a central place among Israeli Bible scholars" (p. 136). In contrast, he alleges that Greenberg's most important contribution to the modern Jewish Bible was "secondhand," namely, his publication of a one-volume English epitome of Yehezkel Kaufmann's *Toledot ha-emunah ha-yisra'elit* (p. 168, where the English title is misstated–Not *History of Israel*, but *The Religion of Israel from Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*. A big difference!).[3] Yet it was Greenberg who demanded that *parshanut* be integral to the Bible programs of the Hebrew University (as opposed to its being located in Jewish thought), and it is noteworthy that the first doctoral dissertation that he advised on the Bible (the late Sarah Kamin's) actually was on Rashi. For me, Greenberg's programmatic insistence on the integration of traditional and modern critical modes of reading was far more significant than Leibowitz's efforts to retrieve *parshanut* while shunning biblical criticism altogether.

I would part company with Levenson on many other points of interpretation and detail. Prudence dictates that I refrain from comment on his treatment of my contemporaries, most of whom are friends and colleagues, although interested readers may refer to other publications.[4]

I have several random, yet specific critical observations and criticisms. On page 45, Levenson misprises the influence of Geiger, which took more than a century to be fully felt through the work of Samuel Sandmel and especially Michael Fishbane. Both are cited on pages 158-159, but with no recognition of their lineal descent from Geiger. The Jewish Bible of today certainly owes more to Geiger than to Hirsch (pace Leibowitz), whose work seems quaint and outmoded. Levenson writes: "I cannot think of a single scholar today who would agree with [William F.] Albright's claim" for the historical accuracy of the Book of Genesis (p. 101). Apparently Levenson is unfamiliar with evangelical biblical scholarship, such as K. A. Kitchen's *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (2003). One cannot gainsay the influence of such work–even on Jewish readers. He also states: "I analyze [David] Ben-Gurion's hostility toward source criticism and his concomitant championing of Yehezkel Kaufmann" (p. 117). Fine, as long as "concomitant" is not mistaken to mean "consequent," since Kaufmann *was* a source critic, albeit one whose dating and ordering of the sources departed radically from the regnant model of his time. His throwaway line about H. L. Ginsberg on page 155 is opaque to me. It seems to imply that Ginsberg's enthusiastic emendation of texts was the way he "negotiated the challenge" of source criticism. Emend he did, belonging to an elite cadre that also included A. B. Ehrlich and N. H. Tur-Sinai, two giants of Jewish biblical scholarship who go unmentioned. But Ginsberg's exercise in textual virtuosity was not an alternative to biblical criticism, which he embraced late in his career.

Despite these and other cavils, it should be obvious that I derived much pleasure and profit from this book. I found myself nodding in assent to the author's judgment far more than questioning it. *The Making of the Modern Jewish Bible* should be required reading for biblical scholars, and I recommend it to anyone who would like to enjoy the company of a scholar who has devoted much thought to the ever-changing role of the Bible in Jewish life.

Notes

[1]. Alan Cooper, "Two Jews, Three Synagogues: A Jewish View of Historical Criticism," *Conservative Judaism* 64 (forthcoming 2013).

[2]. See the revised and reprinted lecture in Moshe Greenberg, "Can Modern Critical Bible Scholarship Have a Jewish Character? " in *Studies in the Bible and Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995), 7.

[3]. There are many other errors of citation and mis-

spellings of authors' names: for example, Karnafogel for Kanarfogel (p. 7); *Prologomenon* for *Prolegomena* (p. 65); Dahlmann for Dalman (p. 101); Wolfsohn for Wolfson (p. 134); and duplicate bibliographic entries for Nahum Sarna's essay on Abraham Geiger (p. 238). I also might have recommended editing to elevate the tone of some of the writing. I am still smarting from Spinoza's "remarkable ability to think outside the box" and the description of Jacob's commentaries as "not user-friendly," for example (pp. 12, 68).

[4]. See my "On Reading Biblical Poetry," *Maarav* 4 (1987): 221-241; review of *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, by Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, *Hebrew Studies* 30 (1989): 91-96; and "Biblical Studies and Jewish Studies," in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies*, ed. Martin Goodman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 14-35.

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