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Giovanni Garbini, History & Ideology in Ancient Israel

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): History and Ideology in Ancient Israel by Giovanni Garbini and John Bowden

Review by: Steven W. Holloway


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GARBINI, GIOVANNI. *History and Ideology in Ancient Israel*. Translated by JOHN BOWDEN. New York: Crossroad, 1988. xvi+222 pp. $18.95 (cloth).

Giovanni Garbini is a suspicious historian who is deeply skeptical of uncritical scholarship that accepts the ideologically determined “sacred history” of Israel as empirically reliable. His primary expertise is in the languages and civilizations of the ancient Near East; he moves with especial felicity through Phoenicia and the early Hellenistic world, bringing a sorely needed perspective to our discipline, fixed as it is on second and early first millennium comparative data. Garbini sets out to expose the ideologically motivated presentation of key figures in the Old Testament by means of literary and audience criticism and by asking uncomfortable questions that are the trademark of the historian in his or her native element. The book is essentially a collection of independent essays, with the strengths and weaknesses attendant on such an exposition. The ordering of topics in its programmatic chapters, however, reveals the author’s own textual chronology, with David and Solomon preceding Abraham and Moses; Joshua after Darius; and Ezra after Ben Sira; Garbini recognizes that his dating of the bulk of the texts to the Persian period or later is a minority position (p. xv).

Garbini begins his work by examining not the scholarship but the practitioners of Old Testament research, who, not surprisingly, have been predominantly trained by theological faculties. The “History of Israel” is a modern literary convention created in the last century by the juxtaposition of historicism and theology. The grave failing of most histories of Israel stems from a blindness to the theopolitical goals of the texts involved (the Old Testament) and an unwillingness to abide the limits of accurate hindsight into the past predicated by the near vacuum of contemporary and salient epigraphic sources. “The Old Testament has set out a sacred history of universal value, but it is not very reliable as evidence of a secular history of the kind that the Hebrew people actually experienced” (p. 18).

Concrete examples: he takes issue with the historical veracity of the speech of the rab-šqēẖ before the walls of Jerusalem in 701 B.C.E. (2 Kings 18:19–35, parallels), highlighting the legendary and contradictory nature of the siege narratives in both the Old Testament and Herodotus; in his opinion, the linguistic situation (native yehudit vs. the lingua franca Aramaic) better fits the time of the exile (pp. 44–47). In chapter 12, Garbini traces the skirmish lines of the ideological battle waged for religious supremacy between Palestinian Judaism, with its memory of the Mesopotamian exile still fresh, and the Jews in Egypt. The Abraham traditions in Genesis succeed in being both anti-Egyptian and pro-Babylonian in humor, whereas narratives describing the origin of the Israelites dependent on Egyptian sources concentrate on Moses and know nothing of a Babylonian origin of the patriarchs. Garbini speculates that the Hiram of Tyre with whom Solomon (tenth century B.C.E.) was supposed to have had relations was actually the one attested in the inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III (eighth century B.C.E.), and that

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that "a fairly later biblical redactor beautified Solomon with the plumes of Azariah" (p. 41) by projecting the history of the embarrassingly successful Israelite king onto the figure of Solomon. In chapter 13, he revives the hypothesis that Ezra is an historical fiction, whose reforms are patterned on those of the high priest Alcimus, ca. 159 B.C.E.

Garbini has written a saccharin-free guide to the art of historiography in the Old Testament. The book is highly recommended both to the non-specialist interested in sampling the numbing complexity of genuine Syro-Palestinian history and the specialist who would benefit from the searching insights of this fine scholar.

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Creation has, in recent years, become a popular topic for conferences and publications alike. It lends itself to numerous angles of vision: fundamentalist controversies, scientific versus pre- or nonscientific cosmologies, ecological issues, comparative studies, and theological and moral implications.

The present volume, stemming from a congress held at Lille in 1985 by the Association Catholique Française pour l'Étude de la Bible, presents studies by sixteen scholars on a variety of subjects related to creation. It is a selective, not a comprehensive, treatment of the theme in the ancient Near East, with considerably more attention devoted to biblical than extrabiblical traditions.

Following an introductory essay by Jean Ladrière on philosophical aspects of the idea of creation and the nature of being, the first major section contains chapters on the cosmogonies of Sumer and Akkad (by Marie-Joseph Seux), Ugarit (by Jésus-Luis Cunchillos), and ancient Egypt (by Bernadette Menu). Although as a group they fall short of providing an overall picture of creation thought throughout the ancient Near East, each focuses on questions distinctive to its respective culture, questions that are to a degree prompted by issues in biblical interpretation: Sumero-Akkadian perspectives on the human condition resulting from creation by the gods; the Ugaritic concept of creation as procreation, that is, the divine-sexual generation of both deities and humans; and the Egyptian cosmogonies featuring the crucial role of the demiurge in establishing order, initially and continually, within all existence.

The second, and by far the largest, section is devoted to analyses of biblical literature. While many of these attempt to place the discussion in the larger biblical context, there is a general absence of direct references to each other or of synoptic, historical, theological overviews. Yet the discussions taken by themselves have a cumulative effect, for they cover many of the key as well as some less obvious biblical and postbiblical texts on creation: Genesis 2–3 (by Jacques Briend), Gen. 1:1–2:4 (Paul Beauchamp), Deutero-Isaiah (Jacques Vermeylen), Jeremiah (Laurent Wisser), Job (Jean Léveque), Psalms (Claus Westermann), the Wisdom of Solomon (Maurice Gilbert), Philo (Jacques Cazeaux), and the Gnostic writing known as the Paraphrase of Shem (Michel Tardieu). These are supplemented by five additional studies: Germain Bienaimé on the haggadic tradition about paradisiacal marvels in the wilderness after the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt; Jacques Cazeaux on a dialectical reading of 1 Samuel 24–26, a study that deviates from the theme of creation more than any other in this volume; Pierre Gibert on