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Robert Gnuse, Heilsgeschichte as a Model for Biblical Theology

Steven W. Holloway

James Madison University, hollowsw@jmu.edu

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Heilsgeschichte as a Model for Biblical Theology: The Debate concerning the Uniqueness and Significance of Israel's Worldview by Robert Gnuse

Review by: Steven W. Holloway

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tive clause. In the case of final clauses, on the other hand, only the subjunctive and energetic occur, many of the former established by the presence of {â}. One is immediately drawn to the conclusion that the nature of the *yaqtula* form as a dependency marker is dubious and that the semantics of that form may have more to do with volition or emphasis (that dreaded word) than with dependency. One's doubts increase as one reads on. In the chapter on temporal clauses, for example, one finds only one example of the subjunctive indicated by {â} and that one is clearly wrong.⁶

A point that is more or less tangential to the primary topic of the book, but certainly not to its organization: it appears to me futile to attempt to find virtually the same verbal system in prose as in poetry,⁷ nearly as futile, perhaps, as to attempt to give a unitary explanation for the Biblical Hebrew verbal system. Not a single example of a *yqtl* form in Ugaritic prose translated in this book as having a perfect/perfective/preterite function is convincing. Instead of setting up categories on the basis of the (far more abundant) poetic texts and then fitting in the prose forms willy-nilly, the two bodies of texts must be analyzed separately. Only then can overlaps be observed and attempts at limning an *ur-ugaritische* verbal system be made.

A final warning to the reader: Verreet is very lax about indicating which of his examples are taken from lacunary texts. He has simply followed the readings of *KTU*⁸ and in general only indicated lacunae where he himself is in doubt

about the correct reconstruction. It is somewhat disconcerting to notice how many diagnostic forms come from reconstructed texts, but it must be stated that the reconstructions are usually based on other better-preserved texts and the procedure is not as dangerous as it might appear.

Because I have difficulty accepting the primary theses propounded by the book, as well as some of the methodology, this review has to this point been rather negative. But many positive points could be made. First, the structure proposed here must be classified as a brave attempt, heuristically useful. Then on the micro-level there is much to be learned. Many of the literary analyses of passages will prove useful in the further pursuit of understanding the Ugaritic texts—I have cited a few of my disagreements, as one is wont to do in reviews, but am much more often in agreement. In an area of particular interest to me, that of vocalization of forms, Verreet's vocalizations are usually the ones I would choose. Finally, the book is practically without material error as far as text references go.

DENNIS PARDEE

The University of Chicago

Heilsgeschichte as a Model for Biblical Theology: The Debate concerning the Uniqueness and Significance of Israel's Worldview. By ROBERT GNUSE. College Theology Society Studies in Religion 4. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America/College Theology Society, 1989. Pp. viii + 179. \$24.75 (cloth), \$12.75 (paperback).

Pay attention to the subtitle: Gnuse's work is primarily a survey of scholarship regarding the issue of *Heilsgeschichte* as a "theologomena" in the Hebrew Scriptures as analyzed from within its origins in the ancient Near East; the book is secondarily a statement of constructive theology. The introductory chapter ("The Concept of Salvation History") sets up the book's overarching program in rather Hegelian terms: emphasis on the radical discontinuity between Israel and the rest of the ancient Near East (thesis); scholarly reaction to distortions of biblical theologians, demonstrating the prevailing continuities

⁶ *trpâ* in RS 24.258:25' is on the wrong side of the dividing line to be parsed as 2m.s.: it must refer to one or both of the goddesses who heal El, not to the Ugaritic medicine man healing a human drunk (see my *Les textes para-mythologiques*, Ras Shamra-Ougarit, vol. 4 [Paris, 1988], pp. 67–68, with previous bibliography).

⁷ By this formulation I mean that Verreet proposes the same morpho-semantic categories for prose and poetry, but sees different distributions of these categories in the two corpora, for example, the *yaqul* preterite exists in prose but occurs more rarely there than in poetry.

⁸ M. Dietrich, O. Loretz, and J. Sanmartín, *Die keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit*, pt. 1, *Transkription*, AOAT 24/1 (Kevelaer and Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1976).

between these cultures (antithesis); and finally, the author's model, which attempts to reconcile the rootedness of Israel in the native civilizations of Western Asia with the ethical and religious ethos that suffuses the Hebrew Scriptures (synthesis). His definition of Israel as "that revolutionary vanguard of Yahwistic prophets and priests whose minority religious views prevailed at last only with the Babylonian exile" (p. 3) is both misleading and inconsistent with his usage elsewhere in the book where he seems to recognize the existence of a flesh and blood "Israel" whose population was ingenuously polytheistic for centuries (p. 101).

Chaps. 2 and 3 ("Advocates of Salvation History Theology" and "The Critical Theological Response") clearly and fairly document the major *Heilsgeschichte* presuppositions and doctrines that culminated in the mid-twentieth century Biblical Theology movement and then survey the ensuing scholarly backlash, both from within the insular biblical discipline and the perspective of ancient Near Eastern studies. The first three chapters are the most confidently written and cogently presented in the book. A minor disappointment is Gnuse's reluctance to detail the "modern confessional stance" (p. 25) of the authors under discussion and to root the imperatives of the older Biblical Theology movement in the prevalent intellectual and religious *Zeitgeist*: there *are* demonstrable reasons why, for instance, "proving" the uniqueness and superiority of ancient Israel over against its environment, once upon a time, achieved a quasi-normative status in the field of Old Testament research.

Chap. 4 ("Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical Historiography") attempts to counter chauvinistic scholarship that denigrates Mesopotamian and Hittite historiography as *a priori* inferior to that of ancient Israel by providing examples illustrative of their diversity and nascent objectivity, for example, the Weidner Chronicle, the Babylonian Chronicle Series, the Annals of Mursilis II, etc.

By and large, Chap. 5 ("Salvation History Themes in the Ancient Near East") recapitulates the salient arguments and examples found in Albrektson, *History and the Gods: An Essay on the Idea of Historical Events as Divine Man-*

ifestations in the Ancient Near East and in Israel, and Saggs, *The Encounter with the Divine in Mesopotamia and Israel*, a fact that Gnuse forthrightly admits (p. 53). Assyriologists, Hittitologists, and historians of any stripe will encounter no primary materials or novel approaches to their disciplines in these chapters or in any other part of the book. For the non-specialist seeking a balanced introduction to comparative scholarship on the rise of historiography and the theological ramifications of historical thought in the ancient Near East, however, these chapters will be appreciated.

Chap. 6 ("Continuity of Basic Religious Values between Israel and the Ancient Near East") examines selected similarities in cultic practices and ethical values ("social-religious perspectives"), endeavoring all the while to correct cherished stereotypes of Israelite uniqueness. The ruling presupposition of earlier biblical theologians that Yahwistic monotheism was the normative, fully blown religion in Israel prior to the exile is explained as a reflex of their uncritical absorption of the religious polemics presented by the Hebrew Scriptures themselves.

Chap. 7 ("The Continuing Debate over Israel's Concept of Salvation History") surveys leading statements from the past twenty-five years on *Heilsgeschichte*.

Chap. 8 ("Reconstruction of a Salvation History Model") concentrates on a series of ten themes that Gnuse finds are recognized in ongoing scholarship as Israel's "points of divergence" from the neighboring religions of Western Asia, including monotheism, covenant, Divine Word, higher piety or morality (admittedly subjective), pathos, and high literary quality.

Chap. 9 ("Impetus for Change") is a search for the dynamic factors underlying the development of Israel's particular ethos. Gnuse examines ideological concepts such as covenant, election, and monotheism (Albright, Kaufmann), and "social-historical categories" (Weber, Gottwald, Frick, others). The author shows a commendable awareness of the pitfalls that yawn before an uncritical application of sociological constructs to the history of Israel.

Chap. 10 ("General Conclusions") is a résumé of the author's "reconstructive" or "evolutionary" model of Israel's *Heilsgeschichte* that

he advances as viable in light of current biblical and historical studies. The formation of the Israelite ethos that culminated in the Hebrew Scriptures was a centuries-long evolutionary process that developed out of the cultural and theological heritage of the more ancient neighboring civilizations. "... Israel did not invent a worldview in contrast to ancient Near Eastern thought but rather drew upon existing ideas and reconstructed them. They had a fresh beginning with old and traditional values which provided social and moral advancement" (p. 146).

Gnuse's book will expand the horizon for other biblical theologians, who are currently possessed of a limited appreciation of the scholarship regarding the theological unities and parallels obtaining between Israel and the rest of the ancient Near East. Throughout it is clearly written, logically organized, and void of the polemical and confrontational style that the topic naturally suggests. The critical search for the ideological and cultural phenomena that led from Israelite religion(s) to the formation of Judaism and the theology of the Hebrew scriptures is a legitimate enterprise for biblical specialists; Gnuse's work succeeds in chronicling many of the major advances made in contemporary western scholarship (but where is the Italian School?). On the constructive theology in this book: to continue to use a term as powerfully loaded as *Heilsgeschichte*, a relic from the halcyon days of Christian triumphalism that called itself Biblical Theology, is to risk dismissal by scholars who might otherwise profit from the breadth of questions raised and solutions tendered.

STEVEN W. HOLLOWAY

The University of Chicago

East of Assyria: The Highland Settlement of Hasanlu. Edited by ROBERT H. DYSON, JR. and MARY M. VOIGT (*Expedition*, The University Museum Magazine of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania, 31 2/3 [1989]). Pp. 128 + figs. + pls. \$11.

This double volume of *Expedition* continues a recent trend in concentrating on a single theme,

blending anthropology, archaeology, archaeometry, and ethnography in a manner as accessible to the general reader as to the scholar. It is richly illustrated and interestingly varied in content. Hasanlu, in northwest Iran, was the subject of a major excavation from 1957 to 1977 directed by Dyson in the name of the University Museum. Level IV, upon which this volume concentrates, has become a basic point-of-reference for studies of the material culture of the region in the earlier first millennium B.C., since a military sack dated by the excavator about 800 B.C. preserved an unusually rich sample of architecture and objects. For those familiar with these excavations, there is relatively little that is new in these essays. They will serve more as an exercise in stimulating revision rather than as an introduction to the eagerly awaited final reports. For the general reader, they offer both a lively introduction to the Iron Age in Iran and a reliable guide to the complex and continuing process of post-excavation study.

There are contributions here by members of the original expedition and by a new generation of scholars. Dyson appropriately describes the course of the excavations and the architecture of level IV, O. W. Muscarella writes on warfare at Hasanlu, Maude de Schauensee on horse gear, V. C. Piggott on ironwork, and Irene Winter on the renowned Gold Bowl. The new points of interest here to scholars are the plotting of small finds on Dyson's ground plans of major structures, making valuable distinctions between first and second floors, and Irene Winter's magisterial review of interpretations of the designs on the Gold Bowl for which she provides a revised drawing. She inclines to a "Hurrian connection," but wisely remains noncommittal, presenting her contribution as part of a continuing discussion.

New vistas are opened up by Mary Virginia Harris on the Iron Age landscape, with a welcome table of woods identified among the debris of Hasanlu IV, and by D. S. Reese writing authoritatively on the shells. Michelle Marcus perceptively combines a functional and locational analysis of seals and sealings with a study of iconography and style to show that "Assyrian" and other foreign seals were apparently worn by the local elite as amulets and not, like "local" seals,