Holloway, Steven, ed.

Orientalism, Assyriology and the Bible

Hebrew Bible Monographs 10

Series Editors: David Clines, Cheryl Exum, Keith Whitelam

Hardcover. $110.00. ISBN 1905048378.

Christopher Hays
Emory University
Atlanta, GA 30322

This volume of collected essays has its roots in a session of same title held at the 2002 annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. However, it has grown beyond a typical collection of “seminar papers.” Editor Steven W. Holloway notes that most of the contributions were written or expanded after the fact, and his own introduction is much more ambitious than the usual walk-through. The forty-page essay seeks to situate the reader within the present conversation on Orientalism, especially as it relates to Assyriology and (to a lesser extent) biblical studies. Holloway is a capable guide in those waters, and has a particular interest in the intellectual history of Assyriology (also apparent in his book Aššur Is King! Aššur Is King!: Religion in the Exercise of Power in the Neo-Assyrian Empire [Brill, 2002]).

The book itself is divided into four sections: “Intellectual and Disciplinary Histories,” “Visual Perspectives,” “Of Harems and Heroines,” and “Assyriology and the Bible.” If these headings suggest an effort to corral disparate interests rather than a systematic coverage of an established body of information, that is the correct impression. In fact, nearly every essay in the first three sections could fit under the first heading.
The first two essays survey the history of Assyriology. Benjamin R. Foster’s “The Beginnings of Assyriology in the United States” and Eckart Frahm’s “Images of Assyria in 19th- and 20th-Century Western Scholarship” overlap significantly in chronology, but much less so in subject matter. Foster delves into universities’ archival material (among other sources) to document American importation of Assyriological expertise from Germany, roughly between the Civil War and World War II. Both his critical judgments about the quality of scholarship and his engaging character studies of scholars will be welcome to readers seeking to understand the history of the field. Frahm’s piece is less focused on the scholars themselves and more on the ways in which Assyria was perceived and portrayed in scholarship (and to some degree in the broader culture) over the past two hundred years. While certainly not the most detailed discussion of this topic available, its judicious conclusions and wealth of footnotes make it an excellent starting point, or a good quick overview in the context of a survey course on the Bible and the ancient Near East.

Holloway and Donald Malcolm Reid follow with detailed studies of two specific chapters in the history of the study of the ancient Near East. Holloway finds that Cyrus Adler’s 1893 and 1895 Smithsonian exhibits of biblical antiquities employed “the mythical geography of the unchanging East and racial anthropology, beguiling to [attendees] but perilous for all” (138). Reid’s contribution, “Egyptology Under Khediev Ismail: Mariette, al-Tahtawi, and Brugsch: 1850-82,” is a chapter from his book Whose Pharaohs? Archaeology, Museums, and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War I (University of California Press, 2002). It recounts the rivalry among European nations for primacy in Egyptology during the nineteenth century, and the simultaneous efforts of native Egyptians to establish their own presence in the study of their nation’s antiquities. While rich in detail, the essay clearly needed more editing after its extraction from the book; to select only the most obvious example, it never supplies the first name of one of its title characters, Auguste Mariette, nor does it identify him. This omission is only symbolic of a general lack of contextualization that may prevent the essay from engaging readers not already familiar with the history of Egyptology.

In “Mari and the Holy Grail,” Jack M. Sasson notes a recent trend toward optimism about the value of the data from Mari for reconstructing the biblical patriarchal period. He asks why there should be a resurgence of a scholarly trend from fifty years earlier, surmising that it may be a product of the minimalist-maximalist debate. He concludes with a warning that even cautious pronouncements about the applicability of Mari data to the patriarchal period might “encourage resumption of the historicizing effort that so distorted the study of the Bible until a generation ago” (198).
K. Lawson Younger’s “The Production of Ancient Near Eastern Text Anthologies” helpfully locates *The Context of Scripture*, which he co-edited, within the historical scope of such compilations. While it does not explicitly engage with the idea of Orientalism, the article shows various ways in which corpora of ancient Near East texts have been represented and molded, primarily in the service of understanding the Old Testament. Younger points out that the primary difference between *COS* and most earlier compilations, apart from its scale, is its organizing principle, based on Hallo’s “threelfold taxonomy,” then on language, and only afterward on genre (which was the primary factor in *ANET*, for example). The article also includes a chart that gives at-a-glance data about each of the anthologies since 1872.

In the second section of the book, “Visual Perspectives,” Frederick N. Bohrer studies the way in which the first discoveries of Assyrian art were received in different countries in “Inventing Assyria: Exoticism and Reception in Nineteenth-Century England and France.” Starting from familiar observations about the way views of ancient Mesopotamia were shaped by the contexts of the viewers, Bohrer embarks on an interesting study of representations of Assyria in painting before and after the publication and exhibition of Assyria’s art. He notes that while Assyrian art was initially criticized in both nations by the gatekeepers of the fine arts, it thereafter took different paths. In England, Assyrian artifacts were made known to the public, whereas France’s July Monarchy they were much less accessible. The interest of popular viewers advanced the esteem of Assyrian art in England, while it languished in France. Bohrer’s study is somewhat hampered by the fact that individual artists seem not to have worked on Assyrian subjects before and after the discovery of actual Assyrian art, making direct comparisons impossible. But Bohrer does show that later British art was much more likely than French art to incorporate actual Assyrian motifs. He is careful to point out that it is not a question of one culture representing Assyria accurately and the other not, but rather of two ways of appropriating Assyria and fictively transforming it (260), thereby reinventing Assyria in the Western gaze. The next essay, Donato Esposito’s study of *Dalziel’s Bible Gallery*, serves as an illustration of British art after the exposition of Assyrian antiquities at the British Museum.

Burke O. Long’s contribution, “Picturing Biblical Pasts,” will feel familiar to those who have read his book *Planting and Reaping Albright: Politics, Ideology, and Interpreting the Bible* (Pennsylvania State University, 1997). The program of unmasking ideological interests that underlie biblical scholarship is much the same in this new essay. This time Long compares the assumptions encoded in the cover art and maps of two of the major histories of Israel in the twentieth century: that of John Bright and that of Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes. The most interesting part of the essay is his observation that the
Bright history’s cover art mirrors the text’s effacement of certain aspects of (and groups in) Palestine, ancient and modern. The study of the Miller/Hayes cover is interesting but (as Long admits) probably less instructive. Long is correct that Hayes and Miller’s maps reflect a different understanding of the Israelite tribal period, and it has been remarked elsewhere that their history was a watershed. Since Bright was a student of W. F. Albright, Long has the opportunity to rehearse again his exposé of the Albright school (“They wanted to integrate history and archaeology with theology!” . . . “Bright was a churchman!”). In emphasizing these aspects, Long ignores the excellence of large sections of the history that made it a success. To Long, its success is due to the “energetic” marketing efforts of the Albright school (304). Indeed, Albright seems to be a popular bogeyman for contributors to this volume; see also the comments of Holloway (24, 34), Sasson (187–88), Younger (201), and Grabbe (413). Perhaps the Orientalist perspective, grounded as it is in the work of the Palestinian Edward Said, carries with it an inherent aversion to the historical claims of the Albright school, which tend to emphasize (some would say “maximize”) the ancient historical roots of Israel.

In the section “Of Harems and Heroines,” Julia M. Asher-Greve’s contribution has the content and the length of two essays. She first surveys representations of the semi-mythical queen Semiramis across history, noting that they include both negative images of her as a power-hungry and sexually voracious ruler, and also positive images of her as virtuous, beautiful, and successful. Asher-Greve concludes that in the cultural history, “her Oriental origin was irrelevant,” (371) and that representations of her depend more on Christian-pagan or male-female oppositions than on Occidental-Oriental ones. Asher-Greve goes on to argue, however, that negative images of Semiramis have predominated in Assyriology because it has been dominated by men. She points to a recent reexamination of the “monastic” ideal for Assyriologists and archaeologists that has called attention to the shortcomings of an older generation’s studies of gender. Regarding Orientalism, she calls for scholars of the ancient Near East to find a third way, rather than “adopt Said’s critique of Orientalism uncritically . . . or accept the traditional view of (Oriental) women’s lascivious sexuality” (372).

The other essay in the section, Elna K. Solvang’s “Another Look ‘Inside’: Harems and the Interpretation of Women,” is a model of clarity and conciseness in its discussion of the term harem. Solvang asks whether documents from Mari, the Middle Assyrian period, and the Neo-Assyrian period validate the use of the term harem for women living in the royal courts of those cultures, since the term has frequently been used in studies of those periods. She offers a fresh reading of the primary sources describing later Turkish harems (which, she argues, serve as the archetype), and concludes that only in the Middle Assyrian period do they find any possible analogy.
In the final section, Lowell K. Handy offers a sort of three-part “tasting menu,” briefly noting Assyriological influence on understandings of Josiah’s religious reforms and his political position in the region, and on artistic portrayals of Josiah from the Protestant Reformation to the late twentieth century. And in “Assyriology and the Bible,” Lester L. Grabbe (“Biblical Historiography in the Persian Period: Or How the Jews Took Over the Empire”) argues that Ezra is not a reliable source of history.

A few of the contributions make brief overtures in the direction of Orientalism, but are essentially pursuing other matters. For example, in “Whose Truth and Whose Justice: The Uruk and Other Late Akkadian Prophecies Re-Visited,” JoAnn Scurlock drops one reference to the motif of the “Oriental despot,” but her primary interest is the identity of the kings in the Uruk Prophecy. She argues that the traditional negative view of Assyrian monarchs has made it difficult for scholars to consider that the good kings in the text might have been Assyrians rather than Babylonians. Whether it would be helpful to describe such a bias as “Orientalism” is doubtful; why should the West have had any better regard for Babylonian kings than Assyrian ones? In any case, Scurlock’s fresh perspective on the identity of the kings will be of interest to Assyriologists.

The relationship of Victor Avigdor Hurowitz’s “Babylon and Bethel—New Light on Jacob’s Dream” to Orientalism is even more difficult to discern. However, it is a brief, densely argued and ultimately brilliant study. On the basis of a number of Babylonian texts, it argues that “the biblical writer transferred to Bethel the theological outline of Babylon, and in particular its role as a lodging place for gods going up and down a staircase between heaven and earth” (444). It is convincingly executed, and Hurowitz’s concluding reflections are both even-handed and suggestive in teasing out the implications of this intertextual relationship for biblical studies. One minor quibble with Hurowitz’s study is that his concern is unfounded when he remarks that Jacob’s ladder, unlike those in the Mesopotamian literature, does not reach to the underworld. In fact, the Hebrew ארץ (Gen 28:12) may indeed refer to the underworld, as arṣ does in Ugaritic, and occasionally in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Jer 17:13; Ezek 31:14–18; Jon 2:7; Pss 22:30, 71:20).

When a strong cast of contributors like those represented in this volume is assembled, there is little question that the product will be of value. The question is only, to whom? On the one hand, some of the contributions that scarcely touch explicitly on Orientalism (e.g., Foster, Younger, and Hurowitz) are of great value, and one hopes they will not be overlooked by scholars who might wrongly prejudge the volume as merely an exercise in the latest fad adopted from literature departments. On the other hand, it seems to the
present reviewer that, on the whole, its distinctive and fresh contribution lies in its first term, Orientalism. The essays helpfully illuminate numerous issues raised by the juxtaposition of Orientalism with Assyriology and biblical studies, and Dr. Holloway is to be congratulated on shepherding the project to completion. If it helps to call those issues to the attention of a new generation of scholars in training, it has served a worthy purpose.