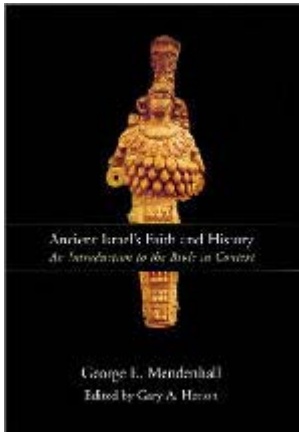


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Mendenhall, George E. and Gary Herion

Ancient Israel's Faith and History: An Introduction to the Bible in Context

Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001. Pp. xx + 284, Paperback, No Price Available, ISBN 0664223133.

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This volume, transcribed from a series of popular lectures, is a distillation of Mendenhall's views on the whole Bible that have been worked out over the course of his scholarly career. Following a short introduction, there are eight chapters. Chapter 1 covers "The World from Abraham to Moses" and discusses the cultural upheavals of the Near Eastern Bronze Age as a background to the emergence of Mosaic Yahwism. In chapter 2, "Moses and the Exodus," Mendenhall argues that the exodus and Sinai traditions document the birth of a new kind of community with a constitution that was completely different from those of the crumbling Late Bronze Age empires: a voluntary association of ethnically mixed people bound together by their acceptance of a generalized moral code rather than by having divinely validated political power imposed upon them. Chapter 3 discusses "The Twelve-Tribe Federation," picturing the occupants of Palestine voluntarily embracing the Yahwist moral ideal and building a society upon it. Chapter 4, "King David and the Transition to Monarchy," describes the corrosion of the Yahwist ethic as, with the growing desire for and ultimate establishment of the monarchy, Yahweh was cast as the divine supporter of political power structures. Chapter 5, "The Legacy of King Solomon," describes the development of what Mendenhall terms "Yahwisticism" as opposed to true Yahwism and portrays the canonical prophets as the defenders of the true faith. Chapter 6, "Josiah Reforms the Imperial Religion," covers relations between Judah and Assyria during the late eighth and seventh centuries and interprets Josiah's reform as a means of consolidating political power. Chapter 7, "Destruction and Exile," portrays the exilic prophets as producing new and deeper insights into the true nature of Yahwism, insights that were later submerged by the

revival of parochial traditions among those who reestablished themselves in Judah after the exile. Chapter 8, "Jesus and the New Testament Reformation," argues that early Christianity was a Jewish reform movement that sought to recapture traditional Yahwistic values. Following a short afterword, the contents of the book are completed by three appendices ("The Judeo-Christian Scriptures," "Yahweh As Lord of History," "The New Testament in Israelite Perspective"), a glossary of names and some technical terms, a bibliography of some of Mendenhall's works for further reading, and three indices (foreign terms, Scripture and ancient sources, subjects).

This is an attractively produced and readable volume, written deliberately to cater to the thinking nonspecialist, with a minimum of technical terminology and no footnotes. Alongside the main text the book features a number of maps, tables, and figures (mostly black-and-white line drawings), together with frequent "boxes" of supplementary information. These boxes are for the most part material from primary sources and function as illustrative asides to points being discussed in the main text. There are also suggestions for further reading at the end of each chapter.

However, for all its careful presentation, the volume raises two major issues of scholarly concern. First, Mendenhall's thoroughgoing historicist perspective must surely be subject to question in the present scholarly climate. He is certainly aware of the extremes of cynicism about all things historical and quite legitimately argues against them, but he does not really deal with the issues raised by that debate about the nature of biblical literature. Despite paying lip service to the influence of ideology on the biblical presentation, he uses the biblical text quite uncritically as a historical source. This is most evident in his reconstruction of the early period of Israel's history and the rise of the monarchy, where the traditions are taken virtually as they stand to represent an actual course of events. One particular feature of this historicizing approach is the attempt to salvage historical credibility for the text's miraculous and supernatural elements by assuming that some sort of natural phenomenon lies behind each one. Thus, the crossing of the Red Sea is a mythologized description of how the runaway slaves managed to get across a body of water during a storm; the Sinai theophany is a mythologized version of a thunderstorm that took place as the escaped slaves arrived at the foot of the mountain; and the sun and moon did not stand still at Gibeon but rather, according to the Hebrew text, they "stopped" (i.e., stopped shining), and this was caused by thick cloud cover from the extraordinary hailstorm that is recorded immediately before the couplet about the sun and moon. Of course, it is beyond question that impressive or startling natural phenomena were mythologized into supernatural events, but it is also true that such mythologizations can take on a life of their own, whether or not an actual historical event lies behind a given mythological description. The apparent assumption that behind every mythologization lies a genuine happening of some sort is therefore questionable, to say the least.

Second, Mendenhall's depiction of Mosaic Yahwism as a pure, stateless, ethical religion to which the prophets recalled their people and from which both official cultic Yahwism and later Judaism were downward steps sounds uncomfortably like an ideal of Western Protestantism that views itself as the antithesis of empty ritualism. This raises the question of how far Mendenhall's reconstruction is simply anachronistic. Certainly he seems to have little appreciation of the positive value of cult and ritual that has been emphasized in more recent studies of the pentateuchal material, for example. As with the question of mythologizing natural phenomena, there is no doubt that cult and ritual can become "empty ritualism," but the sense that they are so by definition—and were necessarily so in the context of Israelite religion—is disconcerting. It is easy enough to claim that "ethical commitment rather than ritual ceremony" was the heart of true Yahwist worship (128), but such a statement begs the question of precisely how that ethical commitment was to be expressed in relation to the deity who supposedly requested it of the people. This question is even more pressing when the commitment is pictured as being the basis of a community: What did Yahwism give these people in common that would positively bind them together instead of simply stopping them from harming each other? Mendenhall's view of the Decalogue as voluntary ethical commitments forming the basis for this community seems inadequate. The only two positive commitments are to honor one's parents and to keep the Sabbath; the rest of the ethic boils down to people keeping to themselves and minding their own business, which is not a very promising foundation for a community. Indeed, Jesus, cast by Mendenhall as a reformer of Judaism who found religious meaning in the remote Israelite past, is shown in Mark 10:17-22 as demanding significantly more of a would-be follower than simply abiding by the Decalogue. If Yahwism was something other than just "being good," and Mendenhall implies that it was, it must surely have had some kind of positive expression, quite possibly a distinctive ritual component, even in premonarchic days.

Overall, then, these considerations mean that although Mendenhall's presentation is interesting, it is ultimately unconvincing.