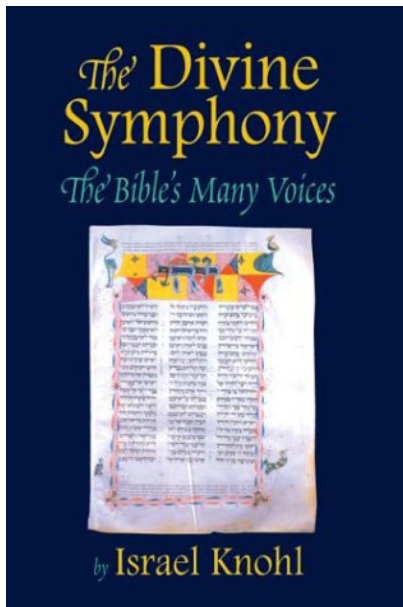


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Knohl, Israel

The Divine Symphony: The Bible's Many Voices

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Israel Knohl, Professor of Bible at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, offers us a bracing and high-speed overview of the various voices retained in the canonical Jewish Bible. A concluding chapter sees the differing scriptural voices taken up in the different parties of first-century Judaism. The main text is elegant and compelling and will attract a wider readership than the concluding forty pages of fine-print footnotes and indices. Most intriguing of all, the opening line of the publisher's text on the inside cover flap notes that the book "challenges the fundamentalist view that the Bible is a monolithic document." In fact, nowhere in the main text do we encounter this claim, nor is this agenda evident in the book. It is not that it is untrue, for *The Divine Symphony* does implicitly challenge such a claim throughout, but rather that it is not clear in what sense this text might be aimed at anyone who holds such a "fundamentalist view." Perhaps it is aimed at those who are unsure how to respond to the fundamentalist claim. Either way, the amount and complexity of material covered by Knohl make this a somewhat ambitious engagement with monolithicity, surely unlikely to be easily followed by anyone who did hold such a position. Better then, in the first instance, to pursue the constructive agenda of the book on its own terms, before evaluating any polemical intent.

A brief introduction gives some midrashic examples of how God may speak two things at one time, even two things apparently contradictory, yet both are to be received by Israel as God's true words. (The opening example may serve as a straightforward illustration: the Sabbath is to be "remembered" in Exod 20:8 but "observed" in Deut 5:12.) How, then, is one to hold on to all of scripture's differing claims in a manner that treats each text as coherent? The answer lies with a Wellhausen-inspired source criticism, with the (significant) modification that the Priestly source is a two-stage work. On this account, the Priestly Torah was written between the tenth and eighth centuries B.C.E., while the Holiness Code (Lev 17–26) was a late eighth-century work of a Holiness school. This schema (introduced rapidly on xii and in the brief chapter 1, "The Editing of the Torah" [1–8], and set out in more detail in an appendix [149–55]) will be familiar to those who have worked with Jacob Milgrom's commentaries on Leviticus, where it has also been adopted.

Succeeding chapters then work out the claim that separate sources lie behind the finished product, patiently explaining the logic and emphases of each. "The Uniqueness of the Priestly Torah" (9–35) focuses on P's avoidance of attributing any action except commanding to God. It has a unique view of "the preexistent evil substance incorporated into Creation" (34), the peaceful transformation of which occupies Gen 1, a demythologization of the ancient combat myth. Chapter 3 turns to "Knowing Good and Evil: God and Humanity in J's Story of Beginnings" (37–49). In contrast to P's primordial evil fashioned into good, here we have J's emphasis on evil (and the serpent) created by God. J tends to democratize monarchic motifs, attributing to individuals (in Gen 1–11) or indeed to "everyone" (11:1), the pursuit of the divine that is elsewhere the prerogative of kings. The decline from communion with God is presented as a series of irreversible steps for humanity, countered only by the election of Israel (through Abraham) to restore the relationship. The J stories from Gen 1–11 are read with care in this short chapter.

In contrast to P and J, we turn next to "Good, Evil, and Holiness in Isaiah and the Holiness School" (ch. 4, 51–69). Here we find a vision of all humanity seeking God (Isa 2:2–3) and correspondingly a notion of holiness that is deeply implicated with moral and social righteousness (as, e.g., in Isa 5:16). This eighth-century emphasis is far from P's ritual holiness and priestly emphasis: "While it is true that the Priestly Code reached new heights of abstraction and sublimity in thinking about God, its message about God was aimed at a select few. Only a handful of people could reach the religious summits of the Priestly Torah. The Holiness School, however, bursts the walls of the sanctuary and turns to the people as a whole" (67).

Two case studies follow. Chapter 5, "Israel's Debate over God's Sanctuary" (71–85) contrasts what Knohl has elsewhere called "the sanctuary of silence" at the center of P

with the “tent of meeting” in the Holiness school. P is described in apophatic terms: it is not possible to praise God aloud in a context where “YHWH is above and beyond any form and any personality” (73). By contrast, the Holiness school sees God as descending in a spirit of prophecy to speak at certain moments in the tent of meeting, where all are normally welcome to come (Num 11–12). This tent of meeting, and in turn the Deuteronomistic house of prayer, “should be seen as the forebears of the synagogue” (85). Chapter 6 considers “Israel’s Debate over King and Messiah” (87–99). Knohl argues that the Torah negates any divine status of the king, while the book of Psalms “provides significant evidence for the deification of the king” (96). A third strand, found in Judges and 1 Samuel, rejects in principle human kingship over Israel.

Chapter 7 takes the analysis forward beyond the sixth century: “New Conceptions of Evil and Suffering during the Period of Exile and Return” (101–22). Here Knohl takes up variant strands in Ezekiel concerning who is responsible for the exile, the story of the Aqedah and the move away from child sacrifice, Second Isaiah’s image of Israel as suffering servant acting as high priest to the nations, and the book of Job’s account of evil and suffering as an inescapable part of the fabric of life. This chapter has the feel of several different sorts of explanatory examples being brought together to fill out a thesis already established.

The concluding chapter offers one hint at a possible rationale for this descriptive project: “The Emergence of the Sects in Ancient Judaism” (123–43). Here Knohl traces the differing views discussed so far into the later rabbinic debates, particularly between the schools of Hillel and Shammai. In contrast to Qumran, as in the Temple Scroll, which “can be seen as a monolithic edition of the pluralistic Torah” (135), rabbinic debate maintains the model of letting every voice continue to speak. In Knohl’s words,

we can see a line that goes back from the Shammaites to certain concerns of the Sadducees, and behind them to the school of the Priestly Torah, both of which preserved an elitist approach to a transcendent God, while the Hillelites recapitulate the spirit of the Holiness School, which opened Torah up to ethics and the experience of the people. (141)

Since it is at this point that the book ends, perhaps it is fair to say that this is its constructive agenda. The one-page postscript expresses the hope that we might benefit from reflecting on the pluralistic character of the Bible, but how such pluralism serves any theological agenda is left to the reader to ponder. Indeed, while Knohl is successful in delineating the variety of conflicting perspectives to be found within scripture, it is puzzling that no reflection at all is offered on how it is that we are to understand the decision to hold all these voices together in a canonical “symphony.” Why is “symphony”

the right image for what is going on here? If a critic were to suggest that what is on display is a discordant din, then on what grounds would Knohl disagree? As a result, one suspects that this book is really the first half of a thesis and that the declared aim of offering an alternative to “monolithic fundamentalism” has in effect allowed it to stop at the point where the really interesting (theological) work has now loomed into view. Given this set of theological strata and this particular array of voices (and it is a relatively low number of specific voices that are discussed herein), why has the Jewish canon ended up putting them together in the manner it has, and what does this do to the desire of a reader, then or now, to make theological sense out of the symphony? *The Divine Symphony* is successful in raising these questions. It is to be commended as a strong, brief but detail-laden presentation of the relevant data. However, it does leave the reader wondering whether the questions thereby raised are larger than the ones answered.