

Book Reviews

Theological Studies
2016, Vol. 77(3) 721–763
© Theological Studies, Inc. 2016
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0040563916653940
tsj.sagepub.com


The Jews and the Bible. By Jean-Christophe Attias. Translated by Patrick Camiller. Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture. Stanford: Stanford University, 2015. Pp. vii + 235. \$22.95.

In a prologue, authors often contextualize their own perspectives, fields of study, and aims in scholarship. While this volume offers much by way of breadth of content and its diachronic approach, the reader may often be looking for the connection between the author and the Bible, but even more importantly, the connection between the author and the Jews. There is nothing inherently problematic about the book but there is something about its tone that is strikingly different than *The Making of the Modern Jewish Bible* by Alan T. Levenson (2011) that covers much of the same material. The difference in title bespeaks the central divergence; whereas Levenson looks at what makes the Bible “Jewish,” Attias’s focus is the Jews and the role the Bible has in their lives. Although A. is correct in his many observations about this relationship, one cannot help but wonder for whom are these keen observations? It often feels like the “Jews” are being explained to Christians, as if the Christian approach to the Bible is the normative approach and the Jewish one is something “ambiguous” (34), “elusive” (25), or “paradoxical” (35). This is not to say that A. is not a fan of the evolving Jewish relationship with the Bible. He often seems pleasantly surprised by his own observations about the role of the Bible in the lives of the various Jewish communities he describes. But why is the relationship of the Jew and his or her hermeneutical preference more “ambiguous” than that of a Catholic or an Anglican to the exegetical traditions of their Bibles?

While there are important American Jewish works on the Bible which are surprisingly excluded in A.’s work, such as most American denominational commentaries and Richard Elliot Friedman’s *Who Wrote the Bible?*, on whom Levenson, by contrast, includes a two-page discussion (Levenson, 191–92), A. demonstrates comprehensive knowledge of biblical commentators and their interrelationship, the history of Jews in different countries from the medieval period to the modern, diverse Jewish theological claims, the Christian reception of Jews and Jewish writings, and Zionist uses of the Bible in the establishment of the State of Israel. The task is impressive.

A.’s book is written in a sermonic fashion; the language is flowery and the title makes a broad statement; the effect is that more often the book feels like reading a philosophical or an extended homily more than a history of religion. At times, I

wondered whether this seeming discrepancy was due to a European versus an American stylistic difference. However, the more I read and reviewed, and reexamined the prologue and the epilogue, it became clear that A. presents strong pronouncements and characterizations more often than descriptive interconnections between a people and their texts. In this way, Levenson's work again comes to mind as it rightfully describes more than it sermonizes.

Not enough space can be devoted in this review to a discussion of a comparison between Levenson's work and that of A., but two areas are worthy of notice: the discussion about Spinoza and his relationship to the Bible, and the treatment of the Bible among the secular and religious Zionists. While admittedly, Levenson's work is focused on the modern period while A. tries to be more comprehensive (the ancient Jewish experience is the least developed in A.'s overall successful attempt to be comprehensive) I encourage readers to make their own comparisons. In Levenson's work, I receive a well-rounded picture of Spinoza and his influences while A.'s description focuses on Spinoza's ambivalent and even contemptuous feelings about the Jewish community. The second area, which needs a longer and more comprehensive discussion, is A.'s treatment of the Bible by the Zionists, which demonstrates clearly where he falls on the political spectrum. He does this without contextualizing his own views, but couches them in his treatment of Ben Gurion and Ahad Ha-am (148–49). In treatise fashion, the epilogue of A.'s book asks the Jews if the Bible is worth saving, given that it has been used to bolster Israeli claims to the land during the last century. "It is in the power of sons and now also of daughters to bring the Father back to life—or not. And in our world today, beyond all the self-proclaimed orthodoxies, it is in the power of the living tradition, the post-genocide and the post-Zionist tradition to save the Bible—or not" (160). This is a strikingly homiletical way to an end a work that is supposed to be prioritizing history. By stark contrast, Levenson demonstrates the many nuances, shifts, and evolving factors in the way different Zionists utilized the Bible in the creation and development of the modern state of Israel (Levenson, 96–150). And Levenson is by no means an apologist for the Israeli government.

A. never situates himself as an insider, a friendly outsider, a scholar of, or as openly writing a polemic against "the Jews and their Bible." When he uses flowery language coupled with politically and religiously charged rhetorical language, it leaves this reader uneasy. His very vast knowledge and honed insights are too often overshadowed by a tone that conveys an overly attached and still yet an ambiguous relationship to the Jews.

Elizabeth Goldstein
Gonzaga University, Spokane

The Responsive Self: Personal Religion in Biblical Literature of the Neo-Babylonian and Persian Periods. By Susan Niditch. The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library. New Haven: Yale University, 2015. Pp. vii + 190. \$50.

Niditch has produced a volume that, like many of her other works, raises fascinating questions, opens new directions for future research, and provides new questions for older research. Here, she is interested in "personal religion"—thinking about the