

BOOK REVIEWS

S. David Sperling. *The Original Torah: The Political Intent of the Bible's Writers*. Reappraisals in Jewish Social and Intellectual History. New York: New York University Press, 1998. xiv, 185 pp.

Anyone who has followed the course of biblical studies in the past thirty years knows that a major shift has occurred in the discipline. Whereas previous generations of scholars accepted the basic historicity of the pentateuchal narratives, the current generation is much more skeptical. Thus, David Sperling states at the outset of *The Original Torah* that “the archaeology of the past three decades demonstrates that the Torah’s fundamental claims appear to be unhistorical. Israel was never enslaved in Egypt, so consequently there was no exodus and no trek through the desert. The people ‘Israel’ did not come from outside the land, so there was no conquest” (pp. 7–8).

Accordingly, we must look elsewhere to situate the Torah’s basic story of Israel’s “past.” Sperling continues: “What this means is that the Torah does not have a thirteenth-century agenda, and certainly none that reaches further back into the second millennium. Instead, the stories in the Torah reflect religious-political concerns of the Israelite-Jewish communities between 1100 and 400 B.C.E.” (p. 8). In short, “the narratives of the Torah are best described as *allegories*, narratives contrived to signify a second order of meaning from what they present on the surface” (ibid.).

With the above as his basic point of departure, Sperling proceeds throughout this well-written and very accessible book to demonstrate the political and religious agendas of the authors of many of the Torah’s most familiar accounts. The Abraham narratives are seen as a reflection of the career of King David; in general they are “political propaganda composed in the reign of Solomon, David’s son and successor, to answer criticism of the monarchy which, in its earliest days, had made radical changes in Israelite society” (p. 84);¹ thus, for example, the need to portray Abraham as a warrior in Genesis 14 in order to justify David’s military expansionism.

1. This view has been expressed by many previous scholars, including the reviewer: G. A. Rendsburg, “Biblical Literature as Politics: The Case of Genesis,” in *Religion and Politics in*

The northern kingdom also had its heroes. Jacob's wrestling with the angel at Penuel, his gaining the name "Israel" (both in Gen 32:23–33), and his consecration of the site of Bethel (Gen 28:10–22; cf. 35:7) serve as an "allegory of Jeroboam" (p. 93), the first king of the northern kingdom of "Israel," who moved his capital to Penuel and established Bethel as one of its two sanctuary sites. In Sperling's summation, "The Bible provides us with a twice-told tale: 1 Kings relates realistically the tale about Jeroboam, and Genesis . . . relates allegorically the events about Jacob" (p. 94).

In like fashion operate the narratives in Exodus. Aaron's manufacture of the golden calf (Exodus 32) serves as the model for Jeroboam's use of golden calves at Dan and Bethel (1 Kgs 12:28–30), and many centuries later Aaron was granted an even greater role as high priest "to serve the religious agenda of certain elements of the second temple priesthood" (p. 117). Moses is the prefiguration of Saul, both of whom unite "the people of Israel under the banner of the god Yahweh" (p. 122). In many instances, "the similarities between Saul and Moses have been obscured by the biblical writer" (p. 123), but enough remains to allow Sperling to read the latter as an allegory of the former. Sperling makes an excellent point in his acceptance of the literal meaning of 1 Sam 14:35, *'ôto hēhēl libnôt mizbēah laYHWH* "he was the first to build an altar to Yahweh" (p. 129); this is clearly what the grammar intends, and no manner of scholarly gymnastics can produce the reading "it was the first altar that he built to the LORD," as many traditional Jewish commentators and modern translations would prefer. Moses, as the initiator of Yahweh worship in Israel, thus represents Saul. Furthermore, "we must interpret the Hebrew traditions of servitude *in* Egypt as allegories of servitude *to* Egypt" (p. 54), for while archaeology has shown that there is no veracity to the Torah's account of an Israel enslaved in Egypt, there is considerable evidence pointing to the emergence of Israel as a Canaanite group that suffered as a *mas*-people during Egypt's rule over the land (see especially Amarna letter 365 with Exod 1:11).

How are we to judge Sperling's overall project? As intimated above (see n. 1), I am very willing to accept that many of the narratives in the Torah serve the voice of political propaganda. Furthermore, I personally am convinced of many of Sperling's specific examples. I part company with him, however, on two issues.

First, I believe that there is sufficient evidence with which to defend the essential historicity of the Torah's narrative (not the patriarchs necessarily, about whom we have nothing save the material in Genesis), but the basic account of a Semitic group migrating to Egypt, sojourning there, working there as *corvée* laborers, and leaving there. Egyptian records of the Nineteenth Dynasty amply document these phenomena.² The Torah's account indeed was written centuries later and served a political function along the lines presented by Sperling, but there is no reason to "throw out the baby with the bath water." A better model, I believe, is a literary work like Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* or a modern movie like Robert Altman's *M*A*S*H*. The Salem witch trials actually occurred, even if we view them in Miller's play through the lens of McCarthyism; and the Korean War actually occurred, even if Altman's movie presents that conflict through the lens of another U.S. involvement in a small East Asian country, that is, the Vietnam War. In other words, the biblical authors utilized some basic historical material, but the actual history (that is, whatever was known to later generations) played a subservient role to the writers' main interests, which derived from their political and religious agendas.

Secondly, the linguistic evidence—and this is the most objective evidence we possess—demonstrates that both the priestly material and the narrative traditions are pre-exilic.³ Sperling brings two pieces of information that he believes point to the Persian period. The first is the name Parnach (Numb 34:25), which closely resembles the well-attested Persian name Farnaka (p. 7). The second is the presence of *miknəsê bād* "linen trousers" among the priestly garments (Exod 28:42), though "art historians have documented [that] breeches and trousers were Iranian inventions, first found in the Persian reliefs of the sixth century B.C.E." (p. 116). But other explanations are possible. The name Parnach corresponds equally well to Egyptian *prnk*, and while this name is attested only for an Old Kingdom female,⁴ our knowledge of Egyptian

2. For details, see G. A. Rendsburg, "The Early History of Israel," in *Crossing Boundaries and Linking Horizons: Studies in Honor of Michael C. Astour on His 80th Birthday*, ed. G. D. Young, M. W. Chavalas, and R. E. Averbec (Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 1997), pp. 433–453.

3. On the former, see the many works of A. Hurvitz, most importantly *A Linguistic Study of the Relationship Between the Priestly Source and the Book of Ezekiel* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1982); on the latter, see now R. M. Wright, "Linguistic Evidence for the Pre-Exilic Date of the Yahwist Source of the Pentateuch" (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1998).

4. H. Ranke, *Die Egyptischen Personennamen*, vol. 1 (Glyckstadt: J. J. Augustin, 1935), p. 133.

personal names shows that the same names are attested throughout ancient Egyptian history and often are borne by both males and females. Similarly, we should be cautious in identifying **miknəsayim* only as breeches or trousers of the Persian type, for it may be closer to the loincloth attested throughout ancient Egyptian history, about which a recent scholarly treatment noted the following: “Its existence seems to be totally ignored in favour of its more illustrious relations, namely, the various types of outer garment. This omission may be due to the fact that it was a purely functional item worn either by itself or *underneath another garment*, for instance, a skirt, kilt or bag-tunic.”⁵

In sum, Sperling has written a stimulating book filled with original insights. While I consider the above points of disagreement to be significant ones, nonetheless I appreciate greatly the value of this study in advancing our understanding of the origins of the Torah.

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Nahman Avigad. *Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals*. Revised and completed by Benjamin Sass. Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities/Israel Exploration Society/Institute of Archaeology, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1997. 640 pp.

The significance of nonbiblical written sources for the study of ancient Israel, Judah, and the other states of the Levant is widely recognized. For more than a century, scholars have utilized data gleaned from these voices from antiquity in general histories as well as in specialized investigations dealing with philology, paleography, iconography, and related subjects. Inscribed stamp seals, bullae,¹ and impressed jar-handles comprise an important part of the extant corpus of epigraphic material. The inscriptions provide not only personal information about the seal owners but insight into the social, economic, and political structure of their societies. A growing number of

5. G. Vogelsang-Eastwood, *Pharaonic Egyptian Clothing* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993), p. 10 (emphasis added).

1. A bulla (sing.) is a lump of clay impressed with a personal seal. It was attached to the string that sealed a document. Both private and administrative documents were sealed in this manner. Sometimes several bullae were used to seal a single document.