

BOOK REVIEW

From Gods to God: How the Bible Debunked, Suppressed, or Changed Ancient Myths and Legends by Avigdor Shinan and Meir Zakovitch, translated by Valerie Zakovitch (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2012), 301 pp. Reviewed by Simcha Rosenberg.

This is an English translation of the popular Hebrew book, *Lo Kakh Katuv ba-Tanakh* (Maskil-Yedioth Ahronoth Books, 2004), written by two professors at the Hebrew University. The thesis of the book is that the early Israelites were familiar with multiple ancient oral traditions of the stories that would make up the Bible, and that "by fixing these stories in writing, biblical writers aimed to establish what they deemed to be the correct tradition and to eliminate other versions" (p. 5). However they were not entirely successful in this endeavor and remnants or echoes of the alternative versions can be found in the text of the Bible. In thirty short chapters, the authors investigate different episodes from the Bible and attempt to uncover the other versions that the biblical authors were seeking to suppress, generally using literary analysis.

Thus, when similar narratives appear in the Bible, or when a particular story is told in different ways in different places, this is seen as evidence for multiple oral traditions of the same episode. For example, the authors understand that Exodus 15:25, *There He made for them a fixed rule*, is evidence of a tradition that the Israelites received the Law in Marah rather than at Mount Sinai. The authors of the Bible incorporated this alternate version into the text "by presenting the story of Marah as the beginning of a process" which would culminate at Mount Sinai (p. 94). The traditional approach found in rabbinic literature in fact views Marah as an initial stage; the authors contend that this is just a byproduct of reconciling divergent traditions.

Another example is the episode of Noah's drunken behavior observed by Ham, and the subsequent cursing of Ham. While the Bible simply reports that *Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness* (Gen. 9:22), rabbinic tradition teaches that a sexual transgression was committed, which the authors state represents an ancient tradition, nearly concealed in the text but still detectable through careful literary analysis and comparison with the story of

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Lot and his daughters. While the traditional rabbinic view is that there was a sexual transgression, here the authors claim that the sexual element was part of an early version of the narrative, which the biblical authors attempted to gloss over (p. 135). Now according to the authors of this book, it is often the rabbis of the Talmud and Midrash who, through their own close reading of the Bible, detect and uncover evidence of the allegedly suppressed alternate versions. Thus, the suppressed stories are sometimes exactly in line with the way traditional commentaries and their Jewish readership understood the Bible!

If the biblical authors found certain ancient traditions objectionable, why did they not eliminate them entirely or change them in a way that made the rejected versions indiscernible? The authors claim that it was impossible to completely erase traditions that had been handed down orally for generations. Thus, "the Bible had to take a different approach: to allow a bit of the stories and use some of their details while simultaneously revising them, possibly changing most of the original elements" (p. 83).

This is a very interesting and thought-provoking book, and something of a new take on the critical academic approach to the Bible – not that it is composed of different documents, but rather that it represents an attempt to take diverse preexisting oral traditions and turn them into a work with an uplifting and theologically appropriate religious message. The book is written in an engaging style and each short chapter deals with a different biblical episode, which makes for pleasant reading.

However, the authors do not devote enough attention to validating the way they understand the development of the biblical text itself. Were the preexisting oral traditions in fact so powerful, and with such fixed words and phrases, that they could not be changed completely in line with the agenda of the biblical authors? Are oral traditions in fact so immutable? If so, why did the writers manage to change some objectionable elements but felt obliged to preserve others? Or were they just sloppy editors who let certain problematic details from the old versions slip into the text by mistake? These questions, which deal with the heart of their theory and the underlying assumption of the book, have not been sufficiently addressed.

BRIEFLY NOTED

Qoheleth: The Ironic Wink, by James L. Crenshaw (Columbia, South Carolina: The University of South Carolina Press, 2013), 171 pp.

A scholarly work, yet one accessible to the layman, this book examines the identity and outlook of the author of "the strangest book in the Bible" (p. 9). Particular attention is given to the often contradictory teachings of the book, and the meaning of the term *hevel*, classically translated as "vanity." The author contends that the book is written in an ironic style, where everything is viewed as *hevel*, including wisdom, the religious life, and even the teachings of the Book of Kohelet itself.

The Aura of Torah: A Kabbalistic-Hasidic Commentary to the Weekly Readings, by Larry Tabick (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2014), 373 pp.

In this collection of short (one or two-page) Torah thoughts connected to the weekly Torah readings, mostly from Hasidic sources, each *vort* is introduced with an explanation of its context and followed by a personal comment or observation from the author. The Hebrew original of each quoted idea is provided, as well as helpful biographical information on the rabbis who composed them. As the author states in his Introduction, "this is, at its heart, a very traditional work" made "accessible to a modern audience" (p. xxiii).

Abravanel's World of Torah: A Structured Interpretation – Bereshit: Theory of Moral Evolution, by Zev Bar Eitan (Renaissance Torah Press, 2013), 542 pp.

A hefty book intended as a "succinct yet comprehensive digest" of the commentary of Don Isaac Abravanel to Genesis for English readers (p. xxii). This is not a translation, but a restatement of selections of Abravanel's ideas presented thematically, as essays on each *aliyah* of the weekly Torah portion. Tables, charts, illustrations, bullet points, and interesting graphics elucidate the ideas presented in the text.