

BOOK REVIEWS

Steven Bob, *Jonah and the Meanings of Our Lives: a Verse-by-Verse Contemporary Commentary*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2016. 228 pp. Reviewed by David J. Zucker

Alan T. Levenson, *Joseph: Portraits Through the Ages*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2016. 284 pp. Reviewed by David J. Zucker

Although their focus is on different biblical characters the general approach of Steven Bob and Alan T. Levenson is very similar. Each author presents his subject through a variety of lenses, including both contemporary and traditional rabbinic commentaries. Conceptually I am reminded of a series published by Paulist Press under the rubric WTSA: What are They Saying About? The Paulist series were authored by recognized biblical scholars, and offered an academic approach to their subjects. Neither Bob nor Levenson claim to be trained biblical scholars. Bob is a congregational rabbi and Levenson's area of expertise is modern Jewish history. These authors present a more popular view of their subjects. Bob's book on Jonah is classified as Biblical Studies and Jewish Studies, but also Religion and Inspirational. It has more than a touch of self-help to it. Steven Bob, as a congregational rabbi (Reform), often draws examples from both his professional and personal life. He supplements this with insights from classical commentaries such as Rashi, Abraham ibn Ezra, Radak, Don Isaac Abarbanel, and Malbim. Bob takes each of the forty-eight verses of Jonah and offers his insights, usually devoting a short chapter to each verse. On some level these chapters read like mini-sermons. Even the titles of the chapters have the ring of sound bites: "Our Names and Identities: Who Are We?," "Understanding the Other: Who Are They?," "Our Faith and Theirs: How Do We View Other Religions?," "Recovering from a Perfect Storm: From Where Does Our Hope Come?"

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There is a rabbinic principle articulated in the traditional sources that "the Torah speaks in the language of humans" (Sifre, Num. 112; cf. TB *Nedarim* 3a); perhaps this was a guiding principle for the author.

That selfsame principle applies to Levenson's volume on Joseph. Indeed, he refers to that concept (p. xvi). Here too, there is a sense that the goal is a broad audience. While he does draw from the classical commentaries of Rashi, Rashbam, ibn Ezra, and Ramban, he explains that "We are modern people and need modern readings to relate to the text" (p. xxvi). He therefore quotes occasionally from modern biblical scholars, Jewish and non-Jewish (Nahum Sarna, Gerard von Rad, Yair Zakovitch, Ilana Pardes, Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg). Levenson explains that he brings insights from the worlds of psychology, feminist analysis and political science. He also acknowledges his appreciation for the viewpoint of Thomas Mann in *Joseph and His Brothers*.

The Joseph cycle in Genesis covers chapters 37-50, about a third of the book itself. Appropriately, the bulk of Levenson's chapters focus on Joseph himself (such as "Joseph: Favored Son, Hated Brother;" "Joseph the Dreamer;" "Joseph from Rags to Riches;" and "Testing, Dreaming, Punishing"). As the book's title suggests, Levenson's approach is to present a broad portrait of Joseph, how he has been understood not just in traditional sense (Joseph the *Tzaddik*), but how Joseph has been regarded by a wide variety of Jewish and non-Jewish sources. In his depiction Levenson weaves in other biblical figures associated directly or indirectly with Joseph such as Jacob, Rachel, Judah, and Tamar. He also explores Joseph's heritage in later biblical history, such as references to the territory of Ephraim (as representing the northern tribes/Israel) and notes that Ezekiel the prophet conflates the names, *Thus says God . . . 'I am going to take the stick of Joseph – which is in the hand of Ephraim – and of the tribes of Israel associated with him, and join it to the stick representing Judah'* (Ezek. 37:19). Three chapters focus in on women who are noteworthy in the Joseph story, Tamar (via Judah), Potiphar's wife, and Rachel. Finally, in chapter 12, Levinson discusses various nuances associated with Egypt, both at the time of Joseph and in earlier and later biblical history.

Joseph: Portraits Through the Ages includes a Bibliography and an Index. The notes pages also feature a helpful listing at the top of the page which indicates the range of pages in the book covered in that section. It is not im-

mediately clear what the target audience is for this work. He presupposes some knowledge of the Jewish liturgical calendar with references to the “*pa-rashah*” and sometimes specific *parshiyot* such as *Va-yeshev* and *Va-yehi*. He also sprinkles his work with transliterations, although it is not quite clear why he does so. Further, he is fairly loose in his definition of words like “midrash” which for Levenson often means something other than the standard definition of that term. He refers to Jeremiah’s reference to Rachel in chapter 31:15 ff. as midrash (p. 164, and coincidentally with an incorrect citation), and likewise he terms Samuel Dresner’s novel *Rachel* as midrash (p. 169). Stylistically Levenson often strikes a very non-scholarly populist note. His book is filled with clichés or inelegant language: “Judah decides to fess up to his culpability” (p. 70); “Joseph initially does not reveal who he is because he does not wish to ‘blow his cover’” (p. 174); “a reader ‘would not place a bet’ on the firstborn getting his due” (p. 175).

To his credit Levenson offers the reader a broad variety of views on Joseph. He sets out his goals in his introductory chapter and he is faithful to his word.