

eyes of many hard-nosed “scientific” anthropologists), and the rather abrupt dismissal of Chomskyian linguistic theory (still convincing for a great many, including myself), speak to some critical lacunae. I do not deny the room for dialogue between these different perspectives, but would question whether “current approaches” to syncretism consist wholly in those that privilege the cognitive.

On a technical level, the volume needs clearer biographical data on the various contributors. This is often supplied by Leopold in her introductory comments, but not always. This is especially important given the diverse perspectives represented.

C. James MacKenzie

University of Lethbridge

Carol Meyers. *Exodus*. New Cambridge Bible Commentary. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 311 pp. Paper. ISBN 9780521002912. US \$21.99.

Carol Meyers’ commentary on the book of Exodus adopts a “centrist” position in current maximalist-minimalist debates, interpreting the pentateuchal book as an example of exilic historiography that utilized cultural memory for didactic purposes. Meyers’ approach flexibly wields historical, literary, ideological, and reader-reception theories to develop a “mnemohistorical” understanding of Exodus narrative and law. The result is a thorough-going commentary that summarizes well the state-of-the-Exodus-question and demonstrates for introductory students the variety of interpretive tools available to biblical scholars.

Meyers’ first chapter provides the reader with a broad overview of the biblical studies discipline, a summary of the key issues of Exodus scholarship, and a guide to the layout of her commentary. The second chapter annotates a bibliography (commentaries, reference works, near eastern literature, and special thematic studies) that serves as a helpful resource. The remainder of the book presents a section-by-section reading of Exodus, dividing the narrative into three broad literary units: Israel in Egypt, Sinai and Covenant, Sanctuary and Covenant. Meyers’ close reading is frequently interspersed with excurses that invite the

reader into a “closer look” at such biblical topics as circumcision, marriage in ancient Israel, musicians and midwives as professionals, and gynomorphic images of God. Additional digressions seek to “bridge horizons” between Exodus and modern American society; the Passover celebration, the Decalogue, and the ark (for example) are all linked to contemporary western culture. Throughout, Meyers displays a sensitivity to the literary artistry of the narrative, supplementing her discussion with relevant information from ancient near eastern literature.

The goal of the New Cambridge Bible Commentary series is to “elucidate the Hebrew and Christian scriptures for a wide range of intellectually curious individuals.” Given this directive, Meyers succeeds admirably in meeting the NCBC target. The inclusion of translated biblical texts, the numerous footnote discussions, and the minimal use of Hebrew language contribute to a readable scholarly rendering of the book of Exodus. As far as mainstream commentaries go, Meyers’ work is top-flight. But the commentary is not without a few problems. Clearly, the range of the “intellectually curious” is limited to an American readership who no doubt will find discussions of George Washington as a New World Moses (14), circumcision practice in the U.S. (66), or the Alabaman display of the Ten Commandments (168) pertinent. Those living outside the purview of this intended audience must either translate or ignore references to American arcana.

There is however a more profound issue in Meyers’ work, one that surfaces when read from a religious studies perspective. Meyers’ need to aggrandize the importance of the book of Exodus (21), her trepidation over the “Israelite concept of a god who might bring about freedom for some at the expense of the affliction of others” (80), or her struggle over the particularism of the “chosen people” (146) indexes a liberal sentiment troubled by the coarseness of the Bible’s churlish grain, yet desirous of its more elegant theological burl. Triumphalist readings of Egyptian defeat are certainly less appealing, but if the book of Exodus is ancient literary art, then why the moral angst? An answer emerges with the realization that in publishing such a commentary, Meyers functions less as a biblical scholar for her readers than as a biblical theologian, reflecting and (more importantly, actively) producing a

culture that dehistoricizes the problematic portions of scripture, gentrifying the grotesque and the unsavory so that the liberal religious might “appreciate its literary and theological features” while easing their concern over the divine havoc wrecked on Egyptian landscape (80).

Seen thus, Meyers’ commentary is more than a refined exposition on the self-definitional work of Israel’s literati. Hence her commentary is a strong contribution to a wider sociological endeavour: the construction and cultivation of a liberal religious identity in an increasingly conservative modern America. The process employed for such cultural formation is time-honoured: reinterpret ancient textualized memory for modern actualizational purposes. Under the guise of exegetical explication (i.e. trying to understand the Israelite and her collective memory), a new twenty-first century socio-religious consciousness is reconstructed, one sensitive to contemporary global concerns, gender matters, and religious etiquette. In so doing, Israel’s mnemohistorians join rank with modern biblical commentators—their productions may look like history, but their real intention is to instruct and create (5).

Does such biblical exegesis constitute disinterested academic scholarship? Should a pluralistic, relativistic society tolerate the financial support of a discipline committed to biblical exegesis as an end, rather than as a means by which to understand better human history and culture? The religious studies scholar would likely answer no, but then religionists are no less committed than theologians to creative culture-making. But such rarefied matters are not for the worry of the intended audience, who will learn much about one of the West’s most important mythologems from this commentary.

David A. Bergen

University of Calgary