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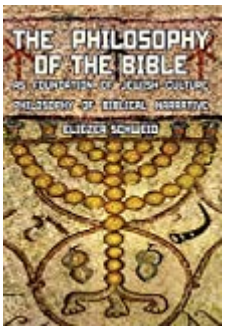

Eliezer Schweid. *The Philosophy of the Bible as Foundation of Jewish Culture. Philosophy of Biblical Narrative.* Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2008. x + 212 pp. $70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-934843-00-0.

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Schweid on the Bible: Philosophy or Ideology?

Eliezer Schweidâs *Philosophy of the Bible* is actually a two-volume work. The first volume is a âPhilosophy of Biblical Narrative,â the second is a âPhilosophy of Biblical Law.â Except for the first chapter of the first volume and the last chapter of the second volume, these books are loosely structured around themes and biblical passages that are relevant to those themes. The primary focus of the first volume is the book of Genesis, followed in significance by a treatment of Moses and the Egyptian enslavement. The second volume treats specific laws and ideas of justice and social organization as elucidated in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. There are incidental references to Psalms, and scattered treatments of passages from prophetic literature and the histories, but otherwise, this is predominantly a book about the potential relevance of the Pentateuch to a contemporary Jewish culture–title notwithstanding. The themes considered reflect Schweidâs personal interests rather than the Bibleâs agenda. So, for instance, there is hardly mention of purity laws, and the sacrificial cultic attracts little attention. My comments here will pertain exclusively to the first volume on biblical narrative, and predominantly the thirty-nine-page introduction at that, which places before the reader Schweidâs motivations and goals.

This is fundamentally an ideological work, in the sense that Terry Eagleton would define a work whose purpose is the âsocial determination of thought.â Schweid is not interested in evoking new critical approaches to biblical literature, nor does he provide any original philosophical insights. Rather, he is focused on showing how a return to “ole time religion” might help save Jews from the contemporary postmodernist catastrophe. After a very brief and historically selective survey of Enlightenment-era biblical studies–almost exclusively focused on Baruch Spinoza as a âprophet of political Zionismâ (p. 9)–Schweid makes clear that his two closely related foci are: (1) the emptiness of Israeli culture, and (2) the vacuous character of Diaspora Judaism. Both suffer from the effects of postmodernism, which has caused a loss of cultural rootedness. For Schweid, the Bible should constitute the foundational basis for all forms of Judaism–from religious orthodoxy to secular Is-

raeli Zionism. But the Bible has been displaced by a variety of sociological developments. Schweidâs goal is to show a path back toward Judaismâs roots (manifest in âlong-term cultural memoryâ), which he believes are best found in the Bible.

Diaspora Jews, Schweid argues, do not know Hebrew, and this is also a fundamental barrier to integrating the Bible into their lives. Schweid never considers the possibility or value of translating works into other languages. I surmise this is because he sees language as an essential part of culture and collective memory. Nor does he see the inherent contradiction in his notion that primary languages are a key to cultural vibrancy. He ignores the fact that Christians do not seem to be hampered by a lack of familiarity with Hebrew and Greek in developing rich religious lives centered on biblical literature. Nor does Schweid demonstrate cognizance of Yiddish or Ladino or Judaeo-Arabic, instances where Hebrew was subordinated to rich âJewishâ vernaculars. As for the Israeli paradox, Schweid recognizes that Hebrew usage has not saved Israelis from nihilism, but this is because Hebrew âhas become emptied of its traditional cultural content and filled with resonances of the contemporary life-flow, bearing linguistic influences of the countries of origin of immigrants and especially American English, for Israel grows culturally closer to the United States with every passing generationâ (p. 21). Without knowledge of the Bible–a knowledge which implicitly must be rooted in its original language–no long-term cultural memory is possible. And without this form of memory, a society will float aimlessly upon the seas of globalization and private egotism.

Indeed, what has caused this degradation of Judaism in its various guises–Diasporan and Israeli-secular–are todayâs ârampant individualism together with the globalization of mass-media cultureâ (p. 21). As noted, the culprit behind these phenomena is postmodernism. Schweid understands âpostmodernismâ to spawn a âcompetitive individualismâ and tendencies toward globalization in all aspects of society. The âideological, interest-serving nature of this outlook,â charges Schweid, is evident from âthe heavy prices of a psychological, existential, ethical, social and cultural kind,â both in terms of the family and the community (p. 22). How are these manifest? âThese are paid in the form of loss of identity, of solidarity, of the fragmentation of ways of life, of the sense of responsibility to the other and to the community.â Schweidâs socialist leanings have him draw attention to the particularly deleterious impact of this ideology on those with less means. âEveryone pays these prices, but especially those whom this economy of abundance exploits more than it satisfies their needs. The rifts in society portending upheaval are all too recognizable. It is therefore imperative to address the factors of postmodernism for the sake of a collective reorientationâ (p. 22). Without this reorientation, individualism and its destructive âegotismâ will pursue unbridled âapocalyptic solutionsâ against the interests of society at large.

The critique becomes reactionary against change in society. Traditional culture, Schweid declares, has irreplaceable value for contemporary society. âTo be wedded to the set patterns that flow from the rhythmic cycle of human life is regarded as conservativism in the negative sense, tedious and boringâ (p. 25). But for Schweid, in those rhythmic cycles and the traditions that have spawned them, we are to find cultural salvation. The individualism of postmodernity only benefits people selectively. Here Schweid breaks things down according to âclassâ–not exclusively economic, but also intellectual: âTo a creative personality that has absorbed a broad cultural background, it [postmodernism] offers a feeling of limitless freedom for creation [*sic*] expression of oneâs inner spirit. But from the standpoint of ordinary people dependent on a culture, or of collective humanity, it is defective and harmful. It offers a kind of entertainment that is stimulating and arousing but superficial and lacking in depthâ (p. 25). The conclusion is that postmodernism results in an âethical, social and philosophical bankruptcy, the same bankruptcy that totalitarian philosophies arrived at in an earlier generationâ (p. 26).

Diaspora Judaism has been particularly ravaged by the impact of postmodernism. Long-term memory has been replaced by dangerous short-term memory. Both âthe mystique of the Holocaustâ and the founding of the State of Israel have come to inform Diaspora Jewish identity as an element of *short-term* memory. As such, these trends are shallow and ultimately connected to trends within the materialist history of the twentieth century. âThere is no substitute for long-term [cultural] memory,â argues Schweid, âfor it alone carries those constant perceptions that serve as the foundation for the sense of group identity of a culture, as well as the sense of individual identity of a person who internalizes the values of that culture as a basis for new creativityâ (p. 29). Schweid then launches into a brief discussion of cultural socialization, the role of education, and how the restoration of the Bibleâs central role in these processes will help transform both Diaspora and Israeli Judaism.

But why the Bible? Why not the Talmud, or the

Midrash, or Maimonides, or all of them together? These literatures are briefly discussed in the introduction, but ultimately the canonical characteristic of biblical literature brings it to the top of the literary inheritance. âThere is something exceptional in [the Bibleâs] literary character that stands at the basis of its acceptance as a canonical work and its propagation beyond the circle of authority of the religions that institutionalized itâ (p. 31). And what would that exceptional character be? The Bible, âas a sacred work deals directly with the fundamental timeless questions of human existenceâ (p. 31). Even when ideas are problematic for modern thinkers, âit is a matter of supreme eternal importance to grapple withâ the biblicistâs issues, so as to forge oneâs own response. By grounding contemporary Jewish culture–secular, religious, Zionist, and Diasporan–in this "philosophy of the Bible," Judaism will regain the deep, long-term cultural memory it requires to provide people with meaningful lives.

Once the introduction has concluded, Schweid continues with a series of quasi-homiletical treatments of a broad array of themes. The second part starts with the question of whether there really is âphilosophyâ in the Bible. Naturally, given the title of this work, the answer is affirmative, but Schweid offers little more than shallow reflections on character development and broad biblical themes. Revelation, the role of the prophet, and some general theological notions–such as the creator God, human destiny, and history itself–are not situated within a history of ideas or contemporary scholarship. Morality, idolatry, particularism (Israelâs chosen-ness) and universalism (God of the world) are explained on the basis of biblical stories with no critical reflection whatsoever. There is hardly any exploration of questions of historicity, ideology, or literary development. Some aspects of Torah are related to as âmyth,â others as actual history, and yet others as history â[raised] to the plane of mythâ–an idea left rather vague. There are essentially no references in this work (other than a periodic note by the translator). Schweid shows no interest in situating biblical ideas against the backdrop of ancient Near Eastern societies, although he does not hesitate to speak of the âethical-political world of ideas embodied in the Joseph narrativeâ (p.111, and then 182-85) (quite astounding given the crude exploitation of the peasantry described in Genesis 47:13-27). There are numerous ideas invented by Schweid that have no basis in any text whatsoever, such as the notion of âthe Torahite law of freedom in Israel,â which is to be contrasted with enslavement in Egypt, and âthe democratic character of the regime of Godâs governance that is based on covenant.[1]

If one is looking for homiletical reflections on biblical passages, then this book may prove meaningful. From a scholarly perspective, however, I find little to recommend in this volume, even accepting its designated target audience. There are numerous extensive critiques of postmodernism currently in print, but Schweid neither references nor takes advantage of any of them: not JÃ¼rgen Habermas; not Christopher Norris; not Sheldon L. Wolin; not James N. Rosenau. Instead, he focuses generically on the hideousness of egotism and the rampant destructiveness of globalism. The critique is too simplistic to be taken seriously. Schweidâs socialist-communitarian leanings–leanings to which I am positively disposed–might have been grounded in any number of sophisticated treatments of contemporary culture. Authors such as Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, David Harvey, Alex Callinicos, and Leszek Kolakowski–to name some of the more prominent champions of or writers about Marxist criticism today–have all offered critiques of postmodernism that are far more eloquent and insightful than Schweidâs own. These are all philosophically rich works, none of which is reactionary, and none of which naively ascribes to a single phenomenon–postmodernism–the deterioration of contemporary society.

In effect, this is an extended personal essay. The author felt no obligation to situate his ideas within any given speech community of writers on the Bible or philosophy. This greatly compromises the value of Schweidâs program. He would have benefited by drawing upon people who have pursued parallel tracks. His insistence on the Bibleâs unique, sacred framing of âfundamental timeless questions of human existenceâ (p. 31) undermines any notion that there is âphilosophyâ in this book. This is squarely a book of ideology, one in which propositions are put forth without any critical scrutiny.

Essentialist claims are exactly the target of postmodernist thinkers, but Schweid does nothing to redeem their wounds. Ironically, Richard Rorty, who embraces a strong anti-essentialist neo-pragmatism, happens to explore ideas that are quite close to some of those Schweid prescribes for a healthy society. His lay-targeted book, *Achieving our Country* (1998) might have helped Schweid avoid ascribing all of societyâs woes to the anti-foundationalism of postmodernism. After all, Rortyâs own anti-essentialism should prove that one can still find oneâs way to a just, moral, and culturally rich society, without believing in the sanctity of a canon. Rather

than turn uncritically toward notions of the Bibleâs intrinsic value (notions that have no philosophical defense whatsoever), Schweid might have found particularly useful Rortyâs chapter, âThe Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature.âThere, Rorty advocates on behalf of âromantic utopiansâ who are âtrying to imagine a better future.â In a nutshell, that is fundamentally what Schweidâs book is all about–imagining a better future through the development of a richer Jewish culture. And if nothing else, Schweidâs work is infused with a romanticism about the value of ancient literature and stable cultural values, a romanticism which unfortunately isolates the author from those who are actively embracing projects that are very much like his own. Schweid, the philosopher, is essentially looking to foster a religion founded upon a certain attitude *toward literature*; not literature in general, but ancient Hebrew literature in particular. Rorty, the philosopher-turned-reader-of-literature, might have been sympathetic to this project–only without its essentialism. How ironic, then, that Rorty, not Schweid, brings his reader the following passage from Dorothy Allisonâs âBelieving in Literature,â where imagination and inspiration are rightly harnessed in the service of a rich cultural spiritualism:

> There is a place where we are always alone with our own mortality, where we must simply have something greater than ourselves to hold onto–God or history or politics or literature or a belief in the healing power of love, or even righteous anger. Sometimes I think they are all the same. A reason to believe, a way to take the world by the throat and insist that there is more to this life than we have ever imagined.[2]

Schweid would apparently like nothing better than to take the Jewish world by its throat, so as to shake into it some cultural sense. But for serious readers of Torah, and much religious literature beyond (Jewish or otherwise), best to stay clear of Schweidâs angry grip. There is little to be gained in attributing the causes of cultural emptiness to external enemies like postmodernism and globalization. Better that the philosopher and religionist look critically at the content of their literary inheritance, so as to evaluate with clear eyes whether that inheritance can really speak cogently to a world whose only consistent force may be change itself.

Postscript: I have not commented on the quality of the translation, but the reader will note how awkward some of the quoted phrases are and might conclude with me that the translator did not render either the most felicitous or flowing prose. This book is published by a relative newcomer to the academic publishing scene. We should all applaud the appearance of a new academic house in a world that is, indeed, diminishing an authorâs options outside of the big corporate publishing houses. That said, the book, while handsome at first appearance and in hand, is poorly printed. The type is neither black enough nor sharp enough. In some places, one can actually see pixilation. A standard, off-the-shelf laser printer today yields results infinitely superior to what appears in this book. If Academic Studies Press wishes to attract more manuscripts, it is going to have to drastically improve its product. There are also other annoyances. Placement of page numbers and the chapter headers do not conform to standard practices. The opening lines of paragraphs, rather than being indented, are backspaced into the left margin the equivalent of three letters. No explanation is given for this unconventional printing format. The book has a subject index, but no verse citation index, which is standard for Bible-related books. There is no bibliography, but that is because the book only cites a handful of writings by others in passing.

Notes

[1]. Both of these ideas appear in a variety of places in the first volume, but they are more thoroughly explored in the volume on biblical law; see p.3ff. and 34-45.

[2]. In Allisonâs collection of essays, *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class, and Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1995), 181; cited in Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 132.