



S. David Sperling. *The Original Torah: The Political Intent of the Bible's Writers.* New York and London: New York University Press, 1998. xiv + 185 pp. \$42.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-8094-7.



Reviewed by Carl S. Ehrlich (Division of Humanities, York University)

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There was a time within living memory when one could speak of a basic consensus within the field of biblical studies. Yes, there were distinct regional/intellectual schools, but one could nonetheless trace a hazy line of development leading in a certain direction. There were certain unquestioned “truths” upon which the discipline was founded. However, the discipline of biblical studies is currently in a state of flux. The fragmentation of the field into sub-fields and the development of mutually exclusive ideological and intellectual schools have occasioned a situation in which so-called maximalists and minimalists hurl invective-laden vituperations at one another, oftentimes in place of engaging in reasoned and dispassionate debate.

One of the major maximalist/minimalist controversies revolves around the questions of the historicity of the biblical accounts and of the integration of textual and archaeological evidence in the reconstruction of the social, political and religious history of ancient Israel.[1] Into this fray steps S. David Sperling with his engaging and readable book on *The Original Torah*, a book remarkably free of invective, but one sure to be attacked by both maximalists and minimalists. Hard-core maximalists will object to his denial of any literal historical narrative in the Torah/Pentateuch and in various other texts, as well as to his denial of historicity to such icons as Abraham,

Jacob/Israel, Joseph, Moses and Aaron, while the equivalent minimalist camp will surely question his acceptance of a united Saulide/Davidic/Solomonic monarchy in the tenth century BCE, perhaps as well as his unquestioning acceptance of a biblical or First Temple Israel at all.

The field of biblical studies is to a great extent reflective of the intellectual and ideological movements of its time (although evil tongues would claim that the field always lags about a decade or two behind the rest of the scholarly world in this regard). Be that as it may, a great influence upon biblical studies in recent years has come from the field of modern literary criticism (to be distinguished from the source criticism that has been one of the hallmarks of biblical studies since the nineteenth century). A greater appreciation of the Hebrew Bible as literature has led to a widening of the investigation into the ideological and theological underpinnings of the biblical text. This has been combined with the results of archaeological analyses of the material culture of the ancient Near East (specifically of Palestine or the Land of Israel) in the Bronze (ca. 3300-1200 BCE) and Iron (ca. 1200-586/539 BCE) Ages to arrive at a cautious attitude toward the assumption that the Hebrew Bible (or certain parts of it) is to be understood in a literal way. Basically, what separates the maximalists from the minimalists is not so much methodology, but the extent to which their

skepticism reaches. Sperling's approach is well in accord with the scholarly *Zeitgeist*. In spite of this, he arrives at his own synthesis of the evidence, one that will allow him to be both praised and criticized at any number of points, depending on one's position on the sliding maximalist/minimalist scale.

Sperling's major aim is to present the general public with a study in which he illustrates the value of seeking the underlying ideology and theology of the text in order to understand it in its "original" context.[2] As his test case, he chooses to look at the Torah, which—as he demonstrates—has assumed an iconic position in Christianity and particularly in Judaism. While he does appear to concede the existence of pre-literary stages in the development of the texts, his analyses deal in the main with the narratives as they are to be found in the Masoretic or traditional text and with the ideological rereadings that some biblical editors/redactors imposed on the narratives. In the final sentences of his book, he acknowledges the tentative nature of what he has proposed: "Some readers will no doubt object that it is impossible to recover what really happened and that consequently, my own researches are themselves allegories of the events I have reconstructed. If so, at least I will have demonstrated the potential of my approach" (p. 136). Nevertheless, he does not shrink from subjecting the text to an ideological analysis that demonstrates for the general reader the fruits of certain lines of inquiry in furthering our understanding of the biblical text in its contemporaneous (not contemporary!) context. Close to thirty pages of notes at the end of the volume allow the interested reader and scholar to explore further the issues that Sperling has raised in the body of his text.

In his "Introduction," Sperling argues—as have many others—that the modern reader must divorce him/herself from traditional religious readings of the biblical text in order to be able to hear the obscured voices of the original authors. Since archaeology has not managed to provide evidence for many biblical personages and events, Sperling concludes that many biblical stories must be read as allegories, by which he means "narratives contrived to signify a second order of meaning from what they present on the surface" (p. 8). He amplifies on this theme in chapter 1, in which he attempts to demonstrate that "It Says in the Torah" is not a sufficient axiom for the reconstruction of the history of ancient Israel. Framing his discussion throughout by recourse to tensions in traditional commentary, both Christian and Jewish, Sperling provides a brief overview of the development of biblical studies. His aim is to argue that the Torah cannot

be taken literally as a historical text, since it contains no externally verifiable information datable to the putative time of its narrative. Indeed, much can be found to cast doubts on a literal reading of the Torah.

Hence, in chapter 2, Sperling presents his main thesis, namely that the tales in the Torah are allegorical narratives, reflective of the later periods in which they were written, rather than of their narrative timeframe. Throughout he is conscious of his readers' potential frames of reference and tries to ground his allegorical readings of the biblical text within the context of traditional interpretation. Origen, Maimonides and others are referred to in order to indicate that an allegorical approach to the text is well grounded in religious tradition, while acknowledging that he is drawing inferences that would have been anathema to older generations. Although Sperling presents an outline of the use of the word allegory and related terms ("allegorizing," "allegoresis") based on the use of the word in classical Greek literature, he assumes an understanding of the word history. An equivalent discussion of the term "history" or "historicizing" would have helped the reader of this chapter on "History and Allegory." Having established his central thesis and methodology, the remaining six chapters of the book are devoted to six specific examples of allegories that Sperling has identified in the Torah.

The first of these is "The Allegory of Servitude in Egypt and the Exodus" (chapter 3). Sperling is certainly not the first to have argued that there is no historical basis for the biblical Exodus and Conquest traditions.[3] Lack of mention of these foundational events in Egyptian sources, lack of supportive archaeological evidence and the abundant anachronisms in the texts have led most mainstream scholars to question the accounts in the biblical text. While many would posit some sort of historical event behind the narratives, Sperling denies the surface narrative in order to posit an allegorical truth behind the text. For Sperling this is to be found in the changeover from the Egyptian New Kingdom domination over the city-states of Canaan in the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1550-1200 BCE) to the national states that arose in the Iron Age. The story of the Exodus, hence, preserves a dim Canaanite memory not of "servitude in Egypt" but of "servitude to Egypt" during the Late Bronze Age. The Conquest tradition is an attempt to distinguish the Israelites from their fellow Canaanites, by appropriating the origin tales of the Philistines and related Sea Peoples, elements of which probably did settle in the land after arriving from elsewhere. While this reconstruction is certainly plausible, an engagement with other "allegorical"

interpretations of the narrative, such as an Israelite rejection of the hegemony of Judah in the late tenth century would have provided a useful wider scholarly context.

Sperling next turns his attention to the subject of the covenant (berith) between God/YHWH and Israel (chapter 4). In contrast to Julius Wellhausen,[4] who argued that the notion of covenant belongs to a late legalistic stage of the development of Israel's religion, Sperling argues that the concept of a covenant between God and Israel belongs to the early stages of Israel's formation in the Iron Age and is paralleled by similar divine/human covenants among other peoples of the ancient Near East. He thus claims that the "legalistic" covenant predates the prophetic metaphor of the relationship between God and Israel expressed in terms of the covenant of marriage. He then presents a hypothetical history of these two notions of covenant in tension with a third biblical covenant, namely the Davidic one.

In chapter 5, Sperling turns his attention to "Abraham," whose name he tentatively interprets following Hermann Gunkel as that of a legendary ancestor (Ab) of the Raham tribe. However, the central part of the chapter is an analysis of Genesis 14, the story of the war of the four kings against the five kings, subsequent to which Abraham (still called Abram) rescues his nephew Lot and is blessed by Melchizedek, the priest-king of Salem. As Sperling indicates, this chapter was long thought to hold the key to determining the historical context of the ancestors of Israel. However, all attempts to find a contemporaneous extra-biblical context for this tale have proven unsuccessful. Consequently, Sperling argues that this chapter, indeed the character of Abraham, is an allegorical attempt to legitimize David and his policies by appeal to an ancient precedent for his actions. Just as Abraham allied himself with the sinful cities of the Plain, so too did David ally himself with the Philistines, the arch-enemies of Israel. The mention of Melchizedek and Salem/ Jerusalem serves to create an artificial ancient religious association between the Israelites and David's capital Jerusalem. Indeed, the anachronistic references to the Philistines in the ancestral narratives are used by Sperling to advocate a date in the tenth century BCE for the composition of these allegorical tales.[5]

In chapter 6, Sperling argues that Jacob and Joseph serve as allegories of the first king of the northern kingdom of Israel, Jeroboam I. In Genesis 28, the story of Jacob's ladder, Sperling identifies a northern myth regarding the foundation of the sanctuary at Bethel by Jeroboam I as a rival to the Temple in Jerusalem (1

Kings 12:29ff.). In a similar vein, Jacob's naming of Peniel/Penuel in Genesis 32 prefigures Jeroboam's building of that city in 1 Kings 12:25. Sperling argues in a similar fashion in the case of Joseph. Like Joseph, Jeroboam had to flee for his life to Egypt, where he was taken under the wing of the Pharaoh (1 Kings 11:40). The motif of Judah humbling himself before Joseph in Genesis 44 represents in Sperling's view the northern hope that Judah (the nation-state) would humble itself before Israel, a wish that came true only in the days of Jeroboam II in the first half of the eighth century BCE.

Sperling moves from Genesis to Exodus for the subject of chapter 7, namely "Aaron," the archetypal high-priest. Scholars have long noted the similarities between the Aaron of the Golden Calf episode (Exodus 32) and Jeroboam I.[6] Taking this as his starting point, Sperling argues that in the earliest layers of tradition, Aaron functions as a wonder-working leader alongside of Moses. He assumed priestly functions when he became an allegory of Jeroboam, a king who also assumed some priestly functions. However, it was only in the post-exilic period that the priests claiming descent from Aaron usurped the priestly functions from other priestly claimants, such as the Zadokites and Korahites. In his reconstruction of the history of the Aaronite priesthood, Sperling also presents arguments for its varying fortunes, positive in the northern kingdom until its fall, then suppressed in the south, until it was finally rehabilitated and triumphed in the days of Ezra the scribe in the fifth century BCE. While much of his argument must remain within the realm of conjecture, it would have been interesting to see how Sperling understands the story of the miraculous death of Aaron's two sons, who bore names nearly identical to Jeroboam's two sons, while offering "alien fire" (Leviticus 10:1-3).

The last chapter is devoted to the figure of Moses, the dominant figure in the Torah and indeed in Judaism as a whole.[7] Once again, Sperling views the figure as an allegory, and not as a historical person. In his zeal for God/YHWH, in his transmitting the worship of God/YHWH to the people, in his fighting the Amalekites, and in his nation-building, Sperling identifies parallels between Moses and the first king of united Israel, Saul. Thus, he concludes, Moses is an allegory for Saul. Drawing attention to the lack of mention of Moses in the Davidic traditions, Sperling finds the origins of Saul's worship of YHWH among a group known as the Kenites, who are mentioned in the story of the rejection of Saul (1 Samuel 15:6). The so-called Kenite or Midianite Hypothesis has a long and venerable history in biblical studies.[8]

Basing itself on the narrative tradition that Moses first encountered YHWH while he was living in Midian with his father-in-law, a Midianite or Kenite priest, the Kenite Hypothesis maintains that the worship of YHWH was transmitted to Israel through the mediation of the Midianites. Since Moses becomes for Sperling an allegory of Saul, Sperling concludes that it was Saul who introduced the worship of YHWH into Israel. It is interesting to note that Sperling's book emphasizes the centrality of the supposed contribution of originally northern Israelite traditions to the formation of the literature and thought of the Hebrew Bible and, thence, to later Judaism.

In summary, Sperling's *The Original Torah* is an excellent and provocative read, providing insight into one of many different contemporary ways of reading biblical texts. While not all will agree with all or part of his reconstructions of the original setting and meaning of the Pentateuchal narratives, his book challenges the reader to rethink previously held suppositions concerning biblical texts and—in this manner—does indeed supply the Torah with another one of its seventy faces.

Notes

[1]. For two recent and opposed discussions of the integration of textual and archaeological data, see William G. Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It? What Archaeology Can Tell Us about the Reality of Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* (New York and London: The Free Press, 2001).

[2]. For another attempt to present such a case, see

Yairah Amit, *History and Ideology: An Introduction to Historiography in the Hebrew Bible* (Translated from the Hebrew 1997 by Yael Lotan; The Biblical Seminar 60; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

[3]. See Ernest S. Frerichs and Leonard H. Lesko, eds., *Exodus: The Egyptian Evidence* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997).

[4]. Wellhausen (1844-1918) was arguably the most influential and important biblical scholar of the post-enlightenment period. His seminal *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* was first published in German in 1878. See the essays in Douglas A. Knight, ed., *Julius Wellhausen and His Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (Se-meia 25; Chico, Calif.: Society of Biblical Literature, 1983).

[5]. Sperling is not the first to have identified parallels between certain narratives in Genesis and the Davidic stories. See e.g., Gary A. Rendsburg, "David and His Circle in Genesis 38," *Vetus Testamentum* 36 (1986) 438-446.

[6]. See Moses Aberbach and Leivy Smolar, "Aaron, Jeroboam, and the Golden Calves," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86 (1967) 129-140.

[7]. About whom, see most recently Carl S. Ehrlich, "Moses, Torah, and Judaism," pp. 11-119, 659-663, in D. N. Freedman and M. J. McClymond, eds., *The Rivers of Paradise: Moses, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, and Muhammad as Religious Founders* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

[8] See Baruch Halpern, "Kenites," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 4.17-22.

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