

Reactions to Reading “The Exodus in Biblical Memory”

Hendel, Ronald "The Exodus in Biblical Memory". Journal of Biblical Literature 601-622 (2001): pg. 601

I. What Particular Issue is being addressed?

This author's thesis is wholly built on the assumption of the Documentary Hypothesis, in fact he supports a myriad of writers and an even greater conglomeration of fact and fiction than the base Documentary hypothesis provides.

An attempt is made to demonstrate that the Exodus event as recorded in scripture is a history of oral traditions that were organized and written as later remembered. The narrative as it appears today is simply a collective memory of cultural discourses that seek to support the present needs of society. While the Exodus event may be based on significant historical references the scriptural narrative is not reliable as an actual window through history, but rather it provides a view of events as that are later utilized in shaping and motivating this society.

II. What is the author's thesis in response to the issue?

The author categorizes the primary factors in the exodus account and provides insight as to how each were impacted through time by the selective memories of a society that sought to reorganize the past into a coherent narrative that would support the needs of the present. This author attempts to discover how later readers and writers of this scripture contributed to it and in fact created the narrative presented to us today. He is not interested in the original author or if early readers were impacted by this writing.

The author does not utilize later scriptural references that speak of the Exodus event, nor does he speak to how these aspects may have helped to shape the faith of early

readers or the readers of today. This author is wholly devoted to displaying how the many parts of the narrative were created to supply the Hebrew people with a central event in their history that continues to provide them with commonality and a unifying goal.

III. How does the author present His case?

In his introduction the term mnemohistory is presented to the reader along with a description of how many documentary sources contributed to the writing of the biblical account. The author also states that he feels there is sufficient evidence available to support the premise that memories of past events are consistently changed and re-organized by many cultures in accordance with their present needs. The main body of this article sets pace working topically in this section of scripture discussing the major themes and players, providing examples of what they could have meant to early document writers and then to later historians and rewriters of the biblical accounts. Thus the writer highlights his presupposed intentions of the scripture writers and seeks to display for us the misrepresentations of actual events.

This author does comfort the reader by assuring us that even though historical writings do not record the facts of history in one sense, they need not be disputed because these facts as represented by documentary writers are the synthesis of history and thus become true history in itself.

IV. What evidence does the author bring in to support his argument?

This article utilizes a logical approach to researching cultural memories called mnemohistory. The author while not balanced in displaying alternate views may appear well researched to the casual reader this article does contain a large amount of footnotes which support the author's observations.

It is notable throughout this article that the author utilizes many secondary and seemingly non-related theories and sources in support of his thesis. He does not site sections of scripture that could establish how the Pentateuch was studied and read by early believers, nor does he seem interested in later scriptures that highlight the authorship or time of writing of the Pentateuch. Utilization of archeological research is only presented as it supports the authors thesis, there seems to be no effort to include any evidence that would present disagreement to his statements. Alerting readers to other sources and theories which are dissimilar to his own could have drawn greater recognition to the strength of his argument.

V. Does the author succeed in persuading the reader?

This reader did not feel that the author was persuasive and did not see many strong points in his thesis or arguments. Possibly a reader who holds fast to a Documentary Hypothesis, or does not feel that a historical critical method should be used, would find great favor with this article.

The lack of counterpoints and any opposing views detracts sharply from the credibility of this author's position. His presupposition is apparent that all agree with his interpretation, thus he has no need to base his discussion in the deep roots of scientific fact or the realm of open discussion. Comments regarding what has brought him to valuing his point of view are entirely lacking from this article.

The study and pursuit of any historical truths are replaced in this author's thesis by the unsteady underpinnings of lies and selfish gains of a society intent on its own preservation through rewriting history. The Bible as a codified book of half-truths is what is presented here. We are encouraged to take heart though. It is for our benefit that the inaccuracy of history is given to us. This reader maintains that this authors

conclusion should have been simply. “Historical truth does not matter to me as long as what we are left with inspires us in some way”.

VI. What significance does this article have for the interpretation and preaching/teaching of the Pentateuch in the church?

This reader found little in this article that would be worthy of repeating to the Church. The writer of this article did assert the historical existence of both the Egyptian Pharaoh and the fact that he had slaves in his court that were known as Israelites. He also saw the great oppression of the Egyptian Pharaoh throughout Egypt and noted that there was a common memory of signs, wonders and plaques throughout Egypt. Although the author seems intent on crediting the plaques in part to rampant diseases that ravaged the area the thought is raised that the presence of these diseases brought to mind the earlier plaques even after the departure of the people of God.

The most intriguing point raised in this article was the observation by the author that only two things regarding Moses can be known, his name and the fact that he was married to a Midianite woman. His further reflections on Moses view him as a thematic character that was used time and time again as a man in-between. A mediator in the fullest sense, although one who failed to mediate fully and fell short in many areas including arriving in the Promised Land.

This however is the most enduring thought one could glean from this article, and to this reader it is notable that Moses status as mediator may well be one of the reasons that was and is a man so loved by God. Perhaps in some ways Moses reminded God of His son, the man who would be the ultimate mediator between God and man. The one who would enter the Promised Land with us, His mission of mediation completely fulfilled. I believe in His truth and ability to preserve the integrity of history.