

Jon Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible*, New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1985 ISBN 0-06-254828 – X, pp. xx + 227.

In *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible*, Jon Levenson, Albert A. List Professor of Jewish Studies at Harvard University, deals with two important symbols of the Hebrew Bible (the two great mountain traditions): the Torah, represented by Mount Sinai, and the Temple, symbolized by Mount Zion. In this well-written book, the author takes the reader through the ancient world of the Hebrew Bible with special emphasis on the significance of these symbols for present-day faith communities.

Levenson's introduction to *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* is particularly appealing to readers who are trying to understand the history of the Jewish Bible and what goes along with it. In his easy-to-read style, he explains the influence of Julius Wellhausen and Walther Eichrodt, along with their evaluation of law in the Old Testament. Moreover, Levenson gives an outstanding recapitulation of the problems associated with "Old Testament Theology" as it relates to the biases brought by Christian exegesis. He places in the forefront of his thesis a concern for both the law (Torah) and the Temple and argues that one need not reject the biblical text where it does not make sense historically because the writers were not writing as modern-day historians; rather, they had a theological purpose in mind wherein they primarily revealed facts related to the relationship of YHWH to his people. Levenson makes this point by way of archaeology: "Although in the popular mind, archaeology is often thought to prove the Bible true (i.e. historical), this is seldom the case, and it is occasionally the opposite of the truth" (10).

Levenson writes that his purpose in writing *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* "is not to trace the history of the ideas and institutions in question, but, rather, to utilize the historical background in order to elucidate the texts which are their classic statement" (12). Thus, this book revolves around clarifying the ideas that gave Israelite religion and all later forms of

Judaism, including modern-day Judaism, their characteristic shape and their permanence. In order to accomplish his task, Levenson divides the book into three chapters: (1) “Sinai: The Mountain of the Covenant” (15-80); (2) “Zion: The Mountain of the Temple” (89-178); and (3) “The Manifold Relationships between Sinai and Zion” (187-209).

Chapter one gives details concerning the significance and centrality of the covenant made at Sinai (Mosaic covenant), questioning the predictable misunderstandings regarding the keeping of commandments. Levenson discusses the Sinaitic Experience or The Traditions about It, YHWH’s Name in no Man’s Land, Sinai and the Covenant Formulary, the Theology of the Historical Prologue, Mitsvot as the End of History, Are Laws the Same as Commandments, among other areas. But his greatest contribution in this chapter is found in the suzerainty of YHWH, wherein he demonstrates that “The correlation between these elements and the covenant formulary...cannot be coincidental” (35). Levenson brings all thing together under the subject of YHWH becoming the suzerain of Israel and Israel becoming the vassal of YHWH. He then highlights the fact that “The Mosaic Torah is thus anything but a stern and impersonal taskmaster. It is a means of communion with a loving and personal God” (50).

In chapter two, Levenson explores the meaning of Zion in terms of ancient cosmogonies. In essence, he discusses how Sinai and Zion relate to one another and focuses on the disjuncture between the two covenant traditions. Which one carries more weight? Which image has more staying power? In his response to these questions, Levenson proves he has thoroughly investigated this subject and makes some valuable contributions to Sinai/Zion studies. Maintaining his focus on the suzerainty treaty, the author delineates how the Davidic covenant is different because the two traditions derive from different Near Eastern antecedents. Hence, the Davidic covenant does not follow the established suzerainty model. Instead, the Davidic

covenant's very structure is also symbolic in an interesting and purposeful way. While omitting certain details like a preamble, historical dialogue, and so on, God sets up a sharp contrast. In contradiction to the Mosaic covenant, a covenant made between two parties in which the vassal is responsible to the suzerain or else, here "the obligations involved in this covenant fall upon one party, YHWH the suzerain, who therein swears to maintain the covenantal relationship under all conditions" (99). One of the more valuable insights of this book is that David's house, although not specified in the covenant, is nonetheless responsible for maintaining the stipulations of the Sinaitic covenant. In the same way that the Old Testament relates to the New Testament, the Sinaitic covenant relates to the Davidic covenant. "There is not text in the Hebrew Bible," Levenson argues, "that holds that the Davidic replaces the Sinaitic" (99). However, Levenson notes that "If the Davidic covenant never displaced the Sinaitic in the Hebrew Bible, it did, in a sense, in the New Testament... Faith in the Messianic identity of Jesus, son of David (Matt. 1:1-17), enables the Christian to experience the grace of God without a commitment to this law (Gal. 3) (216).

Again, as with the suzerainty treaties of the ancient Near East, Levenson shows that the Davidic covenant did not appear out of thin air, but rather that it was a covenant of grant. It is at this point that Levenson offers an important evaluation of the two covenants. He writes, "The focus of the Mosaic covenant sealed at Sinai is twofold: history and morality... In the case of the Davidic covenant, history and morality are no longer the focus, for any claim God might make particularly upon the house of David has already been satisfied by its founder" (101).

Particularly enlightening is Levenson's analysis of the two covenants with reference to man within history. With respect to the Davidic covenant, its "focus is upon the constancy of God rather than the changeability of man, it brings to light what is secure and inviolable, whereas the

Sinaitic texts tend to emphasize the precariousness of life and the consequent need for a continuously reinvigorated obedience” (101).

In chapter three, Levenson addresses the question of the relationships between Sinai and Zion in the Hebrew Bible. Here he argues that the two symbols were not regarded as irreconcilable. Rather, they existed together in harmony in ancient Israel. For example, prophecy that was pronounced to the kings at court was heavily Sinaitic. The basis of the prophets’ oracles was the covenant made at Sinai. In the case, for instance, of Micah’s social criticism, the reading was heavily Mosaic but also very Davidic in that it was “a moving messianic prophecy (Mic. 5:1-5)” (198). Furthermore, Micah’s commitments to the Mosaic covenant in no way “compromised an allegiance to the Davidic covenant” (199). The interesting point is that, although both were present in Micah’s oracles, the Mosaic/Sinaitic was heard differently, in light of deliverance. Levenson provides many examples of this type to show that the traditions of Sinai and Zion were not considered to be incompatible.

I recommend this book to anyone interested in obtaining a broader understanding of the Hebrew Bible. It is a wealth of information and a very enjoyable read.

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