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The Calling of the Nations; Exegesis, Ethnography, and Empire in a Biblical-Historic Present

Edited by Mark Vessey, Sharon V. Betcher, Robert A. Daum, and Harry O. Maier.

University of Toronto Press, 2010. 384 pp.

This rich anthology, published as part of the “Green College Thematic Lecture Series” imprint, sets out to discuss and navigate discourses surrounding the ways in which historical interpretations of the Hebrew Bible have come to influence Western conceptions of national identity, territorial claims, and teleology. The volume covers early Christian and Rabbinic interpretations of the Hebrew Bible, as well as medieval, modern, and contemporary sources, including the European and North American exegetical milieus. Its authors’ various approaches to the subject are wide-ranging, encompassing literary, postmodern, theological, postcolonial, and critical-historical methods, as well as decidedly anti-postmodern and postcolonial perspectives.

Despite the diverse methodologies, the essays in this volume speak together, underscoring the fact that while disparate national identities have emerged and been eclipsed throughout history, until the present day, these have been informed, to varying degrees, by a primarily Christian and biblical-historical definition of nationhood. This, the editors assert, is more pervasive than most Western liberal academics and commentators tend to admit.

The volume is divided into three parts and covers a great deal of exegetical and methodological ground. In the introduction, entitled “The Bible in the West: A People’s History,” Mark Vessey introduces the concept of the *archeophone*, a specialized machine used to preserve the wax cylinder recordings of early phonography and transfer them to current formats. In so doing, cultural historians and archivists enable us to hear the past, making it, “miraculously present by state-of-the-art technology” (12). Vessey similarly asks whether “The Bible” serves as an archeophone by mediating between past biblical “idioms of nationhood” and our current reality—one that is all at once modern and “providentially continuous with the historical reality of the Bible?” (12). Archeophone-as-metaphor thus becomes omnipresent throughout the volume.

In the cheekily-entitled chapter “Perhaps God Is Irish: Sacred Texts as Virtual Reality Machine,” Donald Harman Akenson describes the success of Irish nationalism, which created an exclusionist *ethnography* by successfully capturing the “magical” nomenclature defining Irish nationalism and its inextricable linkage with a specific geographical area, thereby establishing a land claim based on the exclusive Divine name (46). This was bolstered by the development of texts establishing a genealogical justification to claim both the name and the land (46). Akenson draws an analogy between modern Irish nationalism and the mantle of Israel. He argues that the latter utilized a similar method for asserting authority by claiming the magical Jewish brand name, exile myth, and Israelite genealogy, and ultimately, transformed the Second Temple, destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, into “A Temple of the mind” (49). Turning to the impact of the Temple’s destruction upon early Christianity, Akenson argues that this younger faith also had to contend with constructing a new, Templeless religion (54). The genius of early Christianity and its claims to biblical genealogy, he states, was not due to an attempt to claim wholesale the holy names of Israel and Judah, but in adopting the identity of “the true Israel.” As such, Christianity declared itself to be heir to the promises made by God in the Hebrew Bible (54-55). Rather than staking their claim on a piece of land, early Christians instead adopted the spiritual realm, replacing topography with text (56). Indeed, Akenson’s is a study of what he terms “linguistic imperialism” and “self-protecting exclusivities,” both of which inform the other essays (58).

Nabil I. Matar shifts these claims to cartography, describing the mapping of Palestine as found in the *Theatrum*, by Abraham Ortelius—the first of many European atlases—in his essay, “Protestant Restorationism and the Ortelian Mapping of Palestine (with an Afterword on Islam).” In its presentation of the route of the Israelite Exodus and other biblical land-based themes, this is shown to have been far more of a theological and ideological map than it was purely geographical (60). The placement of the biblical map of Palestine immediately following “the Ottoman scourge of Christianity,” Matar states, is highly suggestive, implying the reinforcement of eschatology and Christian destiny. This, in turn, further suggests that Phillip II was Otelius’ patron, primed to engage the Muslim “infidels”. In this manner, cartography is shown to reflect and serve an exegetical and ultimately exhortative agenda.

In a similar vein, in the essay entitled “Beyond a Shared Inheritance: American Jews Reclaim the Hebrew Bible,” Laura S. Levitt points to the discourse implied by the decision of the Jewish Publication Society to name

their 1985 translation of the Hebrew Bible *Tanakh*. In interviews with editor Chaim Potok, and with Jonathan Sarna, she learned that the purpose of using the transliterated Hebrew title, *Tanakh*, was to educate the general public that Jews have an indigenous term for the Hebrew Bible. This purpose, however, was not highlighted in the publicity materials for the new edition. This, Levitt believes, reflects a degree of ambivalence that is likely due to the desire to claim inheritance of the Hebrew Bible through usage of the Hebrew term while also espousing the tenets of liberalism (85-6).

Levitt relates that, ultimately, the JPS translation did not solidify the identification of the Hebrew Bible as a Jewish text, as it cannot easily be categorized and often does not find itself shelved with other Bibles in bookstores. This compels a critique, as Levitt omits an important component of this discourse and tension: the question of audience. Although Levitt presents a strong analysis of the situation leading up to its publication, once released into the wild of the mass market, reaction to *Tanakh* took on a life of its own. In this sense, I would argue that the 1985 JPS translation was a success, becoming well-known and frequently used within English-speaking Jewish communities, particularly among Jews lacking Hebrew reading skills. Here, the title *Tanakh* has allowed individual Jews to momentarily exit the overarching tense discourse Levitt skilfully describes.

Robert A. Daum takes this further, stating that the naming of a Bible edition “has territorial implications” (121). This may be so, but if so, the question still comes down to how the texts are read and used (122). It seems evident that the JPS *Tanakh* has been more successful in addressing educational needs within the Jewish community than in serving a broader educational agenda.

Moving to the Roman context, both Harry O. Maier in “Dominion from Sea to Sea: Eusebius of Caesarea, Constantine the Great and the Exegesis of Empire” and Karla Pollmann, in “Unending Sway: The Ideology of Empire in Early Christian Latin Thought,” address notions of nationality and empire as they existed in ancient Rome. Maier describes the writings of Eusebius of Caesaria, who interpreted the reign of Constantine as a fulfillment of Bible prophecy, establishing dominion over the Barbarian and Greek nations (151, 163 *et passim*). In like fashion, Pollman describes the ways in which Virgil’s *Aenid* serves an almost biblical role in its textual justification of Rome’s dominion, presenting imperial ideas similar to those expressed by Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History* and other works (176, 180). Shifting focus to the

context of the North American First Nations, in “The Amerindian in Divine History: The Limits of Biblical Authority in the Jesuit Mission to New France, 1632-1649,” Peter A. Goddard describes the Jesuit mission to the Huron and Algonquin peoples as an attempt to bring these cultures to Christianity, but not by means of hearkening back to the biblical source texts. Rather, their approach was borne of the Jesuit understanding of what Goddard terms “the stadial theory, which sees human society advancing through stages, with the Christian stage, in this case, at the apex” (253). For the Jesuits, Amerindians were simply too “foreign,” and hence the biblical text took a back seat to practical conversion efforts. Usage of the Bible for conversion was further curtailed by worries regarding the dangers of individual Bible interpretation (255). Instead, Jesuits in New France emphasized the catechism, and offered Native peoples a simplified version of Christian doctrine. To the Jesuits, and in an apparent inversion of the biblical, land-based call to nationhood, Canada was not a promised land, but, in essence, a forgotten land populated by forgotten peoples (264).

This anthology is a fine collection of essays offering a broad yet insightful historical sweep of its central theme of the ways in which Hebrew Bible interpretations have come to influence conceptions of nationhood. While Islam and the relationship of the Qur’an to nation-claims were discussed in several essays, the absence of an essay on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was notable—particularly given the centrality of the volume’s theme to the Middle East discourse. One might understand why they chose to avoid this particular powder keg, which ultimately calls for its own study given the complexity of the issues at hand.

As editor Sharon V. Betcher points out in her epilogue, given the sharing of urban centres by more citizens than ever before, practicing their religions side by side, the essays presented in *The Calling of the Nations* clarify the need for new viewpoints and dialogue on the biblical text and its reception in the 21st century. Citing Jane Jacobs, who examines the city through a postcolonial lens, Betcher reflects upon the possibility that the contemporary scene may bring with it forms of imperialism triggered by nostalgia. In this way, traditions influenced by this nostalgia may come to resemble the archeophone—that is, repetition that aims to preserve culture, but instead renders it static, and therefore useless to the cause of engagement with the other (326).

These issues, and others found in this volume, invite significant questions, among them that of the proper contemporary role of sacred texts

and musings on whether religion itself is in need of a cure. For Betcher, this enterprise calls for a move toward greater awareness of the history of biblical interpretation so that groups may more harmoniously coexist. Neighbouring religions, she believes, can serve as catalysts to each other, warding against exclusivism (331-2).

Indeed, this acknowledgement of our need to coexist within the public square moves religion past the modern discourse, in which religion was an individual concern (334-5). Rather, a form of pluralism encompasses believers and non-believers alike (336). By becoming aware of the broad and deep influences and sociopolitical implications of our interpretations of the biblical text, we may, at long last, come to avoid the imperialist temptations illuminated by this most welcome volume (347).

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