
In The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction, Norman Gottwald adopts an approach that is in deliberate continuity with older historical scholarship, but which also seeks engagement with newer approaches that have gained force and momentum in this last twenty years. His is the first of the introduction genre to move beyond the standard historical-critical method of approach, and thus offers an important challenge to all existing introductions.

By a “socio-literary introduction,” G. means to “identify those literary and social scientific approaches to the Hebrew Bible which, in interaction with other critical methods, appear to be proving decisive for the changing directions of biblical studies” (xxvii).

The book is organized in four parts. Parts II, III and IV follow basically the same pattern in treating each of the major segments of Israel's history: premonarchic, monarchical and exilic/post-exilic periods. Part I describes contextual knowledge necessary for approaching the Hebrew Bible. This includes the history of its interpretation (chap. 1), its geographical, political and socio-cultural context (chap. 2), and its literary history (chap. 3).

G. cautions against attempting to get at the “content” and the “meaning” of the Bible too quickly overlooking the fact that we have no access to the content and meaning of the Bible apart from some method of study (since) all interpreters come to the text with assumptions, dispositions and tools of analysis that lead them to single out aspects of the text and to arrange, emphasize, and interpret those aspects in meaningful patterns (p. 8).
Until approximately two centuries ago, there was solid consen-
sus within the Jewish and Christian communities about the Bible’s
religious role. Then a second major phase in biblical study emerged
with the adoption of the historical-critical method which attempt-
eted to “establish the actual origins of the text and to evaluate the
probability that events it relates happened in the ways described”
(p. 10). Both methods have operated among Jews and Christians
for the last two hundred years — the one approaching the Bible as
“the revealed Word of God,” and the other “as the human literary
product of an ancient sociopolitical and religious community” (p.
16). Efforts to integrate these two perspectives led to the theolo-
gical synthesis of new-orthodoxy, in the form of a “biblical
theology” movement and to an existentialist reading of the Bible.

The last twenty years have seen the emergence of two new
major paradigms in an effort to get around the impasse in present-
day study of the Hebrew Bible: the first views the Hebrew Bible as
a literary production “that creates its own fictive world of mean-
ing and is to be understood . . . as a literary medium, that is, as
works that conjure up their own imaginative reality” (p. 22). The
other focuses on the Hebrew Bible as “a social document that
reflects the history of changing social structures, functions and
roles in ancient Israel over a thousand years or so . . . .” (ibid.)

The two recent approaches share a common concern with struc-
ture, the one with the structure of the writings themselves and
the other with the structure of the society which produced and
handed down the text.

As a result, the former “two-party conversation” between the
religious (= confessional) and historical (= historical critical) para-
digms, has been significantly enlarged to include two new para-
digms. Each of the four paradigms “points to an undisputed
dimension of the Hebrew Bible as a collection of writings that
teems with religious concepts and practices, discloses segments of
an involved history, reflects and presupposes social structures and
processes, and is itself an artful literary work” (p. 31). G. believes
that “we have entered a situation in biblical studies where inter-
action among an enlarged number of paradigms is potentially more
complex, problematic and exciting than ever before in the long
history of biblical interpretation” (p. 34).

After this methodological introduction (chap. 1), G. provides
a broad overview of the geography, archaeology, sociopolitical
and cultural history of the world of the ancient Near East within which the Hebrew Bible originated, took shape and was transmitted (chap. 2). "The ancient Near Eastern combination of geology and climate presented precarious conditions for human life," G. observes, "yet it was in the Near East that two of the great cradles of civilization were located" (p. 37). He finds the explanation for this in the irrigation cultures that grew up around the two great river valleys some 5000 years ago.

For it was in the irrigation-fertile river valleys of the Nile and the Tigris-Euphrates where people were able to concentrate in larger communities and a more elaborate system of social organization came into being. It was this state form of social organization which introduced authoritative leadership and administration to oversee the taming of the rivers and the cultivation of the fields, and (which enforced) certain allocations of the increased wealth that the new techniques and organizations made possible (p. 38).

_Up until the present_, our archaeological information has been mostly about "life among the rulers and upper classes" who inhabited the large administrative centers of the land but who constituted only about ten percent of the total population. "The rural life of Israel (probably close to ninety percent of the populace lived in small towns and villages) over the entire biblical period is not well documented archaeologically" (p. 63). Recent advances in archaeological techniques, however, coupled with current sociological curiosity about how all strata of Israelite society lived has encouraged the excavation of small, unwalled, agricultural settlements in their total setting of fields, terraces, and water systems, with growing sensitivity to the class indicators that might be reflected in the data. All of this holds exciting prospects for the re-study of certain classical topics of biblical study, including Israel’s origins, the transition to the monarchy, etc. Other avenues of study that hold promise include a fuller understanding of military and agricultural technology as well as of the land tenure systems in biblical Israel.

Another element of contextual knowledge necessary is that of the literary history of the Hebrew Bible (chap. 3). Here G. sets the Hebrew Bible within the context of other bodies of literature of the ancient Near East, observing that "the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near Eastern texts share a broad cultural heritage" (p. 81).
In this chapter, he treats of both Jewish and Christian literature dependent on the Hebrew Bible such as the Apocrypha (= Deutero-canonical) and Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the New Testament and the Talmud.

After summarizing the literary history of the Hebrew Bible, G. provides a helpful map of the various versions and translations from ancient times until the present.

Parts II - IV constitute the body of the book. Here G. embarks on a reading of the biblical literature sequentially according to its sociohistoric setting. His aim is "to facilitate a reading of the Hebrew Bible by placing its literature within the full history of Israel viewed in the context of all that we know about the ancient Near East at the time" (p. 136). By "full history," G. means to include the material, cultural, social, political and religious history of Israel.

Part II examines Israel’s origins in the period prior to its becoming a national kingdom under Saul and David (ca. 1000 B.C.E.). His biblical starting point is the traditions about the ancestors in Genesis 12-50, reserving a treatment of Genesis 1-11 for the monarchical period (Part III), since “to understand the distinctive perspective of Israel on the origins of the world it is advisable to examine first the traditions about Israel’s own beginnings” (p. 136).

Two fundamental questions guide the author throughout Parts II - IV: (1) How did the oral and literary traditions of the Hebrew Bible take shape and what is the sociohistorical understanding they provide or presuppose concerning each period in ancient Israel? and (2) How does the sociohistorical picture of each period presented or implied in the Hebrew Bible enable us to comprehend Israel’s place in its total ancient Near Eastern context? (cf. p. 136). G. begins the discussion of each of the periods of Israel’s history with an assessment of the “historical value” of the literary sources pertaining to each period.

The final section of Part II (chap. 6) provides, in summary form, G.’s extensive hypothesis concerning intertribal Israel’s ascendency to power in the highlands of Canaan in the mid-thirteenth century B.C.E.¹

The era of the Monarchy, which G. terms "Israel's counterrevolutionary establishment," is taken up in Part III, and focuses on the rise and triumph of monarchy in Israel (chap. 7), the history of the northern kingdom with reference to the (less documented) southern kingdom of the same period (chap. 8), and the history of the solitary southern kingdom after the fall of the north (chap. 9).

Important biblical writings deriving partly or wholly from the monarchical age are discussed in their sociohistoric contexts. Among these are the great traditionists J and E, the law document of Deuteronomy and the prophetic traditions of Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah of Jerusalem, Jeremiah, etc., all of which constitute sources for understanding the monarchical era which spanned some four centuries. G. adopts the chronological system of Edwin R. Thiele's third edition of *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* (Eerdmans, 1983) for this period.

G. cites previous efforts (based on the assumption that prophecy had one primary locus of institutional origin) to locate the central prophetic literary genre and its life setting either in the cult or the formulations of the *lawsuit* brought by Yahweh against Israel or the nations. In G.'s opinion, it is more likely that "the great variety of prophetic forms of speech suggest a deliberate drawing on practices from many spheres of institutional life" and that by the time of Amos prophecy seemed "well on the way to creating its own institutional matrix" (p. 305). G. notes the *psychosocial* emphasis of earlier social interpretations of the prophets and holds that a broader application of social scientific methods to prophecy suggests that the prophets were "intimately a part of their society even as their stances toward its current directions were highly oppositional" (p. 307).

In concluding the discussion on the rise of the monarchy, G. notes that in spite of the subsequent fatal collision of the weakened post-Solomonic states of Israel and Judah with the imperial designs of Assyria and Babylon, the forms of state rule introduced by David and maximized by Solomon set patterns that were continued by later rulers in the northern and southern kingdoms. He calls attention to four structural changes that had enduring interlocking consequences: (1) political centralization; (2) social stratification; (3) shifts in land tenure; and (4) the domestic repercussions of foreign trade, diplomacy and war (cf. pp. 323-24).

Part IV treats of the radical shift in geographic and sociohis-
toric frameworks of ancient Israel that took place in the wake of the deportation, expulsion and emigration beginning in the sixth century. The segment of later history traced in this section extends from the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. to Pompey's imposition of Roman rule in Palestine in 63 B.C.E. G. concedes that the cutoff date of 63 B.C.E. is arbitrary, in the sense that a full accounting of why the Prophets and Writings came to stand beside the Law as Scripture would require a treatment of the triumph of the Pharisees as the shapers of Judaism in the period following the unsuccessful Revolt against Rome (66-70 B.C.E.).

The meager and spotty biblical records for this period create major problems in reconstructing the exilic and postexilic history. It is not that the later period was literally inactive but that "hard historical data are scant except for the Maccabean-Hasmonean era" (p. 411). G. is optimistic that progress in social scientific criticism is certain as "more attention is paid to the socioeconomic structural realities of subject peoples in the great empires of late antiquity" (p. 412). He explains the diminished interest in large historical frameworks as compared with older biblical writings as caused by the "profound shock that Israel underwent in the transition from political independence to colonial servitude" (p. 413).

Periodization of late biblical history generally divides into exilic and postexilic ages, a division which G. believes "focuses on the deportation of upper class Judahites to Babylon and their extended captivity there" (p. 420). These categories, however, tend to "slide over important aspects of the period and even to break apart the fundamental unity of the dispersion/reconstruction process (ibid.). For G., "the new-Babylonian captivity of the sixth century was only one phase of a larger dispersion of Jews, begun as early as the Assyrian destruction of northern Israel in 722 B.C.E. and accelerated dramatically during the Persian and Hellenistic periods" (p. 420).

The Conclusion attempts a synthesis of the interplay of text, concept and setting in the Hebrew Bible. While the study of the Hebrew Bible is first and foremost the study of a text, each text is an expression of a point of view (concept) and a reflection of a social setting. G. believes that it is time to "rethink the field of biblical studies and to restructure our approaches to the Hebrew Bible to encourage systemic study of the literary, conceptual and sociohistoric sectors as integral elements of ancient Israelite/
Jewish life" (pp. 597-98). As an effort in this direction, he attempts to identify the basic components of a unified socio-literary-theological grid of the Hebrew Bible, consciously bringing together major elements of each sector. G. sketches a grid of key components arranged along domain, sectoral and geographical axes. He isolates five sociopolitical "domains" or "force fields" as having primary significance for literary and theological production: (1) the socioreligious revolution of early Israel; (2) the sociopolitical counterrevolution of monarchical Israel; (3) Israel's internal division into two states; (4) the destruction of both states; and (5) the restoration of Judah to colonial home-rule status (cf. p. 598). He then proceeds to link the sectoral axis to the domain axis by assessing within each of the stated sociopolitical frames, how specific social contexts produced particular literary forms with their distinctive theological expressions. This process includes the identification and characterization of: the relevant sociopolitical domain; the specific sociopolitical sectors that generate texts and concepts; the genres, tradition complexes, sources and books that constitute the literary sector; and, the concepts and patterns of thought that constitute the theological or ideological sector. A geographical axis is operative at two points in the process, i.e. during the divided monarchy and during the exile.

G. has traced these intersecting domain, sectoral and geographical axes throughout the book and he now provides a summary of these in two complex and intricate charts. The first presents the operative social and political organizational domains in historical succession (chart 11).

The second shows literary and conceptual developments as these unfold within the framework of the sociopolitical domains (chart 12).

The net result of such an approach is the realization that far from being a body of fixed doctrines, the Hebrew Bible is rather a rich collection of "theological reflections embedded in historically changing social situations and articulated in concrete literary genres and genre complexes" (p. 607). What remains for those of us who employ the Hebrew Bible as "a mediator of religious faith and theological reflection" is the multidimensional interpretive task of seeking to interpret, at one and the same time, the social situations and literary idioms of the biblical texts, and the social situations and literary idioms of ourselves as interpreters/
actors (cf. p. 607).

Such an approach to the biblical text holds great promise for those deeply involved in reading the biblical heritage from within the context and process of contemporary social struggle. It has a special relevance for the present efforts in the Philippines toward articulation of "theology of struggle."

*The Hebrew Bible* includes numerous maps, tables and charts to enhance comprehension, including a table of ancient Near Eastern texts (table 1) keyed to Pritchard’s ANET and Beyerlin’s NERT. Especially helpful is the chart detailing the growth of the Hebrew Bible from small oral/literary units to large compositions and collections (chart 3). Most chapters begin with lists of relevant biblical readings and are keyed to Aharoni and Avi-Yohanan’s *The MacMillan Bible Atlas*.

A working bibliography of 63 pages is provided in two parts: (1) an extensive list of books and articles arranged according to the divisions of the book; and (2) commentaries arranged according to the biblical books. Both are confined to English titles.

Gottwald’s *The Hebrew Bible* offers a challenge to the more conventional historical-critical approach to biblical study, which some have declared to be bankrupt. The addition of a socio-literary interpretation to older confessional and historical approaches opens the possibility that the biblical past might be brought to clearer interpretation and our present be illumined with new possibilities linking personal and social transformation with a peace that is built on and arises out of justice.