

Konrad Schmid, *The Old Testament: A Literary History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011).

Part A: Purpose, History, and Problems of a Literary History of the Old Testament

Schmid's meticulously written thoroughly Germanic¹ investigation of the literary history of the Old Testament commences with his addressing, first, the question 'Why Do We Need a Literary History of the Old Testament?' As he states it in the Preface

My aim is to present a history of the literature contained in the Old Testament that attends primarily to the lines of intellectual development and the textual relationships within it (p. xi).

He hopes, by doing so, that his

... book will foster the dialogue between German and English speaking scholarship in biblical studies, which is still in need of further development (p. xiv).

And that is exactly what he begins to do in the opening chapter. He sets out his task, offers readers a history of scholarship on the subject, and places the literature of the Old Testament within its context as a segment of the literature of Ancient Israel. This latter point is important as readers of the Old Testament sometimes have the impression that the Old Testament is the sum of all ancient Israel's literature. It surely is not, nor was it ever.

These [other texts] have not survived, but that other texts once existed is more probable than that they did not exist (p. 14).

Schmid also helpfully reminds us (or perhaps informs some readers for the first time) that

There is no such thing as *the Old Testament* or *the Hebrew Bible*; Jewish and Christian traditions recognize different organizations of the biblical books (p. 15).

Having then investigated such matters as canon and the place of literary criticism amongst the other critical tools utilized by Old Testament scholars, Schmid then addresses the second major theme of the chapter- Language, Writing, Books and Literary Production in Ancient Israel (pp. 30ff).

¹ By which I mean a carefully researched and thoroughly explained investigation. It is a compliment of the first order.

In light of what we presently know concerning literacy and illiteracy (or think we know) Schmid's caution is refreshing and his suggestion helpful. He writes

... there is no precise boundary between literacy and illiteracy; the mastery of reading and writing was, then as now, a gradual process. A little note attesting to the delivery of goods like those appearing, for example, in the Samarian ostraca could undoubtedly be deciphered by a broader circle than the Siloam inscription or a prophetic book (p. 32).

This is significant. Often we hear hard and fast numbers concerning rates of literacy in ancient Israel and the truth is, as Schmid has rightly seen, people could probably have easily read and even perhaps written simple receipts whereas complex narratives may have been beyond them. Simple snippets of text do not necessitate full blown literacy.

Who wrote the texts we find in the Old Testament and for whom were they written? I think that Schmid is persuasive when he opines

... Old Testament literature was written by scribes for scribes... This seems especially likely because of the extreme degree of intertextuality in the Old Testament literature... (p. 38).

Because he correctly perceives the interplay between texts in the Old Testament, Schmid is skeptical of oral transmission. In perhaps the most important segment of the chapter, Schmid argues

Above all it is observations on the intertextual interweaving of many of these pieces, and their dependence on literary context, that make it impossible to conclude that they were originally oral material (p. 39).

So much, then, for the Scandinavian School. In Schmid's estimation, the very fact of intertextuality makes the entire 'oral transmission' theory impossible.

The first chapter concludes with a description of the methods and presentation the volume will utilize. First, Schmid states the cultural impact of the ancient near eastern empires and the periodization of Old Testament literature. He remarks, astutely,

The originality of the Bible lies not in the immunity of its materials to analogy, but in their interpretations and transformations, none of which can be adequately understood without looking beyond the Bible itself (p. 43).

Still, he warns against the madness of parallelomania.

And he is also aware of the latest interpretive tools being utilized by literary critics of the Old Testament: reception history and tradition and memory (or cultural memory). He argues in this connection that

...Old Testament texts can be “present” and literally historically relevant in the modes of memory, tradition, and reception in different periods (p. 47).

He then cleverly observes

The dispute between maximalists and minimalists, between “early” and “late” dating is often carried on without regard for these distinctions (p. 47).

In all, Schmid’s initial chapter is well formed and commendable. Next, Part B, as this multi-segment rather lengthy review continues.

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