

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

Part C – The Literature of the Assyrian Period (Eighth-Seventh Centuries BCE)

Schmid offers compelling evidence that four ‘broad theological themes’ developed in the Assyrian period in the literature of Israel.

First,

... traditions that react to Assyrian threats and the subsequent fall of the Northern Kingdom by accusing not God, but the king and the people (p. 68).

Second,

... ‘kingless’ legends of Israel’s origins... (p. 68).

Third,

... in a different direction, the materials in the wisdom and Psalms traditions appear to continue upholding the ideal of the monarchy (p. 69).

Fourth,

... decidedly anti-Assyrian concepts that transfer the relationship of loyalty demanded by Assyria to Israel’s own relationship with its God. Here we should mention especially the book of Deuteronomy, which can be approached as a subversive reception of Neo-Assyrian covenantal theology (p. 69).

The chapter fleshes each of these out quite fully, Schmid offering examples of cultic and wisdom texts datable to the Assyrian era (like Psalm 46 and 48, 24, and 93 along with 72). Also coming to life in this period, Schmid continues, are basic legal texts (the Book of the Covenant) and narrative texts (like the beginnings of the Deuteronomistic ‘Books of Kings’) which he suggests arose in the era of Josiah.

Schmid imbibes the theory of Finkelstein that the destruction of the Northern Kingdom led to a mass exodus towards the south and that many texts were transported there. Yet he also asserts that the streams begun in the Assyrian period weren’t completed until the Persian era.

Along the way Schmid makes some genuinely intriguing suggestions including

It is thus entirely imaginable that the political program of Judges 3-9 can be set within the framework of an orderly empire and to that extent... is pro-Assyrian in its orientation (p. 79).

And

...above all the Neo-Assyrian background of the [Moses] tradition reveals the critical, anti-Assyrian orientation of the Moses narrative, in sharp contrast to Judges 3-9. In place of the Assyrian great king, the non-monarchical figure of Moses appears as the one chosen by God to free Israel from imperial slavery (p. 81).

Evidently the compilers of the Hebrew Bible either didn't see the contradiction or they were happy to integrate desperately opposing viewpoints without any hesitation.

Schmid examines as well the Abraham-Isaac-Jacob cycle and suggests (probably accurately) that

The Isaac and Abraham traditions are thus probably not originally related as basic layer and expansion but as two sources alongside one another, so that the Abraham narratives, bit by bit, adopted motifs from the Isaac tradition and expanded them further. The combination of Abraham and Isaac narratives was still probably completed in the monarchical period (p. 86).

Schmid, then, is midway between a minimalist and a maximalist. He accepts the basic historicity of the monarchical period but he's well aware that the traditions compiled in the Old Testament have lengthy histories of compilation and accretion.

Schmid treats in the present chapter the origins and early stages of prophetic literature, writing

... the beginnings of the construction of prophetic traditions must lie in those books whose protagonists belong both biblically and historically to the Assyrian period: Hosea, Amos, Micah and Isaiah (p. 88).

For Schmid, written prophecy began with the fall of the North because it was then that the situation necessitated writing down what had previously been orally transmitted.

Concerning Hosea

It seems obvious, then, that Hosea's message has been literarily updated for Judah in order to make it impossible for readers there to historicize the text and to force them to apply Hosea's tradition to themselves as well (p. 89).

Intriguing thought, isn't it? To be sure, it isn't a new thought, but it is so nicely and compactly formulated that it's worth noting.

Schmid's examination of the other Assyrian period prophets is equally instructive. But perhaps the highlight of the chapter is his treatment of the legal traditions springing up in the Assyrian era.

Deuteronomy can be understood over long stretches as a reinterpretation of the Book of the Covenant, while the Holiness Code in turn accommodates material from Deuteronomy to the Priestly document (p. 96).

Naturally the primary weakness of Schmid's entire argument is the now fairly dated 'source' theory with which he (and many Old Testament scholars) operates.

Nonetheless, Schmid's present chapter is incredibly informative. Next, the Babylonian period materials.

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