

***Rewritten Biblical Figures*, edited by Erkki Koskenniemi and Pekka Lindqvist**

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I am typically hesitant when reading a volume that begins by defending the validity of its own internal argument. And when *Rewritten Biblical Figures* opened with Antti Laato's rather lengthy explanation of what it was the included authors were actually talking about, I was strangely reminded of my youth when I, always "late to the party," would do anything to be noticed by my peers. In fact, it is not evident that what the authors are doing here is any different from Reader-Response Criticism, Newer Literary Criticism, or even a throwback to what different



strands of Redaction Criticism sought to accomplish. While methodological repetition is not a problem, the Rewritten Bible Network's belief (as Laato describes it on page 1) that it is doing something entirely unique, and therefore paradigm-changing (a rather bold assertion), is not one soundly grounded.

Antti Laato's article ("Gen 49:8–12 and Its Interpretation in Antiquity") takes up the task of clarifying the term "Rewritten Bible" through a focus on Jacob's blessing of Judah and how it has been rewritten in ancient contexts. Laato investigates how the passage has been translated in the Targum, Peshet, Midrash, Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, and theological tractates within the Christian tradition. Lotta Valve's article ("Typological Use of Traditions of the Jacob Cycle in the Book of Malachi") investigates how the Jacob traditions have been used in the post-exilic prophetic book of Malachi. She concludes that the dichotomy between Jacob and Esau does not denote only Israel and Edom but that both brothers are found within the "post-exilic Israelite audience" itself. Pancratius C. Beentjes takes on Ben Sira's view of Elijah (in "Ben Sira's View of Elijah [Sir 48:1–11]") and concludes that "Ben Sira's portrayal of Elijah definitely demonstrates there is no doubt the Jerusalem sage took the Hebrew Bible of his days very seriously" (56). Jacques van Ruiten's article ("Abraham's Last Day according to the Book of Jubilees [Jub 22:1–23:8]") shows how Jub 22:1–23:8 rewrites Gen 25:7–10. Michael Becker (in "Abraham in the *Genesis Apocryphon*") argues that the whole scroll of the *Genesis Apocryphon* is an example of "rewritten Bible," due largely to its revisions and alternatives to the biblical traditions within Genesis. Folker Siegert (in "Emotional Plausibility in Josephus's Rewritten Genesis") argues that Josephus, in his *Antiquities* (1.1–2.200), expands upon the traditions in Genesis and makes them accessible to a Hellenistic culture and psychology. Erkki Koskenniemi's article ("Joseph and Potiphar's Wife [Gen 39:6b–20]") shows how early Jewish ethical instruction retold the narrative on Joseph and Potiphar's wife and made constructive use of the narrative. Pekka Lindqvist (in "The Rewritten Broken Tablets") traces out early rabbinic retellings of Moses's shattering of the stone tablets in Exod 32. Michaela Bauks's article ("Rewritten Jephthah [Judg 11:29–40]") demonstrates why the Jephthah narrative was problematic in Medieval Jewish literature—which prompted oftentimes creative commentary. Lukas Bormann's article ("Paul and the Patriarchs of the Hebrew Bible") argues that Paul's rhetorical use of the Patriarchs was "deeply related to the Jewish traditions of his times which were formulated in the literature called Rewritten Bible" (180). Paul competes for the heritage of the Patriarchs and rewrites them as forefathers of both Jews

and Christians. Anna Tzvetkova-Glaser (in “Joseph and his Egyptian Family in the Interpretation of Origen and the Early Rabbis”) tackles the interpretative particularities of Gen 41:45 by Origen and the early rabbis and argues that some traditions in the interpretation of “Aseneth’s familial story” originated from first-century CE Palestine. Martin Tamcke (“Ephraem’s Joseph”) analyzes the role of Joseph in the Syrian Christian tradition and concludes that Ephraem selectively uses biblical narrative materials by choosing only that which was fundamental for context or theological reasons. Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta (“Cain, Ruler over the Cave”) analyzes the figure of Cain in the anti-heretical writings and the Nag Hammadi texts. He concludes that while Gnostic views on Cain range widely, he is generally considered to be of low stature. Mariano Gómez Aranda’s article (“Jacob’s Blessings in Medieval Jewish Exegesis”) concludes that the differences among medieval Jewish exegetes reflect different historical contexts and situations. Hannu Töyrylä (“The Patriarchs and the Creation in Megillat ha-Megalleh”) concludes that Bar Hiyya—in contrast to criticisms that his work is fragmentary—uses a wide range of methods and source materials to create a coherent set of ideas upon which his exegesis of Genesis is based. And, Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila (“The Story of Joseph in Islamic Literature”) argues that the Surah of Joseph is both a rewritten narrative and one whose meaning is found within its own *Sitz im Leben*.

What, then, is the entire enterprise to which this volume is dedicated? According to Laato, “Rewritten Bible” is an interpretative process that “opens up a new horizon for a modern critical scholar to understand that a reader in antiquity attempted to build up his religious referential world with the aid of the biblical text” (26; but compare Valve’s somewhat more restrictive definition of the term as a reference to post-biblical texts in which the Bible is retold [27]). But of course, the term “Rewritten *Bible*” assumes the existence of “Bible” as a canonized and socially legitimated symbol; otherwise, the appeal to a Bible, both symbol and text, to build a referential world would be meaningless. In that regard, several from among the included articles, whose foci are on the biblical text itself, seem out of place in this edited volume. Lotta Valve’s article (27ff.), for example, discussed Malachi’s adoption of the Jacob cycle. However, it is unlikely that the author of Malachi was aware of borrowing any *biblical* tradition above a cultural tradition. “Bible” as a meaningful symbol would be a much later development.

As a whole, the volume seems uncertain about whether to accept that the (Hebrew) Bible contains universal or objective truths transferrable from

one cultural context to another or not. That uncertainty, however, is an illicit pleasure; the process of *rewriting* necessitates the overwriting of one culturally determined meaning with another more contemporary one—an idea of which the volume does not seem expressly aware. In that more pressing sense, the biblical characters are little more than memes. That said, I would certainly agree with the volume’s assumption that later authors who revised biblical stories or characters did so to give their own writings credibility—the practice of appealing to authority that was a characteristic quality of historical literature. Some articles, however, left me somewhat bewildered: Pekka Lindqvist’s carefully argued conclusion (168), for example, that Moses was not a “short-tempered fool” (and so would not have carelessly thrown down tablets written by a divine hand) seems to be little more than an exercise demonstrating that rabbinic authors reinterpreted biblical texts (a fact to which the Talmud already testifies).

There is, to be sure, benefit to tracing out themes that are carried through from one text to another—it shows cultural borrowing or influence. And in this regard I was hopeful for Hämeen-Anttila’s article on the Surah of Joseph (275–83). That article, however, does little more than identify the uniqueness of the surah and conclude that it is best understood within its Qur’anic context (283)—hardly a conclusion that needs to be proved. While this volume should be commended for emphasizing the importance of identifying reinterpreted traditions, biblical or otherwise, I think that the volume’s internal, dogged focus on validating Rewritten Bible as a new critical method or interpretative process overshadows the work of any one scholar and produces a general sense of tediousness within the collection of sixteen articles. But to be fair, this volume is part of a larger series focused on Rewritten Bible and so operates within that framework. And, there is still redemptive value in the work. It forced me as a reader to rethink some of the conventions I had previously taken for granted. To that end, something I would have liked to have seen more of is an allowance for the malleability of even “canonized” meaning rather than suggesting, intentionally or not, that biblical meaning had achieved a certain approachable universality.

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