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Review of Yairah Amit, *Shoftim (Judges: Introduction and Commentary)*

Michael Carasik

University of Pennsylvania, mcarasik@sas.upenn.edu

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Abstract

Let me begin my review of Yairah Amit's *Judges* volume in the *Mikra LeYisra'el* commentary series by making an admission which, rumor says, more of my fellow reviewers make than do: I have not read this book--not, at any rate, from cover to cover. I make this admission with a clear conscience because of the hybrid nature of the commentary form, part introductory material, part reference work. What I have done, therefore, is to read the book's introduction and to use the rest of the book as its owners and borrowers will do, by consulting the commentary, the fifteen excurses, and the eight indexes (to biblical references, extra-biblical literature, textual witnesses, emendations, structural/redactional terms, religious terms, grammatical terms, and geographical names). My purpose was to get a sense of how useful the volume will be for me--and hence, I hope, for the typical reader of *Hebrew Studies*.

Disciplines

Biblical Studies | Jewish Studies

Wevers' notes indispensable when working on LXX Exodus and also while preparing the Leviticus volume for the New English Translation of the Septuagint. What I value particularly about his approach is that he allows for the possibility that variant readings of the LXX are ascribable to the fact that the LXX is a Jewish exegetical document. In fact, one hardly picks up any volume of his which does not refer in one way or another to Z. Frankel and/or L. Priejs, two scholars who in the previous century carefully documented the relationship between the Septuagint and halakhic literature.

Dirk L Buchner
University of Durban-Westville
4000 Durban, South Africa
dbuchner@pixie.udw.ac.za

SHOFTIM (JUDGES: INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY).
By Yairah Amit. *Mikra LeYisra'el/A Bible Commentary for Israel*. Pp. xiv + 337. Tel Aviv/Jerusalem: Am Oved/Magnes Press, 1999. Cloth, \$17.78.

Let me begin my review of Yairah Amit's *Judges* volume in the *Mikra LeYisra'el* commentary series by making an admission which, rumor says, more of my fellow reviewers could make than do: I have not read this book—not, at any rate, from cover to cover. I make this admission with a clear conscience because of the hybrid nature of the commentary form, part introductory material, part reference work. What I have done, therefore, is to read the book's introduction and to use the rest of the book as its owners and borrowers will do, by consulting the commentary, the fifteen excurses, and the eight indexes (to biblical references, extra-biblical literature, textual witnesses, emendations, structural/redactional terms, religious terms, grammatical terms, and geographical names). My purpose was to get a sense of how useful the volume will be for me—and hence, I hope, for the typical reader of *Hebrew Studies*.

Since I believe this is the first review of a volume of *Mikra LeYisra'el* in *Hebrew Studies*, let me take a moment to present the series. It is described in the preface provided by the general editors, Shmuel Ahituv and (originally) Moshe Greenberg, as “modern” and “professional,” and on the series title page and the cover of the book as “scientific,” that is, grounded in intellectual effort rather than religious belief. But like its American cousins in the Jewish Publication Society commentary series, it sees itself as

very much indebted to traditional Jewish exegesis. Hence Amit's commentary moves easily in this realm, from Targum through midrash to the mediaevals and beyond. She can cite Rashi and Rashbam as readily as Boling and Burney; given the nature of a Hebrew-reading audience, more so. Thus on the odd use of the Hiphil of ירע in Judg 8:16, she quotes David Kimhi's suggestion that it might be interpreted using the standard meaning of the word, citing Jer 16:21 in support; interprets Targum Jonathan as implying an original וירע; and ends by suggesting that the reading of the Septuagint, retroverted to שידע, is the correct one, based on the use of the same verb in v. 7. This is the general plan of the commentary: to treat both the current form of the text and the explanations provided for it in Jewish tradition seriously and respectfully, but to let a contemporary scholarly sensibility be the final arbiter. For this reader, it's a satisfying mix.

Amit's approach to Judges, as her introduction indicates, is centered on her understanding of the central core of the book (3:7–16:31) as carefully edited to demonstrate a cycle of sin, punishment, prayer, salvation, and rest repeated seven times under a sequence of ruling "judges." The third "judge" in the sequence is listed in her chart (5) as "Deborah and Barak," an entry that gains more significance when one reads in her commentary to Judges 4 and her excursus on the relationship between Judges 4 and 5 that the identity of the "savior" is deliberately left unsettled (Yael also enters into the picture) so that the reader will understand that God is the real savior. According to her reading, most of the Deuteronomistic terminology in the book is limited to the introduction (2:6–3:4), and is almost all proto-Deuteronomistic, at that. The chapters on Micah and Dan (17–18) provide the third part of the original book, which she dates to the era of Hezekiah. The introduction of Jonathan the grandson of Manasseh/Moses clearly puts the implied date early in the period of the Judges. Amit views this editorial shaping as a way of telling the reader that the seven cycles of the main body of the book are getting Israel nowhere fast. She sees Judges 19–21 as a kind of anti-Saulide appendix to the book (comparable to 1 Chr 10:13f.), dating to the Second Temple period. (The table of contents, for some inexplicable reason, sets off Parts 1 [1:1–3:6] and 2 [3:7–16:31] of the book, but then drops the scheme.)

As one would expect, Amit's sensitivity to literary features of the text is a strong point of the commentary. An example is her treatment of the theme of Eglon's obesity in the story of Ehud (3:12–30). At v. 17, where we first encounter mention of it, she points out that the word בריות (always applied to animals outside of Dan 1:15), combined with the king's name,

implies that he is a calf ready for the slaughter—yet at this stage his fatness suggests that Ehud (with his short sword, a conclusion explained in her note to the *hapax* נמר in v. 16) may have some difficulty in killing Eglon. In v. 22, the king's fat turns to Ehud's favor, hiding the murder weapon entirely and sealing in the tell-tale blood that might have alerted Eglon's courtiers sooner. In her introduction to the section, Amit points out that the word שמן, describing those whom the Israelites kill, is used in 3:29 with a rare meaning (RSV "strong," AV "lusty," NJPS "robust"; cf. Ezek 34:16) in the service of the motif: The entire struggle is revealed as a battle of the "thin" Israelites against their "fat" oppressors. Finally, she wonders whether the eighty (שמינים) years of rest—a unique occurrence—is not meant to cap off the joke.

Our volume lacks one feature with which most biblical commentaries are provided: a translation. But Amit is careful in her commentary to translate biblical Hebrew (and her frequent quotations from the Targum) into Modern Hebrew. Thus the דבר-סתר that Ehud has for Eglon in v. 19 is translated in the commentary as "secret message." By the necessity of explaining the meaning and the effect of such words rather than offering a continuous translation, Amit can make them clear without eliminating their literary function, in this case the *double entendre* of a hidden "thing" (Ehud's weapon). Another nice feature of the Hebrew nature of the commentary is that when Amit makes a point with a biblical reference, it is both natural and easy for her not merely to cite it, but to quote it.

Some smaller points. Besides the geographical index already mentioned, the volume begins with a useful map. The short introductions to each section of the commentary are irregularly provided with bibliographical references, as are most of the excurses; the Hebrew references are, of course, particularly useful to the non-Israeli reader. There is a nice comparison, in parallel columns, of the story of the concubine in Gibeah in Judges 19 and that of Lot in Genesis 18f. Except for the Song of Deborah, printed in its traditional "laddered" arrangement, most of the actual text of Judges is printed in straightforward blocks of prose (and, I might add, in an extremely attractive and readable typeface, reminiscent of that in the Koren edition). But Jotham's fable in chap. 9 is presented in lines, in a format designed to call attention to its literary patterning, as is 16:23–24 (with NJPS in the latter case but not the former). Judg 19:1 and 21:25, too, are set off from the rest of the text, pointing to their function as an *inclusio*, marking off this section of the book. So far I have encountered only one error: "Gideon" for "Ehud" at 3:17.

A monograph is read once; rarely more. But a commentary is designed to be turned to over and over again. My judgment of a commentary is finally based on a simple question: Does it suit my needs, or does it offer the frustration of regularly failing to discuss the point I am interested in? Amit's approach suits me well. She does not always have an answer, but I have yet to ask a question that her commentary does not address, whether about a word (פרשנה), a phrase (רחם רחמים), a sentence ("the stars in their courses fought against Sisera"), or a pericope (the 300 drinkers in 7:1–8, the names Gideon and Jerubbaal). Despite her expressed frustration at being forced by the editors to produce a commentary "that one who runs may read," her overall view of the book is also extremely well-served here. If the other volumes of *Mikra LeYisra'el* match this standard, they will be a welcome addition to the scholar's bookshelf.

Michael Carasik
Philadelphia, PA 19147
mcarasik@sas.upenn.edu

THE BOOK OF JUDGES: THE ART OF EDITING. By Yaira Amit. Biblical Interpretation Series 38. Pp. xvi + 427. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1999. Cloth, \$143.50.

The entertaining tales which make up the book of Judges have long been a rich topic of scholarly study. Because of the book's cyclical structure and its conspicuously layered composition, they are a uniquely valuable focus for those who want to use critical methods to unravel the construction of an individual biblical work. Moreover, the fact that they are set at a key moment in Israelite history has made them a valuable resource for information about the nation's emergence. However, the author of this book, which originated as a doctoral dissertation at Tel Aviv University and was published in Hebrew several years ago (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1992), is not primarily interested in the history of either ancient Israel or the book of Judges. Instead, her goal is to understand the overall coherence of this biblical masterpiece in its present form. She understands that form to be theological and didactic. Its overarching theme is that Israel's history was a sign of God's concern; by putting past events into a systematic historiographic framework, its lessons could be transmitted to future generations. Because she is not, therefore, trying to determine how the book achieved