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The Politics of Ancient Israel

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The Politics of Ancient Israel

Norman K. Gottwald

Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001

366 pages, \$44.33 Hardcover

The renowned author of *The Tribes of Yahweh* has made an important contribution to the “Library of Ancient Israel” series. In an easy to follow step-by-step development Gottwald leads the reader from methodological concerns through an examination of the “matrix” of imperial politics in the Fertile Crescent from the emergence of the state to the Hellenistic epoch to the final focus on the political situation within the territorial groupings who ultimately focussed on Yahweh alone as their source of worship. Gottwald’s narrative is neither inspiring (in the usual sense of that word) nor boring, but rather functional and extremely useful to the academically inclined who would like an overall picture of the Israelite political scene during the delineated epochs.

I found his methodological sections exceedingly helpful, even refreshing. He does not fall into the so-called “objectivist” trap which claims to build a case on indisputable facts independent of the scholar’s own personal agenda. What a delight to read an historian’s honest acceptance of such an agenda. Gottwald acknowledges his commitment to democratic socialism, his “free-church” Christian faith and his own “stake in ancient Israel’s politics to the extent that the legacy of those politics continues to impact the world” in which he is “an avowed political participant” (30-31). However, *The Politics of Ancient Israel* is not a propaganda piece posing as academic work. It emerges as a balanced and careful study describing and criticizing carefully various takes on ancient Israel from the traditionalist to the minimalist schools. Far better, he argues, to “own up to our ideological investments” which enhance critical dialogue rather than distort it through false claims of objectivity. Gottwald builds his scenarios chiefly upon the material archaeological evidence like the minimalist school while sustaining his confidence in evidence that can be gleaned by a critical examination of the Biblical texts themselves, a position that tilts him toward the more traditionalist school.

Without going into detail about his reconstructions, suffice it to say that he steers away from self-serving religious notions of the

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uniqueness of Israel, its faith and its politics. Instead he emphasizes what the various ancient near eastern societies had in common. The only uniqueness he underscores is the long-term survival in the Jewish and Christian traditions of the values and writings that emerged from this marginal and constantly conquered people. Ironically he suggests that this survival of a non-statist, more village-oriented faith needed the state apparatus it despised to insure a literate intelligentsia to preserve those very values which challenged the hegemony of a centralized state apparatus.

I could go on and list other positive features of this book, but I leave that to those readers and scholars who wish such a concise and comprehensive study of this vitally important topic. By placing ancient Israel within its own historical context and that of the empires, which shaped its life for good and ill, Gottwald provides this very thing.

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Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins

Fernando F. Segovia
Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2000
177 pages, \$27.27 Softcover

The methodological assumptions that undergird biblical criticism are profoundly shifting. Fernando F. Segovia's rich collection of essays provides both a thoughtful description of this shift, and an articulate, passionate call to embrace it in its multiplicity of forms.

Segovia organizes the history of biblical criticism into four broadly conceived methodological paradigms: traditional historical criticism (beginning in the 19th century), literary criticism and cultural criticism (both developed in the 1970s), and ideological criticism, or cultural studies (a recent, largely post-modern development, which is Segovia's focus). He presents the first three paradigms as expressions of Western hegemony, claiming to have the