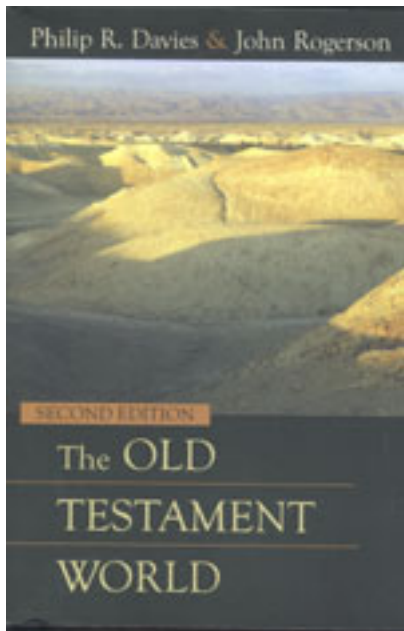


RBL 02/2006



Davies, Philip R., and John Rogerson

The Old Testament World

Second edition

Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005. Pp. x + 250.
Paper. \$29.95. ISBN 0664230253.

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In 1940, the great German biblical scholar Martin Noth published *Die Welt des Alten Testaments*. Many students of the Hebrew Bible, including me, derived great benefit from this book, especially from its 1966 English translation under the title *The Old Testament World*. It was concise and clear, summarizing much background material on the Bible. It still remains useful, in part because of Noth's brilliance and ability to synthesize complex material. Yet it is hopelessly outdated—our understanding of all of the subdisciplines that it investigated has increased remarkably, often to a point where our current understanding would be unrecognizable to Noth. Thus, I read the book under review, a significant revision of the authors' 1989 volume of the same name, with one main question in mind: Would it offer advanced undergraduate students or beginning graduate students the same clear, comprehensive, convincing introduction to biblical realia that Noth provided for me and my contemporaries?

The answer? Sort of, or, more precisely, in some aspects. The book by Davies and Rogerson has a very different structure from Noth's: rather than containing sections on geography, archaeology, ancient Near Eastern history, and the text of the Bible, it focuses on the setting, history, and religion of Israel, the literature and life of Israel, and the formation of the Old Testament. The longest section by far is "Literature and Life," a

survey of the major genres and books of the Hebrew Bible. This leaves much less room for various issues discussed at length by Noth and entirely omits issues that Noth devotes entire chapters to, such as “Languages” and “Methods of Textual Critical Work,” important topics that should be of interest to students. There is another significant structural difference: instead of a carefully footnoted work, this new book contains notes for “Further Reading” at the end of each chapter. Given the book’s likely audience, this is a good idea, although at times I was surprised at certain works that were excluded by the authors. (For example, the works of John Barton and *The Canon Debate*, edited by L. M. McDonald and J. A. Sanders, are not cited in the concluding chapter on canon, and the chapter on sacrifices and Psalms has no reference to any works on sacrifice and neglects the very user-friendly *Introducing the Psalms* by Seybold.)

The book is written in a lively manner and is much more readable than Noth. It also uses charts and maps liberally and effectively. It is quite up to date and contains several references to issues that have changed radically since the book was previously issued (e.g., re-creating the reign of Solomon). Given that both Rogerson and Davies taught at Sheffield and that Davies is often associated with the “Copenhagen school,” it is not surprising that the book is more interested in social-scientific methodologies than its predecessor (the book’s second chapter is on social organization) and that it is unusually cautious in reconstructing history. Its reconstructed history is close to that of the Copenhagen school, though at times it points to alternate views or reconstructions, noting, for instance, that gates at Megiddo, Hazor, Gezer, and Jezreel are “increasingly ascribed to Omri or his son, Ahab ... although the view that Solomon was responsible for these buildings is still held” (75). At some points it is more revisionist, such as when it states that “Ezra may be a literary creation” (91).

Beginning students who have learned something about the Bible would learn a great deal of contemporary biblical scholarship from this book. For example, they would learn that in the ancient world there was little interest in history for its own sake (124–25), that Gunkel’s typology of stories developing from short oral to long written is not always correct (126–27), that the term “code” should not be used for ancient Near Eastern legal collections (137), and that in looking at prophets we have only the final product, the prophetic books that postdate the prophets by centuries, so that any attempt at recovering the *ipsissima verba* is futile (166–88). To my mind, the beginner will also be misled in some places. For example, I disagree with the authors’ use of narrative and story interchangeably; in my view, a story is a type of narrative, with a beginning, middle, and end. Also, I think that the authors mislead readers by placing “The Royal Ceremonies of the Psalms” at the beginning of their chapter on the Psalter (158–61), giving these royal psalms more attention than they deserve. These are, however, minor problems when compared to how useful this book is.

In sum, this book complements rather than replaces Noth, which remains useful on many of the issues of realia that he deals with in much greater detail. However, for a broad understanding of how many (although certainly not all!) biblical scholars understand the biblical world and the meaning of the Bible, this new book is very clear and helpful. It will quickly bring such readers into the ongoing conversation and debates about the Bible, its origin, and its nature.