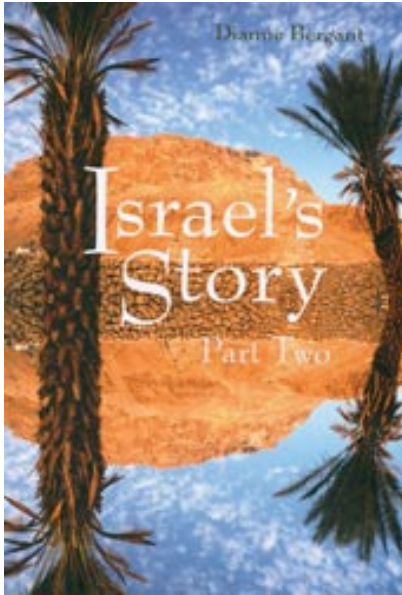


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Bergant, Dianne

Israel's Story: Part Two

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This book is the second part of a two-volume work. The first volume was published in 2006 and reviewed in *RBL* in July 2007 (http://bookreviews.org/pdf/5566_5862.pdf). In the first volume, the author indicates that her intention in this work is to provide a survey of the Old Testament story for people who have only a limited acquaintance with biblical studies. In six chapters in the first volume, Bergant surveys Genesis, Exodus, the conquest memories in Joshua and Judges, the establishment of kingship, the era of the divided monarchy, and the preexilic prophets of ancient Israel.

The second volume also has six chapters, focusing on the kingdom of David, the prophetic tradition and the experience of exile, the challenges of the postexilic era under Persian domination and the struggles to resist Hellenism, the world of wisdom literature and the move from an oral to a literate culture, and, finally, a discussion of the Second Temple era.

In chapter 1, Bergant provides a brief overview of the history of Judah, with paragraphs on Asa, Ahaz, Hezekiah, Manasseh, and Josiah. No significant attention is given to the realities of the northern kingdom and its destruction by Assyria in 721 B.C.E. Rather, the discussion moves directly to the southern kingdom of Judah. The chapter concludes with a brief overview of 1 and 2 Chronicles, with its distinctive focus on temple and cult and

an interpretation of the history of the monarchy “through the lens of retribution: goodness will be rewarded; sinfulness will be punished” (15).

In chapter 2, “The Conscience of the Nation” (18–35), Bergant gives primary attention to Isaiah but in a very traditional way, suggesting that Isa 1–39 is the literary work of the original author. Bergant writes: “Only the first thirty-nine chapters of the sixty-six chapter book that bears his name actually reflect the time and concerns of this pre-exilic man of God” (18–19). No attempt is made to acknowledge the widespread recognition in recent years of the exilic and postexilic editing of chapters 1–39. The books of Micah, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, and Nahum are briefly surveyed, and a more detailed discussion of Jeremiah and Lamentations concludes the chapter.

Chapter 3, “By the Rivers of Babylon” (36–51), may be the most helpful chapter in this work. I suggest that those who use this work actually start with this chapter, for the memories of exile and restoration may well be the most formative realities for understanding the prophets and other canonical writings. The chapter includes a discussion of the book of Ezekiel, reflections on the significance of Cyrus of Persia, and discussion of “Second Isaiah,” then gives considerable attention to the restoration era, focusing on the four waves of returnees under Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, Nehemiah, and Ezra. The dating of the returns seems a bit puzzling; Bergant reports that the third wave returned in 445 B.C. and then writes: “the final group arrived sometime after 458 B.C.” (43). An elementary reader could certainly wonder: Did the final group arrive before or after the third wave? The chapter concludes with discussions of Haggai, Zechariah, Joel, and Malachi.

Chapter 4, “The Hellenization of Israel,” focuses on the allure of Hellenism as it became the dominant culture in the Near East in the era after Alexander the Great. Bergant traces the rise of the Hasidim and the Hasmoneans after the Maccabean revolt; Maccabees, Daniel, and Sirach are discussed along with the traditions of “Messiah,” “Servant of the Lord,” and “Prophet” (65–67).

Chapter 5, “The Word of the Lord,” includes a survey of a number of topics: the transition from oral to written law; the question of canon; wisdom literature with introductions to Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes; and discussions of the Psalter, Song of Songs, Tobit, Judith, and Esther.

Chapter 6, “The Second Temple Period,” may be the most lively and interesting chapter in this study, as Bergant discusses the complex and diverse world from which early Judaism emerged. She includes concise introductions to the writings of Philo Judaeus and Flavius Josephus. She cites Philo’s work *De vita contemplativa* (*On the Contemplative*

Life) to note his contrast between the two Jewish ascetic sects, the Therapeutae and the Essenes. While the Essenes apparently were exclusively male, the evidence from Philo indicates that the Therapeutae included both women and men. She writes: “The Therapeutae were contemplative and lived as anchorites, practiced voluntary poverty and sexual abstinence, lived a life of severe physical discipline, and followed a strict schedule of hourly prayer” (93). She includes an interesting summary of the life of Josephus, noting that it is largely from his writings that we learn about Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots. She also cites Epiphanius, the early church father (367–404) who lists seven pre-Christian sects: Sadducees, scribes, Pharisees, Hermerobaptists, Ossaeans, Nazoreans, and Herodians. Her summary discussion of the various sects of Judaism, including a description of the Samaritans, can certainly be helpful for students who are engaged in study of the origins of Christianity.

In his review of *Israel's Story: Part One*, Sven Petry wrote that this work “is unsuitable for academic use ... not for its brevity but for its total absence of reference to sources other than the biblical text. This feature may improve the readability of the text, but it complicates a critical examination of Bergant’s presentation and renders such an examination more or less impossible for beginners.” That is perhaps too harsh a judgment. While I concur with Petry’s sentiment, I have several reservations. My guess is that Bergant offers this work as an introductory handbook primarily for people who have previously understood the Bible as a source book offering support for certain theological doctrines. She intends that this work can introduce people to the realities of the historical study of the Bible, a realm of thought that is still quite foreign to many. I think that the author, a professor of Old Testament studies at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, quite clearly has in mind a primary audience of people who live within the world of Roman Catholic schools and parish life.

The fact, however, that this two-volume work has no footnotes and no bibliography still seems rather insulting to the reader. A reader at any level of competence deserves to know the academic sources from which an author has drawn insight. At the least, there should be some suggestions for further study.

To her credit, Bergant writes with a clear and cogent style. She has included a wealth of data throughout the chapters. The particular strength of this work comes with her discussions of the Second Temple era, where she demonstrates a certain sense of energy and passion for her subject matter. At the end of the second volume, she includes a helpful glossary of terms and a timeline.

As one who is challenged each year by the task of introducing first-year college students to the Hebrew Bible, I can envision that this volume might be helpful for those who have

never previously opened a Bible. However, I expect that students, even in an introductory course, will raise far more critical questions than this work raises and that they will press well beyond the introductory data presented here.