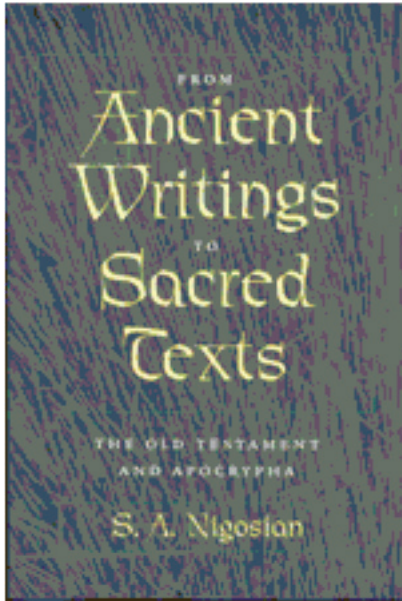


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Nigosian, S. A.

From Ancient Writings to Sacred Texts: The Old Testament and Apocrypha

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This short book's stated aim is to provide a "well-informed explanation in the light of modern scholarship" (xi) of the Old Testament and Apocrypha and their formation. Nigosian also discusses "borrowings" from the wider ancient Near Eastern literary world. In a number of places, he offers a good discussion of the contents of the biblical texts. As to questions of the corpus's formation, however, the stated goal has been missed by a very wide mark. This is mostly due to the author's reluctance to address many hotly contested issues in anything but a superficial manner. This lack of engagement with modern thought concerning the compositional history of the biblical materials is very peculiar, given that the book is framed by an introductory chapter on the "History of Biblical Texts" and a closing one on "Biblical Authors, Editors and Scholars." Nigosian frequently indicates that scholars are hardly of one voice on many issues but generally leaves the discussion at that, providing too few details as to the nature of the disagreement.

Nigosian's book is not directly comparable to one-volume, glossy-paged introductory surveys of the Hebrew Bible, but its intended audience seems to be much the same in terms of a limited background in the subject. The book is quite accessible; the lack of photographs, maps, and sidebars of the glossy surveys is nothing to be lamented. On the

other hand, Nigosian provides a good number of helpful charts which compare differing canon lists, parallel features in diverse writings, and other matters. Newcomers to biblical studies will also appreciate the glossary. Yet Nigosian sometimes seems to forget the level of his audience and directs them to rather technical works in German and French.

The first chapter establishes the biblical writers as the heirs to a rich legacy. Nigosian links the rise of Hebrew writing to the Israelite invasion and settlement of Canaan in the thirteenth century B.C.E. and their adoption of the Phoenician script. The rest of the chapter deals with such issues as canonical processes and the various genres of writing in the Hebrew Bible and the transmission of earlier texts and traditions by succeeding generations who manipulated them to fit their own ideological viewpoints.

In the second chapter, on the Pentateuch, Nigosian offers a good discussion of the interrelationships of the Genesis creation and flood narratives to other ancient Near Eastern texts and presents a good discussion of key elements of the biblical accounts. The rest of the chapter concentrates on the patriarchal narratives and the various law codes. Regrettably, little is said of the exodus narrative itself. Throughout, Nigosian makes his reader aware of the composite nature of these texts, yet the Documentary Hypothesis is not introduced until the very end of the chapter, and then only cursorily. Virtually nothing in the way of details about the evolution of modern diachronic research on the Pentateuch is provided. Some of the main players in contemporary Pentateuch scholarship are named, but their individual positions are not summarized. Some additional information is provided in the final chapter, although what details do emerge mostly concern the dates accepted by “earlier” critics as W. F. Albright. Nigosian ends the first chapter with a note that one would perhaps do best not to ignore any of the many diachronic and social scientific approaches now on offer. Yet he leaves unexplored how these approaches can illuminate a biblical episode or passage. The intended readers would have benefited immeasurably from some good examples of how these diverse methods can illuminate a biblical episode. It would be very hard for a newcomer to biblical studies to make the leap from this book to the more technical works mentioned in the footnotes as examples of social-scientific and literary approaches.

In the chapter on “History,” Nigosian emphasizes that he is discussing the representation of the past as depicted in the books and not the past itself. Of course, some discussion of the rise of Israel as a state is necessary. Although having earlier commented on the Israelite invasion of Canaan, Nigosian is less certain here. He denies that the content of Joshua can support the theory of a single, brief invasion of Canaan. He also indicates that the infiltration model of Alt, Noth, and Weippert has long been an alternative while adding later that reports that the positing of an ancient “amphictyonic ceremony” to explain biblical references to tribal assemblies at a variety of locations “is falling

increasingly into disfavor” (78). Nigosian considers the social-revolution model of Mendenhall and Gottwald to be the “third and most recent view” (77). Discussions on the origins of Israel, however, have gone far beyond critiques of hypothetical amphictyonies and Gottwald’s 1979 *Tribes of Yahweh*. Nigosian’s brevity and unwillingness to engage recent discussions head-on misrepresents the state of current state of scholarship.

Nigosian is far more forthcoming in presenting the ideological framework and literary qualities of Judges. Some key texts from the wider ancient Near Eastern world are brought into the discussion of Samuel and Kings, including the Ugaritic story of Daniel and Danatiya (in relation to the Hannah and Samuel) and the story of Sinuhe in the context of the recounting of David’s bravery in fighting Goliath. Following what is largely a paraphrase of Kings with a number of comments on the use of diverse historiographical and legendary materials, Nigosian devotes a section of only a page and a half to the theory of the DtrH. While rightly noting that disagreements exist on the composition of the history, Nigosian again gives no summary of the main positions and the arguments employed to support them. In contrast to the lengthy treatment of Samuel and Kings, Chronicles merits less than two pages, in which it is concluded that the Chronicler advocated piety in expectation of a new Davidic ruler. Ezra and Nehemiah receive far more extensive coverage. Some recognition of the numerous chronological and historical difficulties in these two books is given, but Nigosian’s commentary is largely a periphrastic reconstruction of the religious and cultural circumstances in Persian-era Judaism. On the other hand, Nigosian ably describes the literary genre and qualities of Ruth and Esther.

Chapter 4 deals with “Poetry and Wisdom.” The biblical wisdom traditions are set in the context of their Mesopotamian and Egyptian counterparts, some of which are quoted for an effective comparison. Nigosian is cautious about any definitive classification system for the Psalms, which are also presented in comparison with other ancient Near Eastern texts, including the Hymn to Aton. A similar treatment is given to the wisdom writings and Song of Songs. The comparisons are particularly effective in illustrating the skeptical side of wisdom writing in Job.

With most of the discussion centering on the biblical materials themselves, the chapter on the prophetic texts provides somewhat less comparative data. When discussing the three longer prophetic texts, Nigosian says much of worth in a relatively short span of pages. He provides brief introductions to each of the Minor Prophets illustrating some main themes of each book and some interesting features to watch for when reading (e.g., the rhythmic tone of Mal 1:6–8). A brief postscript on the prophetic collections is provided that calls attention to the eschatological focus of the biblical prophetic material in contrast to the comparable literature from the ancient Near East and the need to

differentiate between the actual prophets and the collectors and transmitters of the prophetic works. This caveat, however, did not prevent Nigosian from earlier reconstructing (and at some points almost romanticizing) the historical prophets based on the completed prophetic texts.

The sixth chapter deals with Apocrypha and is disappointingly short (197–212), given that it receives equal billing with the Old Testament in the book's subtitle. Much of the discussion here deals with authorial, canonical, and textual issues. Little is said of the literary qualities of these diverse writings. One gets the sense that, for Nigosian, the Apocrypha remains something of an appendix.

In the final chapter, Nigosian provides an outline of compositional dates for the biblical material accepted by “‘earlier’ critics,” although providing no defense of their views. Still, he hardly laments the new methodological pluralism and the new freedom to challenge earlier consensuses and introduces the leading figures of the new historical approaches, such as P. R. Davies and N. P. Lemche. In the end, however, he says that their reassessments of the Bible's history are unconvincing. Characteristically, he spares the reader any sort of detail, saying only that, besides there being little historical evidence to support their views, they have been strongly criticized by others. Still, he writes, “Their proposal, however, has freed scholars to question the early dating of biblical texts” (220). Commenting on methodological pluralism of the current situation—mentioning literary, ritual, and feminist approaches, among others—Nigosian holds that older dating proposals have yet to be completely discredited. He prefers a “wait and see” approach, writing that, “until something better is suggested, the dating proposed by ‘earlier’ critics may have to be allowed to stand, despite its shortcomings” (221). Just what these shortcomings are Nigosian has almost nothing say, leaving the reader wondering why a large number of scholars (not all of whom are “minimalists”) are at least attempting “something better.”

Despite having some strength in regard to the handling of particular biblical texts, this book fails very badly in serving its intended readership: nonspecialists interested in the Old Testament and Apocrypha as viewed by modern scholarship. The book is inconsistent and unbalanced in its discussions. Most important, by emphasizing that there is no consensus left in historical studies of these books while ignoring even the basic outlines of how and why this came to be the case, Nigosian keeps his readers unaware of just how far mainstream thought has shifted in the past few decades. It is very hard to recommend this book either to the casual, nonspecialist reader or to the college or university instructor seeking a potential textbook.