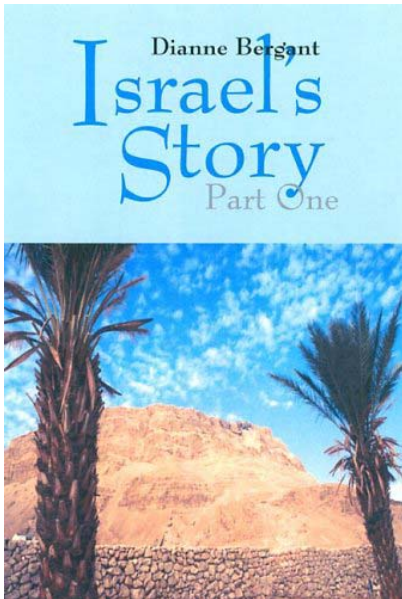


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**Bergant, Dianne**

***Israel's Story: Part One***

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Sven Petry  
Georg-August-Universität  
Göttingen, Germany

This book is the first part of a two-volume work. The second, *Israel's Story: Part Two*, is scheduled to be published in August 2007. The author presents her work as an introduction to the Bible, apparently aimed at beginners. It is intended to guide their first steps of getting to know the Bible by acquainting the reader “with the characters found in the biblical accounts” by giving “some historical information about these people, from whom and from where they came” (v). Subsequent to the introduction (v–vii), *Israel's Story: Part One* comprises six chapters.

In the introduction Bergant states the aim of her work (make the reader acquainted with the Bible) and rightly notes that the various books it is composed of show various forms of writing and that “each unique literary form must be read in its own proper way” (vi). Within those parts of the Bible she mainly covers in the present volume, Bergant finds “four major points of view” (J, E, D, and P) in the Pentateuch and one of those (D) again in Joshua–Kings.

Chapter 1 (1–16), entitled “First Things First,” deals with the book of Genesis and is subdivided into four sections. “In the Beginning” (1–2) describes the stories in the opening eleven chapters of the book of Genesis as myth, as “the stories of ‘Everyman’ and

'Everywoman' (2) that deal with universal truth. "What's in a Name?" (2-7) addresses the issues of the names and titles given to God in the Bible, the two accounts of creation and the account of the flood and of the tower of Babel. "My Father Was a Wandering Aramean (Genesis 12-50)" (7-13) strictly speaking covers Gen 12-33, the story of Abram, later Abraham, and his family from the departure from Haran to Jacob obtaining the name Israel and his reunion with his brother Esau. "Israel in Egypt" (13-16) discusses the account of Joseph and his brothers that tells how Israel came to Egypt.

Chapter 2 (17-34), entitled "Out of Egypt," follows the storyline of Exodus to Deuteronomy and is divided into seven subsections. "Settled in Egypt" (17-19) briefly provides information on the history of Egypt and concludes that the "the story of Israel's origins is ... a reinterpretation of known historical traditions" (19). "Moses" (19-22) and "Signs and Wonders" (22-25) recapitulate Exod 2-19. "The Covenant" (25-26) stresses parallels of the Sinai covenant with Hittite suzerain treaties. "The Law" (26-32) mentions the two basic forms of biblical law (casuistic and apodictic) and two of its three major collections (Covenant Code and Holiness Code). "Wandering" (32-33) is devoted to the book of Numbers, while "Deuteronomy" (33-34) deals with the concluding book of the Pentateuch that bears this very name and contains the third major biblical law code.

With Chapter 3 ("Into the Land," 35-51) *Israel's Story* proceeds into the books of Joshua and Judges. Starting from the observation that Joshua and Judges provide very different depictions of the occupation of the land, "Occupying the Land" (35-38) presents various theories of how Israelite settlement took place (military conquest, incorporation, social revolt, infiltration). "This Land Is Your Land" (38-40) stresses the liturgical character of the conquest account in Joshua, "The People of the Land" (40-41) draws on the contrast between Israel and Canaan and the religious threat that the Canaanites—according to the biblical account—posed to Israel. "There Was No King in Israel" (41-44) deals with the book of Judges and provides a rough outline of Bergant's understanding of the Deuteronomistic History, while "The Judges" (44-46) acquaints the reader with the prominent figures depicted in the book of this name. They may be referred to as "Charismatic Leaders" (46-47). The final subsections of this chapter are devoted to "Ruth" (47-49) and "Tribal Religion" (49-51).

Chapter 4 ("Long Live the King!" 52-67) covers the books of Samuel and 1 Kings 1-11. "A Prophet of the Lord" (52-55) presents Samuel as a "transitional figure" (53), a bridge that connects the time of the judges to the time of the monarchy. "A King to Rule Them" (55-59) describes the rise and fall of Saul, succeeded by David, who is portrayed as "The Man God raised Up" (59-64). A final subsection shows "Solomon in All His Glory" (64-67).

Chapter 5 (68–83) is entitled “A Kingdom Divided” and follows the storyline of the books of Kings from the break-up of the Davidic monarchy (“To Your Tents, O Israel,” 68–71) to the downfall of the northern kingdom of Israel “Because of the Sins of Jeroboam” (71–74). “The Man of God” (74–78) is devoted to Elijah and his successor Elisha. This subsection is followed by remarks on “The Prophetic Movement” (78–81) and “Northern Theology” (81–83), which according to Bergant is the source not only of Elohist theology but also of the book of Deuteronomy.

Chapter 6 (“Thus Says the LORD”; 84–99) starts off from Assyrian domination as the political backdrop of the northern “Classical Prophets” (85–87). Further subsections discuss “Prophetic Action” (87–88) and “Hebrew Poetry” (88–89). “A Land Flowing with Milk and Honey” (90) illustrates the regional diversity of the southern Levant and explains the high fertility especially of those regions that belonged to the northern kingdom of Israel as a source of temptation leading to social and religious abuses against which Amos (“Woe to You...,” 91–94) and Hosea (“Fertility in the Land,” 94–95; “A Harlot Wife,” 95–99) arose.

This book has two indisputable assets: it is written in a clear style that makes it highly readable, and with roughly one hundred pages it is enjoyably short. Dianne Bergant offers a combination of a brief retelling of the narrative books of the Old Testament (and the “northern” classical prophets), some essential theological background information, and some information on biblical scholarship. *Prima facie*, the book could well serve as a guide to first-time readers of the Old Testament.

*Israel’s Story: Part One* is unsuitable for academic use, however, 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. This is unfortunate, since for the intended audience this book may be the first contact with the Bible and hence with biblical scholarship. Although I agree that an introduction for first-time readers of the Old Testament is not the place for extensive discussions of scholarly controversies, I insist that also for the audience this book targets the information on critical scholarship the book provides should not be outdated. And the information Bergant’s provides is—evaluated with goodwill—outdated for more than two decades.

To give just one example: “Scholars maintain that the Yahwist tradition took shape sometime around the tenth century B.C.” (vii). I do not doubt that some scholars still maintain this position, but currently it is without doubt only one of several positions. A statement on page 81 later reveals that Bergant is aware of this: “The scholarly hypothesis that identifies four major theological traditions in the Pentateuch—the Yahwist (J),

Elohists (E), Deuteronomists (D) and Priests (P)—has been severely criticized in the recent past.” In addition, phrases such as “scholars maintain,” “(most) scholars believe,” or “all commentators contend” appear regularly and suggest that the statements they open do at least more or less represent a consensus. Thus, in the end, and despite the periodic statement that the biblical texts reached their final form in exilic or early postexilic times, the reader is left with the impression that “most scholars” believe that the Elohist and Deuteronomist traditions not only emerged but were more or less fully developed in the northern kingdom of Israel and were carried to Judah after 722 B.C.E., where they were consolidated with southern traditions. Only some “minor editing” (83) was caused by the Josianic reform and later by the experience of the exile, but Israel’s story was more or less completed in the late eighth or early seventh cent. B.C.E.

Although I suppose that most scholars would be surprised if they were told that this is their belief, this is not the place to rate Bergant’s view improbable or impossible. But I deem it inadequate to introduce this view in a way that suggests to the reader that it presents a majority view if not a consensus. Since an inexperienced reader will naturally be unable to evaluate Bergant’s references to biblical scholarship, this is a major flaw of this book. Three minor annotations: (1) I hope *Israel’s Story: Part Two* will include a bibliography; (2) the Deuteronomy version of the Decalogue is in 5:6–21, not 4:6–21, as stated on page 33—this is an obvious misprint; and (3) I am unable to relate the year 532 B.C.E. to the time of the exile (see 28).