

H-Net Reviews

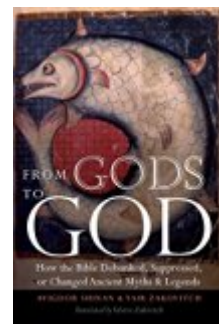
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Yair Zakovitch, Avigdor Shinan. *From Gods to God: How the Bible Debunked, Suppressed, or Changed Ancient Myths and Legends*. Translated by Valerie Zakovitch. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012. xi + 301 pp. \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8276-0908-2.

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What the Bible Says—and What It Didn't Want to Say

It has long been understood by scholars, if not necessarily by the wider public, that biblical stories are not journalism, attempting to report on events detail by detail as they happened and conversations word for word as they actually took place. But this, of course, implies that the biblical stories were shaped with particular purposes in mind.

In their new book, biblicist Yair Zakovitch and his Hebrew University colleague Avigdor Shinan, a scholar of rabbinic literature, attempt to reveal the stories behind the stories—not the historical events (if any) that may lie behind a particular biblical tale, but the stories that were originally told about these events before the Bible froze them into one particular version. Their position is that many biblical stories are framed as they are in an attempt to eliminate or confute earlier, “unwanted” traditions. Their method for doing this is “literary archaeology” (p. 7), employing three strategies: identifying duplicate traditions within the Bible, considering traditions from the “pagan” world, and examining a story’s subsequent renditions in post-biblical literature. (It is interesting that this procedure closely matches Avi Hurvitz’ methodology for identifying Late Biblical Hebrew; perhaps it is simply a matter of parallel evolution.)

The book is divided into four sections, “The World of Myth,” “Cult and Sacred Geography,” “Biblical Heroes and Their Biographies” (the longest of them), and “Relations between Men and Women,” but it really consists of

thirty more or less independent chapters that have been grouped under these headings. In the original Hebrew publication, *That's Not What the Good Book Says* (2004), each chapter’s heading is actually a question, e.g., “What Happened to the Sun at Gibeon?” The extremely readable translation by Valerie Zakovitch sometimes echoes these question-titles but sensibly does not insist on doing so; in this case, the title reads “The Hero Who Stopped the Sun.” I looked in the original volume in vain for information about where in the popular press these chapters were originally published; they very much give the impression of magazine or more high-brow newspaper columns that have been collected here in a single volume.

But this structure should not be considered a flaw. The overall message of the book does not depend on a sustained argument, but rather on the treatment that the authors give it, building a mosaic that uses the details of each, or any, particular story to create the overall impression that “[b]eneath the biblical narrator’s words ... it seems that we still hear the rush of older currents, of more ancient belief systems” (p. 25). Nor should the book’s readability and popular character keep it out of the hands of scholars, even biblical scholars, who will find details worth considering in almost every chapter.

It is all too easy to think of “Bible stories” rather than of the stories as they are actually told in the Bible. A case in point is chapter 5, already mentioned, about the sun stopping over Gibeon in Joshua 10. Zakovitch and Shi-

nan's discussion of this story takes us through Ps 77:17-19 and a parallel text, Hab 3:10-11, on through Ben Sira and 4QapocrJosh^a, to the Babylonian Talmud and Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer, with a stop along the way in Judges 14. The argument of the chapter is that the original story of Joshua stopping the sun "was stifled in the book of Joshua because of its mythical character: the attribution of divine powers to a mortal being" (p. 62).

The reader benefits from this sort of closer look at a story in two ways. First, though some of the authors' side trips will be obvious to the knowledgeable reader, not all will be. I, for one, had not made a connection between Timnah of the Samson story in Judges 14 and Timnath-heres, where Joshua is buried in Jud 2:9. Yet Samson is of course Shimshon, "Sunman," and in Jud 14:18 the Philistines answer Samson's riddle just before "sunset," where "sun" is not *shemesh* but *heres*. Moreover, in chapter 21 Zakovitch and Shinan will remind us that Samson lived between Zorah and Eshtaol, where Beit *Shemesh* is located, though the stories never mention that name. This is just one example of how each chapter of the book magnetically aligns various biblical texts (here about the sun, elsewhere about snakes or some other topic) toward a particular story in ways that can offer a fresh perspective.

Secondly, with thirty opportunities, it is likely that everyone will find places in this book where the overall discussion of a biblical text will lead to a new understanding of it, or at the very least to new questions. Sticking with the story of Joshua 10, I found myself asking for the first time not only whether it was Joshua or God who had stopped the sun (the primary subject of Zakovitch and Shinan's chapter) but also how to understand the mention of the moon in Josh 10:13 and (most significantly) *why* the sun had to stop at all in this version of the story.

The overall message of the book—that some of the texts in the Bible are responding polemically to earlier versions of the same stories that were well known in Israelite times, and that rabbinic and other later texts sometimes move those earlier versions back into public view—has been presented elsewhere in the scholarly literature, notably in Michael Fishbane's *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking* (2005). But it is still not generally realized among those who are not biblical scholars, and this book can potentially remedy that.

The reader who is so inclined will find plenty here to disagree with. Were the story of David and Bathsheba and the details of Esther's relationship with Ahasuerus really modeled on the three stories somewhat mislead-

ingly known as "the matriarch of Israel in danger" in Genesis 12, 20, and 26, as chapter 25 of the book claims? And the larger perspectives of the various biblical books considered individually receive no attention here. Saying that "An early story about David and Abigail, a story about a passionate meeting between an impulsive warrior and a married, unfaithful woman, became transformed in the Bible into a story about a wise woman and a hero who conquers his impulsive passions" (p. 258) does not, to my mind, really come to grips with why 1 Samuel 25 is presenting the future founder of the Judahite royal dynasty as the head of an outlaw gang that runs a rural protection racket.

The overall perspective, too—at least as the authors sum it up in the epilogue—does not convince me. Their claim that the traditions that existed before the Bible came into being "needed to be adapted and refined in order to make them suit the lofty ideals of monotheism, to elevate them to the morals and value system that the Bible sought to instill in its readers" (p. 267), or that the "loftier aim" of the biblical writers was "to educate a nation, purify its beliefs, cleanse it of the dust of idolatry and myth, and wash it of vulgar expressions and faulty morality" (p. 268) describes just a small part of the Bible that I know. Perhaps this kind of moralistic overstatement is the spoonful of sugar that will make it palatable to the more religious lay readers of the book.

But the book's value does not, after all, lie in the accumulation of such claims, but rather in the places where Shinan the midrashist and Zakovitch the *pashtan*, chapter after chapter, deploy their intelligence and erudition to focus our attention on the details in every biblical story that demand further study. If you have never paid serious attention to the seemingly minor family drama in 1 Chr 7:20-24, this book will convince you that you must do so: "Anecdotes such as this one are proof that readers must listen not only to the forceful, central current of the biblical narrative but also to the smaller rivulets of traditions that ripple more quietly: it is these traditions that preserve divergent and even disparate points of view that escaped the stronger current's sweeping flood" (p. 162).

The Hebrew version has a sequel, *Once Again: That's Not What the Good Book Says* (2009), in which the authors turn their attention more fully to the afterlife of biblical stories. Here the most comparable volumes would most likely be James Kugel's *The Bible As It Was* (1999) and *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible As It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (1999). The evidence of the volume we now have makes me eager to see this new vol-

ume in an English translation too. It will be a welcome you read between the lines.
reminder that you can get more out of the Bible when

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