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**Feldman, Louis H.**

***“Remember Amalek!” Vengeance, Zealotry, and Group Destruction in the Bible, according to Philo, Pseudo-Philo, and Josephus***

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In one way, writing about the Jewish understanding on biblical violence in the name of the Lord resembles its associated activity, learning the language of religious violence. Achieving some fluency is manageable, but mastery is almost impossible. Transcribing the notes from others frees you from the necessity of keeping one’s nose to the grindstone, and your objective provides your structure. However, the goal is really the problem, that is to say, reaching the *Endzeit* by reading the thought of others on material of a Hebrew setting in life not well known in Jewish circles, let alone Christian seminaries and secular schools of higher learning. For the uninitiated, the result can be slipshod experience, misguided and nonproductive.

A number of works in biblical interpretation talk on biblical vengeance, but much of the information given is necessarily incomplete, murky, and parochial. Some writers confine their scholarship to “what did the rabbis teach?” or to a packaged Christology, while others believe that Scriptures osmotically informs us about today’s Middle East and global terror. On understanding holy terror and Judaism in the rabbinic age, informed in *peshat* and midrash but ignorant of Hellenistic Jewish literature, and reverse, competent in Greco-Roman categories of thought but lacking classic rabbinic know-how, is a matter of straddling galloping horses and trying not to fall between them. Louis H. Feldman’s

*“Remember Amalek!”* is a first effort with sufficient competency and savvy to traverse both worlds.

The book demonstrates an awareness of the problem of divine justice, sources, and social history in showing how ancient Jewish and non-Jewish sources wrestled with the pertinent issues. Feldman’s methodology is clear: identify categories of Jewish interpretation; search for comparison and contrast among Greek and Latin sources; elucidate advantages and disadvantages connected with each interpretation; and provide a common ground for further analysis and discussion.

Feldman sets himself the laborious task of explaining how the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo in his many essays on biblical themes, Pseudo-Philo or *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*, a post-70 C.E. Latin translation of a substantive midrashic work by an unidentified Jew that chronicles biblical history from Adam to Saul, and the foremost Jewish historian of the ancient world, Josephus in his *Jewish Antiquities*, deal with the ominous and onerous fallout of the 604th commandment: “Remember what Amalek did to you by the way as you came out of Egypt. . . . you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; you shall not forget” (Deut 25:17a, 19b).

The author also investigates how these ancient commentators deal with other biblical narratives that illustrate acts of total or near-total destruction of humanity (the great flood) and groups of people (Sodom and Gomorrah, the tenth plague of the firstborn Egyptians, the seven nations of Canaan) by divine fiat or not (the Hivites, to avenge the rape of Dinah, the nations of Sihon and Og, the residents of Jericho, and the annihilation of the priests of Nob). Other chapters discuss alleged Jewish hatred of Gentiles and divine approval of Phinehas circumventing the law in killing an erring Jew and his companion engaged in an act of sexual impropriety.

Totally familiar with the scholarship in the field yet maintaining a perception distinctly his own, Feldman examines his illustrious literati against themselves and in the context of Jewish existence and survival in Eretz Israel and in Diaspora before, during, and after the fall of the Second Jewish Temple. He observes that the separatist Pseudo-Philo is most consistent in maintaining a literal acceptance of divine commandments, including genocide. Philo, in contrast, who labored in the vineyard of Socrates and Plato, raised questions of theodicy and resolved seeming paradoxes between the yoke of the Torah and Hellenistic thought by his creative and innovative method of allegory. Josephus, an apologist of his people to the charges of the anti-Semites, is insistent that Jews do not hate non-Jews and rationalized divine anger against the Amalekites and the seven nations of Canaan because they sought to destroy the Israelite faith and nation; and the

inhabitants of Jericho were casualties of conventional war. For Philo and Josephus, the preoccupation of Israel and Gentiles is not essentially a problem of history but attitude.

Basically, the format in each chapter is architectonic: introduction (scriptural text, extrabiblical account, ethical and moral problems), commentary and analysis, and summation. The chapters are straightforward, and the author's compare and contrast style of writing is appealing. The volume, content and critique, is a scholar's delight: it is compact with erudition that reflects mastery of primary and secondary sources. Needless to say, Feldman's *zeitgeschichtliche* approach, heavily inoculated in linguistic data, source criticism, and statistical minutiae (typical is the ratio of words encompassing biblical individuals and events in the Hebrew Bible compared to the amount found in the Septuagint, and the commentators) will prove burdensome for the general reader; less trouble are the expository sections.

Feldman's presentation of problematic biblical passages interpreted by first-century nonrabbinic exegetes is novel. They address what appears to be an insurmountable problem: how to reconcile the Name of the Lord with the catastrophic decree with degree to obliterate sections of humanity. Alas, there is little attempt to show how divinely sanctioned criteria relates to modern religious radicalism. Admittedly, it is not the author's intent to show this, but the ground covered by him is so rich for this instructive. Perhaps in a future edition of this excellent volume this excursus can be added as an appendix. Nonetheless, Feldman's chapters are what they are: an exhilarating encounter with an old-new dilemma.