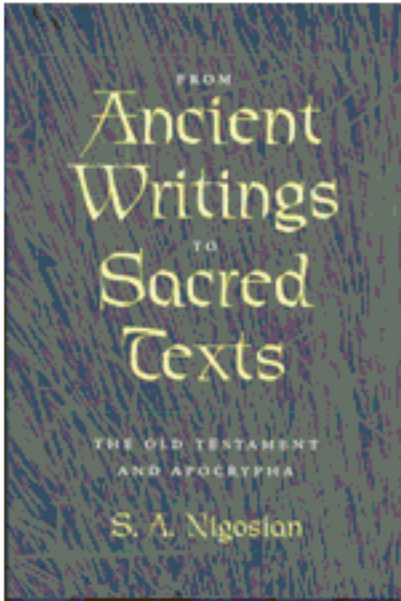


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Nigosian, S. A.

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

Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004.
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Instigated by a guest lecture given on biblical literature for a colleague in the Department of Classics at the University of Toronto, Nigosian's volume is intended to satisfy a perceived need for a concise analysis of the literature of the Old Testament and Apocrypha "for those in related disciplines" (xii). Nigosian seeks "to convey the formation and contents" of this literature "to those who desire a well-informed explanation in the light of modern scholarship" (xi). At the same time, he intends to examine the "borrowings by biblical writers" (xi) from the literatures of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria-Palestine, and Asia Minor. Unfortunately, these three independent areas of interest (formation, content, and parallels) compete for a hearing in such a short volume such that each remains incomplete.

The formation of the biblical texts is introduced in the opening chapter, entitled "History of Biblical Texts." In a mere thirty pages this chapter attempts to address (1) the invention of writing, (2) the formation of the Hebrew text, (3) the recognition of the Jewish Scripture, (4) translations of the Hebrew text, (5) translations of translated texts, and (6) the Christian canon. Contrary to Nigosian's stated goals, the shortest of these sections is devoted to the formation of the Hebrew text (6–8). The extensive explanation of the various biblical translations (17–26) is well written and easy to follow, although

most of it is superfluous to the question of how the literature came together in the first place.

The body of the book treats the contents of the biblical texts in order according to the Christian Old Testament. The chapters follow the genre categories, Pentateuch (ch. 2), history (ch. 3), poetry and wisdom (ch. 4), Prophets (ch. 5), and Apocrypha, or Deuterocanon (ch. 6). These chapters contain independent sections for each book (except for Exodus to Deuteronomy, which is treated as one section). The reader is aided by Nigosian's judicious use of footnotes throughout. These notes indicate avenues for further study of a particular issue and very commonly also introduce recent alternative approaches, especially feminist ones. The book also contains a glossary of terms and a quite extensive bibliography. Readers who are not scholars may be surprised to find quite a few of these references to be German works.

Each section of the central chapters of this volume begins with a concise description of the basic plot, themes, and genres present in a particular biblical or apocryphal book. This is followed, when applicable, by relevant parallels from ancient Near Eastern literature. Nigosian employs a variety of terms to describe the relationships between such texts and the biblical texts (e.g., "borrowed," "used as a source," "is similar to," "resembles," "is analogous"). Unfortunately, he fails to explain his choice of terminology or to indicate the processes by which such borrowing could have occurred. Instead, the selected parallel texts are presented with little explanation or discussion. He gives no indication what makes the flood narrative and the birth story of Moses a "borrowing" from the stories of Gilgamesh and Sargon, respectively, while the seduction of Joseph "is analogous" to Anubis's wife's attempt to seduce Bata, and David's slaying of Goliath "reminds us" of the deeds of Sinuhe. In his attempt to cover the contents of all the books, insufficient space is left to clarify these connections effectively. The benefit to this treatment, over a volume such as *Old Testament Parallels*, by Victor Matthews and Don Benjamin, is that it presents the parallels together with the relevant biblical references. As such, this volume provides somewhat greater access for those acquainted with the literature of the ancient Near East but unfamiliar with the biblical literature.

Each section ends with a discussion of the key scholarly issues surrounding the interpretation of each biblical book. These summaries are clear and quite helpful, although they usually conclude without taking a clear position on the issues. Given his stated interest in the history of composition and compilation, these discussions could have been opportunities for proposing some specific conclusions regarding dating the texts. Instead, the reader frequently encounters a generic refrain stating that such and such a book was written at various times by various unknown people. The conclusion of the section on the Song of Songs is typical. "We can probably assume that the text

underwent a long history of tradition before it finally reached its present form and was accepted into the biblical canon” (150).

The final chapter, “Biblical Authors, Editors, and Scholars,” contains four sections: authorship, borrowings, ancient Near East, and dating of biblical texts. One of Nigosian’s clearest claims, presented in the section on authorship, is that the vast majority of the books that make up the Old Testament and the Apocrypha are not the product of a single author but rather show evidence of the activity of many authors and editors over many centuries (213). Each of these authors/editors, he claims, was affected and influenced by the social, political, intellectual, and literary changes that took place over that time (214).

For some reason unclear to me, Nigosian presents, here at the end of the book, an introductory explanation of the civilizations that made up the ancient Near East and the history of their influence over the region. The reader would have been better served to have this information before encountering excerpts from the literatures of these civilizations throughout the book. As it stands, this introduction intervenes between the two lists that serve as the book’s conclusion. The first list is a recap of all the “borrowings” mentioned within the preceding chapters, and the second presents a dating of the biblical texts.

In the first list, Nigosian treats the texts from the Apocrypha/Deuterocanon as if they were inherently secondary to the Old Testament. He compares their use of “biblical” texts to the biblical use of ancient Near Eastern texts as if the authors of the Apocrypha understood themselves to be borrowing from a corpus of literature of which their texts were not a part. Reliance on and reference to material from earlier texts within the Israelite religious tradition is clearly of a different order than the adaptations of ancient Near Eastern religious traditions into the biblical texts. It would have been more consistent for Nigosian to discuss adaptations of Persian and Hellenistic traditions by the authors of the Apocrypha. Instead, Nigosian gives the false impression that the texts later considered to make up the Apocrypha considered the biblical texts to be something “other.” He writes, “Just as the New Testament writers borrowed freely from the Old Testament and the Apocrypha..., the writers of the Apocrypha freely drew on the Old Testament, and, in turn, the Old Testament writers borrowed from the literature of neighboring Near Eastern civilizations” (xi). Such a characterization misrepresents the degree to which canonization had occurred during the second Temple period.

The final list places various texts in categories according to their date of composition (early period, Assyrian period, Neo-Babylonian period, Persian period, Hellenistic period, Roman period). These determinations are based on what he calls “the results established by ‘earlier’ biblical critics” (218), referring specifically to Albright, Cross,

Freedman, and Julius Beyer. After discussing briefly the more recent positions of the minimalists (Lemke, Thompson, etc.) and their opponents (Dever, McCarter, etc.), Nigosian resolves that “until something better is suggested, the dating proposed by the ‘earlier’ critics may have to be allowed to stand, despite its shortcomings” (221). Unfortunately, Nigosian did not use the body of his book to address the dating of the texts in order to present a conclusion of his own.

This book could serve as a concise handbook of the Old Testament and Apocrypha for the novice, as it effectively highlights the key contents of the individual books as well as many of the key scholarly issues. However, this book fails to present “a concise and accessible history of the composition and compilation of the Bible and the complex process of canonization,” as claimed on the back cover. Rather, Nigosian has provided some information about the results of these processes without a sophisticated explanation of the nature of the processes themselves. For example, his description of canonization is simplistic and presumes a conscious choosing by certain individuals. He writes, “The editors or adjudicators responsible for making choices and canonizing the collection reserved for the Jewish scripture were absolutely convinced that their selections represented divine inspiration and/or divine revelation” (8). Such a formulation presumes a modern concept of divine inspiration as the criteria for selection, which in any case was a more organic and evolving process whose results were based on the continuing significance and relevance of certain texts for the various Jewish communities over time. Readers, especially those acquainted with the basic contents of the Bible, who are especially interested in the history of composition and compilation of the Bible will be better served by looking elsewhere for a treatment that addresses the social and historical processes involved. See, for example, the recent volume by William Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*.