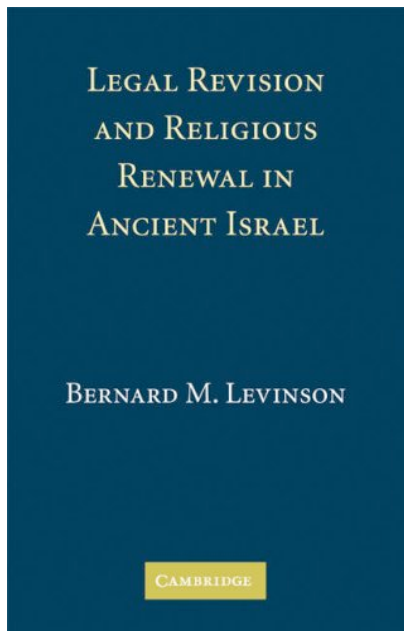


RBL 03/2010



**Levinson, Bernard M.**

***Legal Revision and Religious Renewal in Ancient Israel***

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. xxvi + 206. Hardcover. \$75.00. ISBN 0521513448.

Bruce Wells  
Saint Joseph's University  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Levinson's book is primarily about innerbiblical exegesis, the process whereby the author of one biblical text cites or alludes to another and seeks to interpret the other text for his (or her?) own purposes. Levinson is, by all rights, a leading scholar in the analysis of this phenomenon and extends here his previous work on the topic in a number of intriguing ways. It is worth noting that, in his own words, "the present volume extensively revises and expands an earlier French version" (*L'Herméneutique de l'innovation: Canon et exégèse dans l'Israël biblique* [Le livre et le rouleau 24; Brussels: Éditions Lessius, 2005]). Indeed, the book contains significant new material and should not be overlooked by those already familiar with the French edition.

Throughout the book, Levinson attempts to weave together several premises (see his own list of four "theses" on 20–21, which are similar in certain respects to the ones I list here). They include: (1) Israelite (or, as is more likely the case, Judahite) practitioners of innerbiblical exegesis typically sought to subvert their cited texts; (2) they concealed their subversive efforts by passing their work off as congruent with older traditions; (3) such attempts at subversion provided opportunities for the Israelite religious tradition to adapt itself to new circumstances; (4) this was an ongoing process within Israelite thought and

religion; (5) this process can best be seen in the area of law. The principal thesis in support of which Levinson marshals these arguments suggests itself already in the title of his book. The revisions made to legal ideas in the Bible—by means of the process just described—provided the energy to renew religious thought in ancient Judah and to maintain its vitality and relevance, as the people of Judah faced new and unexpected challenges over the course of their history.

At several points Levinson expands his thesis in a very interesting direction. He seeks to connect his analysis with a problem that has occupied a great deal of scholarship within the humanities for quite some time: the problem of canon. He begins with Jonathan Z. Smith's contention that "the dialectical interplay between canonical delimitation and exegetical expansion should be made central to the study of the History of Religions" (15–16). Levinson points out that the confrontation between exegesis and canon existed also in ancient Israel and, more importantly, that one can see this confrontation not merely in postcanonical literature but also within the very literature that makes up the canon. This is not a minor point. As Levinson notes,

The stakes here are important, because Smith's model in effect posits a hierarchy between canon and interpretation. That hierarchy is untenable. Interpretation is constitutive of the canon; it is not secondary to the canon in terms of either chronology or significance. (18)

In other words, elements within the canon itself provide justification for continued exegesis and interpretation—that is, reinterpretation—of the canon. The idea of the canon, therefore, does not call for rigid adherence to a static tradition but for recognition of a tradition with sufficient vitality and flexibility to adapt to change and *thereby* maintain its relevance.

This raises the question of what exactly Levinson has in mind when he speaks of interpretation and exegesis. He provides the answer:

By *exegesis* or *hermeneutics* I mean the range of interpretive strategies designed to extend the application of a given canon to the whole of life, even to circumstances not originally contemplated by the canon itself. By means of exegesis, the textually finite canon becomes infinite in its application. (15)

Levinson refers to a "range of strategies" on several occasions: "a number of sophisticated literary strategies" (48), "a range of literary strategies" (49), and "cluster of strategies" (xviii). Unfortunately, he never clearly enumerates these strategies. Along the way, he makes mention of chiasmic citation, Seidl's law, common vocabulary, and the like, but one

is never entirely sure which moves on the part of a biblical author would count, in Levinson's view, as one of the aforementioned strategies. Levinson does, however, coin a phrase to function as a rubric for the set of strategies used by biblical authors to carry out their legal revision of earlier texts: "the rhetoric of concealment" (xviii, 48, 92). This relates back to premise 2 above. Biblical authors who attempted to revise and innovate also attempted to conceal their revisions and innovations in various ways. Levinson looks to three biblical texts to illustrate his point.

All of the texts relate in one way or another to the idea of transgenerational punishment. The first is Lam 5:7: "*Our fathers* [אבותינו] sinned and are no more; But as for us—the *punishment for their iniquities* [עונותיהם]—we must bear!" (translation and emphasis are Levinson's, 58). Levinson claims that this text alludes to the idea of transgenerational punishment as found in the Decalogue, specifically in Exod 20:5: "visiting the *punishment for the iniquity* of the fathers upon the sons" (פקד עון אבת על בנים); again, emphasis is Levinson's). For nonreaders of Hebrew, the English words in italics might imply that there are as many as five words in both verses that are identical. Obviously, that is not the case: there are only two, אבות and עון. Further, the text of Lamentations does not use the two in construct, as the text of Exodus does. Levinson believes, however, that the lament's "speaker has broken apart the original genitive phrase" (59). True, the words are not together in Lamentations, but that the "speaker" did this intentionally is very hard to prove. Levinson goes on to argue that, by adding pronominal suffixes to the words אבות and עונות—which, in their absolute forms, rhyme and assonate—the speaker/author has broken the "similarity of sound. The broken assonance highlights the fractured logic: the punishment that the speakers endure is not for their own but for their fathers' apostasy" (59). Again, anything is possible, but the reader would have to be expecting the two words to rhyme and assonate and then be surprised when they do not. But there is no particular reason why the reader should be expecting this (or why the author should be expecting the reader to have this expectation) and thus no particular reason why we interpreters ought to perceive that there was any sort of assonance at stake, the breaking of which would have been noteworthy. Simply put, it is not at all clear that Lam 5:7 uses אבות and עונות because Exod 20:5 uses אבות and עון.

Furthermore, it seems to me that Levinson's interpretation of this verse in Lamentations depends on how one answers the following questions. First, is the author of the text questioning whether it is fair for members of his generation to suffer for the wrongdoing of their ancestors? The answer, of course, is almost certainly yes. Then one must ask: Is the author attempting to criticize the principle of transgenerational punishment in general? A yes answer here is highly probable. The final question is whether the author has in mind Exod 20:5 and its particular articulation of that principle. This is where an affirmative answer has to remain at the level of mere possibility. It seems just as likely that

the appearance of אבות and עון in both texts is coincidental. Besides, the lament's author would undoubtedly have been familiar with the idea of transgenerational punishment by virtue of having grown up in Judahite society, not necessarily because he had read Exod 20:5.

A similar line of reasoning can be applied to Levinson's next example, Ezek 18:1–4, which quotes the proverb: "Fathers eat sour grapes and their children's teeth are set on edge" (translation Levinson's, 60). The text then has Yahweh say that this proverb will no longer describe the situation in Israel, because now "the person who sins, only he shall die" (61). Levinson argues that Ezekiel uses the proverb as a "strategic foil" (63) not only for criticizing the principle of transgenerational punishment but also "for the far more theologically problematic act of effectively annulling a divine law," namely, the law about transgenerational punishment in the Decalogue. Even if the Decalogue had been composed in the form as we have it today by the time this text in Ezekiel was written, however, it is not a foregone conclusion that the author of Ezek 18:1–4 knew that text and was reacting against it.

There is no question that the concept of transgenerational punishment is one that this Ezekiel author is not at all happy with. Interestingly enough—and Levinson points this out—the same proverb castigated in Ezekiel turns up in Jer 31:29–30 in yet another assault on transgenerational punishment. Again, though, there is no compelling reason to assume that these texts have the Decalogue's version of transgenerational punishment as their target. Clearly, the idea of transgenerational punishment had some currency and even venerability in Judah: it had been enshrined in a proverb no less. Those who were unaware of the concept were likely the exception rather than the rule. Thus, there is every reason to note how various biblical texts call this idea into question and in rather severe fashion at times. But their attack seems directed strictly at the idea, and there is, in my view, insufficient warrant to read into these texts a direct attack on the relevant portion of the Decalogue.

The chief issue that Levinson raises in this regard, however, still stands: How does one explain the presence of contradictory legal ideas within the Hebrew Bible? Levinson's solution—suggesting that contradictory ideas were introduced by means of the rhetoric of concealment—might actually work in some cases. His third example is his most convincing. He examines Deut 7:9–10, a text that apparently does indeed revise the statement on transgenerational punishment in Deuteronomy's version of the Decalogue (Deut 5:9–10). The cluster of common vocabulary is larger here than in his other examples, and Seidl's law seems to be applicable in this case. Levinson's interpretation of the passage is most insightful.

The concluding chapter is really the next-to-last chapter of the book (ch. 5, “The Canon as Sponsor of Innovation”). Levinson has led up to this conclusion by articulating the need to reconnect biblical studies with the humanities (ch. 1), by pointing out that “exegesis” is not always posterior to “canon” but can occur within “canon” itself (ch. 2), by describing the issue of legal revision and innovation in ancient Near Eastern texts, including the Hebrew Bible (ch. 3), and by working through the texts on transgenerational punishment (ch. 4). Chapter 5 contains a forceful restatement of his main thesis—that revisions within the canon were opportunities for renewal and for adapting older traditions to new circumstances—and an especially strong emphasis on the idea that revision and innovation are part and parcel of the nature of canon. “The biblical text,” writes Levinson, “is regarded as a parade example of an unredeemed text that encodes and perpetuates concepts of power, hierarchy, domination, privilege, xenophobia, patriarchy, and colonialism. The truth is much more complex” (93). Of all things, it is the biblical canon that offers precedent for revising and reworking tradition. It invites readers to engage in a process that it has initiated and that continues to remain open. This is an argument that one can agree with, even if one remains unconvinced concerning the specific relationships that Levinson posits between particular biblical texts.

Levinson’s last chapter is entitled, “The Phenomenon of Rewriting within the Hebrew Bible: A Bibliographic Essay on Inner-biblical Exegesis in the History of Scholarship.” The chapter occupies about eighty-five pages and contains Levinson’s comments on the work of approximately fifty different scholars who have worked on the topic of innerbiblical exegesis, beginning with Julius Wellhausen. The chapter offers an array of interesting insights and finds ample occasion to reinforce what Levinson has been trying to demonstrate all along.

The book deserves a wide readership. It would serve well as a text for advanced undergraduate or graduate courses that deal with innerbiblical exegesis. One can also hope that scholars in other fields will read it and take to heart Levinson’s argument for the reintegration of biblical studies into the core of academic work in the humanities. In addition, there are faith communities that would be encouraged by Levinson’s insight into the nature of canon and the necessity for ongoing reinterpretation of tradition. The book’s research is thorough, its argument forceful, its writing elegant, and it is blessedly short. If books can be placed into tribes, may this one’s increase.