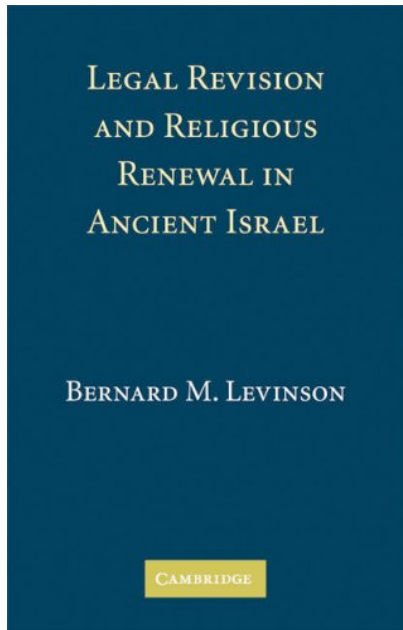


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Levinson, Bernard M.

Legal Revision and Religious Renewal in Ancient Israel

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In *Legal Revision and Religious Renewal in Ancient Israel*, author Bernard M. Levinson argues that too often scholars have drawn an arbitrary line separating the canonical biblical text and its postbiblical interpretations. This line ignores the fact that interpretation is built into the canonical text itself, as biblical writers reworked and reinterpreted portions of the received tradition for their own needs and in their own contexts. The consequence of treating the canon and its interpretation as two distinct entities relegates postbiblical interpretation to an endeavor completely separate from rather than continuous with the biblical text and suggests a much sharper break with the Bible than is actually the case. Levinson further claims that this insight is invaluable not only to biblical studies but to history of religions and the humanities in general.

This short book, or long essay, is really a synthesis of his work beginning particularly with his *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation* (1997) and expanded and refined in his recent work "*The Right Chorale*": *Studies in Biblical Law and Interpretation* (2008). In these texts Levinson explicitly outlines his approach to innerbiblical exegesis and provides detailed textual examples of how the biblical canon, particularly the legal material, is itself a work of interpretation and reinterpretation. While Levinson draws on

some of the technical examples from these pieces to support his claims in *Legal Revision and Religious Renewal in Ancient Israel*, he focuses more on the challenges and opportunities that emerge from his view that the biblical canon is really a dynamic force in and of itself, containing its own substantial self-critical tools and mechanisms of change.

In chapter 1, “Biblical Studies as the Meeting Point of the Humanities,” Levinson begins by noting that “At the precise moment when the canon has become such a point of contention in the humanities, critically absent from the discussion is academic Biblical Studies: the one discipline devoted to exploring what a canon is, how it emerges historically, how its texts relate to one another, how it affects the community it espouses” (4). Levinson then goes on to set the agenda for the text by stating that “Properly understood the canon is radically open: it models critique and embeds theory. By recovering that absent perspective, this short work seeks to open the conversation between Biblical Studies and the humanities” (11).

Twice in Deuteronomy (4:2 and 13:1), Moses warns his audience: “You must not add anything to what I command you nor take anything away from it, but shall keep the commandments of Yahweh your God.” “With such fixity and textual sufficiency as its hallmarks, how can a canon be made to address the varying needs of later generations of religious communities?” asks Levinson in chapter 2, “Rethinking the Relation between ‘Canon’ and ‘Exegesis.’” According to Levinson, exegesis is the answer, providing the means by which “the textually finite canon becomes infinite in its application” (15). The author goes on to point out that, while neither the idea of canon nor the formula prohibiting legal change originated in ancient Israel, the Israelite scribe found himself in the interesting bind of needing to adapt the law to meet the changing needs of the community, while at the same time demonstrating that no innovation had taken place at all. In this chapter, Levinson indicates that, for his model of canonical creativity, he is deeply indebted to the “inner-biblical exegesis approach” most often associated with Michael Fishbane and James Kugel. But, he notes, the “the implications of the study of inner-biblical exegesis for a broader theory have not been probed” (20).

In chapter 3, “The Problem of Innovation within the Formative Canon,” Levinson builds upon the problem that he has framed in chapter 2 by focusing on the uniquely ancient Israelite idea that the law was divinely revealed. “As Israelite authors turned their hand to law,” writes Levinson, “they wiped that genre clean of mortality by transforming the royal speaker from a human monarch into their divine king, Yahweh” (27). He then goes on to ask the central question: “How does a culture with a concept of divine revelation address the problem of legal change? How can legal texts, once viewed as divinely revealed, be revised to fit new circumstances without compromising their—or God’s—authority?”

(29). There is only one instance of explicit legal modification in the Hebrew Bible—in the book of Ruth—but generally, “once a law [was] attributed to God, it [could not] be questioned or qualified” (48). This did not mean, however, that the scribes left the laws intact; the times demanded their revision and adaptation, and “as a result ... it was necessary to develop a number of sophisticated literary strategies to present new law as not in fact involving revision or annulment of older laws” (48). “The biblical authors,” argues Levinson in this chapter, “developed what may best be described as a rhetoric of concealment, one that served to camouflage the actual literary history of the laws” (48).

Focusing on the ethical and theological problems raised by passages such as Exod 20:5 in which God describes himself as “visiting the punishment for the iniquity of the fathers upon the children,” Levinson describes in chapter 4 some of strategies biblical authors used both to conceal and to authorize their efforts to revise biblical law. In each of three biblical texts—from Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Deuteronomy—Levinson demonstrates how the authors of these texts reinterpreted the issue of transgenerational punishment so as to radically subvert it, in effect limiting punishment to the sinful individual in his or her own time rather than allowing it to travel through the generations to impact innocent descendants. The methods employed by the scribes to effect this change are subtle and sophisticated, ranging from the use of indirect reference to and poetically reframing of the doctrine in Lamentations to the use of lemmatic citation and reformulation, along with pseudepigraphy, in Deuteronomy. Finally, to make clear how postbiblical interpretation is consistent with innerbiblical interpretation, Levinson shows how the authors of Targum Onqelos effectively annulled the doctrine of transgenerational punishment in the rabbinic period using techniques reminiscent of those already employed within the biblical period.

In chapter 5, “The Canon as Sponsor of Innovation,” the author returns to his initial argument, concluding that, based on the foregoing evidence, “textual authority was widely challenged and actively debated in ancient Israel,” making it impossible to maintain the assumption of a foundational canon with subsequent exegesis (89). Scholars within the arena of religious studies, as well as across the humanities, writes Levinson, “would benefit from deeper exploration of this rich paradox” that is the canon. At once seemingly closed, yet radically open, “it invites innovation, it demands interpretation, it challenges piety, it questions priority, it sanctifies subversion, it warrants difference, and it embeds critique” (94).

The last chapter, “The Phenomenon of Rewriting within the Hebrew Bible: A Bibliographic Essay on Inner-biblical Exegesis in the History of Scholarship,” really functions as a second and distinct part of this book. As Levinson states in the introductory paragraph, the goal of this section is “to offer a broader intellectual genealogy of the approach

frequently designated 'inner-biblical exegesis' ... from its origins in nineteenth-century European source-critical scholarship" (95). The section appropriately begins with Julius Wellhausen, a careful reader of text who early on saw in Deuteronomy evidence of innovation and not merely "reform in which the nation returned to older norms" (96). From Wellhausen, Levinson jumps to the middle of the twentieth century to mention scholars such as Seeligman, Rawidowicz, Bloch, Sarna, Sandmel, and Scholem. The majority of the chapter, however, focuses on scholars writing from 1975 until the present, with more extensive coverage given to figures such as Fishbane, Steck, Lohfink, Kratz, and Otto. There is also a very up-to-date listing of scholars who have written in the last decade or so in areas that deal with innerbiblical exegesis, including Schmid, Bar-On, Tov, Scoralick, Nihan, Zahn, and Veijola. The last section of the chapter, "Approaches to Exegesis in 1–2 Chronicles," departs somewhat from the preceding organizational logic," which is primarily chronological, to highlight scholarly contributions to the study of Chronicles.

While the main text of this book reads more like an essay, focusing more on the idea of canon and its implications, the extensive and detailed footnotes provide a roadmap to the resources that have brought Levinson to this point. Not only do they contain full references to his earlier more textually based work, but they provide a strong sense of his conversation partners on these issues. In some ways, then, the text has three distinct parts: (1) an essay on the dynamic nature of the canon and its implications; (2) a summary of Levinson's detailed textual scholarship in the footnotes; and (3) a brief history of modern scholarship on innerbiblical interpretation.

The format of this book has some advantages and some weaknesses. First, it provides a thorough but brief introduction to innerbiblical exegesis approach, both in method and in theory. Anyone, scholar or student, who is interested in learning more about how the theoretical foundations of this approach as well as how it works will find the text invaluable. Second, for scholars in particular, the footnotes and the bibliographic essay are excellent and up-to-date resources of the field. The bibliographic essay was a particularly delightful read in that Levinson connected many scholars with whom most readers will have at least a passing acquaintance in a new way. Third, the length and style of this text make it very accessible to both upper-level undergraduate students and graduate students working in the area of biblical interpretation or looking more generally at the idea of canon. The format of this text also presents a difficulty for some scholars who would like to deal more with the technical aspects of innerbiblical exegesis in that the examples are clear but limited. For those interested in more comprehensive descriptions and analysis of scribal innovation, Levinson's other new book, *The Right Chorale*, might be the better choice.

More generally, while Levinson emphasizes (rightly, I think) the need for the wider academic world of humanities to take notice of the role and function of the canon in ancient Israel, I am not certain how this text will reach that audience. Levinson is well aware of the gulf separating biblical studies and the humanities, himself noting that “contemporary theory has all but divorced itself from the study of Scripture, from thinking in a sophisticated way about religion” (93). The title is almost certainly one to put off readers in the humanities, however, as something that does not pertain to them. In addition, in order to be relevant to the scholars in the humanities who are interested in issues surrounding canon, I think that Levinson needs to more fully engage some of the current discussions surrounding canon. He highlights German studies as one example, but I think one that addresses the American and British contexts would probably be more relevant.