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John Rogerson, *Chronicle of the Old Testament Kings: The Reign-by-Reign Record of the Rulers of Ancient Israel.*

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John Rogerson, *Chronicle of the Old Testament Kings: The Reign-by-Reign Record of the Rulers of Ancient Israel*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1999.

The *Chronicle of the Old Testament Kings*, written by John Rogerson, professor of biblical studies emeritus at the University of Sheffield, provides an accessible and engaging academic summary treatment of the major leaders found in the biblical text. The target audience is the general, interested reader. Biblical scholars would likely not turn to this as a source book for their own research. But for the arm-chair hobbyist it could be a valuable addition to one's collection. The book has been artfully designed. Over 260 illustrations and images (including images of ancient artifacts) are thoughtfully and strategically placed throughout the book to accompany the text and enhance the reading. The artwork depicting ancient leaders or biblical events is drawn from diverse artistic genres (Byzantine, Renaissance, Neo-Classical, etc.). In addition to illustrations and images, side bar call-outs provide focus and insight on topics of interest.

Even though the title of the book highlights Old Testament kings, this book reviews many notable ancient Israelite leaders who do not fit the definition of an Old Testament king either because they were not a king or they lived after the time period of the Old Testament. Hence, in addition to Old Testament kings, the book discusses ancient Israelite ancestral leaders (such as the patriarchs, Moses, Joshua, and the Judges) as well as the rulers of Israel during the 2nd temple period (such as the Hasmoneans and Herod the Great).

In the preface, Rogerson engages the reader with thought provoking questions. Do we really “know” the leaders of Israel? Are the stories about them in the Bible myths and legends? In the introduction, he presents some of the problems scholars encounter with the Bible. Is it reliable as history? How do we account for discrepancies in biblical chronology? Though outside archaeology and texts can help to corroborate details in the Bible, the general rule is that the further back we go in biblical history, the more guesswork that is involved. Hence, the dates and details assigned to the various kings and leaders of ancient Israel are provisional.

After the preface and introduction the book divides the discussion of ancient Israelite leaders according to this outline: From the Ancestors to the Judges: ?1450 – c. 1020 BC; The United Monarchy c. 1020-931 BC; The Divided Monarchy: Israel, 931-722/1 BC; The Divided Monarchy: Judah c. 931-539 BC; and The Second Temple Period.

This latter period is divided into the following sub-periods: Under the Persians 539 – 333 BC; Under the Ptolemies 333 – c. 200 BC; Under the Seleucids c. 200 – 166 BC; The Hasmonean Dynasty 166 – 37 BC, and The Roman Period 63 BC – AD 70).

Rogerson devotes the substance of the book to reviewing each leader, presenting relevant chronological information, providing a summary of the leader's life, and including pertinent biblical citations. Using a version of the historical-critical approach, Rogerson also highlights intriguing questions from challenges or inconsistencies found within the Bible or triggered by competing extra-biblical evidence. He then offers reasoning for how to deal with these issues. Primarily his conclusions to these challenges express the general opinion of many biblical scholars.

Though I recommend the book to any casual reader as an informative and educating experience, I have two general criticisms of the book. First, the historical-critical approach that some biblical scholars employ to provide scientific and objective interpretations for biblical data can lead to academically condoned speculative theories—this has become so commonplace that few acknowledge the speculative nature of such reasoning, even if this reasoning is sound and compelling. Second, modern feminist thought may have over-sensitized some scholars in their interpretative treatment of male and female characters, maximizing the “negative” features of the male characters and foregrounding the “positive” features of female characters.

I'll begin with the first challenge. Many biblical scholars assume that in order to produce “objective” biblical interpretation one must accept that many biblical stories are legendary. Furthermore, the assumption is that the stories preserved tell us more about the history, values, and culture of those who preserved and transmitted the biblical text rather than about the history, values and culture of the people who are the focus of the stories. This has long been the mode of some biblical scholarship, to try to account for why a later group would tell a story from an earlier past. One example of this trend in biblical interpretive scholarship is how Rogerson concludes the section on the stories of the patriarchal ancestors. The next three paragraphs are quoted from pages 18-20 in Rogerson's book.

“A starting point for addressing these questions [how to account for differences between the religion of Abraham and that of later Israel, as presented in the Old Testament] is the observation that, although the Old Testament is concerned primarily with an entity named Israel, the story begins not with the founding father of Israel, namely Jacob..., but with Jacob's putative grandfather Abraham.

“Further, many of the Abraham stories are set in the area of Hebron, which was the ancient chief city of the kingdom of Judah. In other words, the story of the Hebrews begins with a figure who was believed to be the founding father of

Judah. Now Judah was much smaller than its northern neighbor Israel, was populated later than Israel, and was initially less significant in the development of Old Testament religion. Why, then, does the overall story begin with the ancestor of the initially smaller, less important country? The likely answer is that the story began to receive its final form at a time when Israel no longer existed as a political entity and Judah alone survived, representing itself as Israel. This could have been at any time after the destruction of the kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 722/1 BC. Three possible moments are the reign of either Hezekiah (c. 728-698 BC) or Josiah (640-609 BC), both kings of Judah, or the post-Exilic period (from 539 BC).

“Any attempt to narrow the chronological possibilities further can only rest on plausible rather than probable theories. Hezekiah certainly had pressing needs for an overall story in which the founding father of Judah (i.e. Abraham) was also shown to be the founder father of Israel. He had seen the destruction of the northern kingdom, Israel, by the Assyrians in 722/1 BC and he was trying to preserve the independence of his own kingdom against Assyria by extending his influence into the former kingdom of Israel, as well as by forming alliances with other rulers of small kingdoms in the area.

Josiah was in a similar position a century later. In favor of the post-Exilic period it can be said that Abraham’s links with northern Mesopotamia in the biblical story may indicate that he was identified with the interests of those who returned from Exile in Babylon, and who argued that they, and not the people who had remained in Judah, constituted the true people of Israel.”

I agree with Rogerson that the biblical data present a challenge in making firm historical conclusions regarding the patriarchal ancestors. However, I am not convinced that “inventing” new scenarios—for which we have no confirming evidence—to account for the production and transmission of the stories helps us to answer the original question. Instead, we have perpetuated the very problem we say the Bible presents to us—lack of solid, confirming, historical evidence. Such reasoning appears to be academically condoned speculation without much support.

Replacing one legend lacking unassailable historical validity with another does not solve the academic problems presented by the Bible. Just because the story of an ancestor places that ancestor in locations such as Northern Mesopotamia or in a specific village of the hill country of ancient Israel does not mean that later writers were trying to appeal to groups living in those locations to coalesce together around a shared narrative. When literacy rates in ancient Israel were possibly less than 10%, and the likelihood of these written stories to be widely promulgated was low, why would anyone believe that such a tenuous connection between the remote past and a specific

geographical location would be personally meaningful to Israelites living in a later time period?

Would not, instead, the main themes and messages of the stories be the inspiration and reason for telling the stories? Is not that one of the primary reasons that the biblical text still has staying power today? Not because the stories resonate with the majority of readers due to a connection with ancient Israelite political affiliations, geographical centers, or religious practices. But rather, the stories represent humanity and life as we all know it—difficult, challenging, unjust, inequitable—and yet fraught with the hope of a better life, perhaps through divine intervention.

Certainly stories are told and preserved because they have relevance to those telling, hearing, and preserving them. But most biblical stories and figures have sparse or incomplete details. Much of what we know of ancient Israelite history lacks full and robust historical concreteness. Therefore, it is not a stretch of the imagination to see that many of the biblical stories could be reasonably fit into a wide variety of time periods. This fact should curtail any confidence we might have in firmly concluding that a particular story was composed or preserved at a specific historical juncture in time.

The second challenge detected was Rogerson's treatment of some male and female characters. His dealings with the female judge Deborah (and the woman Jael, both in Judges 4) are curious. His interpretation of the story demonstrates that despite our best attempts at historical objectivity, it is difficult to avoid infusing our own culture or values into the interpretative process. First, Rogerson takes as certain that Deborah sat under a palm tree. Reasoning that it would be highly unusual for a palm tree to grow in the area between Bethel and Ramah, he concludes it would be a well-known spot (ostensibly a famous location where the people would know to find Deborah).

But how does Rogerson know that a palm tree would be rare in such a location? Do we know enough about ancient botany to make a determination with such certainty? When so many other details in the biblical text are considered to be later projections or fanciful legend, why does Rogerson suddenly think that a palm tree was truly historically accurate to the story of Deborah?

Rogerson goes on to say that Deborah “no doubt” was a capable judge “based on her skill, insight, and impartiality” (p. 46). Are we now projecting our expectations of a judge upon her? Is there any evidence, Biblical or otherwise, of her skill, insight, and impartiality? Or is it possible in the aftermath of the modern women's liberation movement, feminism, and feminist studies, which have had such a profound effect on the academy, that there is now a tendency among scholars to highlight and speak well of women, especially women from the past who are so underrepresented in the

historical record? Curiously, Rogerson concludes about Deborah and Jael that “We need not doubt their deeds, even if the exact circumstances are less easily discerned” (p. 48). Why would Rogerson make these claims of “no doubt” for women in the biblical record and not for men?

When Rogerson reviews stories of Moses, Joshua, Joseph, or Abraham everything is called into doubt. He does not treat the stories as “historically true” but simply representative of ideas and events from a later time period that are retrofitted. This “inequality” of treatment of men and women that Rogerson practices, though it may sound honorable from a feminist perspective, is not academically appropriate.

Compare Rogerson’s presentation of these women to his presentation of another judge who was a man—Samson. After reviewing Samson’s deeds he concludes, “What history, if any, lies behind these extraordinary events?” (p. 61) and “Whether Samson really did kill a lion with his bare hands, or became weak once his head had been shaved, is improbable” (p. 63). Why are the details about Deborah’s account generally construed to have historical validity while the figure of Samson and the stories surrounding him are called into question altogether?

I’m not advocating for the historicity of any specific items in the Samson narratives, but the uneven skepticism Rogerson brings to the biblical record I think says more about modern academic values and sensitivities than it does about the validity of various biblical details as being historically accurate. There is no escaping the fact that women throughout history have often been marginalized, though there are rare exceptions (Deborah and Jael may be representative). But that does not mean we go beyond academic and scholarly constraint in recounting a woman’s experience just as now we try not to do so with men.

In conclusion, this is a delightful, informative book. Besides some academic perspectives that could be tweaked in some instances, the book cogently demonstrates the Bible’s strengths and weaknesses as a primary source on the lives of ancient Israelite leaders. Because the western civilized tradition is a blended fusion of ancient Greek and Israelite values, knowing something of the ancient leaders that led the Israelite culture for nearly two millennia is important. Rogerson’s book provides a nuanced, though introductory, perspective for understanding one strand of influence in the tradition of Western heritage.

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