Hendel, Ronald

*Remembering Abraham: Culture, Memory, and History in the Hebrew Bible*


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After a preface, six chapters comprise the main body of Hendel’s book: (1) “Israel among the Nations” (3–30); (2) “Remembering Abraham” (31–44); (3) “Historical Memories in the Patriarchal Narratives” (45–55); (4) “The Exodus in Biblical Memory” (57–74); (5) “The Archaeology of Memory” (75–94); and (6) “The Biblical Sense of the Past” (95–104). An appendix deals with various linguistic phenomena that have implications for dating biblical literature, features that can be attributed with relative certainty either to CBH (Classical Biblical Hebrew) or LBH (Late BH), from lexical issues to problems in verb morphology (109–17). Abbreviations (119–21; this placing is odd—why not at the book’s beginning or end, for easier usage?), extensive notes (123–64), and a massive bibliography (165–87) are rounded up by an index of biblical citations (189–94) and a general index of biblical names and concepts mentioned in the text (195–200). In other words, the two “texts” of this book, the more discursive and the more technical, are almost equal in length. Clearly, this book is intended for experts rather than for laypersons or even undergraduate students.

According to Hendel in his preface (xi), chapters 2 and 6 and the appendix are new; the other chapters (1, 3, 4, 5) are “revisions of earlier publications.” One of them, chapter 4, is also available digitally. The earliest was published in 1994, others in 2001 and 2002;
one is still forthcoming. Clearly, then, the chapters were originally written as individual essays and are recent and available enough, revisions notwithstanding, for this reviewer to ask, Do they form a cohesive unity when published together? Is the collection as meaningful as a whole as are the single themes read on their own? Is there a common thread, are there common matrixes, that justify the collection as a book whose significance that exceeds the sum of its components? The author declares, “The essays in this book approach a central set of themes: the interplay culture, history and memory in the Hebrew Bible, particularly as they relate to issues of the formation and transformation of religious and ethnic identity” (x, emphasis added). Hendel continues to warn us that history is not neat and that a dialectic of remembering and forgetting is operative in identity formation and memory construction. Does he deliver a clear vision, or interrelated perspectives, about the processes he touches upon here, as they are articulated in the Hebrew Bible?

Yes and no, would be my answer. Hendel is a treat to read. His breadth of knowledge is a pleasure to behold: from archaeology to history, from linguistic analysis to textual criticism and much more. But his book is and remains a collection of articles that are not “interlocking,” as both Robert Alter and Frank Moore Cross generously assert in the back-cover blurb. Identity, memory, and narrative are themes that afford a wide field of play; in other words, they can serve as an umbrella for inquiries that are only loosely linked outside a material book cover.

I found myself enjoying chapter 1 because it leads to understanding biblical identities as complex, relating to their presumed ancient Near Eastern contexts for separation and boundaries as well as for context, for creating uniqueness as well as not escaping similarities. I like the argumentation and the style, but this is hardly new. And while “culture” and “cultural” are often used, no explanation of what these words may mean for (nonbiblical) critics of the twenty-first century is not forthcoming.

Chapter 2 is a series of notes on the Abraham narratives, with worthwhile insights about their interbiblical reception. To remember Abraham is indeed “to enter into this age-long history of memory and countermemory. The memories of the patriarch continue to exert powerful claims as part of the deep root of Western culture and of modern Jewish, Christian, and Muslim identities” (42–43). True enough. But then? I make a note to add it to my file of relevant Genesis bibliography.

Chapter 3 presents Gen 12–50 as a combination of myth and (manufactured? “authentic” in some sense?) memory. Only at the very end does the last sentence state it directly: the patriarchal era is “an era in sacred time” (55). Yes, this is exactly where we should explore further, isn’t it?
In chapter 4 Hendel views the stories of the exodus as a combination of history and (mnemo)memory of various pasts, converging and serving in the creation of a (national) identity. I like his use of Bloch and Braudel but wonder how exactly the harmonization of memory (= fiction) and history (real?) is to be achieved. I make a note to add this to my Exodus bibliography file.

The reading of chapters about King Solomon in chapter 5 is enlightening as a commentary on 1 Kgs 1–2 and beyond, but do we really approach in it “two King Solomons—one historical and the other discursive—who are not wholly separable” and refer to two separate realities (p4)? I am wholly convinced by Hendel’s version of the discursive Solomon, not by the historical one, which makes “memory” and the “archaeology of memory” here only in a very special sense. Add to the 1 Kings file.

Yes, biblical representations of the past are a conflation of history and myth (ch. 6), but in what quantities, and how does “memory” come in? And what kind or kinds of “memory”? The appendix includes important remarks on early and late biblical Hebrew phenomena, but they are disjointed, more like a series of single notes put together than a unified whole.

So, on the whole, I beg to differ: as a book, this is not a “magnificent volume” (Cross on the back-cover blurb). It is and remains a collection of articles—some of which I find useful, others less so—that are strung together loosely to form a meaningful new approach to the themes discussed. Hendel uses F. Braudel and M. Bloch’s work for his inquiries, which is a little rare in North American biblical scholarship. But otherwise, does he really “occupy a middle ground between radicals and conservatives” in “an exciting place” (David Noel Freedman on the back cover)? I would answer no. Hendel’s position veers toward the conservative and established. It is perhaps not very useful to apply concepts such as “identity” and “identity formation” and “memory” to the Hebrew Bible without problematizing them first, for their own sake, foraying outside the biblical fields before coming back to plough them for a new crop.

Yes, as Freedman notes, in terms of biblical scholarship many readers may find this work “impeccable.” I do not, in spite of my admiration for Hendel’s erudition. What I would appreciate, at this time, on the threshold of the twenty-first century, is a combination of classical Bible-reading tools—an area in which Hendel is a master—with more ideas and questioning from philosophy, literary criticism, literary theory, psychology, and sociology. At this time, when biblical studies are steadily diminishing outside confessionalism, a possible refreshment is to be gained by integrating with other fields of the humanities. Sadly, this is not done here, at least not adequately. I hope that Hendel may return to
these themes. Meanwhile, we can read his essays as individual contributions to certain biblical texts—which I shall certainly do—rather than to concepts and processes.