

Ronald Hendel, *Remembering Abraham: Culture, Memory, and History in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 216, £54.00, ISBN 9780195177961

Ronald Hendel's *Remembering Abraham: Culture, Memory, and History in the Hebrew Bible* is a compelling collection of six short studies that successfully contribute to the growing field of memory studies within the framework of Biblical scholarship. Through his approach in exploring the cultural and historical forces at work in shaping the memory of Abraham and other foundational biblical narratives, Hendel offers fresh perspectives on how Israel's identity was formed and subsequently maintained. The book not only engages with relevant questions relating to biblical historiography but also, unsurprisingly, examines the role of memory, through collective intergenerational storytelling, informing religious and cultural identity which makes it a valuable resource that can uniquely speak to biblical, cultural and memory studies.

This is in no small part due to the interdisciplinary approach adopted by Hendel that involves a methodology encompassing archaeology, cultural theory and biblical criticism. One of the first questions Hendel deals with is this: how do a diverse collection of people (including fugitives and escaped slaves) gathered in the highlands in the land of Israel come together in a cohesive fashion to foster a genuine expression of community and togetherness? His answer rests primarily on a shared theme across all six studies; shared belief in a common story that was told, instilled and lived out in community in a fashion that relied heavily on memory and not necessarily historical accuracy. As a result of this, Hendel brings his main arguments through the examination of two such common stories: the patriarch Abraham and the Exodus narrative.

Chapter One positions Israel as a nation that finds comfort and identity in opposition to its neighbours around them. Hendel utilises the narrative of Balaam, who presents Israel as uniquely chosen by God, to reinforce the notion of Israel as a 'people apart' from others around them and this sets the stage for a nation who utilise storytelling and memory to hold onto that position. Chapter Two turns to Abraham as the central pillar of Israelite memory that is often used to 'articulate Israel identity' and particularly in

times of great difficulty or when such an identity is under threat. Hendel points to the evoking of memory as a turning point in the redemption of the nation from Egyptian slavery (Exod. 2:24), the eventual rejection of disobedient worship of a golden calf (Exod. 32:13) and in the struggles of the Babylonian exile (Isa. 51:2) as key examples. However, despite this, it is also argued by the author that whilst remembrance of Abraham produces 'collective identity' it also contains the potential for the creation of division and dissent.

Chapters Three and Four adopt an approach that focuses heavily on the historicity of the patriarchs of Genesis. Though his stated desire is not to prove or falsify the patriarchal narratives, Hendel draws on several techniques that produce an outcome that intentionally places the narratives in a location where 'history and imagination mingle'. His geographical, chronological and archaeological approach to the region of Negeb and Fort Abram, in particular, accepts a valid historical argument that offers insight into the existence of Abraham within a certain timeframe. However, this is subsequently countered by an exploration of El and Haran which suggest a prehistory to the Genesis narratives as they contain 'authentic pre-Yahwistic' historical memories and content that is pre-Israelite. The overarching point that the author makes in these chapters specifically is that these narratives, though at times lacking clear historical evidence, serve an important mnemonic function which is used to reinforce the unity and divine favour of Israel.

Chapter Five introduces Solomon to the fray with a re-examination of dating that calls into question the validity of his moniker as a great builder since the acceptance of later dating would support the construction of such work with that of later kings. In doing so, Hendel explores the textual narrative to conclude there are 'two Solomons', the historical king and the individual the biblical text represents. This is cemented in his examination of how memory and history can be distorted in royal ideology. Finally, chapter six pulls everything together through the discussion of a biblical sense of history through the lens of myth, epic and genealogy which all contribute to a broader narrative of divine interaction with the world.

Given the content and approach of Hendel outlined above, I would like to address several relevant critiques.

Hendel argues that the patriarchal stories of the bible are not intended as literal historical accounts but as reflections of the evolving nation of Israel as it strived for self-understanding both within themselves but also how they viewed the other inhabitants of the world around them. His use of Abraham and the Exodus, for instance, highlight how biblical narratives encouraged, shaped and guided the nation particularly in time of great crisis and where a reinforcement of identity was required. As a result of this approach, examination and portrayal of the patriarchs, the key focus of the author does not adequately consider the theological dimensions inherent in these narratives. While Hendel comprehensively explores the socio-cultural and mnemonic functions of the patriarchal stories, he appears to understate the theological significance that they accounts hold within the religious tradition of Israel and Christianity today.

A prime example of this is the lack of deep analysis of the covenant between Abraham and Father God. Such a covenant speaks to promise, faith and the relationship between God and his people yet it is not dealt with in a manner that would be expected in a piece of work that is particularly concerned with capturing the story of Abraham in new light. A further example of this is how the author presents the causes for Egyptian and Canaanite slavery. Hendel proposes aspects of military campaigns, human tributes, mass deportation and economic hardship as clear driving factors for such events but neglects the text of Exodus 1:10 that draws on Pharaoh's growing fear at the size of the expanding Israelite population which leads him to the conclusion that appropriate action must be taken lest the captive gain an opportunity to overthrow the captor.

In addition to this, there is a reluctance from the author to consider what a Biblical text says in the interest of creating or constructing a historical scenario that is removed from tradition and a desire for accuracy. Hendel's reliance on cultural memory theory above and beyond sometimes leads to speculative conclusions about the intention of the original author and the experiences of the original audience. While there are occasions where it is useful and appropriate to consider how collective memory shapes identity

and drives action, attributing specific mnemonic strategies to Biblical writers without substantial textual evidence can be at best problematic as the risk of projecting modern theoretical framework onto ancient texts comes plainly into view.

In his archaeological and historical analyses, particularly in Chapters Three and Four, Hendel exhibits a level of selectivity that could be seen as contentious. While he accepts certain archaeological findings that support his thesis about the mingling of history and imagination, he appears to dismiss or downplay evidence that might suggest a stronger historical basis for the patriarchal narratives. This selective engagement with archaeological data may undermine the objectivity of his scholarship and could be a point of contention for historians and biblical scholars who advocate for a more nuanced interpretation of the evidence.

Despite these critiques, it is both appropriate and fair to state that the work of Hendel is informative, useful and most importantly thought-provoking. The work also offers a fresh lens through which to view the biblical patriarchs and the narratives surrounding. While there is a pattern of underplaying the theological dimensions of these stories and an approach that occasionally leans towards speculative interpretations, its contributions to understanding the interplay between memory and identity are significant.

Hendel invites readers to reconsider the nature of Biblical narratives and see them not merely as historical records or theological volumes but as living memories that have shaped and been shaped by the communities that embody and preserve them. As a result, this approach invites us to reexamine our own memories, how they have shaped, helped formed our identities and contributed to our understanding of faith or not faith as may be the case. Overall, the work of Hendel in 'Remembering Abraham' is commendable as he attempts to bridge the gap between ancient text and modern theoretical framework, even if the execution is sometimes uneven. For scholars of Biblical studies, memory theory, or cultural anthropology, this work is a text that poses challenging and provocative questions. It encourages its readers to expand their interpretative boundaries and consider how shared stories and communal memories

influence religious identity and collective self-understanding. Ultimately, Hendel's exploration leaves an enduring mark on the conversation surrounding the intersection of history, culture, and faith, making this book an invaluable addition to both personal and academic libraries.

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