

Susan Niditch

The Responsive Self: Personal Religion in Biblical Literature of the Neo-Babylonian and Persian Periods. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015. Pp. vii + 190.

Fortunate indeed were the Amherst College students enrolled in Susan Niditch's "Personal Religion in the Bible" courses. Their luck is also ours, though, as Niditch's insights are now available in a monograph. It will interest scholars, who will find significant new line readings; students, who will gain a critical interpretive framework; and informed laypeople, who will obtain insight into the personal religions of ancient Israel. The book reads like an intense yet accessible seminar, one led by a master professor who anticipates questions and continually makes the material relatable and relevant.

The study concerns the emphasis placed on individual experiences, and the authors who personalize ancient Israelite religion, in material dating to the chaotic and unstable Neo-Babylonian and Persian periods. Although personal religion is not unique to late-biblical texts, literature of these periods contains "increased emphasis on the real or material, the individual or personal, and the unofficial or popular aspects of religion" (p. 7). Motivating factors for this change are "destabilization, factionalism, the movement of populations, and the power of colonialist overlords" (p. 137) that exist from the sixth century BCE onwards.

In her introduction, Niditch draws upon foundational work by sociologists, anthropologists, and religious scholars, which helps accomplish the goal of the Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library to publish volumes accessible both to scholars and "the educated nonspecialist." Thoughtful analogies concretize her arguments: Judeans residing outside Jerusalem experienced physical and psychic trauma during Jerusalem's fall just as Americans who lived far from Ground Zero still felt the effects of the 9/11 attacks (p. 12).

To her credit, Niditch admits challenges to her task, such as continued editing of earlier biblical texts in the Second Temple period, the effects of diaspora, and questions of chronology – and this last category proved the most problematic for this reviewer. Arguments for dating texts as Persian might become circular if "[m]ethodological approaches and theoretical considerations drawn from the study of contemporary religion" (p. 14) assist in the dating. (Identifying "themes central to our study of personal religion" can help date Qohelet as late [p. 37], yet her own study illuminates these themes.) The exact dates under consideration are sometimes inconsistent. Some Neo-Babylonian texts pre-date Jerusalem's fall, but much of the argument concerns exilic and post-exilic Yehud. Was the whole era "a time of nationally experienced stress" (p. 91) and

different from earlier national crises? Would the “trauma of exile” (p. 118) still affect a Hellenistic text such as Daniel 7?

Niditch’s first case study concerns a *māšāl* quoted by Jeremiah and Ezekiel: “Parents eat [have eaten] sour grapes, / and the teeth of the children twinge” (p. 17). While many scholars explore how this proverb assigns blame for the exile, Niditch wonders what force this saying had for the parent of a three-year-old child killed during the city’s fall: it might have comforted an individual, helping someone to cope with senseless suffering. While theodicy-minded prophets fret about God’s fairness, the people recite the proverb “to make unfairness comprehensible” (p. 27).

Chapter Two examines Job and Ecclesiastes, which discuss with urgency themes of justice, individual accomplishment, death, fate, and God’s fairness. The use of the first person and reflexive or self-referential terms (“I spoke did I with my heart,” as she translates Eccl. 1:16 [p. 41]) makes the works intensely personal. A tour-de-force text study of Ecclesiastes 12 exposes sexual nuances in the text and demonstrates the usefulness of Niditch’s framework for revealing Qohelet’s “deep and dark personal religion” (p. 51).

Form-critical studies of lament motifs often overlook the individual lamenter. Niditch corrects this oversight in Chapter Three, tracing the evolution of early incantations and laments from conventionalized formulas into narratives greatly “privatized and personalized” (p. 64), in the case of the late-biblical confessions of Jeremiah. In Nehemiah’s memoir, the author “individuates” stock motifs to suit the man and his setting. Autobiographies are “a valuable means of self-assertion and self-representation” in response to colonialist Persian rule (p. 70). Perhaps, though, Niditch’s use of the “auto-” prefix in describing this genre is too imprecise.

A study of vows in Chapter Four exemplifies Niditch’s approach. The author begins with a form-critical exploration of different types of vows before discussing activities (votive offerings) and texts (1 Samuel 1; Numbers 6) that involve vows. Her clear explanations and innovative interpretations by themselves would make this exercise valuable, but Niditch continues by building elegant arguments concerning personal religion. Nazarite vows, for example, expose changing gender roles, priestly efforts at control, relationships between vowing and social class, and even ancient Israelite hairstyle traditions. Finally, Niditch dates these sources, explaining how exilic and postexilic socioeconomics and social upheavals contributed to these phenomena. In contrast to previous works that describe Israelite personal religion, the current volume brings the reader along for the journey instead of only presenting final data.

Material objects also reveal aspects of personal religion (Chapter Five), including graffiti at burial sites and created objects used by prophets in

performance art sign acts. (Illustrations in place of prose descriptions would have assisted in this section.) Niditch excels in helping her reader understand the “visceral feelings and sensations evoked” by these physical objects – smell, sight, touch, taste (p. 93). A diachronic study of divine council and symbolic vision texts (Chapter Six) shows that late authors take formulaic material and particularize it to their social and historical situation; plotting texts chronologically shows that God becomes increasingly hidden and symbols more complex in late-biblical texts. Prophetic visions grow more elaborate, and the prophets themselves emerge as more fully realized characters.

Chapter Seven contrasts the late-biblical book of Ruth with the earlier Tamar narrative in Genesis 38, as similarities in subject allow differences in writing style to stand out. While the earlier text is minimalist, the later story is emotional, revealing characters’ motivations and views. In the late book of Jonah, characters (including God) reveal inner thoughts and justify their actions.

While Niditch successfully demonstrates the evolution in personal religion from the general to the specific, from the conventional to the personal, she also invites the reader to personalize these texts, to make them material, to experience the lived religion of the ancient authors. The results are revelatory.

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