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## "Review of *The Middle East under Rome*"

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*archal Narrative and Mosaic Yahwism* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992]), P. suggests that a Mosaic narrator, though shaping the text to suggest a typological connection with Joshua's conquest, may have judged the massacre by Simeon and Levi, for example, as inappropriate in the ancestral "dispensation," making it an "antitype," of later "holy war" under Joshua. A reading in the Christian "dispensation" would reset the ethical accents of the story once more. Although Christian readers might possibly interpret Simeon and Levi's violence typologically as spiritual "violence" deployed by the church against real violence, they must reject the actual violence perpetrated by Simeon and Levi as an anti-model.

In chap. 6, P. addresses various feminist perspectives on Genesis 34, admits its "patriarchal" perspective (though relativized by the biblical metanarrative), and allows for midrashic reconstructions of largely unvoiced perspectives of female characters (Dinah, the Hivite women); but he resists firmly any imposition of extrabiblical canons as authoritative for the story's interpretation.

Two appendixes (on discourse analysis and on Gen 49:5-6), an extensive bibliography, a general index, a Scripture index, and listings of Paternoster Biblical Monographs and Paternoster Theological Monographs conclude the book.

Parry's work is thorough to a fault, methodologically programmatic and consistent, and yet—apart from a few pedantically meticulous passages—interesting to read. It demonstrates that a literary interpretation of texts in their canonical form can be a thorough academic discipline with historical perspective, and that narrative ethics can proceed in a disciplined way from ancient text to contemporary Christian appropriation. P.'s methodological integrity saves his eventual conclusions from any premature or unwarranted "applications for today." It also shows, however, that at the end of a long exegetical and hermeneutical road the ethical yield of some OT stories for Christians may be fairly limited and general, although the exercise itself is thought provoking and rewarding. A fine study!

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MAURICE SARTRE, *The Middle East under Rome* (trans. Catherine Porter and Elizabeth Rawlings with Jeannine Routier-Pucci; Cambridge, MA/London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005). Pp. xviii + 665. \$39.95.

*The Middle East under Rome* is an abridgment and a translation of Maurice Sartre's *D'Alexandre à Zénobie* (Paris: Fayard, 2001). It is an excellent piece of scholarship. This abridgment consists of those chapters from the original work that deal exclusively with Rome; it even includes their illustrations. This tack has allowed the English version to be a complete, thorough, and enjoyable read, for it includes all references and elaborated points—elements that are not found in most abridged works. Consequently, the book is of great use to the researcher, scholar, and student alike.

Sartre's point of departure is the claim that the term "Middle East" best encapsulates the ancient reference to "Syria," a region that the author feels historians have kept at arm's

length. Scholars have studied Hellenistic Phoenicia, Israel, the Transjordan, and Mesopotamia, but he feels that Hellenistic Syria has “never been the object of a real synthesis” or “of a comprehensive study.” This baton is the one S. picks up. Because Syria had been subsumed into the Greek world before the Roman conquest, Syrian and even Arabian cults had earlier had the opportunity to migrate outside their lands of origin. Thus, S. wishes to study how the culture of Syria contributed to Greek civilization by observing the syncretism these indigenous cults underwent at the hands of those who promoted Hellenistic values. S.’s aim is to see whether this syncretism had any bearing on Roman acceptance of the foreign cults. He also explores this “Syrian” version of Hellenism along with the often violent resistance to the Hellenistic cultural domination within the Jewish and even the Aramean and Arab populations.

For this exercise, S. limits his research to the period between Pompey’s annexation of Syria in 64 B.C.E. and the fall of Palmyra in 272 C.E. As the author observes, this period is not uniform; it was one in which the peace brought about by Pompey’s suppression of brigandage was welcome, yet it also was one that was caught in the upheavals of the Roman civil war. It was one in which everything from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates was brought under one administration through the annexation of Nabatea and the creation of the province of Arabia, but it was also the time in which problems arose through attempts to extend that administration beyond the river under Lucius Verus and Septimius Severus.

Sartre admirably accomplishes his task in eleven chapters plus a conclusion: (1) The Hellenistic Legacy, (2) The End of Seleucid Syria and the First Roman Rule, (3) From Augustus to Trajan, (4) The Crises in Judaea from Herod to Bar Kokhba, (5) From Trajan to the Severi, (6) Civic Life and Urban Development during the Early Empire, (7) Rural Life in the Early Empire, (8) The Urban Economy in Roman Syria, (9) Hellenization and Indigenous Cultures, (10) Pagans, Jews, and Christians in Roman Syria in the Second and Third Centuries, and (11) A Time of Trials. S. concludes that the Greco-Roman culture endured for so long in Syria because of the Roman mix of “(fiscal) constraint and (cultural) freedom” (p. 367). As a result, the Syrians “drew upon differences and the plurality of cultures to create their own complex and infinitely rich civilization” (p. 368).

Each chapter’s references are given as notes at the end of the book, and the bibliography features the works of American, European, Israeli, Jordanian, and Syrian scholars and archaeologists. The double-columned index is fifteen pages long and lists both ancient and modern authors. It also cites locales according to their ancient and contemporary names. Although an overuse of parentheses in the text can be a distraction at times, the translation is smooth and fluid down to the idioms.

In sum, the period about which S. writes was one of great prosperity, which he concludes was the apogee of Greco-Roman Syria—despite the crises of the Jewish wars, the Bar Kokhba revolt, and Ardashir’s invasion. Although the author admits that using the fall of Palmyra as the terminus of his research may seem arbitrary, he defends his position by maintaining that the Diocletian reforms and the rise of Christianity, which soon follow, offer a sufficient break from the preceding era.

For biblical scholars, one can hardly do better for a comprehensive and thorough overview of this crucial period within the geopolitical region that saw the birth of Christianity and the rise of rabbinic Judaism. Indeed, historians of Hellenism and the Roman

Empire will also find *The Middle East under Rome* a necessary book for their libraries. It succeeds in giving shape and understanding to a region that has played as important a role in the geopolitical events of antiquity as it does today.

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KENTON L. SPARKS, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible: A Guide to the Background Literature* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005). Pp. xxxviii + 514. \$39.95.

Frustrated over the lack of comparative bibliographic resources at his disposal in graduate school, Kenton L. Sparks has ventured to write a massive introduction to and overview of the Hebrew Bible in its ancient Near Eastern literary context. One is immediately struck with S.'s extensive background in ancient Near Eastern civilizations, which makes him well suited to write a book such as this. The book is a bibliographic reference marvel, as S. explores numerous comparative literary genres from Mesopotamia, Egypt, Anatolia, and Syro-Palestine.

Sparks makes a strong argument for the modern reader's need to understand the social, historical, linguistic, and literary world in which the biblical writers lived. A good understanding of the biblical genres is enhanced by (and even dependent on) comparison with ancient Near Eastern exemplars. To facilitate this, S. spends a great deal of effort providing a theoretical underpinning for a discussion of comparisons, with the primary goal to consider the generic character of Hebrew and ancient Near Eastern literature.

Chapter titles include Archives and Libraries; Wisdom Literature; Hymns, Prayers, and Laments; Love Poetry; Rituals and Incantations; Omens and Prophecies; Apocalyptic Texts; Tales and Novellas; Epics and Legends; Myths; Genealogies; Historiographic Texts and Royal Inscriptions; Law Codes; Covenants; and Epigraphic Sources. In each section, he provides numerous points of reference between the ancient Near Eastern and biblical documents. S. also divides the chapters into separate geographic and cultural regions (Syro-Palestine, Anatolia, Egypt, and Mesopotamia).

Because the book is intended as a bibliographic reference tool, the reader will not find a great deal of innovative material in this work. All of Hebrew literature, S. argues, can be "better appreciated when viewed against the backdrop of the ancient Near Eastern world" (p. 117). In fact, textual similarities provide evidence of scribes involved in the active intercultural exchange of literature and ideas. For example, nearly all of the genres found in the Psalter and Lamentations have counterparts in the ancient Near Eastern tradition. Most striking are the parallels in the Song of Songs, previously interpreted as an allegory about God's love for his people, which discounts the highly erotic nature of the text. The interpretation of Song of Songs has been greatly enhanced by a study of ancient Near Eastern love poetry, and now many see the Song as a cultic celebration of sacred marriage, a love drama or incantation, or an anthology of secular love songs. S. argues that the purpose for the collection was to "teach young women propriety in matters of love and sexuality" (p. 142). He also muses that the author was perhaps female.

Most of the comparative data provided by S. is well known to the specialist in the ancient Near East; however, some items deserve attention. The daily temple rites at Uruk



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