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Review: The Keepers: An Introduction to the History and Culture of the Samaritans

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Brief Reviews

The Keepers: An Introduction to the History and Culture of the Samaritans. By ROBERT T. ANDERSON and TERRY GILES. Peabody, Mass.: HENDRICKSON PUBLISHERS, 2002. Pp. xvi + 165, illus. \$29.95.

This work breaks no new ground in the study of Samaritan history or culture, but it does provide a very readable introduction to the ancient and modern relevance of this religious-ethnic group who have survived more than two thousand years of "intrigue, occasional persecution, and frequent deception" (p. 145). It also describes in some detail a collection of Samaritan artifacts and manuscripts at Michigan State University that the authors call "the largest assemblage of Samaritan materials in the United States" (p. 135).

Robert T. Anderson is Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at Michigan State University. He is the author of *Studies in Samaritan Manuscripts and Artifacts* and of the articles on the Samaritans in both the Anchor Bible Dictionary and the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, as well as numerous other articles and essays on manuscripts of the Samaritan Pentateuch. His co-author, Terry Giles, is Professor of Theology at Gannon University, and has published studies on Samaritan inscriptions.

They begin by describing the Chamberlain-Warren collection of Samaritan manuscripts and artifacts at Michigan State University and how it came to exist. In 1904 E. K. Warren met some Samaritans in Jerusalem and determined to help them become financially self-sufficient, which resulted in the purchase of numerous manuscripts and artifacts from Samaritan leaders. These materials were given to MSU in 1950.

The collection consists of five classes of items. First, a marble inscription found at Emmaus containing the text of Exodus 15:3 and 11 has a Hebrew text (sixth century A.D.) that shows significant variations from the MT and "shares characteristics of what later became divergent manuscript families" (p. 54). Second, there are about a dozen copies of the Samaritan Pentateuch, dating from the fifteenth to early twentieth centuries. Most of these were written in Damascus, Nablus, and Egypt, variously in Hebrew, Aramaic, and/or Arabic. Third, a scroll case made of brass with an inlaid silver design contains several Samaritan inscriptions, crafted in Damascus by Abu'l Fath in 1524. August von Gall speculated that "this case may once have held the Abisha scroll" venerated by the Samaritan community in Nablus (p. 142). Fourth, there are six liturgical texts covering Samaritan festivals and rituals such as circumcision, marriage, and burial. These are largely hymns, prayers, and poems dating from 1724 to 1904. Finally, the *Memar*

Marqah, a pedagogical commentary on portions of the Pentateuch, was originally composed during the Byzantine period, and this manuscript was copied sometime before 1835. The "Sayings of Marqah" are a series of sermons expounding Samaritan theology.

The authors provide three criteria for determining the earliest formation of the Samaritan sect, in order to distinguish it from ordinary "Samaritans": self-awareness as a religious sect; the use of the Samaritan Pentateuch as a holy text; and the preference for Mount Gerizim as the proper place of worship (p. 9). They offer little evidence that the boundaries of what constitutes a "Samaritan" can be restricted to these, but using these criteria they demonstrate that the Samaritan sect emerged during the Hasmonean period (168–123 B.C.)—beginning with the Maccabean revolt and ending with John Hyrcanus's persecution of the Samaritans. To the Samaritans' claims that their origins reach back to Moses, the authors answer that a demonstrable self-consciousness is only traceable back to the second century B.C.

The rest of the book traces the origin and development of the Samaritans during six historical periods: Persian, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, Islamic, and modern. Many sources are examined, including several Samaritan chronicles (Abu'l Fath and the *Samaritan Chronicle Adler*), the Hebrew Bible (especially 2 Kings 17:25–34; 18:34; Jeremiah 41:5; Ezekiel 37:16–19; Ezra; Nehemiah), 1 and 2 Maccabees, 1 Esdras, Theodotus, Josephus, Eusebius's *Praeparatio evangelica*, the New Testament, the Mishnah, and later Samaritan and non-Samaritan writings. The authors conclude that the Hebrew Bible contains no direct reference to the Samaritans as defined by their criteria. In addition, Josephus is too biased against the Samaritans to be trusted in his account of their origins.

When the Samaritans refused to join the Maccabean revolt and continued to reject the Jewish claim for the uniqueness of Jerusalem as the place to worship God, the Jewish high priest John Hyrcanus treated the Samaritans as Gentiles and sealed the division between the two groups. By the mid-first century B.C., "a distinct Samaritan version of the Pentateuch had already developed" (p. 30). In the Mishnah, Samaritans, though unalterably unclean, are viewed as neither Israelite nor Gentile. During the period of Byzantine rule, the Samaritans were vigorously repressed, but experienced a theological revival (through Baba Raba and Marqah).

The Muslim invasion affected the Samaritans profoundly, as they adopted the Arabic language for daily use and began using part of the Muslim creed. Beginning in the sixteenth century, Samaritan manuscripts began arriving in the West, giving rise to the birth of

Samaritan studies in Europe. Subsequent chapters describe the manuscripts and peculiar readings of the Samaritan Pentateuch, and specific areas of Samaritan theology (their monotheism, their view of Moses, the Torah, Mount Gerizim, the "day of vengeance and recompense"), their priesthood, their sacred mountain, and various rituals.

While this volume is in no danger of unseating the masters of Samaritan history and theology, it provides an effective understanding of a broad range of Samaritan issues, especially from a supra-biblical perspective. The format of the book is helpful, with many photographs of manuscripts and artifacts. Readers seeking a general understanding of Samaritan issues and sources will find this book useful.

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Injustice Made Legal: Deuteronomic Law and the Plight of Widows, Strangers, and Orphans in Ancient Israel. By HAROLD V. BENNETT. *The Bible in Its World*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: WILLIAM B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING CO., 2002. Pp. xiii + 209. \$28, £19.99.

As implied by the title, this monograph focuses on the laws in the Deuteronomic Code that contain provisions applicable to widows, strangers, and orphans (Deut. 14:22–29; 16:9–15; 24:17–22; 26:12–15). What makes this study innovative is the author's methodology, which employs contemporary critical legal theory to contextualize and interpret the Deuteronomic laws. Critical legal theory holds that the aim of perpetrators of laws is to exercise institutional power to control groups in society. Bennett rejects commonly held notions that these laws functioned as remedies for the plight of vulnerable persons in Israelite society. On the contrary, he views the motives of formulators of the laws as exploitive and self-serving.

The book is organized in six chapters with useful summaries at the end of each: (1) Prolegomenon; (2) Texts and Terms: Delineating the Widow, Stranger, and Orphan and Identifying Their Socioeconomic Location; (3) Texts and Adjudication: Examining Innovations in the Widow, Stranger, and Orphan Laws in the Deuteronomic Code; (4) Texts and Interpretation: Deuteronomy and the Oppression of Widows, Strangers, and Orphans in the Biblical Communities; (5) Texts and Contexts: The Societal Matrices of the Widow, Stranger, and Orphan Laws in the Deuteronomic Code; (6) Conclusion.

As part of the investigation, the author carefully re-examines and subsequently modifies definitions of the terms *'almānā*, *gēr*, and *yātôm* based on biblical and comparative Near Eastern linguistic and contextual evidence. He also recreates, with some measure of success,

the *Sitz-im-Leben* for the distribution of tithes, observance of pilgrimage festivals, and the laws on gleanings as they pertain to the Deuteronomic provisions for widows, strangers, and orphans.

Bennett's main thesis, that the Deuteronomic laws were created to benefit their creators, drives this study. He posits that legal injunctions pertaining to widows, strangers, and orphans arose as a result of political and economic policies of the Omride kings, who placed exorbitant demands on local peasant farmers and herders to support military endeavors and maintain state bureaucrats. This economic policy, in turn, broke any extant social welfare system. Simultaneously, it jeopardized the sustenance of cultic officials, in particular those of the Yahweh-alone group, who then promulgated the laws to serve their needs. The laws on tithing and celebration of major pilgrimage festivals guaranteed the influx of grain, wine, and meat to cult officials. Charity to vulnerable persons was simply a pretext, as is evident by the hardship imposed on this group to travel to the distribution site to collect their food (Deut. 16:11, 15).

At best, the periodic assistance bolstered false hope. Ultimately, it exacerbated the burden of peasant farmers and herders who were obliged to share their meager sustenance. Thus, promulgators of the laws instilled moral codes of behavior that championed their own cause while dominating and exploiting the very groups in society that they pretended to aid. Bennett concludes that the inculcation of the laws was accomplished through ideological statements, oft-repeated, about the relationship between obedience to Yahweh, before whom the rituals were performed, and the general well-being of the worshipper, the one obligated to observe the laws.

Bennett's approach and interpretation is interesting in a postmodern setting. His conclusions, however, rely heavily on conjecture and his unwavering commitment to critical legal theory clouds his work by precluding other options. Certainly, the results of the study would have been buttressed by analyses of other ancient societies with similar legal provisions. Also, Bennett's dismissal of ancient ideas on social welfare, relative to modern ones, seems misplaced. Governmental obligation to provide avenues for the poor to become self-determining members of society is an unrealistic expectation for antiquity. The most obvious pitfall is the author's presupposition that the biblical laws were enacted exactly as recorded, quite probably a stretch of reality.

Despite the weaknesses, Bennett's study of the Deuteronomic laws dealing with widows, strangers, and orphans is significant in light of current scholarship which attempts to delve deeper into the socio-political and economic world of biblical Israel. Indeed, his utilization of critical legal theory to interpret biblical laws expands the possibilities for understanding ideas and motives underlying those laws.

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