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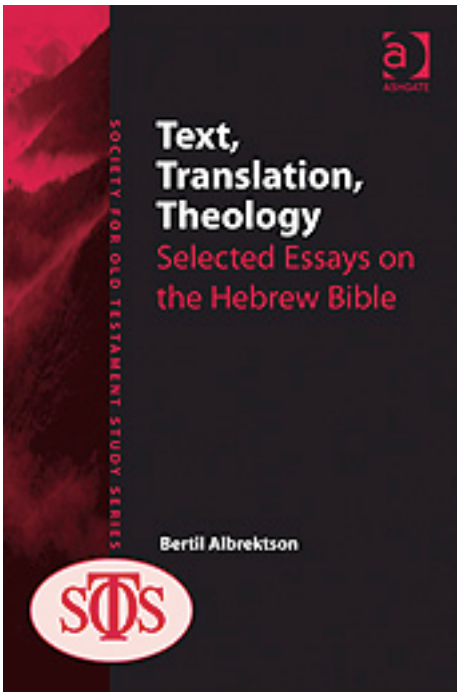

Albrektson, Bertil

Text, Translation, Theology: Selected Essays on the Hebrew Bible

Society for Old Testament Studies Monographs

Burlington Vt.: Ashgate, 2010. Pp. xii + 142.
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The volume collects a number of articles written by Swedish Old Testament scholar Bertil Albrektson in the space of about forty years, from 1963 ("The Background and Origin of the Theology of Lamentations") through 2007 ("Masoretic or Mixed: On Choosing a Textual Basis for a Translation of the Hebrew Bible").

The title of this collection clearly indicates Albrektson's main interests in the field of biblical studies, even though only the first study is explicitly devoted to a theological approach to the book of Lamentations (9–34), in which the roots of the theological milieu of the author of the book are identified. These roots are to be found in the Jerusalem cult traditions and in the theology of the Deuteronomist, and they aim to understand and explain the tension between faith and historical reality.

The second study is devoted to the well-known and much-debated expression אהיה אשר אהיה in Exod 3:14. Albrektson offers a detailed linguistic analysis of this sentence and concludes that there is no reason to question the traditional rendering of the Bible

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translations ("I Am Who I Am"), it being understood, that even though the words are not so difficult to translate, their meaning is still puzzling, if not "irrecoverable" (46).

"Reflections on the Emergence of a Standard Text of the Hebrew Bible" (47–62), originally published in 1978, is a magisterial study on a theme about which we know less than we are generally inclined to believe. According to Albrektson, we have no real proof of any "official" promulgation of a standard text of the Bible, not least because it is difficult to imagine a careful "philological" work in such hard times as those following the destruction of the Second Temple. On the other hand, it is not simple to consider the many cases of textual corruptions to be found in the Masoretic Text the result of a more or less careful recensional activity. A brief note is not the place to even try to deal with this problem. It is worth noting, however, that a cursory check of the agreements between the Qumran "biblical" material and the immense legacy of medieval biblical manuscripts collected by Kennicott and de Rossi in the eighteenth century seems to support Albrektson's view, in spite of the general negative judgment on these manuscripts as *codices descripti* (see, e.g., J. A. Sanders. "The Hebrew University Bible and Biblia Hebraica Quinta," *JBL* 118 [1999]: 518–26).

Although an occasional note worded as a response to J. C. Greenfield, "Etymological Semantics: Response to J. C. Greenfield" (87–93), contains some acute observations and on the so-called etymological method, that method should always be used in combination with other methods.

The following studies are mainly focused on a text-critical approach to the Hebrew Bible, both from a practical and a theoretical point of view. "Some Observations on Two Oracular Passages in 1 Sam." (63–72) is an analysis on two textual conjectures proposed on 1 Sam 10:22 and 14:41, whereas in "Translation and Emendation" and "Ezekiel 30:16—A Conjecture" (107–12) Albrektson himself proposes a conjecture for the passage cited in the title. According to Albrektson, Ezek 30:16 should be read ונף יצל יומם ("and Noph, their day grows dark") instead of the obscure ונף צרי יומם. Nowadays conjectures on the biblical text are not so widespread or welcome, and biblical scholars oddly prefer to publish the manuscripts' text even when it shows obvious errors. Thus, these brief studies are very instructive, and it is to be hoped for a rebirth of such an ancient and useful practice.

"*Difficilior lectio probabilior*: A Rule of Textual Criticism and Its Use in Old Testament Studies" (73–86) is a seminal, though rather neglected, study on the reuse of a well-known text-critical rule from the field of classical scholarship to the field of biblical studies, where the *difficilior lectio probabilior* rule is intended as a passe-partout to always legitimate the Masoretic Text even when it is clearly and desperately corrupt. In this

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regard, Albrektson's call to an approach to the biblical text "as free as possible from all ideological bonds" (85) is more than ever topical at a time when we are faced with a number of statements, some of them influential and authoritative, against the need for a sound and clear-cut text-critical analysis of the biblical text.

In "A Disputed Sense in a Covenant Context: On the Interpretation of Genesis 15:6" (113–20), Albrektson proposes to translate the passage "He trusted Yahweh and considered it [i.e., Yahweh's promise] reliable." From a theoretical point of view, it is interesting to note that Albrektson, although convinced of the soundness of his own interpretation, prefers not to include it in the translation of the Swedish Bible, where the preference is given to the traditional translation ("and he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness"), "on the ground that an official new version ought as a rule to reflect a majority view" (119). Majority opinion is not always the right opinion, and in a perfect world a translation should be one single translator's responsibility rather than the result of a community analysis.

"Masoretic or Mixed: On Choosing a Textual Basis for a Translation of the Hebrew Bible" (121–34) is a clear and merciless description of the impossibility of getting a literal, faithful translation of the Leningrad manuscript B19a, on which most "critical" editions of the Hebrew Bible are based, because of the many textual corruptions it contains. Furthermore, this article clearly demonstrates how the abhorred "eclectic" editions of the Hebrew text as a matter of fact stay behind most (if not all) modern Bible translations. This latter is also the main theme of "Translation and Emendation" (95–105), in which Albrektson criticizes those biblical scholars who seem reluctant to just evaluate the possibility of corruptions in the Masoretic Text.

The volume ends with two indexes: biblical references (135–38) and authors (139–42).

All in all, one should whole-heartedly welcome this collection of studies by Bertil Albrektson. This book allows the reader to reconsider and restudy the main lines of the work of a great Old Testament scholar who in his forty-year activity has never forgotten the centrality of textual criticism as the inescapable basis for any further study of the Bible.

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