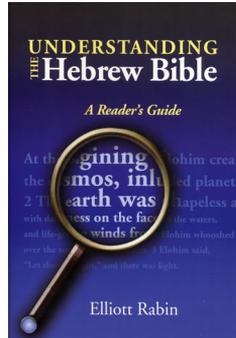


# ○ REVIEW OF ELLIOTT RABIN, *UNDERSTANDING THE HEBREW BIBLE: A READER'S GUIDE*

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‘You should read [this book],’ Elliott Rabin writes in *Understanding the Hebrew Bible*, ‘if you find the Bible imposing and are not sure how to make sense of it’ (p. 6). This ‘sales pitch’ encapsulates Rabin’s goal for *Understanding the Hebrew Bible*. He offers it as a guide to the Tanakh for readers engaging biblical studies afresh, or for the first time. Rabin lays out the book’s plan and objectives quite clearly:

*Understanding the Hebrew Bible* takes the large mass of writing compiled in this tome and organizes it according to different kinds of writing, called genres. The Bible contains six major genres – storytelling, law, history, prophecy, wisdom, and poetry – each one characterized by its own writing style and perspectives reflecting different groups within ancient Israel. Understanding the Bible requires grasping what makes each of these genres ‘tick.’ This guide will enable the reader to open the Bible to any book and not feel lost. The reader will recognize the basic qualities of the writing and the assumptions for that genre; will know to what body of writing the book belongs; and will have a good sense of when the book was written. Other introductions to the Bible bog the reader down in a book-by-book analysis, or focus on one genre – usually history – at the expense of the rest. The approach in this book offers the best method not only to understand the Bible, but also to read it with pleasure. (pp. xi–xii)

With this introduction, and with chapter titles bearing the names of the six ‘genres’ listed, Rabin leads readers to expect instruction in the conventions of different biblical genres and strategies for reading them. We may therefore judge *Understanding the Hebrew Bible* by whether it actually achieves these goals.

One need not read far to realise that *Understanding the Hebrew Bible* only partially delivers on Rabin’s stated projections. Perhaps half of the entire volume instead presents Rabin’s summaries

of the biblical books treated. This feature helps to explain the sequence of individual chapters: Rabin attempts to arrange his genres in a way that follows the Tanakh's internal structure of Torah, Former and Latter Prophets, and Writings. Despite an introductory swipe at other introductions that 'bog readers down in a book-by-book analysis,' Rabin himself often offers a book-by-book *summary*, sometimes more analytical (as with the patterns of sibling rivalry in Genesis) and sometimes less (as in the Former Prophets).

Rabin's confluence of a genre-based survey with a canonical structure explains another strange phenomenon, Rabin's artificial distinction between 'storytelling' and 'history' as separate but overlapping 'genres.' Rabin places storytelling first (as chapter 1) and offers Genesis 1–Exodus 15 to exemplify this 'genre.' The term 'storytelling' better fits an activity than a literary genre, though. Moreover, artificially restricting 'storytelling' to Genesis 1–Exodus 15 implies a qualitative difference in the literary artistry of the Torah's narratives and those of the Former Prophets, but this distinction cannot be maintained. As for the genre conventions of 'storytelling,' Rabin focuses his readers' attention on narrative gaps, repetitions, and thematic structures. Instead of theoretical discussions on how one might handle these literary features, Rabin models such reading by way of examples. While the examples presented undoubtedly make the book more enjoyable to read than a theoretical discussion alone, one wonders whether inexperienced readers will really find that working through Rabin's discussion of 'rivalry triangles' in Genesis (for example) equips them to discover other thematic structures for themselves.

Other chapters fare even worse than storytelling, however, in the 'learning how to read' department. In the chapter on 'law,' Rabin lays a good conceptual foundation by helping readers understand some general characteristics of Ancient Near Eastern covenants, but after that he merely summarises specific themes within the Torah's legal corpuses, trying to convince readers that studying biblical law has merit. Chapter 3 thus tells readers what Rabin finds compelling about biblical law, but does not really equip readers to study biblical law on their own. Chapter 4, 'History in the Bible,' alternates between Rabin's summaries of the 'story' – the biblical narrative – and the 'backstory' – the history of the Hebrews, of Israel and Judah, and of Yehud as reconstructed by historians and archaeologists working at least quasi-independently of biblical materials. Readers learn some valuable information in this chapter, but do not gain strategies for independently reading biblical historiographical (or historiographical-looking) narratives. Similarly, chapter 6 introduces readers to the phenomenon of prophecy and to a few individual biblical prophets, but readers must infer interpretative guidance from Rabin's extended treatment of the book of Amos. The chapter on wisdom resembles the chapter on 'history in the Bible,' consisting almost entirely of Rabin's summaries of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. Experienced readers will realise, of course, that Rabin could hardly do otherwise, since Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes do not actually belong to a single genre called 'wisdom' – but Rabin aims the book at general readers, who will find here Rabin's understanding of the books rather than tools for building their own understandings. Finally, the chapter on 'poetry' – which, like the 'wisdom' chapter, gathers up several distinct genres under a single, too-broad label – gives readers a useful introduction to parallelism and scratches the surface of form criticism. However, chapter 8 then turns to a disproportionately long summary of the Song of Songs, and ultimately leaves readers with some valuable background knowledge but little guidance on what to do next.

Halfway through the book, chapter 5, 'History of the Bible,' interrupts both the book's genre focus and the canonically-structured flow. While a bit heavy on source criticism at the beginning,

this chapter genuinely helps readers struggle with the use and adaptation of tradition in the composition of the biblical books. Here Rabin also discusses frankly the biblical writers' projections of their own social realities and ideological concerns onto the Israelite and Judean pasts. Readers who work through this chapter carefully should come away with a richer appreciation of the complexities of the biblical composition processes. However, that benefit does not necessarily give readers the skills to practice even basic source or tradition criticism for themselves.

Had Rabin done a better job of reaching his stated goal, readers might feel more inclined to forgive the numerous misstatements, oddities, and idiosyncrasies the book displays. As it stands, readers themselves can forgivably conclude that the payoff fails to justify the frequent annoyances. A few examples will suffice to give the overall sense. On p. 66, Rabin states that 'biblical law can never be changed,' but he immediately proceeds to contrast Exodus 20:21 with Deuteronomy 12:10–11, concluding that this 'change in the law – one of many in the Bible – clearly represents a development in ritual practice over history' (p. 67). The discussion therefore demonstrates the falsity of the original claim. Rabin facetiously tells readers that the 'Bible is shaped as a work of history: it starts at one point in time, ends at a later point in time, and moves chronologically forward between those points' (p. 75), though this characterisation can only apply if one shrinks the Bible to just the Torah and Former Prophets. Rabin discusses the old, unworkable proposal to date the Hebrew exodus from Egypt with reference to the expulsion of the Hyksos and the thirteenth-century proposal, but he leaves out the fifteenth-century date derived from 1 Kings 6:1. Despite many problems, the fifteenth-century date certainly boasts more proponents than the Hyksos synchronism, but Rabin ignores it completely. Sometimes Rabin states as facts matters of pure speculation, such as the odd characterisation of Isaiah as 'Amos's most important student' (has Rabin confused Amos with Amoz?). On p. 107, Rabin repeats the long-discredited claim that a rabbinic council at Yavneh c. 90 CE excluded the apocrypha from the Jewish canon. Rabin refers to the Tamar of Genesis 38 as a 'Jewess' (p. 125), combining sexism, anachronism, and inaccuracy in a single word! Rabin's timeline of the 'literary prophets' (his term) inexplicably places the life of Jonah in the fifth century BCE; such a date might hold for the book's *composition*, but certainly fails to capture its internal setting. For some reason, Rabin chooses to follow the Septuagint in calling Qoheleth – the man – 'Ecclesiastes,' a usage that will surely sound strange to anyone not accustomed to reading the book in Greek. These and many other quirks cause informed readers to pull up short, and mislead or misinform inexperienced readers.

I cannot agree with the back-cover reviewer who proclaimed *Understanding the Hebrew Bible* to be 'a perfect introduction to the Bible.' Rabin undertakes a worthwhile task, but certainly does not pull it off 'perfect[ly].' The actual content of the book does not really square with, and still less does it accomplish, Rabin's stated goal of giving inexperienced readers a grasp of the Bible's various genres in order to help them read the Bible independently. It seemed to me that Rabin could not firmly decide what he wanted the book to be, and that vacillation – along with numerous small errors and questionable judgements – weakens the whole.