

Review of Hanna Liss and Manfred Oeming, eds., *Literary Construction of Identity in the Ancient World*. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2010.

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This volume is a collection of papers presented at a conference entitled “Literary Fiction and the Construction of Identity in Ancient Literatures: Options and Limits of Modern Literary Approaches in the Exegesis of Ancient Texts,” held at the University of Heidelberg, July 10-13, 2006. The book contains 18 essays and is divided into five sections: (1) Thinking of Ancient Texts as Literature; (2) The Identity of Authors and Readers; (3) Fiction and Fact; (4) Rereading Biblical Poetry; and (5) Modeling the Future by Reconstructing the Past. While a detailed summary and critique of each essay is beyond the scope of this brief review, I will provide an overview of each section, noting the general topic of each essay, and highlighting what I consider to be the most helpful aspects of selected essays. I will then offer some reflections on the project as a whole.

Part One, “Thinking of Ancient Texts as Literature,” serves, at least in part, as an overview of the methodologies employed in the subsequent essays. Joachim Vette presents a useful overview of narrative theory and its use by Hebrew Bible scholars, and Irene J. F. De Jong offers an overview of the adoption of modern literary theory in the field of Classics. Helmut Utzschneider raises the question of the universality of the genre “drama.” Jan Assmann’s essay on the role of memory in identity formation in relation to the Exodus narrative provides perhaps the clearest example of scholarly interest in the role of ancient literature in the identity-forming process. Important in his discussion is the distinction between political and sacred myth, the role of memory in myth, and the formative function of both. Though Assmann clearly thinks the distinction between the sacred and the political is over-emphasized, he focuses on political myth as a form of memory, and is thus concerned with the construction of a collective identity. After analyzing several types of political myths (origin, liberation, passion, and election), Assmann examines how the Exodus narrative functions as political myth in the construction of a collective Jewish identity.

Part Two focuses on the “Identity of Authors and Readers,” though the emphasis seems primarily to be on the construction of the reader’s identity rather than that of the author. For example, Melanie Möller argues that the “notion of a subject that knows that its identity is in tension between self-awareness and dependency forms the basis of Catullus’s *Carmen 8*” (147). Barbara Porter argues that two Akkadian inscriptions, which are traditionally understood as texts of intimidation targeted at outsiders or political rebels, are actually intended for insiders to “minimize the intimidating aspects” (120) of the king’s rule, focusing on the positive results of the king’s warfare, thus encouraging continued submission to his rule. Christof Hardmeier examines an understanding of ancient texts based on communication pragmatics and neurobiology and argues that a new philology is needed that takes into account the insights of communication pragmatics “within the frame of reading hermeneutics of caution because misunderstanding texts is the normal case” (133). In the sole essay of this section that focuses primarily on the author, Dagmar Börner-Klin discusses the Alphabet of Ben Sira and the development of hermeneutical rules by early and medieval rabbis that enable them to infer information not found in the biblical text. The author of the Alphabet, Börner-Klin maintains, asserts that the application of these rules can lead to unacceptable interpretations.

Part Three deals with “Fiction and Fact” in ancient literature, with very little discussion of identity construction. Frank Polak assesses negotiation narratives in the Hebrew Bible by using Conversation Analysis to discuss the interaction between the negotiating characters in the narratives. He concludes that the negotiation tactics used in the narratives reflect not only the expected knowledge of the audience but the concerns and interests of ancient Israelite adult communities. Hanna Liss

demonstrates that the purity codes outlined in Leviticus 11-15, rather than prescribing ritual law, communicate a fictional reality and, as such, do not function as a factual report of Israel's cultic practices. Instead, they "set up a system of the ongoing *imagination of the sanctuary* . . . In times when it no longer existed" (212). Ute Eisen maintains that all narrative texts come into existence, at least partially, by being molded and fictionalized and, furthermore, the audience determines what should be considered fictitious. He develops this twin thesis by examining the prologues of Luke-Acts, the so-called "we" passages from Acts, and the story of Ananias and Sapphira. He concludes that "narratives are constituted more or less through invention, because the past is ultimately lost and can only be found again through creative composition and creative reader-reception. David Kraemer explores the Talmud's role in the construction of Jewish identity by focusing on the discussion of Jew/Gentile interaction through the sharing of wine. Interestingly, Kraemer argues that *b. 'Abod. Zar. 30a*, "makes two points in tension with each other: one that beckons the reader to view the Gentile as poisonous and the other that invites him or her to understand the Gentile as a person, and even as neighbor." Gerritt Kloss examines Hesiod's initiation experience in his *Theogony* as a vocational text, asking if such texts are to be viewed as fictional or factual. After defining his terms, Kloss analyzes the vocational text from *Theogony* and concludes that, somewhat like the vocational texts from the Hebrew prophets, Hesiod offers a blend of both fact and fiction.

Part Four, "Rereading Biblical Poetry," though it provides three helpful essays on literary method in the Hebrew Bible, offers little in terms of the identity-forming work of these texts. Nehama Aschkenasy examines the book of Ruth in light of various facets of literary criticism, from Aristotle to Bakhtin, as the title of the essay states. Perhaps the most helpful part of the essay, at least in terms of identity construction, is the author's interaction with Bakhtin, in which she demonstrates that Ruth in light of Bakhtin's theory of carnival, in which "folk celebrations . . . allowed for rowdy humor and a parody of authority (which) offered the oppressed lower classes relief from the rigidity of the feudal system and the church and an opportunity for expressing nonconformist, even rebellious views" (269). Francis Landy is concerned with the implied author and reader of Isaiah and their relation to the real author and readers, and thus with the identity construction of the author and readers. Jan Fokkelman focuses on the plot of Job and the place of Job 3:1-42:6 in the plot.

In Part Five "Modeling the Future by Reconstructing the Past," Joachim Vette examines the retellings of 1 Samuel 12 in Josephus and Pseudo-Philo to illustrate the complexity of the literary character of Samuel and his role in this narrative. He concludes with a plausible reading of Samuel's speech in the biblical narrative in which Samuel advocates restoring "previous power structures that had existed before Saul attained the status of hero" (338). Adele Berlin discusses the ideology of exile and the ways that some scholars have gone too far in asserting that the exile is strictly an ideological construct with no historical value at all. This, she claims, is due to an anti-Zionist and anti-Israel agenda on the part of those scholars. She maintains that, while the biblical exile certainly has ideological components, the historicity of the exile need not be abandoned.

As my brief summary has attempted to demonstrate, this volume contains some excellent essays on the interaction of modern literary theory and ancient literature. A major gap in this volume is the lack of interaction with any of the major theories of identity construction. Though perhaps assumed by the conference participants, readers of the volume would benefit from an overview of theories of identity construction such as Social Identity Theory, Self-Categorization Theory, and Ethnic Identity Theory, to name just three. Another chapter on the intersection of identity theories and literature would, likewise, have provided a helpful way of thinking about how these theories work together in a project such as this. Despite this, Liss and Oeming have put together an excellent collection of essays that together provide a very helpful analysis of ancient texts using modern literary methods, a collection that will be of considerable use to students and scholars in various fields.



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