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## Book Reviews



Carol A. Newsom, *The Spirit within Me: Self and Agency in Ancient Israel and Second Temple Judaism*. The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021. Hardback. Pp. xii + 277. \$40. ISBN 9780300208689.

This book of many merits is the product of decades of thoughtful and careful research conducted by one of the leading scholars of Hebrew Bible and early Judaism. In chapter 1, Newsom outlines the book's purpose, which is not to provide "a comprehensive study of cultural models of selfhood in ancient Israel and Second Temple Judaism" but to focus on two areas of self-representation, i.e., (especially moral) agency and "the development of cultural forms that model and support introspective practices and self-presentations" (4). In this chapter, Newsom also reviews previous research with a focus on the body in Israelite anthropology and sociocentric vs. egocentric models of the self.

Chapters 2 and 3 concentrate on selected themes in Hebrew Bible texts. In chapter 2, Newsom examines agency—"both the capacity to act and the sense of being able to act" (23)—and introduces different types of agencies. In her own textual analysis, she pays closer attention to proxy agency, divine co-agency, and unrecognized divine co-agency in the Bible, as well as exploring how the divine spirit may give an agential "boost" to humans. Chapter 3 then explores moral agency in Israelite perspective. Newsom discusses three problems of the moral self in biblical texts—failure of understanding, wrongly directed desire, and resistance to appropriate authority—which appear as "interconnected aspects of the whole person" (51). The case studies concern Proverbs, Deuteronomy, and Ezekiel.

Chapters 4 and 5 investigate specific topics in the Hebrew Bible and beyond. In chapter 4, Newsom studies sin-consciousness and self-alienation, identifying "more complex models of subjectivity" in the second temple era (82). Yet she emphasizes the irregularity of development and the variety of models of the moral self, notions of agency, and spaces of interiority. Newsom first maps out the phenomenon in the Bible and then proceeds to explore body language

in the Barkhi Nafshi prayers, sin and evil spirits as the “alien within” one’s self in 11QPs<sup>a</sup> 24:3–17 and 19:1–18, the changing meanings of *yetser*, and the rise of dualism in the construction of an interior landscape in texts such as the Songs of the Sage and the Two Spirits Teaching. In chapter 5, Newsom studies Gen 2–3 and its early interpretation, tackling the question of rational agency and the birth of the human. She reads Gen 2–3 as a postexilic writing reflecting “some of the disillusionment about moral agency that characterizes other post-586 texts” (126) and analyzes moral agency in early Jewish interpretations of Genesis’ creation account. Borrowing Harold Bloom’s term, Newsom characterizes Gen 2–3 as a “strong poem” that provoked struggle with and recontextualizations of the text (141–42).

Chapter 6 focuses on the Hodayot of the maskil figure. Newsom argues that “no text is more significant” than this collection of prayers in a study on self and agency (143). She highlights the use of the first-person singular voice and the significance of thanksgiving in the construction of subjectivity. She also examines the association of the Hodayot’s negative anthropology with the material nature of human being and the phenomenon of “the masochistic sublime,” i.e., how the maskil’s self-experience arises from the intersection of contradictions; the self both knows and cannot know divine mysteries, and the self both does acts of righteousness and cannot do such acts (159).

The conclusion highlights the plurality of the models of self and human agency, which are not mutually exclusive, and stresses the impact of Judah’s fall to Babylonia on shifting models. While the second temple-era texts are heterogenous, first-person singular prayers that create an act of introspection are common. In addition, many of them outline an experience of “a sinful condition that one is powerless to affect,” while also envisioning “a solution to failed moral agency” through “transformation of the self by God” (174).

Newsom’s book is the result of a nuanced close reading of ancient texts informed by modern neuroscientific studies. She thinks widely and brings various sources into conversation with each other in an illuminating way. Newsom explicitly argues for taking seriously the nonbiblical texts of Qumran. Because these texts do not belong to Jewish or Christian canons, only a few scholars grant them “the dignity of being taken seriously as colloquy partners in our own self-understanding” (167). Yet they “deserve the status of classic literature and so to be admitted to the canon of texts for the wider culture than can speak across confessional lines” (167). While the Scrolls obtain most welcome attention in the book, the same does not apply to Greek Jewish texts. To be sure, Newsom does not claim to offer a comprehensive study and acknowledges the lack of consideration for “Jewish literature composed in Greek” (175), but

the book nevertheless raises the question of how representative the selected Semitic texts are, especially regarding the late second temple era when most Jews lived in the diaspora.

Newsom presents her work as “cultural history” (170), but the texts’ historical and wider cultural contexts do not receive considerable attention. Newsom does reflect on the exile’s effect on early Judaism though; she argues that Judah’s fall challenged the Judeans’ confidence in their ability to exercise moral agency and led to refining and re-envisioning frameworks of moral agency (47, 63, 114, 173). Meanwhile, parallels to non-Jewish texts remain largely unexplored, although there are a few mentions of Egyptian and Greek texts and Newsom explains in her conclusion that she has not attempted to set the observed models of the self in relation to the Hellenistic world. She acknowledges that “it would be myopic to imagine that the discourse about the self ... developed in isolation from wider currents” (175). New comparisons are thus invited but not executed, except for some final remarks on possible parallels between Qumran literature and Hellenistic philosophy (177–78).

Overall, Newsom’s insightful study shines at textual analysis and points to the importance of bringing Jewish texts into a conversation with other writings from the ancient eastern Mediterranean. As such, it presents solid arguments and will generate future research.

*Elisa Uusimäki*

School of Culture and Society, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark

*elisa.uusimaki@cas.au.dk*