

Meir Sternberg, *Hebrews Between Cultures: Group Portraits and National Literature*.  
(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 730 pp.

Reviewed by Francis Landy  
University of Alberta

Meir Sternberg has been a major critic of biblical narrative ever since his ground-breaking article, "The King through Ironic Eyes," appeared in *Hasifrut* in 1968. *Hebrews between Cultures* is a complement to his *Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (1985), and is a massive work: closely argued, printed, infuriatingly difficult to read, it nonetheless offers a complete, challenging, brilliant, and formidable synthesis of Meir Sternberg's views and of the biblical narrative as a whole.

Sternberg's thesis is that the "master plot" of the Hebrew Bible is a struggle between Hamites and Hebrews, the cursed and the blessed, the slave and the enslaver, and that thereby it sustains a critique of slavery across both narrative and legal corpora. Hebrewness is a sign of intercultural denomination: thus Hamites name Israelites, at least when they want to denigrate them. It is also how Israelites speak of themselves when addressing a Hamite superior. Sometimes the use of the word "Hebrew" grants us insight into the consciousness of a character, such as Moses; at other times, it expresses the narrator's disapproval of individuals or groups. Hebrew is contrasted with Israel as unchosen to chosen; it represents the people before or outside the eponymous struggle with God. Whenever it is used, then, it is a throwback, to an inglorious origin "across the River," or a moral exclusion from the covenant community. Sternberg has other objectives. In particular, he wishes to show the fluidity, flexibility, and dense resistance to stereotypes of the biblical narrative, in the service of what he calls its "foolproof composition."

The Bible, as part of its war against idolatry, rejects all fixture. There are good Hamites and bad Israelites; the "Hebrewgram," as Sternberg terms it, is constantly shifting. He is accordingly against atomizing and demarcating the text; not only do all narratives contribute to the whole story, and cannot be read apart from each other, but legal texts are not independent of their narrative frame or vice versa. One of the most impressive features of the book is the sheer remorselessness of its attention to detail and intertextual links.

He is very interested in history, eschewing the insularity of historical and literary preserves in biblical scholarship (p. 525). A literary approach, he holds, cannot avoid historical questions, because the work itself is an exercise as well as a participant in history. Just as law and literature cannot be separated, nor can literature and history. Accordingly, a great deal of space is taken up with polemic against the Hab/piru hypothesis, rather too much for those for whom it represents a past era in scholarship. Inevitably, the argumentation is repetitive, as Sternberg frequently acknowledges; yet it is necessary, as a way of thinking through his own position. Sternberg thrives in controversy; his "foolproof" Bible has become, in his eyes, a fools' paradise.

For Sternberg, the Bible, as the national literature of ancient Israel, is ideologically consistent and morally overdetermined. The gaps and indeterminacies of biblical narrative converge on and reinforce

the same message. There is very little room for polysemy, contradiction, and doubt. The Bible, in his often repeated phrase, moves between the truth and the whole truth, and it is his job, as critic, to discover that truth for us. This means that he is anything but eirenic. The Midrashic catchword, *davar 'aher*, "another explanation," is very far removed from his consciousness.

Precisely because of his conviction, Sternberg produces a very compelling story. Jonah describes himself as a Hebrew to the sailors, because they are Tyrian, and hence Hamites, and he is insecure among them. Abram is described as a "Hebrew" in Gen. 14.13, in order to reveal the thought processes of the Sodomite fugitive, for whom he is a relative of the conquering kings. Moses goes out to his "Hebrew brothers," because, raised in the Egyptian court, that is how he thinks of them. The Hebrews whose movements and allegiance are at stake in I Sam 13–14 are so labelled because of their disloyalty. The laws concerning the Hebrew slave in Exod.21.2–11, Deut.15.12–18, and Jer.34. 8–16 use the term to emphasize the anomaly of slavery in Israel, in which slave owners act the part of Egyptians.

Much of this is convincing. For instance, Sternberg proposes that the detail that the Egyptians do not eat with the Hebrews in Gen. 43.32, because it is an abomination to them, foreshadows the ethnic conflict between them (pp. 286–308). He explores, expertly and subtly, the discrepancy between the divine commission and Moses' speech to Pharaoh. The overall thesis that "Hebrew" is a sign of intercultural devaluation, specifically associated with the Egyptians and their literary doubles, the Philistines, is persuasive, as is the contrast with Israel. The shock value of the *'ebed 'ivri*, "the Hebrew slave," is well taken.

The book suffers from overkill. Sternberg wants to tie every thread together. The result is that he often constructs a mountain out of very little material, e.g., the Sodomite's motivations in Gen. 14.13, or the three incidental mentions of the Hebrews in I Sam 13–14. This is symptomatic of a more general tendency, to try to explain everything from a rational, teleological perspective. Sternberg would make a good writer of detective fiction. Every occurrence of the word "Hebrew" is a puzzle, which needs to be explicated as evidence of national or personal attitudes and ideologies. In other words, interpretation is limited to motive and mindset. Why did Jonah call himself a Hebrew? What did he stand to gain from it? Why did Moses think of his brothers as Hebrews? Once we have the answer, the "whole truth," as Sternberg nominates it, our task is over.

This only works insofar as we buy the story. We will only do so, as with any detective story, if we accept the rules of the game. One of the rules is the rejection of indeterminacy. Supposing we said, "You may be right, Mr. Sternberg, that the Sodomite fugitive hoped to curry favour with Abram, but supposing that is not the whole truth. Supposing we do not know why the word is there." One of the conditions of biblical interpretation must surely be the surplus of information over any possible interpretation.

Similarly, Sternberg's thesis concerning I Sam 13–14 may be persuasive, and other constructions may be equally plausible, but we simply cannot tell from the very sparse evidence who the pusillanimous Hebrews were. Sternberg's theory of foolproof composition requires a unitary narrative and unitary ideology. He is accordingly intolerant of contradiction and dialogue in the text. For instance, he argues at length against any substantive as opposed to rhetorical difference between the slave laws in Exodus and Deuteronomy. Nonetheless, biblical evidence is often less than straightforward. Sternberg takes the Table of Nations in Gen. 10, together with Noah's curse in Gen. 9.18–29, to be the key to subsequent ethnic strife (pp. 109–113). The Table of Nations, however, is very confusing. For instance, Shem is the ancestor of all the children of Eber, according to Gen. 10.21; however, Eber is Shem's great grandson (Gen. 10.24.). Are the other Shemites then Eberides? Dependent on this question is the status of Elam, Shem's firstborn, one of the Mesopotamian kings in Gen. 14.1. Even more disputatious is the affiliation of Shinar, whose king heads the list in Gen. 14. For Shinar, according to Gen. 10.10, is Cushite, i.e., Hamite, territory. From Shinar, however, arises Assyria (10.11), Shem's second son. So Assyria, at several generations' remove, is an autochthonous Hamite. Tid'al, "king of the nations," is, of course, unspecified, and Gen. 10.5 might indeed link it with the children of Japhet. The other ally, Elasar, does not appear in the Table. The Sodomite's identification of Abram as an Eberide with a natural affinity for the invaders thus cannot be taken at face value. It is not that Sternberg is completely unaware of these ambiguities (e.g., pp. 7–8), but they tend to disappear in the analysis. The problem recurs, on a larger scale, in relation to Sternberg's insistence that 'ibri is always an ethnicon, co-referent with Israel (p. 8), and his rejection of alternative hypotheses. For, when Joseph says that he was stolen from the "land of the Hebrews" (Gen. 40.15), which land does he mean? Similarly, if it is an abomination for the Egyptians to eat with Hebrews (Gen. 43.32), and Hebrew is co-referent with Israel, the only Hebrews in existence are those sitting at the table. Sternberg interprets these references rhetorically, and often superbly, for instance to suggest Joseph's harmlessness, coming from across the border of Egypt, since the word for "cross" ('br) puns with that for Hebrew. Nonetheless, to make sense in context, they must imply a land and a people within Canaan greater than Jacob's nuclear family.

Sternberg's attempts to interpret the literature historically comprise the weakest, though at times the most adventurous, parts of the book. For it is very difficult to ascertain where he stands. He is no fundamentalist, and polemicizes against fundamentalist premises (e.g., p. 448). He knows that literature is not history, and that the Bible knows nothing of Egyptian dominance over Canaan (pp. 118, 209). Yet he wants to believe in the historicity of the Bible. He identifies, almost without argument, the Jonah ben Amittai of the prophetic book with the eighth century prophet of that name, and even suggests that it is set after the fall of Samaria (p. 215). He believes in the conquest under Joshua (pp. 46–47) and inveighs against revisionist historians of all colours. Some of his speculations are remarkable: that the Israelites' proliferation in Exod.1 is in ironic counterpoint to Rameses' fecundity (p. 123); that Mei-Nephtoh in Josh. 15.9 and 18.15 may be a satiric allusion to Mernepthah (pp. 148–149); that the narrative of Moses' flight to Midian may consciously reverse the Tale of Sinuhe (p. 367). He argues against the low realism which dismisses the possibility of Mosaic or even divine authorship of Exodus and Deuteronomy (pp. 529–530). Yet almost in the same breath he endorses Wellhausen's relegation of Leviticus to the post-exilic era (p. 668 n.16), largely because it conflicts with his interpretation of the other slave texts. Notwithstanding this, he frequently adduces the narrative of the blasphemer in Lev. 24.10–23 in support of his general thesis.

One wonders what Sternberg would make of Israel Knohl's and Jacob Milgrom's case for the antiquity of the Priestly and Holiness Codes. He does not mention them, however, an omission indicative, I think, of a general isolation within biblical studies. He is extremely critical of everything "trendy": feminism, deconstruction, cultural studies, etc., but there is relatively little engagement with contemporary literary-critical writing on the Bible. The closest he comes to approbation is of James Ackerman's 1974 essay on the Moses Birth Story.

Sternberg's style is extremely complex, convoluted, tortuous. Most sentences I had to struggle through several times, and some I abandoned. Indeed, he reads like a cross between Henry James and the Russian Formalists. But I would not want him any different. His writing is the product of careful craftsmanship as well as enthusiasm; it is extremely funny, dotted with puns, internal rhymes, wild literary allusions. It is a reflection of a mind that is subtle, complex, and almost dizzying in its intelligence. In short, this is a great book, written by one of the finest of contemporary literary critics. But the whole truth—no.