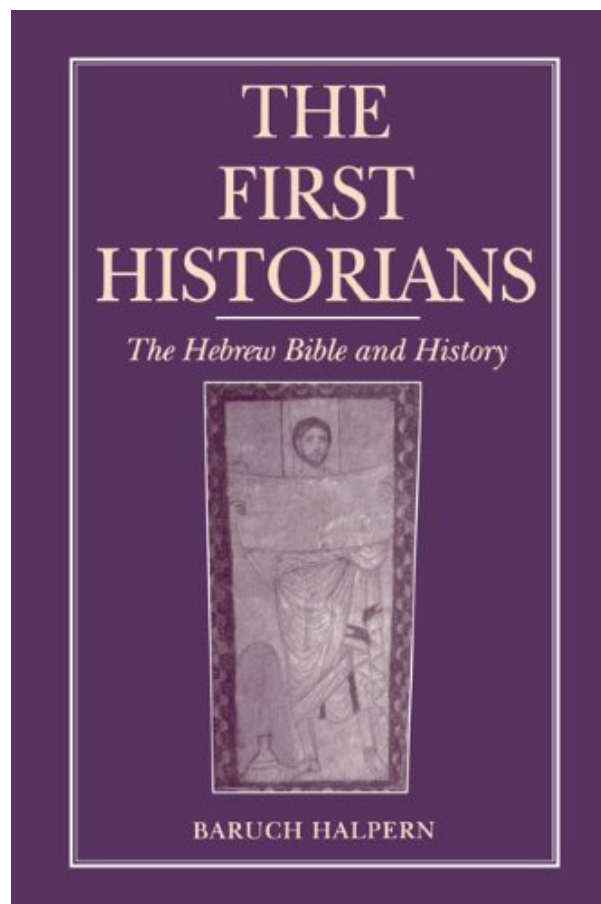


**THE FIRST HISTORIANS: THE HEBREW
BIBLE AND HISTORY BY BARUCH
HALPERN**



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THE FIRST HISTORIANS

The Hebrew Bible and History



BARUCH HALPERN

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Review

“The First Historians is a book that no one with serious interest in biblical scholarship can afford to neglect. Halpern is one of the most fertile, exuberant, and audacious minds of his generation. He is witty, learned, and outrageous in turn, a Momigliano of Hebrew historiography. One learns more from one book by Halpern than from a dozen by his plodding peers.”

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An important reinterpretation of the Hebrew Bible as historiography, now available in paper.

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Most helpful customer reviews

23 of 57 people found the following review helpful.

Based on a Faulty Foundation

By Jonathan Bailey

While artfully written and scientifically organized and referenced (thereby preventing me from giving only one star), This book, though trying to advance the idea that historiography began with the Hebrews and not the Greeks, is operating within the framework of thinking created by humanistic German bible scholars of decades ago. The cornerstone of the book is Martin Noth's adaptation of Julius Wellhausen's Documentary Hypothesis, which states that the Torah and Early Prophets (Genesis through Kings) is a patchwork of collected traditions that has nothing to do with traditional notions of authorship or revelation. Wellhausen synthesized the idea that Torah was a conflation of 4 separate documents from various stages of the Israelites' invention of their religion, while Noth claimed that Deuteronomy through Kings was all written as one document as a forgery to prop up the reign of King Josiah. Though Halpern in this book is attempting to find critical historical method in the compilation of the alleged forgery of King Josiah, he is operating on the foundations of Wellhausen and Noth, whose ideas sprang from perceived problems in the structure of the Hebrew text, which themselves sprang from a complete ignorance of Semitic poetic and prose structures. Since the publications of their ideas, doublets (duplications and 'retellings' of certain segments of text), the main 'difficulty' they found in the text, have been found in all types of Semitic literature (even the Greek New Testament) and are now considered to be proper Semitic style, rather than evidence that multiple sources were cut and pasted together. So while Halpern is trying to advance some interesting ideas, he is basically engaged in dialogue with a segment of the academic society which has not yet learned to abandon these faulty principles of analyzing the structure of ancient Semitic literature. This book should be avoided on that basis.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

Important arguments that yet need more to bear the weight of the thesis

By E. L. Bess

Halpern's **The First Historians** is a work unlike most other works of biblical scholarship in that (a) its author is truly a trained historian with a precious competency and (b) it gets down to basic methodological issues about history and history-writing, not only as it pertains to the biblical writers, but modern scholars as well, four types of which Halpern makes out as hostile to history and history-writing in varying degrees: fundamentalists, negative fundamentalists, 'Pyrrhonists' and source critics. He criticizes each, though understandably he's gentler with source critics.

Chapters 3 & 4 are case studies demonstrating how biblical writers utilized their sources to indite genuine histories. (intentionally anyway) Then comes Part 2. Halpern shows, or attempts to show (it is not my place to judge if he succeeds), how redactional techniques in the Deuteronomistic history indicate historical interests, not romantic interests. But first he interacts with the views of other scholars on the structure of the Deuteronomistic history. Frank Moore Cross's double redaction theory, even in Halpern's presentation, seems to have the most explanatorial power to its advantage as well as parsimony within that power, and Halpern nitpicks at it unnecessarily in my opinion. One can't help but be impelled by Halpern's hawk's eyes,

but there's an irresistible feeling, slight but admitting of reservation, that he expects his biblical historian made, like he accuses his peers of expecting redactors of making, 'unreasonable demands on the analytical skills of his audience.' [174; cf. 243-4, 275ff.] Still, the logic behind his criticisms of other views stands, broadly, to reason. To those scholars who break up the texts into too many redactional layers on the charge of inconsistency, Halpern reacts not so politely: 'Such hypotheses are only a final refuge for readers who cannot contrive a coherent reading: like Hupfeld's R in the Pentateuch, oblivious to all the problems that combining sources entailed, they are unconscious by-products of literary, not historiographic, analysis; they imply stupidity or dishonesty in an ancient author, but call down doubt only upon themselves.' [139]

So not to mislead, it should be clarified that Halpern is not adverse to source criticism of the bible, only to its abuse. (see pp. xxiv-vi) For this chapter 2 is a good explanation for the origins of source criticism and a history of Hebrew bible scholarship, highlighting Wellhausen and Noth. But strikingly, instead of seeking to undermine the historical truth of the bible, source criticism 'had been a rearguard action against Enlightenment attacks on the Bible.' [19] On the other hand, it should also be stated that Halpern is nothing like an apologist for the biblical tradition: 'The idea that biblical literature, of whatever genre, is anything more than human, intended for humans, subject to interpretation by humans, and thus riddled with error, is a fantasy.' [xxii]

In Part 3, the last, Halpern discusses the various kinds of sources his Deuteronomistic historian used with proofs of their accuracy as sustained by external evidence. He selected and presented what subserved his theological agendas; however, his biases were controlled by his sense of the evidence. He rarely resorted to thin-air inventions. 'Our historian,' he writes, 'and some of the authors whose work he used, believed that the evidence sustained their historical theses.' [242] But there is tension in Halpern's own thesis. Again, the Deuteronomistic historian 'riddles his texts with doublets and inconsistencies. All this is better explained on the hypothesis that H(Dtr) wrestled with his sources than it is on the hypothesis that he composed sheer fantasy in an inconsistent fashion. No Israelite narrator evinces an aesthetic predilection for self-contradiction. Had H(Dtr) concocted the history, he would have gone to the trouble of keeping it consistent.'

If Halpern's historian could permit conflicts in the narrative, why couldn't a redactor?...the very kind of redactor other scholars seek to demonstrate operated in the Deuteronomistic history that Halpern had strong words against? (see 138-40) Can it be that Halpern 'cannot contrive a coherent reading'? An apparent tension like this simply can't be explained away with the vague rationalization that the Deuteronomistic historian 'wrestled with his sources.'

Rather, the sophistication Halpern reads in the history probably reflects more of his own than that of the actual biblical writer. Halpern anticipated that scholars would find his points 'unduly generous'. [278] Outright munificent in some compartments of his thesis, in my view; and I was still disappointed that he never tells us who the Deuteronomistic history was written for. Nevertheless, this is a volume that can't be missed and which all students of the bible must 'wrestle' with themselves.

Fun Fact:

* The 1996 paperback edition is missing part of note 13 and notes 14-26 for chapter 5!

12 of 16 people found the following review helpful.

Enjoyable book presents recent ideas in Biblical criticism.

By James B. Williams

Halpern is well known and is always enjoyable to read. This book is an excellent introduction to the ideas of this important Textual Critic. Halpern describes the "Deuteronomist," a person (or group) that has collected

together the material that forms the bulk of the Biblical histories of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. His thesis is plausible and consistent and has been supported by recent archeological work by Finkelstein and others. His writing is detailed and specific but his wit and humor always keep the reader interested. Due to their subject matter, biblical archaeology and criticism have been alternately plagued and supported by religion and politics. Halpern, Finkelstein and their associates are often under attack, not always because of their arguments and research, but rather on the basis of religious beliefs and Middle Eastern politics. (...). Time will tell if further developments will support or contradict Halpern's position. Nevertheless, whether you agree with his position or not, Halpern's book gives an exciting glimpse into one of the most important current trends in Biblical archeology and criticism.

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