David Frankel takes the reader on a tour of various texts throughout the Hebrew Bible which explore how the land plays a role in the constitution of Israel. Is Israel a territorial entity whose communal existence and relationship with Yahweh is bound to the land, or an ethnic entity constituted by law? Frankel distinguishes his work from other theologies of land by celebrating the plurality of ideas about Israel’s connection to the land. He does not allow the reader to escape the character of the Hebrew Bible as a “battleground” (p. 64) on which scribes with different views on Israel’s relationship with the land sought to establish their respective ideologies by shaping and reshaping the text.

Frankel illustrates this plurality first with a discussion of the Sinai and Shechem covenants in chapter 2. The Shechem covenant emphasizes the centrality of living on the land. Its laws are designed for life in the land; Israel is chosen when a land promise is given to the patriarchs; and Yahweh’s saving acts include both exodus and conquest. The Sinai covenant places a greater emphasis on law than land. Its laws are given outside the land and can be followed anywhere; Israel is chosen at the exodus; and Yahweh’s saving act is the exodus alone. These independent traditions came to be juxtaposed in the text and now exist in tension with one another.

The issue of what defines Israel is not a black-and-white one, but different texts explore different and often quite nuanced ways to navigate the tension between the concerns of law and land. In chapter 3 Frankel notes that the exile raised the question of whether Yahweh can be worshipped on foreign soil, which is related to the question of whether Yahweh is a land-bound or a universal deity. Na’aman builds an altar to Yahweh in Aram out of Israelite soil, implying that there is something special about Yahweh’s connection to the land even when he is worshipped outside of it, while Mal. 1:11 emphasizes that people in other lands worship Yahweh on their own soil. 1 Kings 8 emphasizes that Yahweh dwells only in heaven and can receive prayer from anywhere, even though the Temple remains the central place to which Yahweh turns his attention.

In chapters 5–6 Frankel considers attitudes about Israel’s relationship with foreigners. He points to a tension between conquest laws, which promote a strict exclusivism, prohibiting Israelites from coexisting with foreigners because the land requires a level of religious purity that would be compromised if Israelites made covenants with other inhabitants of the land, and Genesis, where the patriarchs coexist with foreigners who are not perceived as a religious threat. Frankel discusses texts that navigate the extremes of exclusivism and coexistence by advocating pluralism, tolerance, and universalism. Again we are seeing independent and competing traditions about how the promise of land to Israel affects its relationships with others: Israel brings terror on other nations in the conquest laws, while the promise of land in Genesis emphasizes that Israel is to be a blessing to other nations.

Frankel urges us to resist the temptation to situate these diverse theologies of territory in a simple chronological development (e.g., pre-exilic and post-exilic). Rather, we must recognize that multiple perspectives coexisted. In chapter 4 he explores contrasting approaches to emigration. In some cases, the patriarchs are depicted as wanderers wherever they go, while in other cases emigration is prohibited. Jacob travels without issue to Paddan Aram to get a wife and remains there a long time, while Abraham sends a servant to fetch a wife for Isaac to keep Isaac from leaving the land. Prohibition on emigration is also at work in Isaac’s sister/wife story, where the “foreign” land to which he goes is Gerar, which is within the bounds of the idealized promised land, so he hasn’t really left. A third approach is a level of unease with emigration even while recognizing it as necessary and temporary, an approach reflected in the Gen. 12 sister/wife story where Abraham leaves for Egypt under dire circumstances. Frankel argues that these views on emigration developed among different groups who experienced exile. The third approach is the perspective of exiles: those who go outside the land and bear children within the ethnic group will return, whereas those who remain in the land and intermarry forfeit it. The second approach is the perspective of those who remained in the land. Frankel emphasizes that this is an ongoing debate, as the texts that advocate these different views sought to dominate, as different scribes shaped the text.

Frankel’s book is a rich mine of topics to discuss. One of its strengths is its effort to connect theology to historical criticism in an organic way by exploring the ideologies that motivated different
biblical writers and by emphasizing the theological diversity within the Hebrew Bible. Unfortunately, Frankel’s imprecision sometimes compromises this point, as when he says that biblical literature on the whole “exhibits a somewhat ambivalent and dialectical attitude” (p. 70) toward Israel’s relationship to the land, even as he demonstrates throughout the book that the attitudes are anything but ambivalent. Given his stated aim, it is not clear why he tries to distill a single biblical attitude at all. In fact, there are many points throughout the book where Frankel does not seem tightly in control of his argument. He sometimes uses long strings of questions to set up an argument, leaving the reader bewildered about what to focus on. He also at points allows his argument to be controlled by lengthy rehearsal of the views of other scholars which he then rebuts, leaving the reader to wonder precisely how the discussion fits the broader thrust of his argument. By the time he makes the connection, the reader has often lost the thread. As a consequence, his ideas are not nearly as clear and accessible as they could be, and such difficulties may compromise their impact.

Frankel’s discussion of the divergent theologies of land hinges on detailed discussion of composition history. Again, this approach is a major strength of the book, and his analyses overall are plausible. But they are not tethered to a clear theory or model of composition history, and this is a significant weakness of the book. Frankel frequently refers to well-known potential markers of diachronic development such as doublets. But he also, and too often, uses expressions like “awkwardness,” “smoothness,” “disruptive,” or “it seems”—expressions that suggest an impressionistic analysis that lacks sufficient critical self-awareness. One is frequently left wondering what the specific warrants for Frankel’s arguments are because terms like these do not make them transparent. To be fair, such expressions have long been typical in source-critical studies, but they have also long been the subject of criticism, especially by those who seek to discredit the historical-critical project. Those of us who work in Pentateuchal studies need to rigorously avoid such words and challenge ourselves to lay bare our warrants and the models on which they are based so that both our arguments and our models may be subject to productive discussion that moves the discipline forward. This level of rigor is arguably necessary if we are ever to find a viable model (or models) of composition history to replace the Documentary Hypothesis and if we want the results of historical criticism to impact other subfields rather than be ignored as unduly speculative, as they too often have been.

The frequent absence of clear warrants leaves Frankel vulnerable to the charge that his analyses are driven by his broader agenda, whether or not this is true. As an Israeli scholar, he is keenly aware that issues of theology and territoriality are relevant to contemporary political issues, and he seeks to elucidate how biblical studies might inform that discussion. He does a vital service by challenging us to see that the Hebrew Bible does not offer a single perspective to which one can bluntly appeal but contains multiple voices which offer a range of possibilities for thinking critically and in nuanced ways about the relationship between people and land both in antiquity and today. Sensitive, careful, nuanced thinking can only be an asset when so much is at stake, and Frankel demonstrates how Jewish tradition can be thoughtfully engaged by people across the political spectrum. I hope that critical discussion of Frankel’s work will come not in an effort to use its weaknesses to discredit the whole project, but in an effort to further refine the specifics of what he presents, for the benefit of both Pentateuchal scholarship and those who might wish to draw on the insights of Jewish tradition to inform contemporary life.

These critiques aside, I found Frankel’s volume to be full of delightfully thought-provoking insights and ideas to further explore. These make it a strong and very worthwhile contribution. I intend to keep it close and refer to it frequently as I continue to think about the issues and the texts he treats.

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