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Book Review: The Responsive Self: Personal Religion in Biblical Literature of the Neo-Babylonian and Persian Periods

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The Responsive Self: Personal Religion in Biblical Literature of the Neo-Babylonian and Persian Periods

by *Susan Niditch*

Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015. 138 pp. \$50.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-300-16636-1.

IN THIS SHORT, ENGAGING, and learned book, Susan Niditch takes readers into the world of sixth–fifth century BCE Judah/Yehud to understand what it might have meant for religion during this period to have become “personal.” Books like Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Job, Ecclesiastes, Psalms, Proverbs, and Zechariah, among others, take center stage as examples of the turn toward the individual’s relationship to God and the personal psychology of discrete actors in the process of figuring out their place in the world. Though biblical scholars have often correctly emphasized the “group identity” of ancient Israelites, rallying around symbols like temple, land, and king, the era under Niditch’s focus saw many fascinating expressions of a singular person, a “self” in the making, forging an autobiographical relationship to the deity. Not limited purely to biblical texts, Niditch illuminates this phenomenon through the sociological study of religion as well as archaeology. Her simple but convincing argument is that during the exilic and post-exilic periods in Israel authors turned toward complex descriptions of the self, and in doing so ushered in a new period in which religiously creative expressions of personality entered the world of “lived religion” as never before.

This volume would make a very good addition to the bookshelves of clergy and teachers who are interested in the way biblical authors made sense of their lives as individuals in a period of great turmoil and change. One often hears claims about American culture being increasingly “individualistic”—meant negatively—but Niditch is able to show how religion is nothing if not complex, and it is “always personal, immediate, and fluid” (p. 134). Her chapter on “Material Religion, Created and

Experienced” (pp. 90–105) demonstrates the way non-biblical artifacts such as burial art come into conversation with “objects” depicted in biblical texts to show individuals in the process of creating “visual, dramatic, and participatory” connections between their world and the divine (p. 105). Though it often trends toward academic prose, typical for the work of a specialist, Niditch’s work here is a worthy representative of the goals of the Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library series in which it appears—offering, in the words of series editor John J. Collins, “the best contemporary scholarship in a way that is accessible not only to scholars but also to the educated nonspecialist.”

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