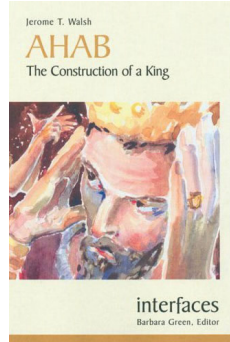


○ **REVIEW OF JEROME T. WALSH, *AHAB: THE CONSTRUCTION OF A KING***
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Jerome Walsh addresses three central questions in this study of the biblical portrait of King Ahab in I Kings 16:29 – 22:40. Walsh suggests that the pertinent questions to be answered are: How does the text itself depict Ahab? How has the text undergone change as passed from generation to generation? How has the redactional work in the texts altered the portrayal of Ahab? Walsh structures his study in three parts: the Ahab of history; the Ahab portrayed in the narrative; and the history of the texts under consideration. Excellently written, the intricacies of this study become accessible, even to the general reader, in the clarity of the outlines, summaries and lucid explanations. The introduction quickly summarizes the thrust of the book by providing a map of the methods used and a cursory statement of the wealth of meaning it will uncover. There is meagre evidence by which we can recreate much about the historical personage, Ahab, yet what can be assembled of the historical king is stark in its disparity to the biblical representation. Finally, Walsh advises us that the history of the texts in the hands of the redactors and their purposes will necessarily be a central theme for his study.

The biblical texts that we have come to us from the deuteronomic historian and belong to a period 200 years following the events described. On the other hand, we have three records contemporary with Ahab that offer the scant information we have of the actual king's life. In each instance they cannot be reconciled easily with the text of I Kings. The Monolith Inscription of Shalmaneser III tells us of his victory at Qarqar in 853 BCE over an alliance that included Ahab, the Israelite, and Hadad-ezer of Damascus/Aram. Scholarship today is sceptical that the 'victory' was really much more than a stalemate. In either case, the biblical account names Ben-Hadad as king of Aram and Ahab an opponent of Aram during the same calendar year. The second witness to Ahab, the *Mesha Stele* tells us that King Omri, Ahab's father, had humbled and subjected Moab, and this extended to half the time of his sons' reigns as well. It would be an understatement to recall that the biblical account credits far less to the House of Omri. The third is the House

of David Inscription that celebrates the victory of Hazael of Damascus over both the northern and southern kingdoms (Israel and Judea). The biblical account ascribes the defeat to Ahab's era. In the first instance, Damascus and Israel are allies. In the second, Omri had successfully established alliances to his north and south. Finally, the alliance with Damascus may have ended soon after the battle with the Assyrians at Qarqar. The historical evidence, then, offers us a politically successful picture of King Omri and his son, Ahab. It was Omri's second son, Jehoram, who will suffer defeat.

The following chapters, Walsh's strongest suit, are extensive exegeses and critical analyses of I Kings 16:29-22:40. Walsh carefully delineates the importance of narrative criticism to deal with the Ahab passages. Because of the presence of several narrators within the text, a gulf exists between the historical and biblical impressions given of Ahab. Walsh's grasp of and ability to convey the text's complexity at this point sparkles. Every biblical student has heard about the oral tradition that predates so many texts. Walsh's style and care helps the student understand well what this actually involves and to observe it in the text under consideration. Beginning with an original story, we may have a series of oral transmitters, not simply a single narrator. In the case of the biblical passages surrounding Ahab and his contemporary Elijah, we have several narratives/narrators. In addition, there is the hand of the deuteronomist historian, the redactor, at work. Each narrator and narrative mirrors their respective perspectives with whom the redactor may or may not fully agree, but all of which are maintained in the text. The question is not whether the various narrators are right or wrong. There is not sufficient access to data to make such a determination. What we can attempt is to evaluate the adequacies of the 'picture' of Ahab presented by the various narrators for the purposes of the narrative/s and for our historical curiosity. We encounter narrators both positive and negative in their assessment of Ahab. These evaluations shape the passages, but in the final analysis, the narrative's (given us by the deuteronomist) purpose is the decisive factor in the evaluation of a passage's significance. It is not an historical evaluation of King Ahab of Israel as such.

This becomes particularly clear when Walsh leads us to the inescapable conclusion that 200 years after Ahab, the text often attributes to Ahab inaccurate events and conflicting motivations. This is not deceitful, Walsh reminds us. The point is not Ahab the king; the point is that the activities attributed to Ahab are intended to teach the values of authentic Yahwism. As serious students of the Hebrew Scriptures know the deuteronomist historian does not intend to impart 'secular' information about the House of Omri. Nonetheless, Walsh's skill sets this out marvelously for the less familiar reader. An illustration is the author's ability to explain that there are, at least, two narrators in these passages. Each attributes opposite motivation and behaviour to Ahab. In one instance he is seemingly loyal to Yahwism, in the other he is stubbornly Baalist. This underscores the obvious tension within the received text. While one narrator ascribes Yahwism and courage to Ahab in his relationship to his ally, the King of Judea, the second narrator, perhaps cynically, points to motivation that completely undercuts both positive assessments. The contrasting memories of 'Ahab', if indeed they are memories of the same king (one narrator appears to have transposed onto Ahab the actions of a later king) are neatly summed up in two conflicting narratives: Ahab died a violent death in battle, the other that he died peacefully and 'slept with his ancestors.' The different narrators alternately present Ahab as courageous and a faithful Yahwist, 22,1-4, 29-36 and as deceptive and disloyal, 22-5-28. Walsh illumines this with reference to the precise choice of Hebrew vocabulary and the connotations involved. The exam-

ination of the received text permits us to appreciate the confluence of materials and the accumulation of religious insight over time: Northern and Southern Kingdom priorities regarding the Temple and the House of David, the amalgamation of sources with divergent interests – chronicles of the prophets and ‘official’ records of the ruling kings – and finally, the theological development of monotheism.

Narrative Criticism leads, however, to an important conclusion. The personage described in the passages 16:29- 22:40 while demonstrating many positive qualities is, nonetheless, one from whom we learn what should not be done. ‘Ahab’, at the hand of the deuteronomic historian becomes a teaching tool. The role of a reader is to accept the narrative, as readily as one does *Moby Dick*, and enter into it for its own value. The redactor’s biases represent Yahwist reform in the southern kingdom during the late 7th century. It frames his perspective: authentic Yahwism is practiced at the Temple in Jerusalem, absolute monotheism – long championed by some of the prophets – has triumphed in the ensuing years since the historical Ahab, and Samaria has become a symbol of syncretism. The victory of absolute monotheism reflects, perhaps, the chronicles of the prophets to which the redactor turns when earlier texts are resourced. The Deuteronomist used ‘history’ to good effect. The reader’s attention is grabbed and held. The narrative rivets us and we learn and we remember the story’s point.

Walsh’s study is one of the best tools I have encountered in recent years with which to teach students biblical methods and hermeneutics. He is clear, organized, nuanced and specific, if sometimes so detailed as to require closer than usual reading for the college student. Nevertheless, most of the obstacles many students encounter in their study of the Hebrew Scriptures are addressed here in a thorough and readable manner. In rapid succession, Walsh leads the student through a series of issues in biblical interpretation that will leave them with an understanding of and sympathy for the passages and the interpretive methods that, if they are lacking, allows too many students elbow room to dismiss these ancient scriptures as reflective of a time, at best, that is quaint and, at worst, irrelevant for its violence. As the texts are unpacked, we recognize the issues as similar to our own. The core realities and dynamics that existed then shine light on our questions and behaviour as well. We too are fickle, stubborn, angry, or lose our way in the welter of decisions made. This short book deserves appreciation for its coverage of so many considerations: the development of doctrine and believers’ insight, the extraction of meaning from violence in the stories, the importance for readers to insert themselves into the narrative, and the discovery that while the redactor has his purposes the complexity of the text which the redactor assembles and respects remains and the richness of perspectives are honored. This is a valuable book with which to teach college students and non-biblical specialists the strategic value to listen to the text even as we must strive to understand the author’s intention, the ‘surplus of meaning’ included, and/or historical/cultural bias brought by the author to the text.