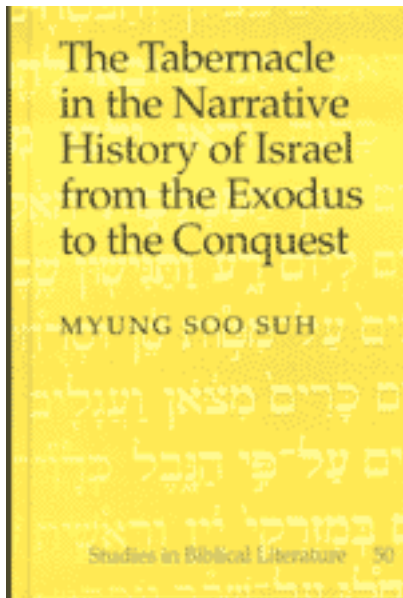


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**Suh, Myung Soo**

***The Tabernacle in the Narrative History of Israel from the Exodus to the Conquest***

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The tabernacle belongs to the puzzling mysteries of the Pentateuch. Myung Soo Suh is to be commended to take up the difficult task to shed some light onto this “device” and the closely related term tent of meeting. He aims at a broad perspective and takes a wide range of texts into account—a wider range than usual: beyond the occurrences in the Pentateuch, Suh includes an analysis of the role of the tabernacle, the tent of meeting, and the ark of the covenant in the book of Joshua. It is also a fruitful decision not to use the standard historical-critical and diachronic methodology but to choose an approach Suh calls “narrative criticism.” The book is the revised version of Suh’s doctoral thesis written under the direction of D. J. A. Clines at the University of Sheffield. Suh teaches at Hyupsung University in Hwaseong, Korea.

The study contains seven chapters. After the introduction, Suh analyzes the biblical texts in the order of the narrative (i.e., ch. 6 deals with the book of Joshua). Chapter 7 provides a brief conclusion. The introduction (ch. 1) contains the usual issues of a doctoral thesis (“the problem,” “survey of research,” “defining terms”). All remarks are kept short, which is welcome in most cases. But sometimes brevity leads to pictures like a woodcut. In his “methodological considerations,” Suh presents a very brief—one might also say sketchy—overview over the history of biblical exegesis beginning with Gabler. It is not clear what such a sketch is meant for (other than proving that the author is acquainted

with his scholarly roots). For the last decades, Suh identifies a “paradigm shift” toward synchronic methods, and he sympathizes with them. However, one expects a clear commitment for a reader-oriented approach or a decisive option for a synchronic analysis but does not find such. Suh seems to be too cautious to take the next step of the “paradigm shift.” This ambiguity turns out to be a real problem in reading Suh’s observations on the text.

On pages 6–7 Suh describes—all too briefly, however—the methodology he wants to apply. He speaks of a “combination between a diachronic and synchronic approach based on the hermeneutic pluralism, ‘an indeterminate mixture of the two’ ”—unfortunately, no note clarifies who coined the last phrase. Suh’s study cannot demonstrate that this “mixture” works properly. An unambiguous commitment to a reader-oriented, synchronic approach would have done better, since that is what Suh—successfully!—does in many of his statements. He himself identifies narrative criticism (narratology) “as a main methodology” (6, naming some scholars in the notes of the first chapter), but after that bold statement Suh limits himself again, stating that this methodology “will not be applied mechanically. . . . together with a traditio-historical perspective, the text will be initially read in a narrative framework.” (6). “History and story will be understood in the relationship of interdependence.” What exactly this means does not become clear. “However, [i]n the present research I do not want to say about history as what had actually happened in a certain time, in a certain environment. It only says tradition itself, and admits that some traditions in the text might be reminiscent of what actually happened” (7).

Hence, if one expects to find attempts to reconstruct what the tabernacle actually was in history, or if it ever existed and for what purpose it was used, one gets no decisive answer from Suh’s book. However, one will not find hermeneutical reflections about the issue of the fictitious character of the narratives about the tabernacle either. At times one gets the uncomfortable feeling that Suh takes the biblical texts as historical information at face value. This is not the case, the reviewer assumes, but he would also recommend a more cautious style in order to make clear that one analyzes literary and fictitious texts with a theological message.

The achievement of Suh’s study is the analysis of the tabernacle texts in the larger narrative framework of the Pentateuch and the book of Joshua. Here Suh collects a variety of important insights in the literary function of the tabernacle (in connection with the tent of meeting and the ark of the covenant). His main thesis is that the tabernacle not only functions as a cultic device but also as a military headquarters—and the ark is both a palladium for holy war and a cultic object. Religion and warfare are inseparably interwoven, like the two sides of a coin.

One example may suffice: The despoiling of the Egyptians during the exodus always seems to be a strange motif if one stops reading after the great events of the exodus. Focusing on the tabernacle, Suh demonstrates that the metal spoils taken from the Egyptians provide the material basis for constructing the tabernacle (see ch. 2). The golden calf, however, was the wrong way to use the jewelry taken from the Egyptians—hence this important episode was placed between the instructions to build the tabernacle and the ark in Exod 25–31 and the execution of these instructions in Exod 35–40. Suh discovers an antitypal parallel between Exod 25–31 and Exod 32 (ch. 4).

One wishes that these important connections detected by a reader could be demonstrated from the Hebrew text in more detail. On page 36 Suh provides a chart with English and Hebrew terms regarding the materials offered for the tabernacle (Exod 35:22–28; column 1) and the spoils of the Egyptians (Exod 3:22; 11:2; 12:35; column 2). However, the only terminological parallel that is left over is “gold” and “silver”—rather general terms to denote luxury and wealth. Suh also points to clothing and livestock that might provide the necessary material for building the tabernacle. Nevertheless, despite such lack of terminological bindings, it is indeed a helpful explanation for the question what the despoiling of the Egyptians is good for (regarding the notion that a long wandering in the desert would require quite other important things than gold and silver). The despoiling of the Egyptians’ jewelry can be understood as a way of acquiring the necessary materials for the tabernacle and its furniture (see 36).

A second important result of Suh’s analysis refers to the military function of the tabernacle. During the wilderness wandering and the conquest, the tabernacle in close relationship to the ark functions as military headquarters, while Yahweh appears as the supreme commander. In the narrative history from the exodus to the conquest the Israelite army is never defeated; thus the concept of the tabernacle and the ark also symbolizes the triumph of Yahweh, the lord of war. (Suh also mentions the counterexample in Num 14:39–45: the Israelites go to war without the ark, and consequently the Amalekites and the Canaanites defeat them. It was not Yahweh’s war.) “Thus the triumph of Yahweh is a basis for the cultic-military ideology of Israel” (147).

The tabernacle also functions as a treasury for all metal spoils during the military campaigns. As the story of Achan in Josh 7 demonstrates, human greed causes disaster for the whole community. Thus, the taking of metal spoils is totally prohibited, since the ultimate goal is not the accumulation of wealth but the promised land. Suh further points out that the tabernacle symbolizes and legitimizes the cultic-military leadership personified in Moses and Aaron. Finally, regarding the event of Josh 22:10–34, the tabernacle identifies the only legitimate place of worship of Yahweh and thus symbolizes the integrity of Israel.

As already mentioned, one wishes for more proof for these interesting theses and observations. They work on the basis of intertextual relationships, analogies, parallels in terms and motifs, and the like, which need to be demonstrated in the Hebrew or English texts. The issue of intertextuality is not discussed at all, which adds to the methodological vagueness of the study. Typographical flaws make the reader suspicious: the few Hebrew phrases quoted are sometimes split up in the wrong way by line breaks (see 2, 7, 61, 104); page 7 should read Wellhausen, not Willhausen; on pages 141–42, note 42, a page break runs through a chart. It is hence almost impossible to get the idea behind the chart. The inconvenience of endnotes instead of footnotes is due to the design of the series, which has been criticized in several reviews of other books of the series before and hence is not the author's fault.

After the brief conclusion (146–48) one misses some considerations about the pragmatics of these narratives: Why were they written? For what audience? Or, in a more synchronic way, what should readers think about them? What insights should they gain? It is absolutely appropriate to analyze and illuminate the literary function of the tabernacle in the narrative history, as Suh does successfully, but then the task is not complete. One needs to ask for the pragmatic purposes of these narratives and the theological message in the overall design of the biblical literature. One would also be curious about the possibility of relating the concept of the tabernacle to certain concepts of worship, cult, and warfare in the history of Israel.

Within its limits, the study of Myung Soo Suh answers some (though certainly not all) questions about the tabernacle and opens the door for a new exegetical perspective. The book adds proof to the observation that it is helpful and worthwhile to analyze biblical features such as the tabernacle and the ark in the larger narrative framework.