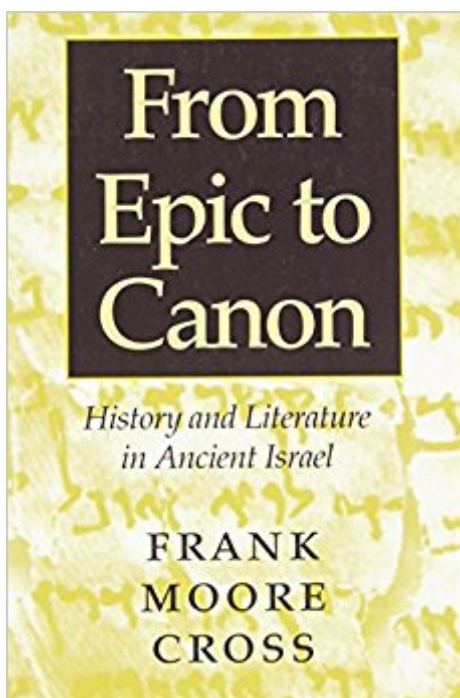


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From Epic To Canon: History And Literature In Ancient Israel



Synopsis

In *From Epic to Canon*, Frank Moore Cross discusses specific issues that illuminate central questions about the Hebrew Bible and those who created and preserved it. He challenges the persistent attempt to read Protestant theological polemic against law into ancient Israel. Cross uncovers the continuities between the institutions of kinship and of covenant, which he describes as "extended kinship." He examines the social structures of ancient Israel and reveals that beneath its later social and cultural accretions, the concept of covenant—as opposed to codified law—was a vital part of Israel's earliest institutions. He then draws parallels between the expression of kinship and covenant among the Israelites and that practiced by other ancient societies, as well as in primitive societies.

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Customer Reviews

"Distinguished scholar Cross, author of the classic *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, uses excavations at the city of Gerizim, the Daliyeh Papyri and other archaeological finds to give fresh meaning to the reading of the Hebrew Bible... Impeccable scholarship and lucid prose make Cross's book a must-read for Hebrew Bible scholars." (Publishers Weekly)"This book is surely destined to become a classic, a crowning achievement to a distinguished life of scholarship." (Biblical Archaeology Review)"[*From Epic to Canon*] has a unity found in the major scholarly concerns which have characterized Cross's academic career... He has an unerring eye for questions which need to be answered and to which is it important to bring a whole range of scholarly tools,

archaeological, historical and literary." (R. Davidson *Journal of Theological Studies*) "A book of substantive argument, scholarly depth, textured reflection, and elegant presentation." (*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*) "Cross's study is greatly enhanced by the new evidence that has been discovered including the Dead Sea Scrolls. He carefully examines how these documents influence the way we think about the beliefs and institutions of ancient Israel." (*Front Table*) "In the study of the Old Testament, perhaps no one has been a better and more stimulating scholar in the past half century than Frank Moore Cross, emeritus professor at Harvard, editor of the Dead Sea Scrolls and author of salient books and articles. Cross is one of the few who commands the whole range of the biblical field, from the second millennium BCE to the Roman period. He has embodied the model of the scholar, who is, as Shakespeare puts it in *Henry VIII* 'Exceeding wise, fair spoken, and persuading. To those men who sought him sweet as summer.'" (*Mark Hamilton Stone-Campbell Journal*)

Frank Moore Cross is the Hancock Professor of Hebrew and Other Oriental Languages (Emeritus) in the Department of Near Eastern Languages at Harvard University. His many books include *The Ancient Library of Qumran and Modern Biblical Studies*, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, and, as editor, the *Hermeneia* series of Old Testament commentaries and *Qumran and the History of Biblical Text*. In addition, he has received several honorary degrees and prizes, including the William Foxwell Albright Award in Biblical Scholarship, the Israel Museum's Percia Schimmel Prize in Archaeology, and the Medalla de Honor of the University of Madrid.

please see my review of cross's companion volume, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*.

For this book Frank Cross has gathered together a series of essays which tell the story of what became the Canon for ancient Israel. The original intent, says the author, "was to fill inter-stices (gaps) in my earlier study *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*." Though many of the essays have appeared in other scholarly literature, several appear in this book for the first time. Early Israel was a tribal league developed due to internal pressures such as the blood feud and external pressures such as the highly organized armies of neighboring powers. Too there was a certain amount of kinship which was tied together by religious unity. Cross calls this "kinship-in-law." This is important because covenants were mutual; covenants with one-sided obligation were a later idea. It was this league which produced Hebrew epic. The beginning of Israelite literature is the transition from poetry to epic (which is defined on page 29). Contrary to the claims of some scholars, Cross maintains that "folk memory" is longer than two generations. Bards, using various formulae, could keep the culture

of a people clear although historical fact, as we now know it, was never the main concern. So the culture of ancient Israel was passed from poetry to epic. This can be seen in Song of Deborah and its accompanying narrative passages in Judges. The partitioning of the material as it passed into epic has been divided into the sources J, E, D, and P. Cross focuses upon the Tetrateuch because it escaped any systematic editing by D. Now as to the matter between text and history, Cross proposes a study of the tribe of Reuben. This culminates in the conclusion that the Apiru were a client class. Personal names found in the Execration texts, New Kingdom texts, and in the Haynes Papyrus show the pattern "client of El" and so forth. Cross believes that the connection between "apiru" and "ibri" should be affirmed. Though he does not mention it, he has an unlikely ally here in Niels Peter Lemche who affirms the same conclusion in his Anchor Bible Dictionary article. Thus far I have summarized only the first 70 pages of Cross's book. By the time he is done Cross has progressed to showing the relationship between the stabilization of the text with the canonization of the text in the late/post Qumran period. Those who know the issues of this book will want to consider Cross. A distinguished scholar has weighed in again.

This book is a worthy and very interesting successor to "Canaanite Myth And Hebrew Epic", exploring a number of issues relating to the history of Israel that were not addressed in the earlier work. Essays cover the relation of kinship to covenant, traditional narrative, the dubious fortunes of Reuben, the old gods of the ancient near east, OT descriptions of the tabernacle tent and temple in context, highly technical essays on Hebrew verse, two essays on the post-exilic restoration with an emphasis on the rift between Samaria and Jerusalem, two essays on the fixation and stabilization of the canonical text, and kind of an afterthought essay on pottery sherds and alphabets. For me, the most interesting articles were the 'olden gods' essay, which places a number of themes present in the Bible firmly in the context of Canaanite mythology, and the the Samaria essay, which brings a lot of insight to the "Samaritan Problem". Just about as compelling are the essays dealing with the canonization of the Biblical texts, which brings the Dead Sea Scrolls and other contemporary evidence in to clarify the concerns and procedures. The most difficult and arcane (and beyond my interest) were the essays dealing with Hebrew verse. My reservations stem from what seem to me to be omissions in the argument. Cross regularly makes the statement "there is no reason to doubt" one thing or another which is by no means proven, either in this work or any other that I know of, regarding practices and institutions of the "tribal league" and the "empire". He alludes to the existence of tribal leagues and their distinct religious forms from the Bronze Age to the modern era without much discussion of evidence. He also attests that at Ugarit patriarchal and specifically urban

forms co-existed. This is interesting and I would like to know more about it. If the tribal and urban practices mingled throughout history, this does not give us "no reason to doubt" the historical accuracy of a Biblical account in which patriarchal religion and politics totally gives way to some national type of religion, nor does it help secure the dating of patriarchal narratives, or the dating of the conversion to Yahwism of Canaanite mythic themes. Cross's assertion of an orally transmitted prose epic seems unlikely, and no evidence is presented here to change my mind. My reservations do not decrease the value of this book, however. In fact, they increase it, because of the issues raised. Overall, a must read.

The author is a very learned man and not a bad writer, but unless you are an expert in the field, this book can be hard to follow. I am a fairly knowledgeable amateur in the field of old testament history, but often found this book very tough going. I don't think I got everything out of this book that a scholar would. There are better books available for the layman than this book. Old testament history is a fascinating subject, so find the other books. I will lead you to them, but you can start with Israel Finkelstein and William Dever and that should lead you to the rest very easily.

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