Naomi Steinberg


Naomi Steinberg’s book, *The World of the Child in the Hebrew Bible,* challenges what she describes as ethnocentric scholarly treatments of the terms “child” and “childhood” in the Hebrew Bible, which presume a universal notion of childhood as a chronological phase where children are deemed innocent and pure (xiv-xv). She attempts to reconstruct the world of childhood in biblical Israel to demonstrate that instead of a universal experience of childhood as an idyllic phase, the terms “child” and “childhood” should be viewed as social constructions that change over time and culture. She surveys the semantic range of the terminology for children and childhood in Hebrew and analyzes specific biblical texts to argue that childhood in the Hebrew Bible is a socially constructed category that was both chronological and correlated with a child’s increasing ability to contribute to the subsistence and survival of the family.

Steinberg’s methodological approach is interdisciplinary. She combines theories of children and childhood and historical and literary-critical methods with the contemporary document, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) for the study of children in biblical Israel. The book is divided into three parts: “Background and Theory” (Chapters 1-3); “Regarding Childhood in the Hebrew Bible” (Chapters 4-8); and “From the Hebrew Bible to Today: Status and Change” (Chapter 9).

Chapter 1 is an historic overview of the development of the theory of childhood as a social and historical construct beginning with the pioneering work of French historian Philippe Ariès. Steinberg shows that although scholars have since rejected his argument that Western Europe was the first to view childhood as a distinct phase, many embraced his view that childhood should be studied within culture-bound contexts.

In Chapter 2 Steinberg engages the question “What is a child?” by first establishing the range of the term, which has been understood on one hand as a chronological category ranging from infancy to age twenty and on the other hand as a social category determined by one’s ability to contribute economically to the family. She understands the term “child” to mean a “biologically immature being” and “childhood” as a “culturally determined construction of the meaning assigned to the various developmental stages through which the child passes” (18).

Steinberg’s examination in Chapter 3 of the Hebrew nouns for children demonstrates the difficulties of ascribing a fixed beginning and end for a phase of life called childhood based on the semantic range of terms. For example, the
terms most frequently interpreted in English as “young boy” and “young girl” (na’ar and na’arâ), have been applied to both infants (Exod. 2:6) and to unmarried persons of marriageable age (Genesis 34). Likewise, in 1 Kgs 3:16-28 and 1 Kgs 12:8, 10, 14 the same Hebrew term is used for both a male infant and young men (yeled/yĕlādîm).

Steinberg focuses on the Israelite family structure in Chapter 4 to show the importance of the child to the basic family unit (bêt āb) as the locus of production and reproduction that was central to the family’s survival. According to Steinberg, children were not wanted for their own sake, but rather their function within the family was to “produce an heir for economic purposes of increasing the workforce for the next generation” (56).

In Chapter 5 Steinberg analyzes social data on the human life cycle to show that there was a distinct phase in the Israelite life cycle that separated “childhood” from “adulthood.” Based on her readings of Lev. 27:1-8, Jer. 6:11 and Jer. 51:22 she determined that there were socially constructed points of transition in the Israelite life cycle. For males, circumcision and weaning, for example, characterized childhood, and marriage and fathering a child indicated adulthood; for girls, menstruation and marriage signaled the progression from adolescence to adulthood with childbearing signaling full adulthood (70-71).

Steinberg considered the different experiences of young people in Chapter 6 on the basis of whether they lived in a monogamous or polygamous household in biblical Israel. Her analysis of Genesis 21 found that the childhoods of Ishmael and Isaac were markedly different because of the social locations of their respective mother within a polygamous household. For example, the semantic range of the terms for child indicating age, biological relationship, and kinship (na’ar, yeled and bēn, respectively), when applied to Ishmael – Abraham’s son of a slave woman – had a deleterious effect on his kinship status (89-90).

Steinberg returns again in Chapter 7 to the “etic” view of what is best for the child as understood by the UNCRC to argue that the interests of the parents took precedence over the interests of the child in the Hebrew Bible, such as the child abandonment of Samuel by his mother in 1 Samuel: “Samuel is property belonging to someone else and can be bartered away by his mother to Yahweh in exchange for the gift of fertility” (102).

In Chapter 8 Steinberg analyzes Exod. 21:22-25, where she concludes that personhood was not conferred on a fetus in the social constructions of the unborn in ancient Israel. Steinberg makes her closing arguments for her thesis in Chapter 9 and raises issues for further investigation on the ramifications for the social construction of childhood in the Hebrew Bible for children with disabilities.