

BOOK REVIEW

Ezra and the Law in History and Tradition by Lisbeth S. Fried. Columbia, South Carolina: The University of South Carolina Press, 2014, 358 pp. Reviewed by Simcha Rosenberg.

This is another book in the series, *Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament*, some volumes of which have been reviewed here previously. Each book in the series has a different author and focuses on a different biblical character. As such, the present volume does not specifically comment on the Book of Ezra as a whole, since Ezra appears only in chapters 7-10 of the Book of Ezra and in Nehemiah chapter 8 (and briefly in chapter 12). Rather, this is a study of how Ezra is represented in the Bible and particularly in later literature, including the Apocrypha and Christian, Muslim, and Samaritan literature. Each chapter deals with a different perspective on Ezra.

Readers of the *Jewish Bible Quarterly* are probably familiar with the way Ezra is characterized in rabbinic literature, as someone as worthy as Moses (TB *Sanhedrin* 21b), who reestablished the Torah for the Israelites after it was forgotten (TB *Sukkah* 20a) and who laid down many rules for the Jewish people which are still in force today, such as the Torah reading for Shabbat afternoon, Mondays and Thursdays (TB *Bava Kamma* 82a). However, in the non-canonical books of the Apocrypha, there are many other stories involving Ezra, with additional roles for him to play. We find him asking why God created evil, experiencing visions and conversations with angels, and talking about the Messianic future and the afterlife. A very interesting tradition, found in the book known as Fourth Ezra, tells how the Torah was in fact burned and lost when the First Temple was destroyed; Ezra then prayed to God, who caused him to prophetically dictate the entire Tanakh (pp. 74-75). This was later the basis for claims by Christians, Muslims, and Samaritans that Ezra's version of the Bible is incomplete, having omitted references to Jesus, Mohammed or Mount Gerizim, respectively (chap. 8).

There is a nice analysis of the biblical text itself where Ezra appears, including literary comparisons between the Ezra narrative and the Mount Sinai revelation (chap. 3). Being an academic work, this volume adopts a critical

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approach to the biblical text, and an investigation into the historical Ezra is undertaken in chapter 2.

It is particularly interesting to read the author's overview of Ezra in modern scholarship (chapter 9), which includes a thorough dismantling of Frei's theory of Persian imperial authorization of local norms. This approach, once very popular and taken almost for granted in academic biblical scholarship, assumed that it was in the Persian government's interests to officially ratify the local laws of the nations under its rule, and it was only at this time that the Torah became "a legally binding law code for Jews" (p. 164). Previously, scholars contended, the Torah had no real official status for the Jews. To my mind, the Persian motives for doing so were murky and unconvincing, having to do with making it easier for the Persians to administrate and govern their empire. The author completely demolishes this theory, dismantling Frei's hypothesis proof by proof.

While by no means accepting Mosaic authorship of the Torah, Fried shows that the Documentary Hypothesis approach and its use of Ezra are thoroughly erroneous and, in many ways, the exact opposite of the current state of academic biblical scholarship.

This is a very interesting work which touches on many topics, the authority of the Torah, Jewish life in the Persian Empire, the composition and authorship of the Bible and, most significantly, the changing way Ezra himself has been perceived throughout the centuries.