

Joseph Blenkinsopp. *Judaism, the First Phase: The Place of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Origins of Judaism*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2009. xiv + 262 pp. \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8028-6450-5.

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Jewish Roots

In presenting the missions of Ezra and Nehemiah as “the first phase” of Judaism, Joseph Blenkinsopp joins scholars of late antiquity interested in an early dating of the rise of Jewish religion and biblicists invested in a late date. But Blenkinsopp enters the dating game almost in spite of himself as if to illustrate how difficult it is for biblical scholars to abandon the search for the precise dates of biblical texts and instead to contend with the ideologies of the Hebrew Bible. This is not so much a criticism of Blenkinsopp in particular, but rather of the state of biblical studies in general. How much do we really gain by pronouncing certain sections of text historical and others invented, and then later reversing these labels? Because Blenkinsopp is an eminent scholar and a leading representative of biblical studies, such questions can be raised when addressing his impressive and erudite book.

The introduction speaks of Ezra and Nehemiah “less as objects of biographical interest and more as emblematic of ideological positions and agendas” (p. 9). It provides a compelling picture of the regional transformation of the Mediterranean and Levant during the first two centuries of Persian rule (539-332 BC). As the Judaism of Ezra and Nehemiah emerges in a territorially restricted temple state, Athenian culture reaches its apex. Athens and Jerusalem both develop pointedly nationalist identities as they navigate a world defined by empire. They differ in access to resources (Athens, of course, having more) and diverge as tax-exempt priests come to rule Jerusalem and its environs and Athens stages ritual centrally in the *polis*.

In Achaemenid Jerusalem, the priests who had contended with monarchs, elders, and prophets before the exile win the struggle for political dominance.

Priest-bashing has long been a favored enterprise of zealous exponents ranging from the Gospel writers and the Rabbis to Protestant reformers and Marxist critics. Blenkinsopp does not revel in this activity—as we will see, he much prefers Ezra’s ritual agenda to Nehemiah’s nationalist one—but does charge Ezra’s priestly party with an elitism so thorough that it discounts anyone not of the group as it expropriates the property of those who remained in the land during the Babylonian exile. That this elitism has a professed hereditary basis is the very thing that has long stirred the ire of those outside the group. While hereditary claims have stoked hatred of Judeans/Jews, they have also inspired deep desires to number among the chosen people. Such desires have not led to mass conversion to Judaism, but to competition over the term “Israel.” As Ezra and his companions declare themselves the People of Israel and others pretenders, a host of sectarian movements—including those behind the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Gospels, Pauline writings, and radical medieval movements—find precedent for denouncing the other claimants of Israel in their midst.

Ezra’s religion has antecedents in Deuteronomy and Ezekiel 40-48—for Blenkinsopp, P rests outside this agenda—and may represent exemplary priestly ideals written down in the form of the book of Ezra during the

Seleucid period, when “the high priesthood was awarded to the highest bidder” (p. 75). If this is the case, then claims of purity work as ciphers for corruption. The priests in question come from Babylonia, where their vision of a restored temple with dimensions stipulated in Ezekiel’s revelation emulates the Tabernacle constructed according to a divine blueprint. What is first known through language becomes tangible in space and time. The temple proxy state achieved by imperial fiat (or, perhaps, without it) rather than conquest based its law on the following tenets: “the exclusion of foreigners,” “distinction between altar priests (Zadokites) and temple priests (Levites),” a diminished secular ruler, and “the apportioning of land” (p. 10). Its exclusivist terms, born in Babylonia among an exiled people, serve as the foundation for the restoration of Israel and also for its sectarian unfurling in the later days of the Second Temple.

Where Ezra dreams up “a self-segregating, puritanical, theocratic state” (p. 10), Nehemiah politicizes the matter and pursues “a ritually segregated, religiously homogenous and autonomous polity” (p. 143). Hasmonean kings and priests serve as his heirs and perhaps as his inventors and promoters. To Blenkinsopp, territorialization and politicization constitute reasons to disqualify a religion as such. If one were to apply this transhistorically, then only certain theories of Christianity quite fit the religious bill. In terms of the period in question, why is local nationalism condemned while empires are spared the same critique? Ethnic boundary drawing, Blenkinsopp adeptly shows, results in the perception of encroaching neighbors who threaten genetic purity. Indeed, the expressed disdain in Nehemiah for the Sanballats of Samaria and the Tobiads of Transjordan reaches a kind of paranoid fever pitch. But does it then follow that the later Hasmonean absorption of neighbors into the Judean nation-state is a perversion of “Judaism, (which) no longer stands for an essentially religious form of life but a facet of a political-ethnic entity, a way of characterizing an aggressive and expansive state claiming religious legitimacy” (p. 188)? If the priestly Ezra party creates something that can be termed religion by using ritual practice to define ethnic identity, then why does the inclusion (and maybe, as Blenkinsopp maintains, coercion) of others mark a violation of the religion? Most likely, the Hasmoneans implemented the policy in the name of managing the potential enemies in their midst, but naming everyone within a given set of borders “Judeans” or “Jews” seems a better strategy than battling, exiling, or demonizing them.

The problematic for Blenkinsopp arises from a Jewish

insistence on homeland and peoplehood different “from other religions during the Hellenistic period” (p. 188). The Nehemiah party and its sovereign heirs do not invent attachment to the land and investment in nationhood—Blenkinsopp himself calls this the “reterritorializing of Judaism” (p. 10)—and the Maccabean mythos relies essentially on resistance to Hellenistic norms. Judaism, in this “first” as well as later phases, is admittedly premised on difference. Blenkinsopp can accept Ezra’s ritual version of difference, but cannot suffer Nehemiah’s political version. With the passing note that the outcomes of these beginnings “have lasted down to the present,” Blenkinsopp seems to wish that Judaism had abandoned its differences (p. 188).

Along with analysis of the ideological force of Ezra-Nehemiah, Blenkinsopp includes several arguments of a more local nature. Some arguments, like which parts of Ezra are most likely historical and whether the character of the scribe or of the official is more verifiable, contradict the very agenda of ideological analysis. Other arguments, like the reading of the sudden deaths of Nadab and Abihu and their replacement by Eleazar and Ithamar (Lev. 10:1-7) as indicating reconciliation between “Judaeo-Babylonian Zadokites and Bethel Aaronites,” are more suggestive (p. 150).

The book’s subtitle speaks of “the place of Ezra and Nehemiah in the origins of Judaism”; stronger on the place of Ezra and Nehemiah than the origins of Judaism, the book falters when seeking analytic rubrics for early Judaism. Is it a religion and, if so, according to what terms? Is it ancient nationalism invested in divine favor and holy blood? Is it a parochial movement of colonized people seeking independence or the revivalist dream of a disenfranchised tribe? Is it a philosophy formulated as a legal code? It is certainly, as Blenkinsopp emphasizes, not as unitary as the books of Ezra and Nehemiah would have it.

It is also safe to say that early Judaism is not a church, yet this is the term employed by Blenkinsopp as he distinguishes mainstream Second Temple Judaism from its sectarian splinter groups. Ernst Troeltsch’s 1912 categories of church, “meaning Western Christianity, the Roman Catholic Church as it existed in the Middle Ages,” and sect, “a voluntary association, entry into and continuing membership in which depend on satisfying certain criteria and demonstrating possession of certain qualification,” establish the rubric for discussing the Damascus Document, Enoch, and Jubilees, all of which Blenkinsopp sees as sharing a separatist position consistent

with that of the Judean community in Babylonian exile (p. 189). This community and the groups that it may have spawned never had an institution resembling a church to support or contest. They seem to have had a prototype followed by a full-fledged state that soon

enough fell to the empire of the moment. Are we best served by condemning this state for its failures to be church-like or by acknowledging that when it comes to Judaisms/Judeanisms, no center holds for very long?

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