

REVIEWS

THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

DIANA V. EDELMAN and EHUD BEN ZVI (eds):

Leadership, Social Memory and Judean Discourse in the Fifth–Second Centuries BCE.

(Worlds of the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean.) ix, 284 pp.

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To understand this book, one needs to be familiar with the various basic concepts of how the biblical text was created. Naturally, each scholar has a somewhat different idea about this process, but the rich and varied opinions can still be classified into four main groups:

1. Authentic memories, in songs, oral traditions or written accounts, had accumulated from the tenth century onward. These constituted the basis for later phases of redaction and manipulation that nevertheless are based on original material.
2. The biblical text was written mainly in the late seventh century BCE and reflects memories and agendas of this period.
3. The biblical text was written mainly in the sixth century BCE in Babylon and reflects memories and agendas of this period.
4. The biblical text was written mainly in the late Persian–Early Hellenistic period and reflects memories and agendas of this period.

As is clearly indicated in the title of the book, the reader should expect to find here articles advocating the fourth category. The author of this review, in contrast, can be classified under the first category.

The two editors are very prolific writers and over the years have published together a large number of books and articles on dating the biblical tradition to the Persian–Hellenistic era. There is little originality in these publications, since they basically recycle the same idea. The new book is composed of 15 chapters written by 14 authors, many of whom do not espouse the doctrines of the editors. Many of the chapters focus on a well-defined topic, using systematic terminology and dealing with texts like Ezekiel, Job, Esther, Nehemiah and Judith, which are self-defined and universally recognized as having been composed in the post-First Temple era. The chapters written by the two editors, however, are problematic, as they present speculative hypotheses without any methodological guidelines. The only limits here are those of their imagination. In this brief review I cannot relate to each of the articles, and so will concentrate on the two latter contributions.

Chapter 1 is the introduction, written by Edelman alone and expressing her concept of the book: “The theme of leadership played an important role in ancient Israel and its discourse. It was explored time and again through memories of proper, improper and in-between leaders and through memories of particular institutions like monarchy, priesthood and prophethood. The ways in which this theme was shaped, reflected and explored through social memory and how, in turn, those

memories played a socializing role within the community, is the focus of this collection of essays”.

While the term “Judean” is used in the title of the book, here the term used is “ancient Israel”. Later on the reader is exposed to additional expressions: Yehudite; early Jewish; Yehud; the religious community called Israel; or Judah. This is an unacceptable mixture of terms indicating either poor editing or unclear understanding of the terms employed by the writer herself.

Chapter 2 was written by the second editor, Ben Zvi, and deals with memories and political thought in “late Persian/Early Hellenistic Yehud/Judah”. This is indeed an interesting topic and one wonders what sources could be used for the investigation of the subject. The author, however, does not use any of the documents, such as Ezra, Nehemiah, Daniel, Chronicles, Ben Sira, Tobit, Enoch or other books in the apocryphal assemblage, that are clearly dated to the Persian–Hellenistic era. Instead, for example, on p. 17 alone he uses the books of Samuel, Deuteronomy, Joshua, 2 Kings and Judges, taking for granted that the entire biblical text is homogenous and was written in this era. This hypothesis, a one-dimensional understanding of the entire biblical tradition, is not even mentioned or discussed; it is simply imposed on the reader. The blatant lack of methodological tools in this chapter is an example of how the biblical tradition can be manipulated to achieve any desired conclusion. No wonder that on p. 19 he sympathizes with Judges 17: 6: “In those days there was no king, people would do what was good in their own eyes”.

A point raised by Edelman on p. 232 encapsulates the drawback of the editors’ approach: “Figures and narratives that form part of a group’s social memory remain valued over time only if they continue to help maintain the group’s understanding of their present by connecting to the past and the future in a perceived continuum”. The canonization of the biblical text for over 2,200 years, even according to Edelman’s dating, clearly contradicts this basic assumption. How could the fossilized biblical tradition connect the past with the future in the Roman, Byzantine, Muslim or Crusader eras? Each period had to create its own exegesis to the traditions accepted as Scripture. Thus, in order to understand the Judean discourse in the fifth to second centuries BCE one must search the apocryphal assemblage, not the canonical and fossilized biblical tradition. Even in Mesopotamia, ancient traditions were copied without major changes for thousands of years (T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

The biblical text is a highly complex agglomeration of memories. As an archaeologist I see it as a tell site that consists of many levels that have accumulated one on top of the other. In addition to this, tell sites have pits in which younger material is deposited into older levels, and there are isolated older pot sherds that are redeposited in younger levels. Just as an archaeologist has to deal with site formation processes, a biblical scholar has to deal with text formation processes. Placing the entire biblical tradition in the Persian–Hellenistic era is like claiming that the entire tell of Megiddo, with its twenty different layers, was created in Stratum I, dated to the Persian period.

What we see here is the situation commonly called “the present in the past”. In the present Edelman and Ben Zvi simply create an imaginary past for biblical Judah, assuming that the biblical writers did the same. In this way not only do they misunderstand the biblical text, but they fail to provide any significant contribution to its better understanding.

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