

REVIEW

Approaching Yehud: New Approaches to the Study of the Persian Period, ed. by Jon L. Berquist (Society of Biblical Literature, Semeia Studies), Atlanta 2007, 249 pp.; ISBN 9781589831452

The Persian period in the history of Palestine was until recently among the most neglected by historians and Biblical scholars alike. Most research focused on uncovering the secrets of the Israeli monarchy, prophetism, and the birth of rabbinical Judaism and Christianity, largely ignoring texts from the Persian period and its impact on the development of Biblical literature. Only the past two decades have brought a discernibly growing interest in that period, producing many significant works.

The collection of essays titled *Approaching Yehud* edited by Jon Berquist contains studies on the Persian era which combine both traditional and new methods of Biblical research. The shared focus of the contributions and their varied approaches make the volume a very important publication. For the most part, the texts are thematically grouped, with an issue introduced in one article elaborated on in the next using different research methods. It is precisely the range and combinations of such methods – linguistic, literary, archaeological, sociological – that make the book what it is.

The introduction and the last article in the volume, “Psalms, Postcolonialism, and the Construction of the Self” (pp. 195–202), by Jon L. Berquist enclose the book between them. The introduction presents the development of research up to now and the reasons why a new insight into the Persian period is needed, and from a different perspective than has been adopted so far. In his contribution, J.L. Berquist asks questions about the historical context and the role of psalms at the time of the Second Temple. He combines his observations with a discussion on mutual interactions between the Persian Empire and the Jewish community it subjugated. He points out issues to be addressed by researchers into the period’s writings.

In “Pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the Persian Period” (pp. 7–24), Melody D. Knowles analyzes the term “pilgrimage.” She tries to trace its meaning and links between Jewish tradition and Greek culture. Studying prophetic and historical texts and psalms, she shows three different ways of looking at pilgrimage. An analysis of Biblical books for the practice of pilgrimage in conjunction with the available archaeological evidence on settlement in Persian-period Jerusalem enables her to put forward two hypotheses. One is that the purpose of the period’s Biblical texts was to encourage the faithful to travel to the “city of Yahweh.” The other proposes that the writings reflected the situation in a religious community whose members lived mostly outside the city and would typically visit the Temple for religious observances.

Richard Butch (“Intertextuality in the Persian Period,” pp. 25–35) reviews research in intertextual reading of the Bible to gain insight into the Persian period. He notes the shortcomings in this respect which are also reflected in other aspects of Biblical

studies. He believes that this is due to the insufficient openness of researchers into the Persian period, who did not trust this method, unlike those studying other parts of the Biblical canon. Butch presents important achievements in this regard, emphasizing the role of two scholars, Donald C. Polaski and Christine Mitchell, whose studies he considers as a particularly successful combination of methodologies from many other disciplines.

Donald C. Polaski and Christine Mitchell are also among the contributors. Both authors share an interest in the social and literary usage of historiographic texts. In his essay "What Mean These Stones? Inscriptions, Textuality and Power in Persia and Yehud" (pp. 37–48), Polaski studies the Behistun text and three fragments of the Book of Joshua (Josh 8; 22; 24). What he focuses on is not the meaning of the text alone, but rather the act of its creation. He uses this issue as a point of departure for a discussion of the canon. The problem is particularly important for the Persian period, chiefly because it is increasingly often seen as a starting point for the later development of the Biblical canon. The author, however, is not concerned with the form of the Biblical text at the time; he rather concentrates on how the period's writing became a powerful social and political instrument. Christine Mitchell ("How Lonely Sits the City': Identity and the Creation of History," pp. 71–83) wonders about the origin of the impulse which helped usher in historiographical literature. Using research methods similar to those employed by Polaski, she begins from an analysis of Lam 1:1 to go on to inquire about the development of historiography. She concludes that the genre developed in response to the Jews' desire for their own identity in the period after the Babylonian captivity.

David Janzen ("Scholars, Witches, Ideologues, and What the Text Said: Ezra 9–10 and Its Interpretation," pp. 49–69) addresses mixed marriages. He asks why the author of Ezra insists that the faithful dissolve their marriages to alien women if Deuteronomy and other Old Testament fragments do not make such rigorous demands. An analysis of the text using modern sociological methods leads him to conclude that such actions stemmed from social disintegration and accusations of witchcraft, and were intended to protect the purity of the nation and prevent Yahweh's anger.

B.A. Strawn, ("A World under Control': Isaiah 60 and the Apadana Reliefs from Persepolis," pp. 85–116) revisits the dating question of Trito-Isaiah at the 5th century BC. To resolve the problem, the author proposes an original methodological approach. In analyzing the Apadana reliefs from Persepolis, their subject and ideology, he observes that they are close to Isaiah 60. He concludes that the convergence between the two may suggest that they were created in the same period.

An equally unconventional approach toward his subject is used by J.P. Ruiz ("An Exile's Baggage: Toward a Postcolonial Reading of Ezekiel," pp. 117–135). While there is nothing wrong with studying exile based on the Book of Ezekiel, it is objectionable to try to understand the experience of exile in 586 BC by drawing comparisons to the situation of a present-day Cuban political refugee, Fernando Segovia, a scholar who met with a friendly welcome in his new country of settlement. The author tries to liken the experiences of 20th-century colonialism to the Persian era, a highly dubious technique to employ.

J. Kessler (“Diaspora and Homeland in the Early Achaemenid Period: Community, Geography and Demography in Zechariah 1–8,” pp. 137–166) addresses Yehud community–building and maintaining its national identity. He inquires about how members of the community viewed other Yahwists who were separated from them ideologically or geographically. His demographic study is based on research by Carter and Lipschitz and on his own sociological analyses. His sociological and demographic analysis of Zech 1–8 enables him to gain some highly interesting insights into life in Yehud.

The next two essays in the volume share a feminist approach to the treatment of women in Yehud. H.R. Marbury’s contribution (“The Strange Woman in Persian Yehud: A Reading of Proverbs 7,” pp. 167–182) concerns alien women in the Book of Proverbs. The author concentrates on questions about how public administrative bodies operated and how authorities related to social groups in Israel. He observes that Persian authorities in investing in local worship were trying to secure the loyalty of inhabitants. While studying the Book of Proverbs, he suggests that the Persian administration took an interest in ethnic control and sexuality in the Yehud community. J.L. Koosed, (“Qoheleth in Love and Trouble,” pp. 183–193) tries to explain the causes of the dislike toward women apparent in various fragments of the Book of Ecclesiastes. She wonders about the text’s lack of cohesion and its ideology. In her opinion, an analysis of the book’s text may suggest that it was left unfinished. Her article seems one of the most controversial in the entire volume.

Despite the unconventional methods used by the various contributors, some of which may meet with objections from many scholars, I found in the volume many insights which have altered my understanding of Yehud. I therefore believe that the new, radical approaches adopted by some of the contributors may, by provoking disputes, facilitate resolution of the perplexing complexities of the Persian era.

Marcin Sosik