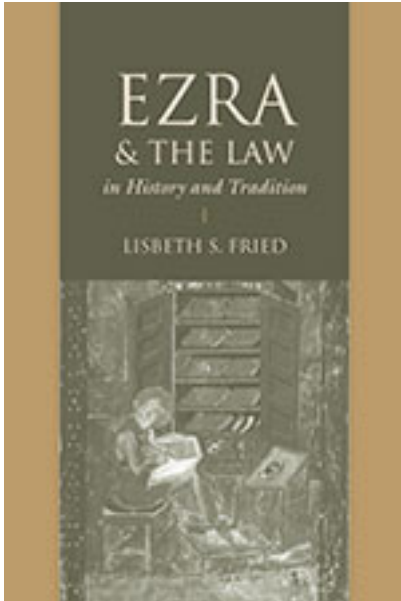


RBL 07/2015



Lisbeth S. Fried

Ezra and the Law in History and Tradition

Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament

Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2014. Pp. 258. Cloth. \$59.95. ISBN 9781611173130.

Thomas Hieke
Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz
Mainz, Germany

This book does exactly what its title promises: it pursues the figure of Ezra and his relationship to the “law” in its various occurrences in “history and tradition.” Fried writes with personal commitment, vigor, and a clear historical-critical position. The author does not side with any particular religious tradition but rather tends to present the evidence in a neutral and unbiased way. This is important to mention, since “Ezra” appears to be used by various religions (Judaism, Christianity, even Islam) as a figurehead and by modern scholarship as an anchor point for certain theories about historical developments in antiquity. This is one of the major results of Fried’s study, and she points out the details in an accessible, intelligible, and winning style, obviously aimed at a wider audience of scholars, students, and interested nonspecialists.

The outline of the book is clear and easy to follow. In the first chapter Fried presents an overview over the sources at hand and gives a short summary of what she is going to develop in the subsequent chapters. That she is following a historical approach one may deduce from the fact that a bold reconstruction of the “historical Ezra” in chapter 2 precedes the description of Ezra in the Hebrew Bible (ch. 3). The next five chapters illuminate the reception history of the *biblical* Ezra, and Fried underscores that this figure is clearly not the “historical Ezra” reconstructed in chapter 2. Fried focuses on 1 Esdras,

4 Ezra, the Christian additions to the Ezra apocalypse, other apocrypha about Ezra, and the discussion about Ezra in Christian, Samaritan, Muslim, and Jewish literature of late antiquity. The final chapter summarizes the viewpoints of modern scholarship on Ezra, and in doing so it also provides a fine overview of the history of biblical scholarship in modern times. A postscript of two pages recapitulates the whole picture and the relationship of “Ezra and the Law” in a more personal vein. There are two appendices: appendix 1 tables the chronology regarding the various rulers in Babylonia, Persia, Egypt, and Greece; appendix 2 deals with versions and translations of 4 Ezra. The notes appear as endnotes on twenty-one pages, the bibliography stretches from page 215 to 233, and there are three indices: ancient sources, modern authors, and subjects.

In chapter 2 Fried sets out to reconstruct the historical Ezra. At first sight this seems to be a hopeless task, since there is no external, nonbiblical evidence for Ezra’s existence or any other data about him. Hence, some scholars tend to attribute Ezra to the realm of fiction. There is not much to gain from the first-person singular accounts, which hardly seem to be authentic. In contrast to some scholars trying to get historical data out of the biblical text by using historical-critical methods (e.g., J. Pakkala, J. Wright), Fried uses a different historical approach to the letter of Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:12–16), the point of departure for all inquiries in this matter. She asks “whether there is anything in the letter that smacks of the historically plausible under the Achaemenids” (11). In doing so, she makes much of the term לְבַקְרָא in Ezra 7:14. Together with the Greek translation as ἐπισκέπτομαι, Fried sees here a title of a Persian official who shall act as “the King’s Ear.” The Athenian *Episkopoi* had a Persian origin, the Achaemenid “King’s Ear” or “King’s Eye”: Persian officials, everywhere in the empire, reporting directly to the king. Fried finds evidence for that phenomenon in passages in Xenophon’s works (*Oikonomikos* 4.6, 8; *Cyropaedia* 8.6.13–16) and assumes that “a man named Ezra was sent to Judah by a King Artaxerxes to *lebaqger*, that is, to act as the Eye or Ear of the king in Judah and Jerusalem and perhaps the whole satrapy Beyond-the-River (7:25–26)” (13–14). This is the backbone of Fried’s reconstruction of the historical Ezra, and every other detail in Ezra 7 either corresponds to this official task (the *dātā* as decisions of the Persian king in the name of his and Ezra’s god, the “God of Heaven” אֱלֹהֵי שָׁמַיָא; the judges as ethnic Persians ruling the land) or must be attributed to a biblical writer painting a fictitious picture and hence discarded from historical reconstruction. The historical Ezra as reconstructed by Fried also brings exemptions for the temple personnel from work assignments and taxes, and that contradicts the situation described by Nehemiah: the building of the city walls probably was corvée labor (contrary to Nehemiah’s biased portrayal of the situation), and the temple personnel took part in it—this would have not been the case if Ezra brought the exemption before. Thus one must conclude that Ezra came *after* Nehemiah, probably under the reign of Artaxerxes II (405–359 BCE). Fried’s reconstruction of the historical

Ezra differs vastly from the biblical account. This is not a problem per se, but one may ask whether the external evidence really suffices to disprove almost the entire biblical picture of Ezra as fictional.

In consensus with the majority of scholarly opinions about the origin of the book of Ezra-Nehemiah, Fried attributes the biblical account of Ezra to the early Hellenistic period (ch. 3, p. 28). In her description of the biblical version, Fried cannot refrain from occasionally correlating the text with her historical reconstruction in chapter 2. At times this creates the impression that the biblical text appears to be somewhat at a loss (as it certainly is from the strict viewpoint of a historian). Fried also reconstructs the chronology inherent in the world of the biblical text. In her attempt to harmonize the names and data in a coherent storyline, she concludes that the biblical writer probably assumed that every Persian king had “Artaxerxes” as a throne name, and thus the entire Persian period can be telescoped “to a nice fifty years” (33). Although this looks like an interesting picture, one may ask whether this was really the intention of the biblical writer. If the fifty-year chronology was the point of departure of the author, then why did he not express it more explicitly in his text? At least to my view, the text does not promote a certain chronology, not even by way of a hidden riddle, but rather uses names and data displayed in fictitious documents in order to suggest to its readers a pseudo-historical reliability of the account. Hence, it still remains much to discuss about the interpretation of the biblical version of Ezra, although Fried has to be commended for her illumination of the biblical Ezra. In her informative retelling of the story, she elaborates how the text promotes Ezra as a “second Moses” by bringing the Torah into the temple—in consequent analogy to the revelation of the Torah in the book of Exodus. Here lies the basis for all the hagiography (my term) about Ezra in the history of reception that Fried describes in the following chapters.

I, however, raise one question about a certain term that Fried uses frequently. She offers helpful and plausible interpretations for the phenomenon of the “mass divorces” in Ezra 9–10. Her explanations of the problems mixed marriages caused within the Persian and Hellenistic period are remarkable, and it makes sense that the authorities were interested in preserving the social order by avoiding too much assimilation. However, what I want to question is the term “*mass divorce*.” Was it really a mass phenomenon? This is not a historical question, since, as Fried convincingly points out in chapter 2, one cannot know from the data whether the historical Ezra ever instituted a (mass) divorce or not. However, is it a mass phenomenon in the world of the text? The book of Ezra-Nehemiah is fond of numbers and lists, and although these figures cannot be taken at face value regarding their historical reality, one may ask how these data relate to each other. Leaving text-critical issues in Ezra 10 aside, one gets an approximate number of 110 divorced marriages. This figure seen in itself is quite high, and it was probably a discomfiting situation, if it ever happened historically. This is by no means proven, hence one has to

read the narrative on the literary level of the biblical text itself. Here one meets other figures regarding the entire population of Yehud, and if one relates the number of divorces to the whole number of (probably all married) men, the picture changes. Counting the people who returned with Ezra from Babylon, one gets approximately 1,750 to 1,800 men. The ratio of the 110 divorced marriages to this number is about 6 percent. Taking into account that the reader has to add at least the same (or an even larger) number of inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem before Ezra and his group returned, the ratio goes down to 3 percent and even less. Hence, although Ezra and the text really make a big issue about the mixed marriages, it is not a mass phenomenon within the numbers of the text world. This bears a message in itself: even if it is only a minor percentage who “sinned” by marrying foreign women, “we” (that is Ezra and the group that shares his ideology of the holy seed, Ezra 9:2) do not tolerate this violation of God’s Torah. In my eyes, the text seeks to proffer this message of “zero tolerance” and absolute observance of God’s Law (Torah) rather than to report a real and historical incident.

Coming back to Fried’s book, the next five chapters provide a fascinating and easily accessible overview of the iridescent and glamorous figure that history and tradition made out of Ezra. In chapter 4 Fried follows the trace of the Greek Ezra, or Esdras. She compares 1 Esdras with the canonical book of Ezra-Nehemiah and concludes with the majority of scholars that 1 Esdras is a rewritten version of 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Neh 7–8. Fried also provides very plausible explanations for the agenda of the special selection by the author of 1 Esdras. In the last part of the chapter she describes how Josephus used the story of Ezra from 1 Esdras in his *Jewish Antiquities*.

A larger part of Fried’s book deals with the Ezra Apocalypse, or 4 Ezra (ch. 5). She describes the structure and content of this work from the late first century CE with the help of the well-known definition of “apocalypse” by J. J. Collins (1979). In appendix 2, Fried presents the various individual aspects proffered in the translations and versions of 4 Ezra (Armenian, Syriac, Ethiopic, Arabic). Fried’s treatment of 4 Ezra is instructive and accessible. It makes clear that 4 Ezra is the link between the biblical account and the later reception of the figure of Ezra in the Jewish, Christian, and even Islamic traditions. The ways of these traditions are not without problems, however, as Fried points out in chapter 6. The Jewish apocalypse 4 Ezra (4 Ezra 3–14) gets a Christian introduction known as 5 Ezra (or 4 Ezra 1–2) that “proclaims the Christian message of supersessionism” (89). With various quotations from the English translations of 4 and 5 Ezra one can compare the messages of both works. Between 259 and 267 CE another Christian author added 6 Ezra (or 4 Ezra 15–16), which reflects the violent persecutions of the Christians by Roman emperors and authorities and expresses the political hope for the destruction of the “evil empire.”

Under the somewhat provocative heading “Ezra Ascends to Heaven and Goes to Hell,” Fried deals in chapter 7 with various writings that “employ the Ezra figure to speculate further on the nature of God’s justice” (100). These works stem from late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. She introduces and summarizes briefly the Greek Apocalypse of Ezra, the Latin Vision of the Blessed Ezra, the Armenian Questions of Ezra, the Apocalypse of Sedrach, further apocalypses, and, finally, the *kalandologion* called The Revelation of Ezra.

Chapter 8 reports the controversies about “Ezra” in late antiquity. While 4 Ezra 14 promoted the fictitious but nevertheless famous and influential concept that Ezra dictated with divine help the twenty-four public books of the Hebrew Bible as well as seventy secret books for the wise after the destruction of the temple and the exile in the sixth century BCE, Samaritan and Islamic scholars as well as several church fathers argued that Ezra falsified the Bible when he rewrote it. Christian theologians suspected that Ezra suppressed announcements of Christ, while Muslim scholars claimed that the true Torah of Moses would surely have mentioned Muhammed. On the other hand, the rabbis in the Jewish tradition identified themselves with Ezra and regarded him as their entirely positive and shining example. These instructive insights into a very controversial history of reception are a fascinating read and demonstrate again that a common figure alone is no warranty for a fruitful dialogue between the religions. With Ezra happened the same as with Abraham: every religion claimed its own interpretation of the figure and thus made it a *tabula rasa* on which the communities and writers projected their own fears, anxieties, hopes, and self-perceptions.

The situation is somewhat similar in modern scholarship (ch. 9). From the seventeenth century up to the nineteenth century scholars asserted that Ezra brought the Torah to Jerusalem (and in fact wrote it) and thus created Judaism. Here Fried provides a sketch of the *Forschungsgeschichte* that led from the questioning of the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch up to the development of the historical-critical method. She reflects on the role of Ezra in Julius Wellhausen’s thought and in the historical reconstruction of the origin of Judaism by Eduard Meyer. Next to the brief presentation, Fried also demonstrates the fallacy of these theories. Furthermore, she criticizes a popular theory that was presented by P. Frei and adopted by scholars such as E. Blum, J. Blenkinsopp, and K. Schmid: the “imperial authorization of local law.” Her refutation of this reconstruction of history results in the bold thesis that the “Torah law” never became legally binding on Jews (169). Jewish life, even in the Persian period, never was controlled by the Torah law enforced by judges and magistrates but rather by custom and taboo: “Torah laws had no imperial status. Observance was always voluntary” (170). As a result, Fried comes to an appealing and plausible suggestion about the pragmatics behind the biblical story of Ezra: it “was created by biblical writers in the Hellenistic period. Written

under the Ptolemies or the Seleucids, the story of a Jewish scribe having a Persian mandate to enforce Judean customs was created in the face of Ptolemaic or Seleucid religious persecutions. It was likely written in an attempt to provide its readers with the proof that the very norms for which they were being persecuted had received the imprimatur and authorization of the Persian Empire and so were legitimate, valid, and vital” (170).

Fried’s book is an informative read and draws together a huge amount of historical data correlating it with literary texts, biblical and nonbiblical writings. The conclusions are presented with self-confidence; the suggestions for historical reconstructions are always thought-provoking. In many cases Fried offers stimulating and convincing proposals. However, scholars in the field will not always agree with the work’s methods and results; this cannot be attributed to the author but rather to the nature of the subject: unambiguous data of this epoch and area are scarce, and the bits and pieces gathered from archaeology, epigraphy, and literary texts such as the biblical accounts need interpretation from the very start. A consensus in scholarship on every detail is neither achievable nor necessary. We can live well with “good guesses,” and Lisbeth S. Fried presents a solid and inspiring good guess on Ezra and the law in history and tradition.