

RBL 06/2005



Tilly, Michael

Jerusalem—Nabel der Welt: Überlieferung und Funktionen von Heiligtumstraditionen im antiken Judentum

Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002. Pp. ix + 307. Paper. EUR 35.00. ISBN 3170172654.

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The phrase “navel of the world,” the title of this work, occurs at times in today’s parlance too. This figure of speech derives from an important mythical idea from the viewpoint of the history of religion that one can regard rightly as a “universal” (“religionsgeschichtliches Universale” [251]). Michael Tilly’s study approaches this phenomenon from the perspective of ancient Judaism and the Jewish conceptions of a sanctuary. Tilly succeeds in presenting an impressive overview of a long-standing tradition that stretched from biblical times up to the era of the Amoraim in late antiquity. He presents a plausible history of development of the following religious-mythical ideas: Jerusalem as the “navel of the world,” as the “center of the world,” and as the “foundation stone” from which the world came into being.

Tilly’s study presents an abundance of details as well as a comprehensive knowledge of early Jewish and rabbinic literature, both of which function to persuade thoroughly. Most of all, however, the meticulous hermeneutic basis of the methodological procedure should not go unmentioned. The analysis of the traditions, aided by the ancient versions and other witnesses from the literature of late antiquity, does not aim at discovering the intention of the original author of the biblical text. As Tilly rightly stresses repeatedly, one needs to focus on the individuality of every single biblical and postbiblical text.

Every text has a right of its own and is a testament to a creative reading and rereading of the tradition that comes before. All texts are products of authors who first read many earlier texts; this process of “productive reading” is a creative achievement that readers today need to acknowledge. Moreover, these processes of productive reading and rewriting the tradition happen independently from the intention of the original author (see, e.g., 9–13). Thus ancient versions like Septuagint and Peshitta are by no means only adequate reproductions of the Hebrew *Vorlage* but rather are always the work of scribes very well acquainted with Scripture. Hence, translations are products of scribal efforts to open the text for a valid understanding in their time and to make the text accessible for a changing religious conscience.

After the hermeneutic introduction, Tilly presents a helpful survey of the history of the city of Jerusalem, the Second Temple, and the Temple Mount from the Babylonian Conquest (586 B.C.E.) up to the rise of Islam. An overview over the *status quaestionis* and former scholarship shows that it is necessary to approach the sources anew. Tilly rightly opts against a tendency to harmonize the texts, motifs, and terms, because to speak of a single, coherent, and systematic worldview at the time of the “Old Testament” or “ancient Judaism” is not a historical construction. The sources need to be read in their respective literary and historical contexts, acknowledging their religious and cultural plurality and diversity (84).

The bulk of the book stands under the heading “Text und Auslegung” (Text and Interpretation). Tilly at first presents the biblical texts containing the phrase “navel of the land” (or “of the world”; Heb. **טבור הארץ**: Judg 9:37 and Ezek 38:12). He sketches the development of the interpretation of these passages with the help of the ancient versions, the Targums, and the commentaries. In the context of Judg 9:37, Tilly also discusses the location of the **טבור הארץ** near Shechem, the possibility of an identification of the “navel” with Mount Gerizim, the issue of the Samaritan sanctuary on Mount Gerizim. The most important function of Ezek 38:12 is to comfort the postexilic temple community (as the rescued remnant of God’s people) and to encourage the self-confidence of the body responsible for the tradition and the cult of the Second Temple. The ancient versions of Ezek 38:12 confirm that its function is to provide identity. In the Targum, however, the idea is transferred to the future, and the “navel” is interpreted as the “strength” of the whole land as basis for the hope that God will protect the land (probably against the Roman occupation). It seems, then, that the Targum already reflects the destruction of the Second Temple.

There are also several other occurrences in the Bible and in the extracanonical literature that stress the idea of Jerusalem and the temple as “center.” Tilly analyzes, among others, Ezek 48:8, 10, 21; Isa 2:2–3; *1 En.* 26:1–2; *Jub.* 8:19; *Aristob.* 83–84; Josephus, *J.W.*

3.52; Song 7:3; and *b. San.* 37a and other rabbinic passages. Some of these passages acquired this meaning only during the process of their handing down which was always interlocked with a process of interpretation. The dominant method of interpretation was a typological reading (e.g., Song 7:3). The results of the analysis of the sources are displayed according to three historical phases: the time after the erection of the Second Temple, the Hellenistic period until the destruction of the Second Temple, and the event of 70 C.E. and the rabbinic age.

In his summary, Tilly underscores the importance of regarding the individual sources as witnesses of their own right, as traces of a heterogeneous process of tradition. In the history of tradition and reception, one may not subordinate the “later” texts under a single ostensibly “original” meaning of the “early” (biblical) text (see 249–50). While analysis of the testaments to the reception of a biblical text or motif is not a necessary step toward the understanding of the original text, those witnesses shed light on the continuous process of retrospective, current, and prospective interpretation of the biblical text. The retrospective interpretation structures experiences; the current construal forms identity; and the prospective view provides orientation for acting in the future.

Appropriate and helpful summaries at important junctures of the study are a remarkable feature of the book. A comprehensive bibliography and two detailed indexes (biblical and extrabiblical texts; topics) make the book a helpful tool. Tilly’s book about the concept of Jerusalem as “navel of the world” presents substantial insights for several issues. On the one hand, the construction of history around a mythical central location creates and warrants religious and social identity, which is always necessary. On the other hand, the identity of the group gathering around this concrete or spiritual center needs to be protected by demarcation and exclusion or even expulsion—and this causes severe problems. These conflicts are relevant, important, and influential still today. The laying claim to the temple mountain in Jerusalem by Jews and Muslims, connected with the particular religious traditions, the respective topographical myths, and the territorial demands is probably an insurmountable potential of conflict and struggle.