

Review of Philip R. Davies, *On the Origins of Judaism*. BibleWorld. London: Equinox Press, 2011.

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The book is a collection of nine previously published and variously rewritten essays with a short introduction. Davies is concerned with what can be said historically about early Judaism, and equally with the degrees of confidence that can be ascribed to any such assertions and knowledge. Throughout the essays he consistently notes that our sources, both biblical and beyond, are strictly limited in the amount and type of information that they offer and that often in the time period concerned, the sixth to second centuries BCE, we are faced with historical “black holes” (for Davies any dates for or within the period are fluid and dates for any texts or events are thus open for debate). Davies makes ample and consistent use of words and phrases such as (im)plausible, (im)probable, (un)likely and (not) very likely. He is well aware of the large number of interpretations and theories surrounding any given text, group (e.g. the Qumran community), or historical issue, and provides a fine introduction to the major debates surrounding this period.

Despite the consistent reiteration of the limits, ambiguity, and uncertainty of studies such as his, Davies is insistent on two points. First, he is talking about *Judaisms*. Although they eventually coalesce into rabbinic Judaism in the fourth to fifth centuries CE, there is no evidence for one single Judaism in this early period. He also excludes thinking of a mainstream Judaism surrounded by various sectarian groups. He discusses various attempts to define what these Judaisms have in common in order to justify using the term itself. These attempts focus on texts, especially Torah, as a guide to behaviour, on cultic and religious behaviour, or on the common culture of Judah. He leans toward the latter expressed as being “Israel” but with no one definition or basis for definition.

Let me jump to the close of his book to develop this point. His final two chapters deal with eating and drinking, at Qumran (chapter 9) and then in the Roman Empire (chapter 10). The chapters are informed by Mary Douglas’s theory that social structure, particularly the margins where people enter or exit the society, is mirrored in the rules regulating bodily ingestion (eating and drinking) and exit (defecation and emissions). Davies is concerned with the Qumran texts that describe in detail two sects, the Damascus community and the Yahad community. The latter is a stricter group within and over against the former. The two are fine examples of discrete Judaisms that define themselves over against the larger society of Judah.

Chapter 10 treats Diaspora Judaism(s) in terms of “the complexities of daily Jewish life, especially outside Judah” (p. 141), which are often some distance from the previous discussion of the Judaisms evidenced in texts. There is little reason to think that there was any set of dietary rules incumbent on all Jews throughout the Roman Empire since there was great variety in what foods could or could not be eaten, when, where or with whom. Individual Jewish groups, especially families and religious communities, could adapt the possibilities to their circumstances to express their group identity. The discussion multiplies the openness and possibilities of the book so much so that Davies asserts: “this final chapter is deliberately an antidote to all previous discussion of ‘early Judaism’” (p. 141).

The second point guiding the essays also goes against much other study. Scripture, “a body of texts that is given the status of a national symbol” (p. 19), does not predate this period (sixth to second centuries BCE) and is not some pre-existent source from which Judaism(s) develop(s). There is no viable distinction between “biblical” and “post biblical” periods. The writing, rewriting, editing, and eventual canonizing of the biblical and extra biblical texts, such as 1 Enoch (the book was, in some form, arguably part of a Qumran canon), are an integral part of the historical process of developing Judaisms and of their negotiations, peaceful and hostile. Judaisms and scripture

“evolved interactively” (p. 35). Davies has in mind to a large extent the Torah, not just obviously late works such as Ben Sira and Daniel (Daniel later plays a significant role in his final chapter). In his discussions of biblical “law,” Deuteronomy, Second Isaiah, Jewish apocalyptic, and Genesis and Enoch, he offers ample reasons for this notion of interactive evolution.

In Torah, the Mosaic constitution of Israel, Davies locates three separate “Israels.” Deuteronomy describes an Israel based on a legal contract or covenant with its deity through which its identity and its future existence are dependent on their obedience to the terms or laws of this covenant. The laws are enshrined in the central chapters of Deuteronomy. Numbers, however, depicts a military Israel: the book opens directly with a census of those “able to go to war (1:3)” (p. 40). Numbers describes the advance of the camp, the army, through the wilderness to the land that is then, in chapter 34, divided into set tribal allotments. The martial structure of the camp anticipates that of the future conquered land. Third is the image in Leviticus of a tightly structured camp based not on military rules but on the religious contours of purity and pollution (Levitical rules on eating and drinking were a starting point for Davies’ previous two chapters). Sacrifice and priesthood are central to the concept that seeks to align Israel’s holiness with that of its God. Davies briefly relates each “Israel” to different Judaisms. For example, the Levitical image of a holy people was influential for a society in which Temple and priesthood were dominant.

At various points Davies effectively challenges the view that Ezra (and Nehemiah) brought a finished “law book” from Babylon that they then imposed on the fledgling Judean community. This is a central assertion of the theory that there was one, or one mainline, Judaism in this early period. In his analysis of Deuteronomy and its relation to the origins of Judaism he effectively questions in turn the scholarly construct of Deuteronomy, a book mostly composed at the time of Josiah and his reform. He argues for a strong possibility that the 2 Kings 22 story is “a programmatic fiction,” “a legitimating legend” (p. 75). Although he doesn’t disprove this scholarly construct, he certainly does undermine its historical certitude. His argument is based, in large part, on his claims that the contents of Deuteronomy fit best in a context where there is no Judean (or Israelite) king.

His treatment of Jewish apocalyptic starts with his striking assertion that he believes “the notion of ‘apocalyptic’ ... is nonsensical” (p. 101), if understood from the viewpoint of its usual connection with apocalyptic eschatology, and with apocalypticism as a religio-social movement. For Davies apocalyptic—and he would drop the term if possible (p. 119)—is a type of literature available for use by any interested group and not just so-called apocalypticists. The literature has ties to prophetic literature and also to mantic, omen literature. They all, in various ways, offer esoteric knowledge of the ways of God and of creation, often claiming to forecast the future. The literature can tell us much about the developing Judaism(s) but does not support the reconstruction of sectarian splits and conflicts.

In an interesting discussion of the relation of 1 Enoch and Gen 1-11, Davies focuses first on the difficult story in Gen 6:1-4 that does not fit its context. He stresses its lack of connection with the following flood story: the sin of “the sons of Elohim” is in no sense a motive for the flood. In short Davies argues that 1 En. 6-11 contains the fuller story of the angelic descent that corrupts both the earth and humanity and leads to the flood and the destruction of earth and humanity. The Genesis author(s) are aware of the tale but choose to locate the reason for the flood only in human, and not angelic, sin and traces of the Enochic tale remain in Genesis as hints of the rejection of the tale. Although he feels the tale precedes both Enoch and Genesis, the comparison is one more piece of evidence for his notion of the mutual evolution of scripture and Judaisms.

The essays are well-written and will be appreciated most by those conversant with the interpretive issues and debates surrounding the period, sixth to second centuries BCE, and surrounding all the biblical and extra biblical literature that he introduces and discusses. His book is valuable for this introduction to all the problems inherent in the question of the origins of Judaism,

for his insistence on the existence of Judaisms and on the mutual development of them and scripture, and for his consistent stress on the conjectural nature of any historical conclusions or theories based on this literature. Indeed, I came away from his book with a heightened appreciation of just how conjectural any such historical reconstruction. This appreciation is perhaps much greater than even Davies would allow. To adapt Davies, the essays are for me an antidote to all previous attempts to use biblical texts to write a history of a society or a history of the formation of the texts themselves.



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