Eva Mroczek


Eva Mroczek’s first book is about imagination. First and foremost, as the title indicates, she aims to illuminate the ways in which ancient Jews imagined their own literary heritage and their places within it. But even more importantly, the book is about our own scholarly imagination: about how the ways we imagine the ancient Jewish literary landscape have been conditioned—and often limited—by our own positions in the world and by the trajectories of thought and practice that have historically accompanied the study of early Judaism.

The alternative “mental architecture” that Mroczek seeks to reconstruct is one in which the books later canonized in the Hebrew Bible possessed no particular primacy, and texts were not thought of as stable, finite, “complete” works of a single author. Instead, the corpus of sacred writing was seen as vast, ancient, and fundamentally open-ended: the imagined library becomes “partially instantiated in concrete scribal projects,” but is never seen as complete or completely accessible (188). What is true of the collection as a whole is true of its individual members as well: texts were seen as neither original (they were constituted out of earlier materials and thus represented crystallizations of existing tradition) nor complete (each particular crystallization of tradition was only a tiny part of the whole, and would be modified or supplemented by later tradents).

Mroczek fleshes out this image in five main chapters, each of which both demonstrates the problems with traditional conceptions of Second Temple literature and offers a new analysis of Second Temple texts. Chapter 1, “The Mirage of the Bible,” exposes the ways in which the Bible continues to frame scholarly approaches to Second Temple literature, not least by influencing our
interpretation of ambiguous data: Mroczek uses the example of the Qumran Psalms manuscripts to show how fragments preserving only one or a few psalms, and often differing from MT Psalms in content or sequence, have misleadingly been taken as evidence for the popularity of the “Book of Psalms” at Qumran. Instead, she suggests that we think of the various psalm collections at Qumran using metaphors drawn from the digital world: as “archives,” “assemblages,” or “projects”: texts with no distinct boundaries (41).

Chapter 2 turns to the issue of attribution, focusing on the association of psalms (and other materials) with David. Noting that modern study of pseudepigraphy has been preoccupied with issues of authority and authorship (i.e., “who really wrote” certain texts; 53), Mroczek suggests that sometimes attribution is not about authority as much as “character-driven literary creativity” (56), love for a character and desire to extend their voice and nurture them as a character. Through such attribution, writing becomes an aspect of the “exemplary reputation and biography” of figures like David and Enoch (85).

Chapter 3 continues the discussion of both textual boundaries and authorial attribution by turning to the book of Ben Sira. Though Ben Sira is traditionally regarded as distinctive insofar as its author wrote in his own name, Mroczek shows that its literary imagination differs little from other Second Temple texts. Not only does the manuscript history of Ben Sira point to ongoing revision and reframing (in both Hebrew and Greek), but the text itself describes its author’s work as gathering and passing on elements of a fluid, unending stream of tradition.

Chapter 4 shifts to the broader question of the shape of “the imagined sacred library in early Judaism.” After rehearsing the well-known evidence that the bounds of authoritative literature in early Judaism exceeded the scope of the later canon, Mroczek incisively illustrates how the history of publication of non-canonical Jewish writings, from the early 18th century down to the present, has in fact reinscribed the primacy of the canon. (In this context, the structure of the DJD volumes, with their problematic distinction between “biblical” and “parabiblical,” also deserves mention.) The end of the chapter uses the book of Jubilees to offer an alternative model of sacred writing. For Jubilees, “God has been talking to Israel—in writing—forever,” with the result that sacred writing was of central importance, yet “was not centralized in a single corpus” (155).

In Chapter 5, “Outside the Number: Counting, Canons, and the Boundaries of Revelation,” Mroczek returns to the question of the scope of the Psalter, juxtaposing it with the issue of the number of books in the Ethiopic canon. In both these cases (as well as the famous mention of 22 and 24 books by Josephus and 4 Ezra, respectively), there is the idea of a fixed number, but disagreement on