
Stone’s book comprises seven chapters. It is a true gem and a must for scholars working on Second Temple Judaism. The chapters are readable on their own, but the book also fares well as a consistent piece of work with numerous cross-references between the individual “essays” and with an over-all coherence provided not only by virtue of the empirical topic but also due to the commonality in terms of thinking. In addition, the book is provided with two useful indexes of subjects and names, and ancient sources.

Stone is known for his profound erudition and massive knowledge of Jewish literature of the period in question, but he is also a scholar commendably willing to acknowledge his lack of clarity on particular issues and the exploratory nature of some of his reflections. Although it should commonly expected in the academic world, Stone is among a few scholars prepared to admit how he has given up previously held views in favour of new standpoints he considers more plausible. All this contributes to making it a pleasure to read him. The present book does not disappoint, but testifies to a scholar wrestling with central problems in the field of late Second Temple Judaism.

In the first essay, which I consider one of the best and most interesting in the book, Stone takes up the moot question how to conduct studies on Second Temple Judaism in terms of epistemology. He advocates a form of “vertical anthropology,” which resembling “horizontal” or ordinary anthropology takes its point of departure in the remoteness and foreignness of the culture studied. The more the influence of time-honoured and habitual perceptual filters—determined by the one or the other ideological agenda (Stone has a particular alertness towards those that stem from religious, confessional biases)—can be acknowledged, and thereby diminished, the better for an approach aspiring to understand the ancient world in terms of its own cultural and social context. The stress laid on “own” may sound naïve, but Stone perceptively recognizes the element of what in contemporary epistemological discussions pertaining to the field of history has come to be called “presentism” (see, for instance, de Certeau and Clark), i.e., the fact that no approach to any world can exist independent of contemporary, interpretative schemes. Nevertheless, as Stone well argues, this acknowledgement should neither lead to defeatism nor to those versions of postmodernism which in their celebration of self-mirroring have run amuck in terms of philosophy of science. In contrast, Stone calls for sobriety constituted by the continuous heed to criteria such as parsimony, plausibility, and rationality as a bulwark against extreme versions of postmodernism. With some scholars, such a panegyric celebration of traditional scholarly values may serve an obfuscating strategy for repeating what one always did. This is not the case with Stone, who reasonably shows how the historical study
of past cultures may be conducted in a manner that takes the linguistic turn seriously. In addition to this more general discussion, Stone succinctly illuminates two central problems. The first one pertains to differences between folk and elite culture (in antiquity with a greater gap between the two than in the modern Western world, and with a numerical distribution between them remarkably more disproportionate than today), while the other relates to the contingencies and, therefore, skewedness in terms of sources transmitted from antiquity. Scholars exclusively working with texts should take to heart Stone’s exhortation to pay close heed to archaeology. Excessive textualism is another vice that skews our understanding of the ancient world. This chapter provides a well-suited point of departure for the subsequent essays on Adam, Enoch, and the State of the World (ch. 2); Apocalyptic Historiography (ch. 3); Visions and Pseudepigraphy (ch. 4); Bible and Apocrypha (ch. 5); Multiform Transmission and Authorship (ch. 6); and, finally, The Transmission of Apocrypha and Pseudepigraphy (ch. 7—with some overlaps, particularly, with ch. 5).

Chapter two discusses the impact of apocryphal works found among the Qumran texts. Stone delineates two different trajectories each with a different view on the origin of evil: Adamic and Enochic. Contrary to Boccaccini, who has inferred from Enochic texts to the existence of an Enochic Judaism as a social phenomenon, Stone settles with the level of texts and discusses the Adamic and Enochic interpretations of the origin of evil in terms of different clusters of motifs. The third chapter proceeds to focus on apocalyptic historiography. Stone makes the acute point that one result of the use of pseudepigraphy was “that past history could be subsumed schematically under the apocalyptic pattern of history, just as earlier, mutatis mutandis, it had been subsumed under the Deuteronomistic one” (87). He soberly emphasizes that since we do not know much about the social contexts in which the apocalypses were forged, it is difficult to estimate whether the literary expression of urgency is a reflection of a lived-out reality or not (86).

Chapter four elaborates a point Stone has previously made, namely that a kernel of actual visionary activity or similar religious experience must have lain behind pseudepigraphic representations of the religious experiences attributed to apocalyptic visionaries. This is an excellent point against dominant views that interpret visions and/or heavenly journeys as Traditionsgut or as a special code to be unlocked by a hermeneutical key provided by innate knowledge of the cultural and social contexts in which the texts arose. The views are not necessarily exclusive to each other, but I think it is difficult to ignore Stone’s point. Unfortunately, he does not come far in pursuing the topic; but I think that progress may be made if recent insights from cognitive theory are taken into consideration (prediction theory may be particularly advantageous in this regard).

In the fifth chapter on Bible and Apocrypha, which together with the two subsequent chapters constitute a thematic unit in the book, Stone like numerous other scholars in the field puts away the terms “Bible” and “canonicity” as suitable