Ari Mermelstein


In this book, based on a dissertation, written under the guidance of L.H. Schiffman (New York University 2011), Ari Mermelstein analyzes the relationship between time and history in Second Temple Literature. The destruction and exile of 586 B.C.E. led to a widespread sense of a rupture in time and called for strategies for re-establishing the connection between covenantal past and present. The leading question of the book is: “How did the historical experiences of Second Temple Jews affect their imagined shape of time, and how did that conception of time, in turn, allow them to construct a narrative of history that made sense of those experiences?” (p. 2). This issue is examined in four books from this period: Ben Sira, Jubilees, Fourth Ezra, and the Animal Apocalypse (1 Henoch 85–90).

In the second chapter, Mermelstein proposes that Ben Sira construes Jewish history as the unfolding of creation until the covenant with Israel. The shape of history is timeless as long as creation is not completed. This perspective on history is developed in an innovative use of biblical intertexts. It is only in the Praise of the Fathers (Sir. 44–50) that creation is completed in Jewish history, as a very detailed and careful analysis of the literary contacts between Sir. 1 and 24 and 44 and 50 tries to demonstrate. The hymn to creation in Sir. 42–43 is closely connected with the Praise of the Fathers; the whole text of Sir. 42–50 is structured as a voyage through the six days of creation, ending with the erection of the tabernacle and the high-priest Simon; on him and on his descendants, the wisdom of creation is hoped to rest forever. The Second Temple thus is not a new beginning but a return to the time of creation and of the tabernacle. The study of Ben Sira is continued in the next chapter, now concentrating on timelessness as support of the Temple-state. In Ben Sira, Sinai is not even mentioned, only Moses; but his authority is only temporary. The goal of the journey of wisdom is Aaron on whom wisdom will rest forever; he has to teach the law to the people. From Aaron, wisdom travels on to David and Solomon; Simon as high-priest is heir to God’s covenant with David and also Solomon redux. Thus, there is continuity between the Second Temple and the pre-exilic past; Ben Sira never mentions the Exile; it has no theological significance.

The next chapter is devoted to the book of Jubilees, where Mermelstein again discovers “Timeless Dimensions of a Covenantal Relationship” (p. 88). Israel’s election occurs already at creation (Jub. 2:19–21); the Sabbath, central in Jubilee’s retelling of Gen. 1, distinguishes Israel from the rest of mankind.
Sinai is not the beginning of a new covenantal relationship but only the last in a set of covenants. Jubilees “downplays the significance of the Mosaic/Sinaitic covenant” (p. 119). It is simply the latest affirmation of God’s relationship with Noah, which became necessary because the earlier covenant was broken. It is part of the paradigms of God’s action in history that thus receives a timeless quality. Sinai is not really a new beginning but rather the timeless reiteration of earlier events; nor is the Exile considered a new beginning. History is timeless.

Whereas much of Ben Sira and Jubilees is patterned on the Song of Moses, Deut. 32, the Animal Apocalypse, the focus of the fifth chapter, is closely connected with Ezek. 34 (enemies of Israel as wild animals). For this book, the whole Second Temple period is one of exile; Ezra and Nehemiah are not even mentioned; the sheep remain blind, i.e., disobedient. Thus, history presents nothing new; it follows timeless patterns until it returns to creation, which happens in the end-time. Adam is a white bull, as also a white bull is born after the building of the new temple; then all are transformed to white cattle as in the beginning, effacing all differences between the nations and the Jews. Israel was not elected at creation, but the Israelites are the survival of Adam’s line and of creation up to the present, when redemption will again include all and not only Israel.

In Fourth Ezra, studied in chapter 6, the view of history is much more complicated; time and history are central to a theological critique, carried through in several attempts with different proposed solutions. Creation, Abraham, and Sinai are offered as equally possible points of beginning of the relationship between God and Israel; all possibilities are tested in the course of the dialogues. If Sinai is seen as the beginning of Israel’s election, it is also contingent on Israel’s obedience. Patterns of sin and punishment recur constantly, thus rendering history timeless. Even the destruction of the Temple is not really a temporal break; it is the consequence of sin, which is not new but inevitable since Adam. The destruction is only the latest iteration of divine justice, not a new beginning. Reading the destruction of 70 in the context of 586 minimizes the distinctiveness of this last event; it is nothing radically new.

It is impossible to do justice to Mermelstein’s fine analyses of these four books within a simple review. Some connections between biblical texts and passages from these books may be questioned. But as a whole, his analysis is fully convincing and demonstrates an approach to history that at least in these four books helped to interpret the tragic events of the past and even more so the present period in which the writers lived. It is interesting to see how the revelation on Sinai and even the role of Moses recedes into the background when creation is taken as the starting-point of a more or less timeless history. This approach to history was, of course, only one possible way of confronting