

BOOK REVIEWS

Blenkinsopp, Joseph. *Ezra-Nehemiah: A Commentary*. Old Testament Library. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988. 366 pp. \$29.95.

Recently I visited the archaeological site of Lachish. As we detoured around the eroding excavation trenches, the archaeologist leading us pointed to one relatively undisturbed section of mound and said that it contained the levels from the Persian occupation period. "There's not been as much interest in digging them," he commented. "They're too recent."

The two centuries of Persian control in Palestine have attracted less attention than other eras not only from archaeologists but also from biblical scholars. Compared to other segments of Israelite history, they are still a blank to a great extent. Introductions on the Intertestamental Period usually skim over the Persian empire and concentrate on the Hellenistic era and the Maccabean revolt. Part of the problem is that we have less scriptural evidence for this period than for some others, but the books of Ezra and Nehemiah do provide a significant body of literary data that has not been studied as it deserves to be. Perhaps this lack of attention is because the difficult problems inherent in the two books have frustrated many scholars. Yet what happened during those years shaped NT Judaism and thus early Christianity.

Joseph Blenkinsopp, John A. O'Brien Professor of Biblical Studies at the University of Notre Dame, has partially rectified this lack with his contribution to Westminster Press's distinguished Old Testament Library series. As he writes in his introduction, "With all of its problems, some insoluble, *Ezra-Nehemiah* is the indispensable source for our knowledge of that period which links the world of Israel with that of emergent Judaism" (p. 38). He believes that "Most of the issues being debated and the battles being fought [during NT times] must be traced back to the formative period of the two centuries of Persian rule. . . ." (ibid.)

Blenkinsopp sees *Ezra* and *Nehemiah* as part of a larger work consisting of 1 and 2 Chronicles and believes that they should be interpreted within that context (p. 48). Thus he holds a position that rejects the recent trend to separate *Ezra-Nehemiah* from Chronicles. In support of his case he shows the common interests and parallels between the work of the Chronicler and the content of *Ezra-Nehemiah* (pp. 47-54). Also, Blenkinsopp places the two books within the context of the known political and social history of the Persian Empire (pp. 60-69 and throughout the commentary section) and suggests how this placement should shape our interpretation of the issues and intent of the two companion books.

Although Blenkinsopp takes the historicity of the events portrayed in Ezra-Nehemiah seriously, he feels that the books follow the approach of the Chronicler as a whole by retelling history "in such a way as to allow for a future" for God's people (p. 37). Unlike modern historians, the biblical writers did not worry about such details as keeping their chronology straight and their data consistent, but sought first of all "to sustain the life and energy of the community to which they belonged." (Cf., e.g., Blenkinsopp's discussion of the chronology of Ezra and Nehemiah [pp. 140-144]. Although he concludes that the evidence indicates that Ezra was first in chronological order over Nehemiah, he believes that the books were edited to place Ezra after Nehemiah because of the importance of his office as priest and mission as lawgiver [p. 144].) The narrative of events is always shaped by theological intent, and readers must always keep that in mind as they attempt to reconstruct those events.

In the commentary sections, Blenkinsopp seeks to refute such common assumptions as that post-exilic Judaism was a religion in decline and oriented inward rather than outward. Instead, he reminds us, post-exilic Judaism struggled with issues that would determine the form of NT Judaism and the Christianity that would emerge from it.

The author has both an extensive general bibliography and specialized bibliographies preceding each section of the commentary.

Blenkinsopp's work is a worthy contribution both to the Old Testament Library series and to scholarship on the too-often overlooked books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

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GERALD WHEELER

Boylan, Anne M. *Sunday School: The Formation of an American Institution, 1790-1880*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988. xii + 225 pp. \$26.50.

Sunday School is a revision of Anne Boylan's dissertation. The author rightly sees the Sunday school as a neglected piece of American history, one that stands close to the center of the mainstream of cultural transmission in the nineteenth century. "Like the common school," the author writes, "the Sunday school taught more than the lesson plans revealed" (p. 4). Along with specifically Christian knowledge, "students absorbed the values and precepts of evangelical Protestantism. More important, they imbibed their teachers' expectations and learned the behavioral manifestations of religious conversion" (p. 5).

Boylan claims that her work is not a history of the Sunday school. Despite that disclaimer, the book is packed with historical data and is