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## Ezra & the Law in History & Tradition by Lisbeth Fried

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**Fried, Lisbeth S. *Ezra and the Law in History and Tradition*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2014. 248 pages. Hardcover, \$59.95.**

Biblical scholar Lisbeth S. Fried's *Ezra and the Law in History and Tradition* is only the latest volume in the series *Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament* edited by James L. Crenshaw, but it is the culmination of Fried's career studying Ezra-Nehemiah. It is a sweeping study of the historical and biblical figures of Ezra and the traditions that spun out of the biblical picture of Ezra into later Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. Doing historiography by centering on great persons has to a large extent fallen from favor. However, some great figures, both historical and legendary, cast such long shadows that they deserve individual study. Ezra is one of these. Fried does a masterful job in doing so. She is an original thinker and plows new ground in the study of the historical Ezra as well as the legendary Ezra that developed in the biblical and post-biblical traditions. Not everyone will agree with some of her hypotheses about the historical Ezra, but she marshals strong evidence for some of her more controversial proposals. I believe that much of her theoretical work will stand the test of time.

As to the historical Ezra—as distinct from the biblical picture of Ezra—Fried posits several novel ideas. The scholarly consensus is that Ezra brought the Torah to the returnees to the Persian province of Yehud and Jerusalem at the behest of the Persian king. Fried demurs. She marshals strong evidence that the entire concept of written law was absent in the Persian period and only arose during the Hellenistic period and was anachronistically written into the story of Ezra's work in Yehud. She proposes, rather, that Ezra was an agent of the Persian king, his "ear" or *episcopos* and also charged with appointing judges as officials on behalf of the king. Fried also has a novel, yet plausible, interpretation of the forced divorces of the people of Yehud from the "people of the land." She posits, with most of her scholarly peers, that Ezra-Nehemiah was written in the Hellenistic period. She compares similar Greek laws banning marriage with non-citizens to those in Ezra-Nehemiah and proposes that the divorces had nothing to do with biblical commands not to marry outside Israel but had more to do with preventing marriage—and, hence, alliances—between local families and Persian officialdom. Such policies kept the machinery of empire from becoming bogged down in marriage alliances with local prominent colonial families.

Moving on from Ezra-Nehemiah, Fried discusses the ongoing traditions about Ezra in 1st Esdras and then 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> Ezra. There is a great deal of confusion in the naming and numberings of the various books entitled Ezra/Nehemiah/Esdras in the extant texts (the Hebrew Bible, the Greek Septuagint, the Latin Vulgate, and the other translations) and Fried includes a very helpful chart of the various books and their names in the various texts. 1st, or Greek, Esdras, by most scholars' opinions a later rewrite of parts of 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah, is, as Fried describes it here and in other writings, "the law triumphant." It is useful in checking the closely related texts of Ezra-Nehemiah and further develops the theology of Israel's exile as a failure to observe Torah. Fried's assessment of 1st Esdras is insightful and fascinating.

The figure of Ezra casts a long shadow in the life of Judaism and then Christianity. In the fifth chapter, Fried discusses 4<sup>th</sup> Ezra (2<sup>nd</sup> Esdras 3-14, also known as the Ezra Apocalypse). It is a first century C.E. Jewish apocalypse with Ezra as the receiver of the revelation. Christian additions to 4<sup>th</sup> Ezra, 2<sup>nd</sup> Esdras 1-2 and 15-16, named 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Ezra, respectively, further the ongoing Ezra legend. Fried also gives an insightful discussion of 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Ezra in two subsequent chapters. Beyond the first century's 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> Ezra, the Ezra tradition lives on in later Jewish, Christian, and Muslim tradition. In the Jewish tradition he became revered as a second

Moses and in the Christian and Muslim traditions he is blamed for perverting the Torah in his rewriting of it in the Persian period. He lives on this way in the Talmud, the Church Fathers, and the Qur'an. Finally, and very fascinatingly, Fried, in appendix two, discusses the various translations of 4<sup>th</sup> Ezra in the context of an evolving debate about theodicy.

Beyond being a good volume of scholarship on Ezra and the centuries-long Ezra tradition, Fried writes a very readable text. She has helpfully included indices of ancient sources, modern authors, and subjects. She also includes a helpful chronology of the Mesopotamian and Persian kings, Egyptian Pharaohs, and the Macedonian dynasty in the period under consideration in her first appendix. All of these additions make this a very usable work of scholarship.

In conclusion, *Ezra and the Law in History and Tradition* is a *tour de force* in the scholarship on Ezra. Some will not agree with some of her views on the historical Ezra, but time will tell if her well-argued theories prove persuasive to the guild of biblical scholarship. The additional material on the long Ezra tradition is insightful and on spot historically. *Ezra and the Law in History and Tradition* is well worth reading if one is interested in the origins of Judaism and the ongoing traditions of the Abrahamic faiths.

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