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Boccaccini, Gabriele

Roots of Rabbinic Judaism: An Intellectual History, from Ezekiel to Daniel

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In *Roots of Rabbinic Judaism*, Gabriele Boccaccini offers a new perspective on the origins of rabbinic Judaism within the Second Temple period; that is, in spite of the sages' claims that rabbinic Judaism was continuous with the Sinaitic revelation to Moses, rabbinic Judaism was, in fact, reform and innovation whose roots could be found in earlier reforms and innovations within Second Temple Judaism. According to Boccaccini, rabbinic Judaism did not exist until after the destruction of the Second Temple. After the writing of Daniel, rabbinic Judaism underwent "formless stages of growth" (209) until emerging as a substantively different Judaism from its historical precursors. Boccaccini attempts to show that the roots of rabbinic Judaism lay within the turbulent period between the Babylonian exile and the Maccabean revolt (Ezekiel to Daniel), during which time "the scriptural idea of covenant developed to include the idea of afterlife retribution and the Mosaic Torah acquired cosmic dimensions thanks to its connection with heavenly wisdom" (xvii). In other words, for Boccaccini, the historical reality of the texts of this period is evidence that rabbinic Judaism as a system of thought built itself on the innovative reinterpretations of the Mosaic revelation of other Judaisms.

Boccaccini's goal is to "elaborate an intellectual history of ancient Jewish thought" (27). Intellectual history depends on the rejection of the unity of history and philosophy in Hegelian terms, according to Boccaccini, as advocated by Eugenio Garin (24). In other words, for Boccaccini, intellectual history rejects any a priori notion of philosophy in history, rejects that social and political history can somehow be separated from intellectual history, and insists that at any point in time many ideas and systems coexist (24).

Following the premise of Jacob Neusner that no Judaism, only Judaisms, existed during this period, Boccaccini claims that although no documentary link can be established as authoritative for rabbinic Judaism in the Second Temple period (i.e., between the Bible and the Mishnah), any historically reliable study must verify this is not the case rather than simply adopt the perspective of the Mishnah as perfectly continuous with its "biblical" source. For Boccaccini, the intellectual historian is concerned to provide "the facts" that are found in the documentary origins of a particular Judaism, which is separate from and independent of the theological concern for meaning (41). According to Boccaccini, the search for the roots of rabbinic Judaism can reliably depend only on the reconstruction efforts of the intellectual historian, albeit a reconstruction (32).

In the first chapter Boccaccini outlines the rise to "priestly supremacy" of the Zadokite Judaism after the Persian defeat of the Babylonians. Boccaccini shows that through innovations and creative manipulation of the Sinaitic revelation Zadokite Judaism effectively absorbed the religious function of the Davidic monarchy into the priesthood, as well as developed a "threefold structure of priestly power" as found within the "Priestly writing and Chronicles" (64). In other words, through the priestly genealogical record, the house of Zadok established itself not only as the legitimate priestly successors of Aaron (itself a postexilic innovation [64]) but also ultimately elevated above all the "sons of Aaron" by the genealogical link to Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron through Aaron's elder son, Eleazar. In effect, the Zadokites established themselves, genealogically, as the sole successors to the high priesthood above all the sons of Levi and Aaron (again, a "postexilic theological problem" [66]).

Zadokite claims to succession naturally had its opponents. In chapter 2, Boccaccini contrasts Zadokite Judaism with, among others, Enochic and sapiential Judaism. According to Boccaccini, Enochic Judaism was a direct priestly opposition to the Zadokite worldview. Enochic Judaism maintained the progressive degeneration of the universe; that is, evil, superhuman in origin, progressively worsened God's original, orderly creation, according to Boccaccini. Sapiential Judaism, a

“lay” opposition, developed prior to and independently of the later adopted covenantal theology of Zadokite Judaism. According to sapiential Judaism, God and humanity were not bound by any covenantal relationship, from the perspective of God, according to Boccaccini. In other words, sapiential Judaism emphasized “God’s unlimited freedom and omnipotence” (109, 205).

Out of this, sapiential and Zadokite Judaism eventually found common ground through the writings of Tobit and Ben Sira, as claimed by Boccaccini in chapter 3. Boccaccini claims that through Tobit, priestly tradition is affirmed alongside familial tradition. For Boccaccini, Tobit represents an affirmation of Zadokite priestly claims in combination with family tradition “as the foundation of Jewish piety” (128). Boccaccini points out, however, that these two ways of thinking were not merged; they remained distinct in Tobit. Ben Sira represents the first attempt toward synthesis of Zadokite and sapiential Judaism. Essentially, for Boccaccini, Ben Sira, opposed to the worldview of Enochic Judaism and “skeptical” wisdom, affirms Zadokite covenantal theology as well as the supremacy of wisdom over Torah. However, wisdom is only achieved through Torah practice, claimed by Boccaccini for Ben Sira. In effect, then, Ben Sira affirms that “obeying the Torah is ultimately more essential than having wisdom, because the stability of the universe and individual salvation depend on this” (149). For Boccaccini, Ben Sira provides the background from which rabbinic Judaism will later claim the preexistence of Torah, in cosmic terms, as Ben Sira for wisdom.

According to chapter 4, the Maccabean revolt brought Zadokite Judaism abruptly to an end. In this period, the writing of Daniel represents, for Boccaccini, a “third way” between Zadokite (as influenced by nonskeptical sapiential Judaism) and Enochic Judaism. Boccaccini claims that Daniel both accepts the Enochic idea of historical degeneration (excluding the superhuman origin of evil) and Zadokite covenantal theology (183). History is important for two reasons in this case: (1) history represents the collective punishment by God for the collective disobedience to the covenant; and (2) history is the stage on which individuals undergo suffering as a test for proving individual obedience to the covenant in anticipation of the final judgment. For Boccaccini, the origins of rabbinic Judaism are located in Daniel, a middle ground between Zadokite theology (after its merging with elements of sapiential Judaism as seen in the works of Tobit and Ben Sira) and Enochic Judaism. “By introducing the ideas of resurrection and the end time and final judgment, and stressing the distinction between collective and individual retribution, Daniel provided the necessary keys for reinterpreting creatively all the previous documents of Zadokite tradition and opening the

Zadokite system to substantial implementation" (208). Further, Boccaccini claims that the "myth of the orality of the rabbinic tradition" is actually the period of a "difficult gestation" of these ideas that occurred after the writing of Daniel and the creation of the Mishnah (209).

Although the book is well written and argued methodologically, I would make one remark of caution from a literary-critical perspective. Boccaccini seems to assume that texts somehow share an affinity with sociological data, that is, that texts directly reflect social data. It is argued by Klaus Berger that this is not the case (*Exegese des Neuen Testaments: Neue Wege vom Text zur Auslegung* [Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1984], 234). In other words, one may not necessarily have direct access to a form of Judaism as a social phenomenon through a text. Texts themselves are not history but are interpretations of social environments. The assumption by Boccaccini that the arrangement of texts, denominationally, is distinct from a text (which, I would add, is itself an arrangement of interpreted social data) is no distinction between what is and is not history. Such a distinction does not provide access to better history. In what sense is a scholarly reconstruction of Jewish thought any more reliable than a denominationally oriented one, both of which are only as reliable as the author's (authors') intent?

That being said, Boccaccini as an intellectual historian is adept and convincing in his treatment of the texts addressed. Boccaccini has provided a fascinating historical framework for the roots of rabbinic Judaism and is commended for his study. Although I am not willing to concede the primacy claimed for the historical-critical method in this book, Boccaccini opens up a vast literary environment with persuasive historical argument. Boccaccini makes clear that reform and innovation are elemental in the textual origins of rabbinic Judaism, alerting the reader that the establishment of rabbinic Judaism itself is no less a reformation.