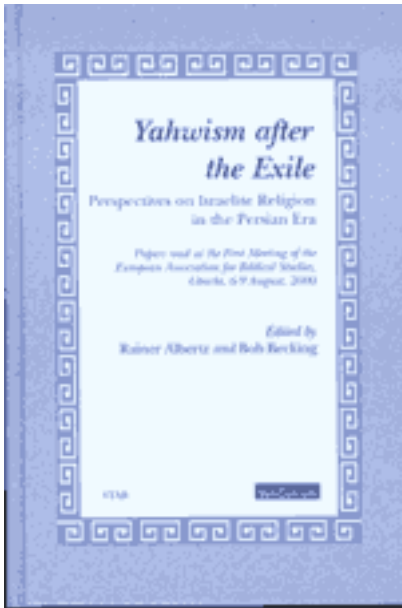


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**Albertz, Rainer, and Bob Becking, eds.**

***Yahwism after the Exile: Perspectives on Israelite Religion in the Persian Era: Papers Read at the First Meeting of the European Association for Biblical Studies, Utrecht, 6–9 August 2000***

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This volume consists of papers read at the first meeting of the European Association for Biblical Studies in Utrecht (Netherlands), on August 2000. All papers are written in English with one exception (the essay by Rüdiger Schmitt, which is in German), and most of them offer an important contribution to a better understanding of the Persian period and its significance for the formation of the Hebrew Bible.

In their foreword, the editors (Rainer Albertz and Bob Becking) describe the Persian period as a “transit period” from the former Israelite and Judahite religions, which reveal multiple Yahwisms, to Judaism as it appears in the Hellenistic period. They also emphasize the difficulty of understanding the Judean situation during the Persian era, since we have no documents from the Persian administration that are directly related to the province of Yehud. Hence, biblical sources remain important, even if their date and intention are not easy to identify; at times, some evidence from inscriptions and archaeology may also shed some light on the period. The foreword is concluded by a brief presentation of each paper by Albertz and Becking.

In the volume, the essays have been ordered alphabetically. Instead of following this order, however, the present review will briefly discuss the articles according to their topics.

The first essay, by Rainer Albertz (“The Thwarted Restoration” [1–17]), is a good introduction to the whole volume. Albertz argues that the term “restoration,” often used by biblical scholars to describe the Persian period, is not actually adequate. Indeed, the Persian period does not witness a return to preexilic institutions but a new political and ideological structure, which Albertz describes as follows: on the top of the province of Yehud is a governor (who can be either Persian or Jew); under him stand two councils of Jewish self-administration, the “congregation of the priests” and the “council of elders.” Beneath those councils, Albert identifies a third institution, the “assembly [*qahal*] of the people,” which had quite restricted powers compared to the councils of priestly and lay leaders. These two councils had, furthermore, the same interest as the Persian government, in particular to prevent the emergence of monarchic or messianic movements in Yehud. The view of Antje Labahn (“Antitheocratic Tendencies in Chronicles” [115–35]) partially contradicts Albertz’s analysis, since she argues for an important role of the Levites during the Persian period. According to her the Levites, which she identifies as the probable authors of Chronicles, established themselves as a third pressure group beneath the priestly and political leadership. The Levites should then be conceived of as a “multi-functional group in the Second Temple period” (129). They recognized the privileges of priests in the sacrificial cult, but this topic only plays a limited role in Chronicles. Much more attention is given to the Levites, who apparently functioned as administrators and were influent in almost all areas of the Judean society. Yet, if one follows Labahn’s interpretation of Chronicles, they agreed with the other leading groups in rejecting monarchical ideology.

Some essays emphasize the ideological and institutional changes that took place in Yehud under the Achaemenids. David Vanderhooft (“New Evidence Pertaining to the Transition from Neo-Babylonian to Achaemenid Administration in Palestine” [219–35]) discusses nonbiblical evidence for Babylonian and Persian administration in Judea. The tablets recently published by the French scholars Joannès and Lemaire indicate the existence of a town in Mesopotamia called Al-Yahudu. These tablets also seem to indicate that for Jews in Babylonia it was possible very early to obtain official roles under the Achaemenids. In addition, Vanderhooft argues that the Persians invented a new administrative organization in Palestine ruled by a governor (some of whom are now known, thanks to inscriptions on jars, seals or bullae), which was quite different from the previous organizations. Ehud Ben-Zvi’s paper (“What Is New in Yehud? Some Considerations” [32–48]) focuses on the ideological changes between the Persian Yehud and the monarchic Judah as they are reflected in the Pentateuch and the Prophets. He discusses first the invention of the “exile” as the matrix of a new identity for the Second Temple community. The invention of exile is at the beginning of a vast literary activity, which is reflected in the books of the Pentateuch and of the Former Prophets. From Moses on,

“exile” appears continuously in the “Primeval History.” The underlying assumption that this exile has not been fully overcome leads then to the marginalization of the present (that is, life under the Persians).

The ideological changes that are at the very beginning of Judaism can also be observed in the case of the conception of death in Palestine. Herbert Niehr (“The Changed Status of the Dead in Yehud” [136–55]) shows very convincingly the considerable changes brought in this area by the Priestly and Deuteronomistic writings: abolition of the royal cult of dead ancestors, condemnation of the feeding of the dead and the “funeral banquets,” interdiction of mourning rites, interdiction of necromancy. The Priestly and Deuteronomistic circles did not have the same motives to battle against the importance of death in the popular religion. The Priestly school was concerned with the question of ritual purity, whereas the Deuteronomists insisted on exclusive veneration of Yhwh. Their covenantal theology was at odds with strong family bonds, which are at the root of the cult of the dead.

Nevertheless, the rejection of several areas of popular theology in “official” circles did not succeed easily. The stimulating article of Rüdiger Schmitt (“Gab es einen Bildersturm nach dem Exil? Einige Bemerkungen zur Verwendung von Terrakottafigurinen im nachexilischen Israel” [186–98]) contradicts the thesis of a vast iconoclastic Yahwistic movement during the Persian period. On the contrary, the archeological evidence confirms the constant popularity of a widespread votive cult that goes back to the early Iron era. Thus, a clear distinction should be made between ideological changes put forward by the intellectual elite and the actual practices of popular religion, which may have been relatively untouched by some of the developments taking place in the elite circles of Yehud.

In general, the Persian period in Judah is regarded by biblical scholars as being mainly related to the following issues: temple, Torah and messianism. The main witnesses for the importance of the (reconstruction of) the temple are the prophets Haggai and Zech 1–8. According to Mark J. Boda (“Zechariah: Master Mason or Penitential Prophet?” [49–69]), the temple building is only one theme among others in Zech 1–8. The redactors of Zech 1:1–16 and 7:1–8:23 are very concerned with Jeremianic and Deuteronomistic traditions; hence, they present the prophet above all as a prophet of *penitence* who appeals to an ethical renewal among the community. These texts may reflect a liturgy of penitential prayers that are now canonized (cf. also Neh 9 and Dan 9) and endure outside and even without the temple. Thomas Pola analyzes Zech 3 (“Form and Meaning in Zechariah 3” [156–67]) and comes to the conclusion that according to this text, which he regards as being written before the consecration of the temple in 515, “the re-erection of the temple was the necessary prerequisite for re-establishing the priesthood and its head”

(167). The paper of Bob Becking deals with the question of *torah* in the Persian period (“Law As Expression of Religion [Ezra 7–10]” [18–31]). Becking does not consider Ezra 7–10 a historical report but a “narrative fiction,” a later retelling of the episode in Neh 8. The text was written by the so-called Ezra group to claim divine and Persian legitimization. Becking answers the crucial question of the identity of the “law” in this chapters by identifying the *torah* “as a set of rules given by God in Mosaic times” (23). Most scholars might not find the answer very convincing, but the usual identifications with the book of Deuteronomy or even the whole Pentateuch also raise considerable problems. Becking points out that the measures against mixed marriages in Ezra 9 should be understood as an aggravation of the Deuteronomistic legal tradition. According to Becking, the law of Ezra 7–10 should be seen as “a vital and dynamic concept,” “a gift of God by which the people can remain in freedom” (30), although the exact meaning of such concepts is not always entirely clear to me.

Closely related to the issue of law in the Persian period is the issue of the origin and significance of the figure of Moses. Meindert Dijkstra (“The Law of Moses: The Memory of Mosaic Religion in and after Exile” [70–98]) adopts the view of the Egyptologist Jan Assmann and regards Moses as a figure of *memory*, not of history. The question of the historical Moses is a matter of pure speculation. As for preexilic Mosaic traditions, they certainly existed, as is clearly indicated by Hos 12, but they differ considerably from the exilic and postexilic portrait such as it can be found in the Pentateuch. Deuteronomy 34 probably indicates that there existed a veneration of Moses’ tomb, which was in preexilic times a place of pilgrimage. The invention of the pentateuchal Moses must be seen in connection to the transformation of the former Israelite religion into a book religion, which started in 2 Kgs 22–23, the narrative of the “discovery” of the law book of Moses. During and after the Babylonian period, the traditions on Moses as a lawgiver rapidly developed, in relation to the compilation of the law, which was put under Mosaic authority. It is regrettable, however, that Dijkstra specifies neither who were the promoters of the “pentateuchal” Moses nor the possible social-historical location of these late Moses traditions.

William Johnstone (“The Revision of Festivals in Exodus 1–24 in the Persian Period and the Preservation of Jewish Identity in the Diaspora” [99–114]) addresses the question of Priestly rewriting of older traditions during the Persian era. He shows how the Priestly edition of the book of Exodus (which he considers as the “final” editorial layer) reinterprets the earlier Deuteronomistic version of Passover by creating two festivals, Passover (Exod 12:1–51) and Pentecost (19:1–24:11) in order to provide practical festivals for the Diaspora. These festivals helped to preserve the identity of the Jewish communities outside the land, as did also circumcision, observation of Sabbath, and the dietary laws. The question of rewriting older traditions in the Persian period is also

analyzed by Zipora Talshir (“Synchronic Approaches with Diachronic Consequences in the Study of Parallel Redactions: First Esdras and 2 Chronicles 35–36; Ezra 1–10; Nehemiah 8” [199–218]). She considers the redactor of 1 Esdras as depending on the traditions incorporated in Ezra-Nehemiah, to which he added the story of the Three Youths. In a certain way, 1 Esdras may be considered as one of the first extracanonical midrashim.

There is a certain scholarly consensus about the existence of messianic groups in Yehud during the Persian era. This view is challenged by Walter H. Rose (“Messianic Expectations in the Early Postexilic Period” [168–85]). According to him, Hag 2 says nothing of the promotion of Zerubbabel to kingship. The “messianic” oracles in Zech 3 and 6 depend on the Jeremianic tradition and do not support the idea of a specific messianic fervor during the Persian period. Personally, I have not been convinced by Rose’s arguments, but he has the merit to initiate a fresh discussion about this central issue.

This volume is a very important one, which is to be highly recommended to all biblical scholars as well as advanced students interested in the Persian period. The indices at the end of the book (authors, bibliography, biblical texts and other ancient sources) make it easy to use. Of course, some themes of the actual discussion about Yehud in the Persian area are not or only partially addressed (the so-called imperial authorization, the problem of the “Tempel-Bürgergemeinde” hypothesis, etc.). Several aspects or ideas presented in the volume will not convince everyone (for instance, the rather “naive” reading of Ezra-Nehemiah by Albertz or the results of Rose’s analysis of Zechariah). However, the quality of the articles collected in this volume makes it a most significant contribution to biblical scholarship.