Betts, T. J.

Ezekiel the Priest: Custodian of Tôrâ

Studies in Biblical Literature 74


Brandon L. Fredenburg
Lubbock Christian University
Lubbock, TX 79407

In The Prophetic Literature: An Introduction (Westminster John Knox, 2002), David L. Petersen remarks that, although scholars have noticed priestly material in Ezekiel, the connection has yet to be fully explored (159). Thus, this study by Terry J. Betts, which aims “to investigate the nature of the OT priests’ function as custodians of tôrâ and demonstrate that one of their primary responsibilities was the instruction of tôrâ” (2) and which uses Ezekiel as its main text of interest, seemed somewhat promising. This volume is a revision of Betts’s dissertation from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, where he now serves as an assistant professor of Old Testament interpretation. The book has five chapters and concludes with a bibliography, source index, and modern author index.

The opening two chapters focus on priesthood in the Hebrew Bible. To begin, Betts briefly summarizes various views on the origin, development, and nature of the priesthood in ancient Israel as depicted in the Hebrew Bible. The next section specifically focuses on studies of priests as “custodians of tôrâ.” Finally, he outlines his method of engaging relevant texts, calling it a “synthetic approach” that combines “historical-philological and literary methods” (9) and that emphasizes intertextuality and the final form of the canonical text (ch. 1 [1–15]).
Chapter 2 (17–45) assembles and categorizes multiple Hebrew Bible texts that name responsibilities of Israelite priests. Among the tasks cursorily described are priests as sanctuary officials, sacrifice officiants, custodians of the silver trumpets, and judges. Betts initiates his discussion of priests as teachers by quoting the “Mosaic Legislation” in Lev 10:10–11 and the “Mosaic Instruction” in Deut 27:9–10 and 31:9–13, each of which prescribes a teaching function for priests. The longest section of chapter 2 attempts to equate the references in Leviticus and Deuteronomy to huqqîm/huqqôt, mišpâtîm, and tôrôt with the canonical content of the Pentateuch: “Taken all together, the three terms of Leviticus 26:46 probably best represent at least Leviticus and maybe the entire Mosaic Legislation seeing as it came ‘by the hand of Moses at Sinai’” (26). Again, “The Pentateuch appears to have served as a syllabus and textbook for priestly instruction” (33). The remainder of chapter 2 draws conclusions from the description of Ezra’s instruction to the returnees to indicate how the priests educated Israel in the ancient, written torah of Moses.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine Ezekiel’s priestly role. In chapter 3 (47–88), Betts draws from recent studies by Odell (“You Are What You Eat: Ezekiel and the Scroll,” JBL 117 [1998]: 229–48), Sweeney (“Ezekiel: Zadokite Priest and Visionary Prophet of the Exile,” paper presented at the SBL Annual Meeting, Nashville, Tenn., 2000), and others to argue that Ezek 1–7 describes Ezekiel as a priest-in-exile. Moreover, he marshals six parallels between Ezekiel and Israelite priests (e.g., his concern for the divine name and his own ritual purity) in support of this identification.

Chapter 4 (89–139) describes how Betts understands Ezekiel to have performed his role as a teacher of torah for his exilic audience in Babylon. As for content, Betts indicates that while Ezekiel never quotes from the written Mosaic torah, he certainly alludes to it (cf., e.g., Deut 32:23–25 and Ezek 5:16–17a; Ezek 7 and Deut 32) and echoes it throughout. In addition, on Betts’s reading, Ezekiel evinces a number of rhetorical adaptations of, stylistic similarities to, and motifs drawn from pentateuchal material. Then follows a brief review of Ezekiel’s “pedagogical methodologies,” including sign-acts, figures of speech, and role playing. Chapter 5 (141–44) presents a summary conclusion.

Betts does not write with historical-critical concerns. Although his discussion evinces awareness of the views of Kuenen, Wellhausen, Pedersen, Noth, Milgrom, Zimmerli, and others on the origin and development of the priesthood and the formation of the book of Ezekiel, his interaction with critical biblical scholarship is superficial and ornamental.
As his “synthetic approach” suggests, Betts’s self-defined task is almost entirely
descriptive synthesis. This synthesis, moreover, is not nuanced. The biblical material
simply becomes a quarry; blocks for the edifice may come from any Hebrew Bible text:
“The study will not be as concerned with the history behind the text as with the authors’
perspective of events within the text, whether or not the events are contemporary with the
author or from his past” (9). In this study, almost all concerns for transmission, redaction,
and editing are absent, and the situations depicted are assumed to be the situations as they
actually happened and as the biblical authors understood them. Thus, Betts assumes that
soon after Moses died, the Pentateuch was available in (nearly) its present form as a
textbook for priests to read, learn, and use to instruct Israel. This assumption, then, makes
possible Betts’s claims in chapter 4 that numerous passages in Ezekiel adapt, allude to, or
echo pentateuchal words and phrases rather than reflect, say, tradition associated with the
Holiness Code, P, or even D.

The study accomplishes its aims, given the author’s approach and assumptions. The
conclusion, however, is rather pedestrian. Readers will have to decide whether Betts’s
reading strategy is one they can adopt.

Finally, I must note the extremely poor editing and proofreading of the volume. The
spacing between letters is annoyingly uneven throughout; “Hebrew Bible” routinely
appears as “Hebrew bible”; block quotations may or may not appear with quotations
around them; the endnotes are riddled with problems: some italicize the wrong words,
some omit opening or closing parentheses after article titles, some fail to use
abbreviations supplied at the beginning of the volume, some misspell non-English words,
some fail to separate words correctly, and some are inconsistent in initial reference style
as well as shortened subsequent reference forms; “enormity” is used twice as a synonym
for “immense”; “unto” appears for “to” on occasion; “Asenath” is misspelled; blatant
dittography appears in the last sentence of page 39 — all these before chapter 3.

The hope of a well-presented, scholarly treatment of the priestly vocabulary and material
in Ezekiel still awaits fulfillment.