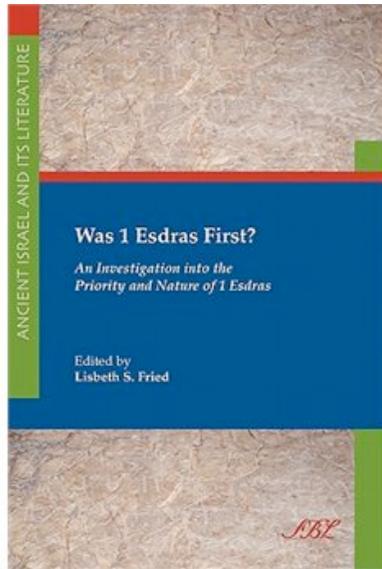


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Was 1 Esdras First?: An Investigation into the Priority and Nature of 1 Esdras

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Lisbeth S. Fried was assigned a commentary on Ezra–Nehemiah in the now-discontinued Eerdmans Bible Critical Commentary. For this commentary she needed to deal with the important question whether Ezra–Nehemiah was a revision of 1 Esdras or whether it was the other way around. She asked eighteen experts their opinions about the relationship between 1 Esdras and Ezra–Nehemiah, and their responses are collected in this book. The articles in the book are grouped in three parts: three essays arguing for the priority of 1 Esdras, seven arguing for the priority of Ezra–Nehemiah, and six investigating the nature of 1 Esdras (although that does not imply that their authors do not know about the priority of either 1 Esdras or Ezra–Nehemiah).

The numbers are not without meaning: a majority of experts supports the priority of Ezra–Nehemiah. This is not all: of the three supporters of the priority of 1 Esdras, only one defends its priority plainly. Deidre Fulton and Gary Knoppers argue on the basis of textual criticism, which they use as a basis for source criticism, that the “letter sent to Artaxerxes protesting the rebuilding efforts of the temple in Jerusalem” (1 Esdr 2:15) is the basis for Ezra 4:6–11a speaking of several letters: one to Xerxes and two to Artaxerxes. Fulton and Knoppers conclude that it is much more likely that Ezra 4 expanded the short notice in 1 Esdras than the other way around, their main argument being that, “if the writer of 1 Esdras deliberately condensed his much longer *Vorlage*, one would expect the

work to speak summarily of a plurality of letters” (25). The matter is, however, more complicated. (1) The material that Fulton and Knoppers discuss are letters quoted by the writers of 1 Esdras and Ezra, not their own texts. That makes a difference to me. Further, although Fulton and Knoppers say in their conclusion that “there are many more cases in which the text of Ezra may be profitably used to explain the development of 1 Esdras than vice versa,” they only discuss these quoted letters. (2) Furthermore, there is the important detail about a certain Beelteemos (one of the authors of the letter that 1 Esdras mentions), who is lacking in the corresponding parallel in 4 Ezra. However, Ezra 4 mentions the official Rehum (who is also mentioned in 1 Esdras as Raoumos) as bearing the position *bʿl-tʿm* “commissioner,” which is clearly misinterpreted in the LXX of Ezra, by Josephus, and by 1 Esdras as a personal name Beelteemos, as Fulton and Knoppers admit. But they fail to make the logical conclusion that in that case textual criticism indicates the priority of Ezra 4, the source of the misinterpretation in LXX, Josephus, and also 1 Esdras.

The two other defenders of the priority of 1 Esdras, Lester Grabbe and Adrian Schenker, do not straightforwardly defend that priority, but they formulate a complex composition history for the two books. While Grabbe gives a more simple hypothesis—1 Esdr 2:4–9 is the source that was used by Ezra–Nehemiah and the author of 1 Esdras—Schenker’s theory is much more complex. First, he demonstrates that the story of the three young men is a later addition in 1 Esdras. Then he argues that 1 Esdras presents two parallel stories of the return of the exiles and the rebuilding of the temple. The author Ezra noticed this doublet and smoothed it into one narrative. Thus argue those in support of the priority of 1 Esdras (henceforth “the pros”).

As already mentioned, the cons are more numerous, and some take a stand with (parts of) the arguments that the pros have forwarded. The first contra is by Bob Becking: “The Story of the Three Youths and the Composition of 1 Esdras.” He demonstrates in his essay that the story of the three young men is not an addition to 1 Esdras. Many defenders of the priority of 1 Esdras (among them Grabbe and Schenker in this volume, as we have seen) take that position because it would be unthinkable that the author of Ezra would have removed that story. If Becking is right about the originality of the story of the three youths, it seriously undermines the theories of the pros. Juha Pakkala, who is also part of the contra 1 Esdras first group, focuses on the same texts that Fulton and Knoppers did, but he turns the arguments upside down. Ezra and Nehemiah have had a long and complex composition history, so their text is sometimes inconsistent and incoherent. The author of 1 Esdras realized that and smoothed it over. The one letter in 1 Esdr 2:15, which demonstrates knowledge of the text in Ezra, is, according to Pakkala, a smoothed-out version of the three letters in Ezra 4:6–11.

The other opponents of the priority of 1 Esdras concentrated on one detail (e.g., Kristin De Troyer) or on one specific aspect (e.g., both Lisbeth Fried and James VanderKam on the role of Zerubbabel). De Troyer argues that “The second year of Darius” in 1 Esdr 6:1 is a *Wiederaufnahme* of 1 Esdr 2:30 that was needed after the insertion of the story of the three youths in the source text of 1 Esdras, which is the canonical Ezra. Fried sees the role of Zerubbabel alleviated by the insertion of the story of the three youths, and James VanderKam, following the same lines as Fried but in a more global comparison of Zerubbabel’s role in 1 Esdras and Ezra, argues that 1 Esdras has expanded Ezra in several places by attributing to Zerubbabel characteristics that originally belonged to Sheshbazzar and Nehemiah. Jacob Wright, who is also in the contra camp, argues in the other direction. He starts with the assertion that 1 Esdras knew Ezra–Nehemiah as one work, and he demonstrates how 1 Esdras has eliminated the memory of Nehemiah from his source because the author of 1 Esdras was offended by Nehemiah’s criticism of priestly corruption. The final essay of the contra is by Zipora Talshir, who demonstrates that the compiler of 1 Esdras rearranged material of Ezra–Nehemiah using similar methods as did the LXX in rearranging material of the Hebrew texts of Samuel–Kings, especially filling in gaps that the Hebrew *Vorlage* had left.

Finally there are six essays that investigate the nature of 1 Esdras without explicitly taking a position in the debate of priority. Though this be the case, some of their conclusions give further evidence against the priority of 1 Esdras. “Darius’ Court and the Guardsmen’s Debate: Hellenistic Greek Elements in 1 Esdras,” by Paul Harvey Jr., especially shows that the debates of Darius’s guards demonstrate the characteristics of Greek history, historiography, and rhetoric. This portion of 1 Esdras is so peculiar that it can be dated no earlier than Ptolemy II Philadelphus (283–246 B.C.E.), supplying a strong argument against 1 Esdras’ priority. Even the article of Sylvie Honigman “Cyclical Time and Catalogues: The Construction of Meaning in 1 Esdras” contributes to a strengthening of the contra of 1 Esdras’s priority. The cyclical time system in 1 Esdras, in contrast with the linear time structure of Ezra–Nehemiah, points to a Greek time concept and therefore to a later date for 1 Esdras than Ezra–Nehemiah. The essays by Sara Japhet, “1 Esdras: Its Genre, Literary Form, and Goals,” and by Hugh Williamson, “Is 1 Esdras a Rewritten Bible?” which investigate the purpose for composing 1 Esdras, come to the conclusion that it “corrected” Ezra–Nehemiah, for example, by minimizing the effect of the exile or improving the position of Zerubbabel (cf. Fried and VanderKam above). This conclusion also supports the priority of Ezra–Nehemiah. The two remaining essays, by Sebastian Grätz, “The Image of the King(s) in 1 Esdras,” and Ralph Klein, “The Rendering of 2 Chronicles 35–36 in 1 Esdras,” are of a somewhat different nature.

The editor concludes that “a definitive resolution to the issue has not been achieved” and “perhaps will only be resolved when Elijah returns” (7). This is, of course, always true, but the present collection of excellent studies has convinced me that 1 Esdras was not first.