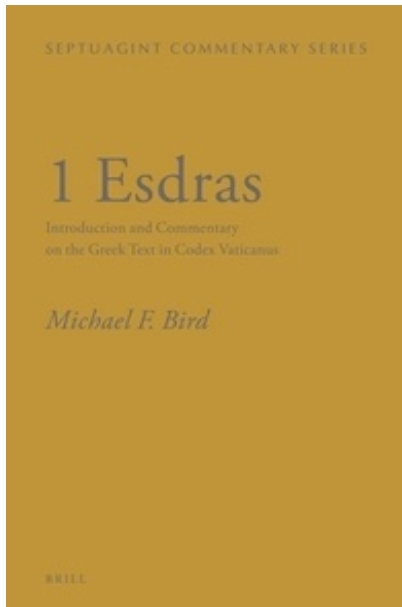


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Michael F. Bird

1 Esdras: Introduction and Commentary on the Greek Text in Codex Vaticanus

Septuagint Commentary Series

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The pseudepigraphic writing 1 Esdras, or Esdras α , or III Esra, has long been poorly endowed by mainstream biblical scholarship. The last years, however, have shown an increase in interest in this intriguing piece of rewritten scripture. Michael Bird now offers a full and thorough commentary on the Greek text based on the Göttingen edition of R. Hanhart.

The book opens with an introduction (1–34). After displaying in short the contents of 1 Esdras and its parallels in Chronicles, MT Ezra, and Nehemiah, Bird pays attention to the text of 1 Esdras. He argues that 1 Esdras is a free translation into Greek of a proto-MT-like Semitic text that is best preserved in the Codex Alexandrinus, with some interesting variants in the Codex Vaticanus. With Hengel, Bird connects the composition of 1 Esdras with the gaining of independence under Simon Maccabeus and hence dates the text to the middle of the second century BCE. As is well known, it is not easy to say something definitive on the provenance of 1 Esdras. An Egyptian background, as Bird suggests with some caution, is one of the possibilities. As for the genre of the composition, Bird correctly classifies 1 Esdras as an example of rewritten scripture. The problem of the sources has been thoroughly discussed these last years, although without a consensus. With Williamson, Bird opts for the view that 1 Esdras is a conscious

composition building on existing source material. I would like to add to that view that these sources in part were not yet written down. It is—by implication—almost impossible to construct the original purpose of an ancient text. Bird, however, offers an interesting view. He thinks that the text functioned to show that faithful and wise Judeans could excel even in a pagan context and that their excellence could be decisive for the fate of the community. In doing so, he accepts the view that the famous story of the three bodyguards must have been part and parcel of the original composition and not a later intrusion. The quality of the Greek in 1 Esdras is relatively good, although the presence of Semitisms indicates a translation process. It cannot be determined whether the *Vorlage* was in Hebrew or in Aramaic. Next, Bird gives a thorough analysis of the text in the Codex Vaticanus. An interesting feature of this manuscript is the presence at various instances of a capital ἥτα placed in a diamond indicating passages that probably were precious to a reader. In the section on the reception history of 1 Esdras, Bird pays attention to the question what it could mean that this book was preserved in Christian Bibles and hence seen as a Christian book. This section is less academic than the other parts of the introduction.

In a second chapter (40–105) Bird offers the Greek text of 1 Esdras with a translation into English. I will not go into detail here but only make two remarks. (1) Bird's translation seems to be for English of the same language register as the Greek of 1 Esdras. This is a laudable approach. (2) Bird delimits the text into narrative sections without, however, indicating the criteria applied in delimiting the text.

The main body of the book is a commentary to the various narrative units of 1 Esdras (109–283). The commentary is very thorough. Bird is in a constant discussion with other readers of 1 Esdras, yet time and again presents his own views. The commentary can be classified as slightly traditional. The reader is informed about all sorts of linguistic and textual problems and their possible solutions. It is a good thing that next to that Bird pays attention to the flow of the narrative. Only marginal remarks are made on the ideology of the text or its social location.

The book ends with a concise bibliography on primary and secondary sources and is concluded with a clear index on textual passages. I would like to congratulate Michael Bird with this commentary. I also would like to thank him for personal voice in the growing choir of scholars around 1 Esdras. His contribution will certainly yield further research.