



Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2015.09.10

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This volume is the result of the St. Andrews Graduate Conference for Biblical and Early Christian Studies on the theme of “Sacred Texts in their Socio-Political Contexts” (July 2013). According to the editors, the collected essays in this volume all address “the issue of oppressive imperial ideology and the extent to which the authors of sacred texts engaged their political contexts” (vii). Although eight of the ten essays do share a focus on the Roman imperial context, these essays actually share a more specific premise: the importance of the concept of evil to Early Jewish and Christian discourses on empire. Therefore, rather than treat each of these chapters separately, I have put them into conversation with one another based on their treatment of evil vis-à-vis empires.

In the first essay, “A Place for Socio-Political Oppressors at the End of History? Eschatological Perspectives from *1 Enoch*,” Loren T. Stuckenbruck focuses primarily on the Book of Watchers. In particular, he examines a divine announcement at the end of the book that declares that in the eschaton all of humanity will worship God (*1 En.* 10:20–22). Stuckenbruck asks, “How can a myth about rebellion in heaven have anything to do with an account that anticipates the globalization of ritual purity, faith, justice, and worship?” (4). In order to answer this question, Stuckenbruck challenges prior scholarship (most notably that of George Nickelsburg) that understands the Watchers and giants of the myth as metaphors for the Diadochi. Although he does see a connection between the myth and imperial power, for Stuckenbruck it is not a metaphor. Rather, the myth reveals the origins of evil and it is this evil, in turn, that lies behind imperial power. By transposing evil onto the separate species of giants/angels, it is possible for the Enochian author to envision eschatological salvation for all humanity, even those that had been a part of oppressive empires.

Stuckenbruck’s reading of *1 Enoch* supports the argument of Brandon Walker’s essay, “The Forgotten Kingdom: Miracle, the Memory of Jesus, and Counter-Ideology to the Roman Empire.” Much like Stuckenbruck, Walker engages in a theopolitical reading of evil, in this case

demonic, within the New Testament. In particular, he notes that Jesus' acts of exorcism and his simultaneous pronouncements of the Kingdom of God provide a challenge to imperial power. However, this challenge dissipates by the second century CE as references to the Kingdom of God are no longer connected to Jesus' miraculous exorcisms. One of the reasons that Walker gives for this change is the increased inclusion of Gentiles in Christianity. A reorientation of Jewish signs and symbols would have been necessary to accommodate these new adherents who had little knowledge of Judaism. Although Walker does not go into any depth about what precise Jewish signs and symbols would have to have been changed, we can safely assume that they were derived from just the sorts of texts that Stuckenbruck focuses on—texts like *1 Enoch* in which empire signifies evil. In support of Walker's argument, I can imagine that, without knowledge of the evil origins of empire, the link between exorcisms and empires would have seemed very strange to Gentile Christians.

Although exorcism was divorced from kingdom language in second century texts, there remains a correlation between Satan and the Roman Empire in the later Christian martyrologies. In Candida R. Moss' "Resisting Empire in Early Christian Martyrdom Literature," she sets out to challenge the dominant "image of the passive martyr meekly yet confidently resisting the coercive efforts of the Roman emperor and judge, and vanquishing both Satan and an oppressive political regime with his or her quiet witness" (147). She does not challenge this image entirely, but rather only the depiction of the martyr as passive/quiet. Instead, she argues, martyrs were portrayed as embodying the ideal Roman traits such as masculinity and piety. In doing so, the martyrs do not passively submit, but actively trump the Romans themselves. What does remain of the classic image, however, is that challenging Rome means challenging Satan. For example, in one of these accounts, the *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyons*, Moss asserts that the martyrs' bodies "become the setting for a cosmic battle between the Devil and Christ" (156). Although this does not form part of Moss' essay, the concept of the martyr as warrior against evil surely reinforces her conclusion that the Roman Empire would be "utterly obliterated by the power of the new emperor, Christ" (161).

Evil, albeit not demonic, is the focus of another group of essays, which all ask a similar question of their Jewish or Christian sources: who is *really* the evil enemy in an imperial world? In a close examination of the book of Daniel, Amanda M. Davis Bledsoe discusses why the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar appears quite favorably in Daniel 1–6. She argues that this characterization represents a purposeful reshaping on the part of the Danielic author so as to make the depiction of Antiochus IV—described by Bledsoe as "the ultimate evil of the author's own day" (24) and "the very incarnation of evil" (39)—appear even worse by comparison in Daniel 7–12. It is Antiochus, and by extension the Seleucid Empire, who is the most evil enemy of the Jews. Similarly, Alexander P. Thompson hones in on the enemy of the early Jesus movement in Luke-Acts: King Herod Agrippa I. Like Bledsoe, Thompson employs a comparative approach; in particular, he examines the death of Herod, who was gruesomely riddled with flesh-eating worms, and the death and resurrection of Jesus. The contrast between the extent of their bodily corruption—the former experiences it prior to death and the latter not even after death—underscores that Herod is "the enemy of God" (106).

In later Second Temple Jewish sources, however, it is the Romans collectively who are the evil opponents of the Jewish people. In "Between Opposition to the Hasmoneans and Resistance to

Rome: The *Psalms of Solomon* and the Dead Sea Scrolls,” Nadav Sharon provides an important corrective to the view that prior to the first century CE the Romans were portrayed in a positive light in comparison to the Hasmonean dynasty. While Sharon concurs that a great deal of anti-Hasmonean sentiment existed, he argues that it existed alongside strong anti-Roman feelings. For example, the *Psalms of Solomon* “strongly vilifies the Roman conquerors” in its depiction of Pompey as murderous (48) and the Qumran *peshirim* present the Romans “as extremely wicked” for their ravaging of the land of Judea (51). This association of wickedness with Rome is continued in the much later Babylonian rabbinic literature according to Bernie Hodkin’s “Theologies of Resistance: Rabbinic Traditions about Rome.” Although Palestinian rabbinic literature (i.e., the Mishnah and Tannaitic Midrash) evinces the Palestinian rabbis’ view that the Romans were their divinely-sanctioned and, therefore, legitimate rulers, the Babylonian rabbis, far removed from the actual Roman Empire, were safe to express a different perspective: “Rome for them was symbolic of evil” (176). For example, the Emperor Titus “serves as a general example of an enemy of the Jewish people” (175) in the Bavli and is eternally punished by God for the destruction of the Temple.

In contrast to the overwhelmingly negative view of Rome in these Jewish sources, Matthew V. Novenson, in “What the Apostles Did Not See,” draws our attention to the “quietistic politics” within the majority of first century CE Christian texts (56). He attributes this lack of concern for the Roman Empire to the fact that Judeans did not experience much of “Rome” *per se*, but merely local Roman-appointed (and not very often actual Roman) officials. When there is anti-Rome sentiment in the New Testament—for example, in Paul—Novenson describes the view of Roman action as “Satanic violence by the principalities and powers of this world” (72). As highlighted in the previous essays, it seems that on those occasions when Rome *is* seen as the enemy, it is a demonic one. The association of evil with Rome in Paul’s letters is more pronounced in the essay by Christopher Heilig, “Methodological Considerations for the Search of Counter-Imperial ‘Echoes’ in Pauline Literature.” In a rare methodological move within historical research, Heilig uses a theorem to try to discern the degree to which Paul’s letters reflect echoes of imperial ideology. The use of Bayes’s theorem is, in part, based on an understanding of Paul’s worldview. In contrast to previous scholarship (most notably that of John Barclay), which asserts that the Roman Empire was insignificant to Paul, Heilig concludes that “there is thus every reason to think that Paul was able to identify specific *manifestations* of evil in Roman imperial rule and ideology” (89). Once again, conceptualizing the evilness of empire seems critical to early Christian writers’ responses to empire. Although David I. Starling does not focus on the evilness of empire, he does focus on the fear that is felt in response to empire—for “without fear, there would have been no empire” (116). More broadly, he explores 1 Peter and its strategy for life under the Roman Empire. In particular, interpretations of the Hebrew Bible provide a framework for both resistant and conformist attitudes towards the Empire. For example, the biblical language of fear of the Lord is used to counter the fear that Christians would have felt towards empire. The previous essays underscore Starling’s conclusion—the evilness of empire would have surely demanded a coping mechanism and what better source for such a mechanism than Scripture?

Taken together, therefore, the essays in this volume do cohere in more ways than the generality of the title might at first suggest. While they do examine a diversity of sources, reflecting a range of Jewish and Christian thought throughout more than a thousand years of history, it is precisely

this diversity that lends this volume its usefulness to the reader. First, it serves as a good introduction to the vast variety of genres of literature—myths, biblical interpretations, epistles, psalms, martyrologies, apocalypses, court narratives, etc.—that were employed by early Jewish and Christian writers to tackle the reality of empire and make sense of it within their worldview. Second, and more importantly, the fact that I was able to find a common thread throughout these diverse texts—namely, a concern for understanding empire vis-à-vis evil—demonstrates that, as many scholars have pointed out, the parting of the ways between Jews and Christians was gradual indeed.