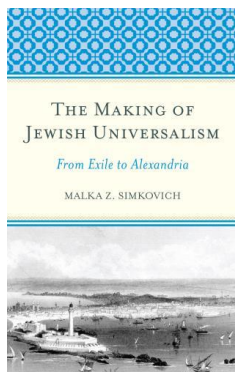




Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2019.01.03

Malka Z. Simkovich. *The Making of Jewish Universalism: From Exile to Alexandria*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017. ISBN: 1498542425. Pp. 216. \$80 USD. Hardback.

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Originally a Brandeis PhD thesis, this study aims to trace universalist thought in Jewish literature from the biblical prophetic writings to about the first or second centuries CE. While older discussions of the subject tended to see Jewish writings as particularistic and Christian ones as universalistic, this is less the case now—and rightly so, for universalistic statements are found in Jewish literature from an early period. However, Dr. Simkovich differs from some of the other recent treatments of the question because of her definition of universalism: Universalistic literature presumes that all people, regardless of religion, have access to a relationship with the Israelite God and the benefits which God promises to those loyal, without demanding that they convert or participate in the Israelite community as a Jew (pp. xviii-xix). Simkovich is right that some discussions have suffered from lack of a definition of universalism but, as I hope to show, her definition is not without its problems.

First comes an introduction that surveys some recent studies of universalism in various contexts, lays out how she will proceed in the present study, and defines four models (pp. xxiii–xxiv): the Subjugator model (Israel dominates its enemies who are turned into servants/slaves); Israel as Standard Bearer (Zion is a light for all peoples, who remain separate but come together to acknowledge the one true God); Naturalized Nations mode (nations assimilate into the Israelite covenant and participate in the Israelite community as full members of the covenantal relationship); Universalized Worship model (the nations are not naturalized into the Israelite covenant but actively worship God and participate in the Israelite cult). In her opinion, only the last one is truly universalistic. Slightly confusingly, she talks about another model, the Ethical Universalism, though whether it is a separate model or only a version of Universalized Worship is not completely clear. She describes this as the possibility that all nations can come together to worship the Jewish God, but the religious and ethnic boundaries that separated them would dissolve (p. 120). Thus, such worship would not require Gentiles to assimilate to the Jewish community, though the Jewish Scriptures could guide all people toward achieving proper behaviour (p. 125).

In chapter 1 she finds the Subjugator model in Obadiah, the Standard-Bearer model in Isaiah 2:2–4 and Second Isaiah, and the Naturalized Nations model in Zechariah 2:10–17. In chapter 2 she argues that the Universalized Worship model is found in Third Isaiah, Zechariah 14, and Daniel. Chapter 3 discusses the War Scroll (Subjugator model), 4Q287 Berakhot (Standard-Bearer model), and the Greek Esther

(Naturalized Nations model). This chapter also has a discussion of the “Noahide Laws.” Chapter 4 finds the Universalized Worship model in Tobit, the two versions of Joseph and Asenath, the Letter of Aristeas, and some passages of Philo of Alexandria. This chapter also discusses proselytes, God-fearers, and the universal love for humans in Hellenistic literature. Chapter 5 is on Philo’s “radical allegorizers” who seem to represent a form of Universalized Worship for her. Chapter 6 examines primarily two texts that are argued to represent Ethical Universalism: Pseudo-Phocylides and the 3rd Sibylline Oracle. Here it is also argued that the Jewish literature employing this model was influenced by the philosophical teachings of Stoicism. The book concludes with a short Summary and Implications of the Argument.

The study has helpfully drawn attention to a number of relevant passages in Jewish literature and provided a detailed analysis of some of the major ones of these. Indeed, perhaps the strength of the study lies in the analysis of specific passages. Personally, I would have preferred it if she had simply started inductively, by surveying the various passages to be considered—all of them, not just selected ones. Then she could have worked from them to discuss constructing various models. Perhaps that is how she originally worked, but in the book the models are presented first and the various passages fitted around them. Such a deductive approach is not as effective or convincing as an inductive one, in my opinion. I find myself in disagreement with some of her models, as she has expounded them according to her own definitions.

Her Subjugators model seems clear enough. It is, as she says, a particularist model, not a universalistic one. When you look at her other three models, along with the passages where they are said to occur, however, it is difficult to distinguish them, in spite of—or perhaps because of—her insistence on clear definitions. Let’s consider briefly her three models other than the Subjugator one, along with the passages that she ascribes to them.

Universalized Worship model: she insists that this allows the nations to worship the God of Israel but to continue maintaining their own identity and not assimilating (converting) to the community of Israel. Yet one of her key texts, Isaiah 56, speaks of “the covenant” (vv. 4, 6) and also about joining worship with the Israelites, including sacrifices in the temple (v. 7). She uses v.7 to claim that the nations keep their identity; therefore, they have not converted. Yet if they worship in the Jerusalem temple, have some of their people become priests and Levites, and keep such clearly Israelite practices as the sabbath, is not the question of “conversion” a somewhat academic one? Why could not they convert and also have their ethnic identity continue to be recognized? Have they not also become “God’s people”?

Naturalized Nations model: here she argues that the nations are presented as assimilating to the Israelite covenant and participating in the Israelite community. Yet one of her key passages, Zechariah 2:10–17, talks about “joining Yhwh” (v. 15). Although she interprets this to mean “joining the Israelite community” (p. 17), this is the same expression as found in Isaiah 56:6 (noted above as employing the Universalized Worship model). I do not see how this example differs from Isaiah 56, yet they are said to belong to two different models.

Similarly, one of the prime examples for the Standard Bearer model is Isaiah 2:2–4//Micah 3:1–5, of which it is said that “a sustained engagement in the cultic community is not an explicit part of the prophets’ message” (p. 12). Yet these passages show that the nations are taught God’s word and *torah*, they walk in God’s ways, and they go up to the “house of God” to worship. Are we to assume they do all this but are excluded from “engagement in the Israelite cultic community”? I see little difference between this and Zechariah 2:10–17.

The point is that I can find little to distinguish the passages which she puts under these three models. What I see from the examples and discussion she gives is a Subjugator model and then various versions of a Universalistic model. This is borne out when we look at the examples she gives from later Jewish literature. For example, she concludes that Asenath is an example of “a Gentile who worships the Jewish God without

assimilating into the Jewish community” (p. 75). She is insistent that Asenath does not convert. But Asenath gives up her Egyptian religion, renounces her idols, and worships the Jewish God. Most important, she marries Joseph. It seems surprising to me that we could still insist that she did not convert.

Also, Simkovich insists that in Tobit 14:6–7, *epistrepousin* does not mean “convert” (pp. 70–73). Granted, the word has a variety of meanings, but contrary to her statement, there are passages where it definitely means “convert,” as all the lexica show. The meaning is of course determined by the context, and we can debate about Tobit 14:6–7 and other passages. But Simkovich is so determined to prove her point that she has overstated her case by claiming that *epistrephein* never means convert. She concludes her discussion as follows: “The author of Tobit envisioned an end-time in which all of the nations would worship the One True God in a sustained manner. This included their taking on Jewish practices, but did not require their conversion” (p. 72). So they abandon their idols, they worship the One True God, they take on Jewish practices—but they do not convert! This is simply a strife over words. It would be interesting to know what Simkovich envisages by “conversion.”

But to return to overall impressions: While I think the organization of the book would have been better if it had been more inductively argued, and I think some of the particularist models are actually not really distinguishable from her universalistic model(s), she has done a good survey of some of the main passages and literature from the Prophets and also the Second Temple Jewish writings. She has consulted widely in the secondary literature. Her argument for Stoic influence on some of the Jewish writers is plausible and very likely, it seems to me. All in all, I think this is a useful addition to recent studies on this subject and has much of value to pass on to us.