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Review of Mark Leuchter, *The Polemics of Exile in Jeremiah 26-45*

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Recommended Citation

Carasik, Michael, "Review of Mark Leuchter, *The Polemics of Exile in Jeremiah 26-45*" (2009).
Departmental Papers (Jewish Studies). 7.
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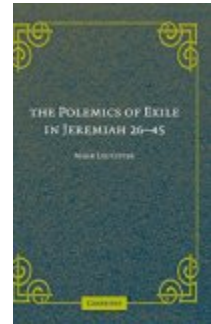
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Mark Leuchter. *The Polemics of Exile in Jeremiah 26-45*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. xiii + 320 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-87991-0.

Reviewed by Michael Carasik

Published on H-Judaic (January, 2009)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman



When Scribes Began to Prophesy

The Polemics of Exile is Leuchter's second book, following less than two years on the heels of his first, *Josiah's Reform and Jeremiah's Scroll: Historical Calamity and Prophetic Response* (2006) on which it apparently builds. (Leuchter has also co-edited a festschrift for Brian Peckham.) The publisher's Web site lists Leuchter as teaching at Hebrew College, the back flap of the book puts him at the University of Sydney, and he now in fact teaches at Temple University. So Leuchter is at the stage in his career where one wants to stake out an area of biblical studies in which to have an impact. This is indeed what he does with *The Polemics of Exile*.

The book is an analysis of chapters 26-45 of Jeremiah, which in Leuchter's view is a "Supplement" to chapters 1-25, "shaped by members of the literati living in Babylon, or at least by someone with strong ideological sympathies to that group" (p. 12). As the capital letter shows, he understands chapters 26-45 as an essentially integral work with a "pro-golah" orientation. Its author is both akin to the Shaphanides and a follower of Jeremiah, and has "access to an archive of material relating to Jeremiah's activity" (p. 17). ("Author" is Leuchter's shorthand for the "limited group of scribes"[16] that he finds responsible for the work.) The Shaphanides, as the reader of 2 Kings 22 and Jeremiah 36 might guess, are a group of court officials who preserved scribal traditions and advocated for Jeremiah's perspective during the exile.

The first four chapters of the book move carefully

through chapters 26, 27-32, 34-36, and 37-44 of Jeremiah, analyzing their composition and their incorporation of earlier materials from the prophet himself. Leuchter views most of chapter 32 and all of chapter 33 as additions to "the Supplement"; they are discussed in one of three excurses that deal with larger compositional issues, and in a fifth chapter that advocates for the Masoretic order of the book as more original than that of the Septuagint and contrasts the "Zadokite" program of Ezekiel with the "scribal counterstrategy" of the Supplement. A sixth chapter explains the connection between the Shaphanide scribes and the Levites, and a conclusion traces the influence of "the Jeremianic corpus" through its later manifestations in Deuteronomy itself, in Isaiah and Chronicles, and eventually in Mishnah Avot 1:1. The book concludes with eighty-four pages of endnotes, a bibliography, and three indices.

Leuchter's readings of specific texts in Jeremiah will primarily be of interest to scholars of that biblical book, but his overall thesis has larger implications. He understands "the Supplement" as carrying on the work of Jeremiah himself. Politically, this means that "the place that the Lord shall choose" of (Deuteronomy 31:11) was, "in keeping with the prophet's own religio-political thought" (p. 94), no longer Jerusalem but Babylon. It is the exiles, and specifically those from the preemptive exile of 597, who now constitute the true Israel. (Jeremiah 32:1-15 is meant to tell the 587 exiles to adopt the perspective of the 597 ones [p. 155]). Theologically, the Supplement is written from the perspective eventually taken

by M. Avot 1:1, “Moses received Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the men of the Great Assembly.” As Leuchter states in his conclusion, the fact that the men of the Great Assembly received Torah from the prophets means that “the scribes of the Great Assembly founded by Ezra bear the exegetical mantle of prophetic authority as well” (p. 193). The Shaphanides responsible for Jeremiah 26-45, according to Leuchter, were scribes who already understood themselves to bear this prophetic mantle.

Biblical scholars, and others who have been following the academic debates over biblical historiography, will understand that Leuchter’s territory is well over toward the maximalist side of the minimalist-maximalist spectrum. His remark that “Jehu’s purge [2 Kings 10:15-28] is a likely historical event, but the literature that depicts it was shaped as propaganda to justify it” (p. 95) is a pretty good general statement of his attitude. He notes that “there is no reason to doubt that [Jeremiah 35] is based on some actual memory or event” (p. 97) and devotes a long endnote to the “questionable” claim of William McKane (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah 2* [1996], 896-898) “that the plethora of

details points to a deliberate attempt to infuse a nonhistorical narrative with historical authenticity” (p. 232 n. 58). There is a certain “he said, she said” quality to this aspect of the argument, making me suspect that Leuchter’s work will not change anyone’s mind on this subject and is meant for those who already share his willingness to mine biblical texts for what they can tell us about times almost contemporary with them. (E.g., his proposed dating of the Supplement to ca. 570 “suggests that its authors did not take long to respond to the Zadokite threat” [p. 165].)

I myself find this attitude a congenial one, and I am also inclined to accept Leuchter’s notion that the shift from reliance on prophecy to reliance on texts began early and in a Deuteronomistic milieu. But Leuchter does not explain how the Shaphanides had access to a Jeremianic “archive” or how they paid the rent while working on this material. *The Polemics of Exile* will have to be engaged by anyone working on Jeremiah in the future, but others may be better served by getting an overview from the collection of articles edited by Leuchter in the *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*, “Scribes Before and After 587 BCE: A Conversation” (accessible at www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS/Articles/article_71.pdf).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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Citation: Michael Carasik. Review of Leuchter, Mark, *The Polemics of Exile in Jeremiah 26-45*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. January, 2009.

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