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Exodus and exile: the structure of the Jewish holidays

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This commentary is more exegetical than homiletical. Danker reserves most comments or suggested applications to witty side remarks or for comparisons, usually unfavourable, between modern authorities (religious and secular) and institutions existing during Jesus' earthly ministry. (Much of this perhaps comes from Danker's transition from teaching at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, to Semine Professor of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.) So also, he often refers to other commentators, either agreeing with them or contesting their viewpoints. A short but comprehensive bibliography aids the reader to pursue topics of interest.

Overall, this commentary is very thorough, indeed almost too much so. Danker's suggestion that one will be able to read it in several settings (1) is overly optimistic if he wishes the reader to absorb the material and wade through the parallels offered. It is a very important tool for understanding the Gospel in its original context and for discerning how to apply its teaching to the present day.

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Exodus and Exile: The Structure of the Jewish Holidays

Monford Harris
Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992
129 pages

Classic rabbinic thought supported the idea that there exist variant ways of interpreting Torah, of which all are legitimate. This is exemplified by the passage in *Bamidbar Rabbah* (13:15-16) proclaiming that "there are 70 modes of expounding the Torah". That sense of creative license is still very much alive within contemporary Judaism.

The tone of *Exodus and Exile*, therefore, must be viewed as problematic. For though the author does a thorough and creative job of illuminating the historical aspects of the Jewish holidays, and of putting them into the perspective of a theology consistent with an historical outlook, he does so at the expense of competing interpretations.

There can be no doubt, as Harris repeatedly points out, that Jewish "holidays embody a sense of time and historical reality" (1). In contrast to others, whose consciousness, he states, is "ahistorical... Jewish existence and, therefore, its celebrations have always been historically oriented" (2). The book explains the evolution of this historical consciousness and then proceeds to explain the historical orientation of each of the holidays from the vantage point of the Exodus to Exile phenomena. "Exodus and Exile

are the polarities of Jewish existence" (5), central themes which reverberate throughout the course of the calendar. Passover and Tishah B'Av "embody the two polarities of Jewish existence: Exodus and Exile" (88).

Though the thesis is sound, its presentation is misleading. The delegitimizing of mainstream, thoroughly Jewish interpretations of the holidays reaches its zenith in Harris' chapter on Sukkot: "The succah is neither agricultural space nor moralistic space. Neither is it dream space nor cosmological space." Amongst those interpretations which Harris negates is that of many medievalists whose explanation of the succah is perhaps the most significant moral lesson of the holiday. Classic Jewish thought would legitimize all of these interpretations; for Harris, however, the only legitimate interpretation of holidays is that which echoes the Exodus to Exile theme.

Consequently, the book may be considered valuable by those who are schooled in the richness of interpretation that is the heritage of the Jewish holidays. Those who, as a result of their own knowledge, are able to see through Harris' bias will appreciate the way the book enhances their understanding of one interpretation of Jewish holidays. Those who are not so well informed may, God forbid, conclude that there is only one valid interpretation.

It should be noted as well, and this is not necessarily a criticism, that *Exodus and Exile* must be read with dictionary in hand. From "bucolic" to "nonautochthonous" to "oneiric" to "neologism", the book is replete with vocabulary that pastor, student, and literate lay person might find challenging. Those who appreciate vocabulary will pick up their dictionary. Those who do not will put down the book.

In addition to the in-depth study of Jewish holidays from the perspective of their historicity *Exodus to Exile* contains a potpourri of obscure and valuable quotes. Topics such as intimacy, hearing, memory, and weeping, are not exclusively "Jewish", and the quotes that Harris has collected could be worked into many a sermon. Harris' tangents contain wisdom and insight. His questions are penetrating and his answers enlightening. Having been forewarned one will find reading this book a worthwhile investment of time.

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