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Review: Isaac, Benjamin *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*

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REVIEW: Isaac, Benjamin *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2004. Pp xiv + 563. Paper, \$31.95. ISBN 0691125988.

Benjamin Isaac's book, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, discusses the origins of racism. This book challenges the assumption that racism started in the Eighteenth Century, asserting that something as simple as judging people based on their heredity had to extend further back in history. He claims that racism is too narrowly defined to coincide with color prejudice and asserts the importance of knowing how and when racism began so that people can better understand how such prejudice can form. After discussing the nature of racism and claiming that it existed in antiquity, if only in the early, undeveloped form or "proto-racism," Isaac then goes on to interpret a wide variety of texts, from histories to dramas to letters to philosophical and medical treatises, showing the existence of racism. However, while Isaac likely has a point that racism does not come from nowhere, his method of looking for racism in the texts assumes a little too much about whole societies than can be found in such a small sample of writings. In this article, I will use reviews from David Noy and M. Lambert to show that, while Isaac has good points about the nature of racism, he also extrapolates his thinking too much, and has somewhat inconsistent interpretations of constitutes racism.

Benjamin Isaac's book begins with a section that lays out his thoughts on racism. The review by M. Lambert praises the book as an "academic tour-de-force" which it described as having "usability increased by clear structure." It is particularly keen on Isaac's definitions of race and racism, as well as his invention of the word "proto-racism," and their separation from ethnic prejudices.¹⁶ Isaac's book does do an interesting job of defining a very charged word, defining racism as "an attitude towards individuals and groups of peoples which posits a direct and linear connection between physical and mental qualities. It therefore attributes to those individuals and groups of peoples collective traits, physical, mental,

¹ Isaac, 405.

and moral, which are constant and unalterable by human will."¹⁷ He likely has a point stating that racism was not invented whole-cloth in the eighteenth century, and his definition for "proto-racism," his terms for early thoughts that follow this pattern, is "attribut[ing] to groups of people common characteristics considered to be unalterable because they are determined by external factors or heredity."¹⁸ Isaac does an interesting thing with these definitions, divorcing racism from necessarily having to attempt to create a scientific element or including a color-bias. Lambert feels that this definition is a step forward for race studies, and, sans a problem or two with Isaac's depiction of Rome's practice of feminizing foreigners, sees the book very positively.¹⁹ I tend to agree with Lambert that the definition of racism is interesting and compelling, but I disagree that the book is particularly clear.

David Noy's review makes the point that Isaac uses texts to represent widely held beliefs that may not have been intended to do so. Noy particularly criticizes Isaac for doing this with satires and oratories, but Isaac makes this assumption throughout the book.²⁰ Isaac's book looks at various forms of early prejudice. One such form is "the environmental theory" which stated that the climate that a people lived in would affect their physical and intellectual characteristics.²¹ Isaac rightly shows that the environmental theory led to prejudice and the thoughts of people belonging to "peoples of uniformly good or bad characters."²² But Isaac makes a leap when he ascribes this hypothesis to the whole. This happens when he links Hippocrates's *Airs, Waters, Places*, a medical text, to undisputed common assumption: "The theory is put forward here explicitly, but there can be little doubt that it was generally assumed to be a matter of course."²³ I do not think that justification can be assumed, at least not as an example of systemic racism, as Isaac shows other views as existing, and neglects to look at broad societal movements, sticking within the realm of ideas.²⁴ Isaac uses broad assumptions to get across his message that proto-racism existed, but does not show sufficient evidence to show that such racist thoughts, as opposed to general ethno-centrist thoughts, were particularly widespread.

Another problem with Isaac's work is its inconsistency in where it sees racism versus ethnic stereotyping. For example, Isaac states in his

² Isaac, 23.

³ Isaac, 38.

⁴ Isaac, 407.

⁵ Noy, 660.

⁶ Isaac, 55-56.

⁷ Isaac, 65.

⁸ Isaac, 76.

⁹ Noy 661

section on the Roman's views of the Germans that the Germans are a better people due to their purity: "we have...the undoubted assumption of the superiority of pure lineage: intermarriage between Germans and others would affect the quality of their offspring."²⁵ Isaac is making a big claim that this example of pure heritage was a proto-racist thought leading Romans to think of Germans as superior. However, when discussing the Jews, Isaac discusses the Roman distaste for this people, who were thought of as misanthropic. Isaac also discusses how the Jews were disliked for their apparent use of proselytizing to acquire new members to their religion.²⁶ However, Isaac does not link this mixing of peoples in proselytizing as an example of disliking the mixing of peoples. Rather, Isaac depicts all of the prejudices against the Jews as ethnic, and not proto-racist.²⁷ This inconsistency shows that Isaac does not always have a clear idea what separates ethnic prejudice from proto-racism.

Lambert points out that Isaac's book has "helpful summaries" and some "sensible conclusions," and that it is readable, but concludes that it never rises above a pedestrian work of analysis.²⁸ I tend to agree that, while Isaac includes some very helpful thoughts, including a thought-provoking definition of racism, and while it was a highly readable exposition, it did not make its case very effectively. Isaac's book left too much out to clearly link racism to these texts or define proto-racism as different from ethnic prejudices. While Isaac's book raises an interesting point about the history of racism, it never completely delivers, leaving too many questions unaddressed. However, the book does raise an interesting point and will hopefully inspire other scholars to follow up on this topic.

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- Noy, David. "Review: *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*." *Phoenix*. 59.3/4 (2005): 495-407.

¹⁰ Isaac, 436.

¹¹ Isaac, 451.

¹² Isaac, 482.

¹³ Lambert, 661.