

Introduction

In his oft-cited monograph *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, the historian of science Thomas S. Kuhn describes a phenomenon that is well known to scholars of the humanities.¹ When new evidence accumulates to the point that one can no longer sustain a current explanatory model, the scholar seeks to marshal old and new evidence into a new model that better accounts for *all* the data. Precisely such a restructuring of the evidence has occurred during the past half century among scholars of Second Temple Judaism.

The Renewed Study of Early Judaism

Descriptions of early Judaism written by Christian scholars in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century tended to contrast Judaism and Christianity. Judaism embodied, for the most part, the negative and inferior religious features that early Christianity would filter out. Dominating this picture was the rabbinic religion that these scholars extrapolated from the second- to fifth-century texts of the Mishnah, the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmudim, and the Midrashim. This allegedly “normative Judaism,” projected back chronologically into the Hellenistic and early Roman periods, was legalistic; the Jews, these scholars claimed, were fixated on keeping the letter of the Law in the hope of receiving divine reward. Alongside this description scholars also found a set of dichotomies within Judaism, especially as ancient Jewish apocalyptic texts were discovered and published. One might contrast legalism with apocalypticism, praising the prophetic spirit of the latter and seeing in it some seeds for early Christian messianism, or one might criticize apocalyptic Judaism

for its fanciful speculation and contrast it with the high ethical quality of the biblical prophets. Apocalyptic literature, with its eschatological focus, was a foil to the ethical emphasis in wisdom literature. In general, however, Christian scholarship—taught in seminaries and preached from the pulpit—portrayed Judaism as a whole as the dark religious backdrop before which were played out the liberating events of the life of Jesus and the rise of the early church. Jewish scholars, for their part, ignored the writings of the so-called Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, and focused their attention on the study of Scripture, especially the Torah, and its authoritative exposition in the ancient rabbinical corpus. Here one found God's will if one searched for it. Thus Jewish and Christian scholars were poles apart.

But since the 1950s a major shift has taken place among those concerned with the study of Judaism. At least four factors have contributed to the revolution. (1) Manuscripts discovered in the caves around the Dead Sea and the findings of Syro-Palestinian archaeology have supplied a wealth of new primary evidence about the history, religion, and culture of Judaism in this period. (2) Methods imported from literary studies and the social sciences have provided new tools for analyzing the sources, and scholars have become more self-conscious about their methods and methodology. (3) Related to this, the development of departments of religious studies in public and private universities in North America has created a context in which ancient religious texts and phenomena can be studied from a historical rather than a Christian theological perspective. (4) In part, these approaches have been encouraged by Christian reflection on the Holocaust, which has called into serious question the old polemical and denigrating descriptions of early Judaism that were generated, in large part, from Christian theological agendas.

These new data, new methods, and new settings have changed the face of scholarship. First, the publication of the initial Qumran Scrolls catalyzed renewed study of the old sources that had long been known, and the new methods and settings shed new light on them. Second, the discovery of these Hebrew and Ara-

maic scrolls in the Holy Land, just at the time of the founding of the State of Israel, piqued the interest of Jewish scholars, for whom these languages were their daily fare, and they began now to look also at the nonrabbinic texts to which they had previously paid little attention. Thus the combined work of scholars bringing to the sources a variety of interests, a multiplicity of religious and cultural perspectives, and significant differences in their training further enhanced the quest to shed new light on ancient times.

As a result of these developments, old stereotypes perpetuated in Christian literature about Judaism have collapsed, and the broader horizon has enriched the Jewish study of ancient Judaism. What is beginning to emerge is a picture of a variegated Judaism, a spectrum with many hues and blends, a religious and cultural phenomenon influenced by the specifics of the Jews' historical circumstances and inseparable from their non-Jewish environment.

It is important to emphasize that the picture is only *beginning* to emerge. The texts of most of the major Qumran Scrolls, to take one example, have been available for up to a half century now. However, the complex nature of the evidence, as well as the accidents of preservation, give pause to the careful historian. Indeed, the fragmentary condition of much of the Scroll material is a kind of parable for the shape and character of our evidence. We can see only bits and pieces of the reality, and we see it darkly through a glass. Nonetheless, a revolution in our understanding of antiquity has begun, and the old schemes and explanatory models no longer work. It is a time for cautious and conscientious construction of new models.

Implications for the Study of Christian Origins

One of the corollaries of the emerging new picture of early Judaism is the need to reassess our hypotheses about the rise of Christianity. If the church developed in the matrix of Judaism and the mother was very different from what we have imagined and described, then we must reconsider the nature of the child, the circumstances of its birth, and the reasons for its youthful separation from its mother and its home. Yet it is fair to say that scholars of the New Testament and Christian origins devote relatively little time to major developments in the reinterpretation

of early Judaism and even less time to the study of the ancient primary sources. Although many in the academy see themselves as historians of the religions of antiquity, in large part they focus their efforts on the foundational, authoritative documents of Christianity—the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

The reasons are understandable enough. The study of Judaism has become a highly specialized endeavor. Add to the factors mentioned in the previous paragraphs the fact that many of the primary texts have been preserved in second- and third-hand translations written in relatively inaccessible ancient languages like Syriac, Ethiopic, Coptic, Church Slavonic, Armenian, and Georgian, and the barrier can seem insurmountable. In addition, over the past decades the study of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament has grown like the stone of Daniel 2 into a mountain of literature that defies the scholar to master it while challenging her or him to add to its mass. Given the law of inertia and the limits of the workday, it is little wonder that important aspects of the renewed study of early Judaism remain *terra incognita* for scholars whose professional responsibilities as teachers are centered on the study of early Christianity.² But the fact remains that a revolution in Judaic studies has occurred, and it is imperative for students of early Christianity to take this into account.

The renewed study of early Judaism has three kinds of implications for the study of Christian origins.

Historical

As the new evidence helps us to construct new models of early Judaism, it requires, in turn, that we reshape our understanding of the rise of early Christianity and the circumstances of its separation from Judaism. On the one hand, Christianity arose from a particular strand of a variegated first-century Judaism. On the other hand, earliest Christianity, attested in the New Testament, brought with it much of the diversity of first-century Judaism. New Testament studies in the past decades have, indeed, emphasized the diversity of early Christianity.³ Attention to the diversity of early Judaism helps us better to perceive, understand, and appreciate this early Christian diversity.

Theological

As we make substantial adjustments in our writing of the history of this period, some equally significant theological questions arise for those concerned about such matters. The writings of the New Testament are thoroughly confessional, substantially apologetic, and significantly polemical. To no small extent these apologetic and polemical edges are directed toward and against contemporary Judaism. Much of the New Testament's picture of Judaism is governed by a desire to prove that the church, not the synagogue, is the true embodiment and continuation of the religion of Israel. While this is an interesting historical phenomenon in its own right, it has had massive and deleterious effects on human history. The past nineteen centuries of Jewish–Christian interactions are complex from every point of view, but much of the dark side of this history is a function of the portrayal of Judaism in the authoritative documents of the New Testament. And much Christian theology and preaching have not caught up with historiography.

Methodological

Several methodological implications follow from these observations and pertain both to the writing of history and to the construction of theology. The purely accidental discovery of the Qumran Scrolls has taught us historians something that we neglect at our own professional peril. Our evidence is spotty, and the preservation and recovery of much of it are the result of accident and serendipity. Where the configuration of the evidence is systematic, this is due largely to ancient purposeful decisions to preserve one text or to destroy another and has little to do with the modern scientist's concern to collect a "representative sample." We are at the mercy of weather, worms, invading armies, and the zeal of the self-defined righteous and orthodox long since dead. The discovery of the Scrolls has helped us to see this with a clarity that was hitherto not possible.

Yet how much have we really learned? Although the evidence from the Scrolls has shown us how little we really knew before, the influx of new evidence tempts us to the conclusion that now

we know much better how things really were, what the grand shape of reality was. But the nature of the new evidence—which constitutes a window onto a hitherto unimagined complexity—warns us against facile conclusions and invites us to scholarly humility and honest tentativeness about our historical conclusions. Before 1947 we were blissfully unaware that the Scrolls would blow our hypotheses about the shape of early Judaism out of the water. We need to keep a copy of the Scrolls on our desks, both because we can learn from their content and because they remind us that once we did not know that they existed.

The construction of new models of early Judaism and the circumstances of the rise of Christianity raise important questions for theologians. What happens, or should happen, when one discovers that theology is based on wrong history? It bears some serious reflection that the church has canonized documents that were written in its youth, in the heat of a polemic begotten of its identity crisis with Judaism, and that these early, highly tendentious, historically conditioned documents of the New Testament remain the yardstick for anti-Jewish and apocalyptic theologies.

These observations are not intended to undercut the uniqueness and value of these texts as theological benchmarks. The question is of a different sort. Is there sufficient elasticity in the understanding of tradition to recognize that the texts of Scripture are themselves the crystallization of moments in the tradition and to seek, cherish, and recognize the value of other moments in that tradition? Catholicism and Orthodoxy, with their understanding of the complementarity of Scripture and tradition, can perhaps more easily adopt this approach than can Protestantism, with its emphasis on *sola scriptura*.

The Scrolls press a final question upon us that is methodological in a way; it is peculiar to the age of the mass media, and its application sweeps across the academy and beyond it. How do scholars responsibly communicate their tentative, ambiguous, and complex findings and hypotheses to a public institution (the media) and a public that, comprising laypeople, have difficulty digesting this tentativeness, ambiguity, and complexity? The recent controversy about the unavailability of certain of the Scrolls, whatever its justifica-

tion, was fed by misinformation, exaggerations, and half-truths uncritically repeated by media that were either unable to understand the issues or unwilling to sort them out.

The Task and Scope of This Book

In this book I attempt to present a broad and synthetic picture of some of the results of modern scholarship on early Judaism, organized around a number of traditional topics. One can argue that the old topics are no longer valid and that one should “dismantle” and “reassemble” the structures and categories.⁴ Robert Kraft and I have already sketched such a picture of the history of post–World War II research on Judaism as the introduction to a volume that is organized according to historical topics and genres of literature.⁵ Here, however, it seemed profitable for pedagogical purposes to retain the scholarly and theological categories and to attempt to redefine them.

Such organization according to topics has necessitated some overlap in their treatment. However, their order unfolds a developing perspective. (1) *Scripture and tradition* are a fundamental category. (2) My discussion of *torah* expands on an aspect of Scripture that is obviously connected with the broad and basic concern of biblical and postbiblical Jewish religion that one should live a *righteous life* in accordance with God’s revealed will. (3) The covenantal rewards for such conduct are sometimes construed as “salvation,” but this term is often inappropriate with reference to the more general notion of divine rewards and blessings, which need not involve saving someone *from* something. As a more inclusive category, I have chosen *God’s activity in behalf of humanity*. (4) In the Jewish writings of the Greco-Roman period, this divine activity in its many forms was increasingly attributed to a variety of human and transcendent agents. I have chosen the expression “*agents of God’s activity*” rather than the common term “christology” in order to demonstrate that this latter term actually encompasses a range of New Testament speculation about Jesus that is based on a number of nonmessianic Jewish models. (5)

Eschatology is less a discrete topic than a dimension or horizon on which any of the previous topics may be set at a given time. (6) Religious conceptions do not exist in a vacuum; they speak to specific *contexts* and function within concrete social and cultural *settings*. In my conclusion I summarize and synthesize my findings, indicating where issues remain unsettled, and suggest some possible directions for future study.

The chapters (except chapter 6) are organized into two main sections. The first discusses the findings of contemporary research on early Judaism. The second sketches some of the implications of this research for a possible reinterpretation of Christian origins. Since the latter is the *raison d'être* for this book, I have been selective in the sections on Judaism, discussing what seems profitable for a study of early Christianity. A more exhaustive treatment of the former would require a much longer book and should await detailed analyses of recently published Dead Sea Scrolls material. Both sections of the individual chapters emphasize the diversity in early Judaism and early Christianity and use this dimension in a comparative way that highlights both the continuities and the discontinuities between the two traditions.

The sources for my discussion are twofold. The first includes a mass of scholarly literature on Judaism, which I have been able to cite only selectively. In doing this I have also used the opportunity to synthesize my own research and publications.⁶ The second source consists of half a century of publication on the origins of Christianity and especially its early relationship to Judaism. I have also put into print some of my own unpublished reflections and discoveries. In citing the scholarly literature on Judaism and Christianity, I kept in mind the diverse audiences for which I intend this book. Sometimes I cite technical articles and monographs. In other cases I refer to dictionary articles and commentaries that synthesize and provide responsible entrée into the mass of technical literature.

The sections of the chapters that deal with early Christianity are more suggestive than demonstrative. This reflects the fact that, in my view, a major agenda has yet to be developed and executed. It is my hope that these pages will provide some impetus in that direction.