



Introduction

The present volume is designed to illustrate certain salient points about Judaism as it developed in the last two centuries B.C.E. and in the century after the birth of Jesus. In this crucial period the patterns were set in which Judaism grew and developed for the next two millennia and in which Christianity arose and took on its enduring form.

Because this period was so crucial for the two faiths, both Jews and Christians have tended to see the Judaism from which they issued in an oversimplified fashion. Jews have generally seen the religion of this age as merely a forerunner of the rabbinic Judaism that became dominant; Christianity has tended to interpret it in light of the attitudes toward Judaism found in the New Testament and earliest Christian literature—many of which were generated in the heat of Jewish-Christian polemic. In fact, both of these assessments underestimate the great variety of religious belief, expression, and practice that existed in early postbiblical Judaism.

Indeed, what is most remarkable about Judaism before the destruction of the temple is the wealth of its spiritual and conceptual world. Not only were there many Jewish groups, but these groups generated a broad range of religious ideas and expression. One major concern was the attempt to work out the implications of living according to the will of God and of interpreting God's relationship to Israel that was expressed in the covenant on Sinai and in all that flowed from it. Ideas developed about the fate of humanity, the providence and justice of God, the purpose of history, and other issues lying at the heart of human concern. Indeed, the Jewish texts of this age foreshadow most of the answers that were later given to the basic problems of humanity, its relationship to God, and its life in the world.

The piety and spirituality of Jews in this age had many faces. One aspect was reverence for the temple and its service; a second was a devotion to God that led people to join a "monastic" community in the desert such as that of the Essenes; a third was practical and sensible instruction that reflects the desire to conduct oneself and one's daily life in a fashion pleasing to God and acceptable to one's

fellows. By seeking insight into these aspects and others, we can perceive something of the attitudes that permeated the Judaism of that time.

Because we direct this work to nonexperts, we have eschewed the technicalities of the scholarly debate and have presented certain essential concerns and concepts as the ancient texts themselves express them. To facilitate this presentation, we have selected half a dozen vitally important topics and have assembled texts and documents that illustrate these topics graphically and clearly. It is from the study of the ancient texts themselves that we gain an insight into the literary, religious, and social variety of the Judaism of the age. Moreover, when we assemble from different sources texts focused around a single theme, the diversity of perceptions, as well as shared underlying assumptions, stand out clearly. The six topics we have chosen illustrate different modalities of Jewish religious thinking and life of the period, they embody important creative thought, and they set forth conceptions that have had a profound influence on later Jewish and Christian thinking.

Chapter 1 illustrates the variety of Jewish life in the large number of sects and parties that existed in this period. These different groups comprised the social reality in which beliefs were developed and piety was practiced, for Judaism was basically a religion of the community, not of the individual living alone or in isolation. We have discussed only the most important of these many groups. It is extremely important to realize, moreover, that our knowledge of them derives from biased sources—whether the bias be that of partial documents of the groups themselves or of tendentious attacks by their opponents. The truth about the groups, of course, lies somewhere in-between. Insight into these groups provides a “road map” for tracing the location of the religious ideas, and so it is crucial for understanding the social and religious history of the period.

In this age, Judaism was a religion of the temple; at its heart stood the sanctuary on Mount Zion in Jerusalem (chapter 2). This temple was a center of sacrificial worship of God. Here Jews came to express their joy in God, their contrition before God, and their awe at God’s work of creation. Much of the Book of Psalms is the prayer book of the temple. The temple was a central economic, spiritual, and legal institution of Judaism. Jews today find it difficult to appreciate that at the center of the spiritual life of their ancestors stood an institution in which animal sacrifices, libations, incense offerings, and other priestly actions were thought to have real sacred efficacy. Judaism today has much less of this sense of what Christians might call a sacrament. Christians too, and Protestant Christians in particular, have found it difficult to comprehend or to sympathize with the idea of temple. They tend to identify their faith with that of the prophets; and the prophets, like Jesus after them, attacked the abuse of temple worship uncompromisingly, though not the temple worship itself. This distinction, however, has often been lost. So, if we are to understand ancient Judaism, it is absolutely essential to appreciate the importance of the temple and its cult. Thus our selection of texts and our exposition of them present some aspects both of the material institution of the temple and of its spiritual importance and character.

At the same time, we have traced traditions that reflect a critique of the temple and hopes for a new and better temple.

Piety, however, was not expressed only in worship at the temple. Human action generally is central to the way Judaism showed its fervent desire to conform to the God's will. This action took many forms, but it was—and it remains—the central aspect of Jewish religious life. As a means of presenting some of the varieties of Jewish religiousness, we have emphasized, in chapter 3, exhortations to the religious life. Some of these call on people to follow the path of upright and just action, devotion, love of God, and righteousness toward their fellows. Others summon the individual to a rigorously disciplined life in a desert community with strict rules, habits, and customs. Still other texts set up the sage, the wise teacher and expounder of the Torah, as the ideal pattern. It is important to view these and other Jewish religious ideals over against the stereotype often perpetuated in studies of early Judaism that present Judaism as a dry, legalistic, external faith obsessed with the idea that God kept an account of one's deeds in a balance book. The fervor of some of the texts also reminds us that modern Jewish presentations of the religion of this ancient period have too often been typified by an overintellectualization of its ancient patterns.

At the root of much Jewish thinking is the belief in God's justice. This is not simply the idea that God rewards people somehow for their good or evil deeds, but also the belief that the just and righteous God will vindicate the faithful in times of crisis. This belief—which enfolds the basic urge to show forth the righteousness of the Deity—was a primary motive in the development of the expectation of judgment at the end of days. This is the subject matter of chapter 4. In that final judgment, then, God's justice would be apparent in the vindication of the righteous and their deliverance from their enemies. Belief in God's justice and judgment, which took on its enduring forms in this age, became a basic part of both Judaism and Christianity. For the New Testament, and for Christianity after it, God's act of vindication par excellence was the resurrection of Jesus. The last judgment has also played an important role in Christian thought, although Reformation polemics have obscured for Protestant Christians the thrust of New Testament texts that speak of a judgment on the basis of one's deeds. The hope and expectation of divine vindication rooted in the justice of God sustained the Jewish people through the vicissitudes suffered during the two thousand years of their exile.

In some Jewish texts, God alone is depicted as the executor of judgment. More often, however, judgment and vindication were expected to come by means of an agent. It was not that the Jews, as a single dogmatic group, awaited *the* Messiah. The variety of Judaism is reflected in a spectrum of beliefs as to who would be God's agent (chapter 5). The Messiah, the son of David, the future king of Israel, is perhaps the best known of these. But there were others. Some texts speak of two Messiahs—a priest and a king. Others anticipate a future supernatural judge and redeemer, created before the world and enthroned with God. Sometimes this figure is entitled "Son of Man"; elsewhere he is called Melchizedek.

Yet other texts speak of a tribunal in which Abel, the son of Adam and the first righteous man, will judge the souls of the dead. Appreciation of this variety of figures is crucial for understanding the message of Jesus and the responses to him in the Jewish community. Moreover, the different expectations provided a variety of instruments by which Christianity could understand and interpret the special personality and role of Jesus. Because the person and work of Jesus are central to Christianity, we have illustrated the spectrum of New Testament belief by means of a relatively large number of texts. The belief in divine deliverance and the expectation of a messianic deliverer at the end of days has also been crucial to Jewish thought over the centuries, and indeed, these ideas comprise one of the major contributions of second temple Judaism to the ongoing thought of Israel.

In our final chapter, "Lady Wisdom and Israel," we trace the development of wisdom from practical teaching to an almost mythological figure, depicted as female. She becomes the Wisdom of God, a personality separate from God and acting along with God in the world, particularly in the drama of creation and redemption. Behind this development may lie older mythological patterns. The teachings of proverbial wisdom books were infused with these patterns, and then mythologized Wisdom was identified with the Torah. Thus the Torah itself took on a cosmic role. In the growth of the idea of wisdom, we perceive the development of conceptual structures that intersected and cross-fertilized one another, shaping early Christian thought and modifying the Judaism contemporary to it. For the rabbis it became self-evident that wisdom is the Torah, by which the world is constituted. Early Christianity, on the other hand, used the language and terminology of wisdom to express and interpret the person and activity of Jesus. He was Wisdom that became incarnate in order to redeem the creation.

Our presentation of these texts and our commentary on them are designed, then, to provide a better appreciation of the varieties of Jewish belief and practice at the turn of the era. This period is crucial for an understanding of the history of Judaism and the rise and development of Christianity, for at this time the types of Jewish religion were many, and they developed and were formulated in complex social settings. The literature of this period allows us to perceive this richness and diversity. The subsequent course of political events led to the destruction of the temple (70 C.E.), with the loss of national independence and the exile of many Jews. This in turn brought about a certain withdrawal, consolidation, and conscious delimitation of variety, and as a result, many of the types of Jewish thought and piety that were earlier vital and living disappeared from sight.

Since our purpose is to illustrate Judaism of the second-temple period, particularly from the second century B.C.E. on, we have presented the texts in their own right and we have interpreted them in their historical contexts. We do not view them, nor do we present them, as mere adjuncts to the study of the New Testament or as examples of a forerunner of rabbinic Judaism. Admittedly, that type of Judaism existed in this period, and we have adduced texts belonging to

it. Nonetheless, it was not the sole form of Judaism, nor, we maintain, a normative one. For this reason, our presentation is not weighted in favor of those forms of Judaism that later became dominant. It would be foolish, of course, to deny that both Christianity and rabbinic Judaism grew out of this age and that from the study of it a great deal can be learned about the predecessors of the rabbis and about the ground from which Christianity sprang. For this reason, we have concluded each chapter with rabbinic and early Christian texts that illustrate the further developments of the faith and piety that characterized the early Judaism and with which this volume is primarily concerned.

The ancient texts illustrate the multiplicity of forms of Jewish religious expression. Nonetheless, at the present state of knowledge, they cannot tell us very much about the actual social relationships between their authors and proponents or tradents. Some insight into these may be gained from the texts dealing with sects and parties (chapter 1); however, the sort of historical evidence at our disposal does not enable us to make decisive and final statements. Even if we could describe the actual situation at a given point in the second temple period, that too might be misleading if viewed as a key to the understanding of later realities. So, for example, what must have been a minor group during this period—the early Christian community—became widespread and extremely important in the coming centuries. So did another of the streams of Judaism that was inherited by the rabbis.

Into our discussion we have introduced a number of parallels from Greco-Roman religion. These show that Judaism did not live in a vacuum, but was influenced and affected by the religious currents of the broader world, although it modified and contained them according to its own particular character.

The format of the book was designed to provide a balance between the texts and some necessary interpretation. The emphasis is on the texts. Accordingly, we have kept our introductions to the chapters and to the individual texts as brief as we could so that the reader encounters the texts themselves as quickly as possible. Nonetheless, texts written in one age and place always require explanation for the readers of a later age and a different culture. We have provided such explanation, in brief form, through formatting, titling, notes, and summary expositions. It should be emphasized that we intend the introductions, texts, and summary expositions to be read as a continuous whole. That is, each chapter is a selective treatment of a particular aspect of the religion of early postbiblical Judaism.

In our commentary on the texts, we have attempted to avoid gender-specific language, especially when it applies to the Deity. In the translations themselves, recognizing the cultural contexts that generated these texts (which should not be ignored in a historical treatment), and not wishing to tinker with other people's work, we have left the masculine pronouns referring to the Deity stand, as well as the use of "man" and "men" for "humanity," "human beings," or "people."

For practical reasons, we have limited the number of topics to be treated. The study of other topics would provide a broader and more comprehensive

view of early Judaism, better insight into the wealth of its religious expression, and a greater sensitivity to its complexities. Such additional topics would include the interpretation and exposition of Scripture; the view of the world and humanity; personal religious experience; individual and communal prayer and devotion; regulations and law to guide one to the righteous life; magic and astrology; and speculations about the nature of the world, the geography of heaven and earth, and their human and superhuman forces. Although we have not dealt with these topics, the material that has been selected offers the reader a firsthand encounter with exciting and unusual religious thinking and with documents that are highly significant for the development of biblical religion and religious thought.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Companion Books

The topical approach of this reader is complementary to three books by the authors:

Michael E. Stone, *Scriptures, Sects, and Visions: A Profile of Judaism from Ezra to the Jewish Revolts* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980; repr. Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2005).

Discusses a number of aspects of Jewish religion as these are understood by modern scholars. Thus it deals especially with the impact of recent discoveries on our understanding of the development of Judaism. The book has a brief "Key to Ancient Writings" as well as an index that, as far as the modern discussion of the history of the religion of Judaism is concerned, will help the reader find material that illustrates, expands, and supplements what is presented here.

George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins: Diversity, Continuity, and Transformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

A detailed exposition of the topics in the present book, drawing on a wider range of texts and comparing and contrasting Judaism and first century Christianity. Topics include Scripture and Tradition, Torah and the Righteous Life, God's Activity in Behalf of Humanity, Agents of God's Activity, Eschatology, Contexts and Settings.

George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature between the Bible and the Mishnah: A Historical and Literary Introduction* (2nd ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

A detailed exposition of the literary works produced in this period, understood in the historical context in which they were created, and set within the tradition of biblical literature, both of the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. A

CD-ROM contains the full, searchable text of the book, a library of almost one hundred photographs that bring the texts and the locations to life, along with a Study Guide that includes chapter summaries, study questions, and links to important Web sites. A detailed topical index provides access to documents and references that illustrate the subjects discussed in the texts printed in the present volume.

General Bibliography

Each chapter of this book concludes with a bibliography of sources quoted and of selected works for further study.

Texts from the Apocrypha have been taken from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible (rather than from the New Revised Standard Version, which is sometimes shaped more by contemporary sensitivities than by attention to the texts' historical context and worldview). Normally, those from the Jewish Pseudepigrapha have been taken from the translations in the collection of R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913), vol. 2, or they have been translated anew by the authors. We have drawn our translations of the Dead Sea Scrolls from a number of sources.

However, since there is no "canonical" translation of the ancient texts that have been preserved in Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin, the reader may wish to consult alternative translations, particularly in the case of difficult or obscure passages. The Apocrypha are included in many modern translations of the Christian Bible. The Pseudepigrapha are gathered in the collections edited by James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (2 vols.; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983, 1985), and H. F. D. Sparks, *The Apocryphal Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984). More or less full collections of the Dead Sea Scrolls include Florentino García Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English* (Leiden: Brill/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); Florentino García Martínez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Study Edition* (2nd ed.; 2 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1997) (with facing Hebrew/Aramaic text and English translation); Donald W. Parry and Emanuel Tov, eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Reader* (6 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2004); Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (New York: Penguin, 1997); Michael Wise, Martin Abegg Jr., and Edward Cook, eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005).

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Michael E. Stone, ed., *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period* (CRINT 2.2; Assen: van Gorcum/Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). A sound introduction to the literature of the age, presented according to its literary genres.

Hermann L. Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (rev. by Günther Stemberger; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).