Reviews


This eirenic book is remarkable for its author's determined effort to place a description of the development of rabbinic Judaism side by side with a picture of the growth of Christianity in order to demonstrate both that the two religions were based on a common 'root metaphor' which they inherited from first-century Palestinian Judaism and that Judaism, as much as Christianity, changed dramatically in the ensuing centuries. Since Segal's view in this respect is undoubtedly right, and his emphasis on it is in striking contrast to the mass of scholarship which treats the two religious traditions entirely separately, his study is much to be applauded. Indeed, since his prose is accessible and lightly sprinkled with illuminating anthropological and sociological observations and parallels, Rebecca's Children has already been not only much praised but also much read.

Which raises some problems, because it is in the nature of a general survey which attempts an overall synthesis of religious change from the sixth century B.C. to late antiquity to skate too quickly over difficult issues and to provoke disagreement without always finding space to propose solutions. Segal's decision to use minimal footnotes while aiming at clarity precludes much attention to dissenting views even on controversial questions. This is a trait which may mislead unwary students, for although his detailed analysis tends to be traditional and conservative (as, for instance, in his description of the Sadducees), he occasionally without real warning espouses much more radical views, particularly in his depiction of the role of Paul in early Christianity. And the rather patchwork organization of his observations on early Judaism is sometimes open to criticism in itself, not least because of an occasional failure to stress sufficiently distinctions between material of different periods, as in the section on the synagogue (pp. 41-3) in which archaeological evidence from late Roman times is inserted, with due cautionary remarks, into the chapter on 'society in the time of Jesus'. But perhaps it is wrong to carp at the product of Segal's desire to get as much as possible into what is intended as an overview, particularly when he has been conspicuously successful in incorporating large amounts of illuminating translated source material in extended quotations.

More significant, because Segal treats it as one of his major conclusions, is his rather curious picture of rabbinic Judaism after 70 as a new universalistic religion of personal piety which should be seen, according to him, as parallel in this respect to early Christianity. This seems to me a rather perverse view of both religions. It ignores the recurrent denigration of non-Jews in rabbinic texts as the rabbis tried to sanctify Israel by contrast, and it overlooks the quite rapid development in the post-Constantinian Roman empire of the political notion of a Christendom co-extensive with the imperial frontiers, while it plays down the importance of personal piety and universalist hopes in Judaism before the first century. Such features were to be found in the Jewish-Christian tradition at all periods without being wholly dominant at any time.

In sum, it seems to me that Segal has done a great service in stimulating scholars and students to ask some of the right questions, but that his own answers to those questions are not very convincing. Nonetheless, students of both Judaism and
Christianity in the early Roman empire will do well to start their investigations from his viewpoint, in which the similarities between the two religious traditions are seen to outweigh their differences.

In starting with his questions they should not, I think, end with them. What is notably missing from Segal's book is the last part of the subtitle, the Roman world. He ignores the problem that the social situations which encouraged Jews and Christians to interpret differently their shared ‘root metaphor’ of the covenant between God and Israel were themselves no longer shared situations by the end of the first century A.D. As he shows himself well aware, most Christians from a very early date were not Jewish either by birth or by inclination. Conversely, rabbinic Jews were rarely encouraged to make explicit statements about their sibling religion. For both Jews and Christians during most of the early centuries the real threat lay not in each other but in paganism. After Robin Lane Fox's brilliant Pagans and Christians (1986), and Segal's laudable contribution reviewed here, what is needed next is a conflation of the two approaches to produce a history of Jews, Christians and pagans in the Roman world.

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This book, which deals with the Eden narrative in Genesis 2–3, is a revised version of a doctoral thesis which was written under the direction of Frank Moore Cross. As such, it resembles other Harvard theses which discuss Ugaritic and Akkadian parallels to biblical myth: The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament by R. J. Clifford is one obvious example. Parallels to the garden theme, the rivers, trees, serpent, etc. are cited from various sources, and Wallace makes the interesting observation that ancient Near Eastern literature has nothing that is similar to the tree of knowledge, although there are many parallels to the tree of life. The book also provides detailed discussions of the meaning of 'knowing good and evil', and of the name 'Eve' and its relation to Semitic words for 'serpent'. Ugaritic and Akkadian passages are cited in transliteration and translation. Unfortunately, the Akkadian transliterations are reproduced from standard editions which are often seriously outdated: for example, Campbell Thompson's (1930) transliteration of the Gilgamesh Epic uses an obsolete transliteration system and is inaccurate by modern standards.

The Eden Narrative also deals with broader questions relating to oral literature. In the first chapter, Wallace surveys previous studies of the Eden story and comments on a trend away from earlier attempts to discover separate literary sources behind the existing account. At the same time, recent studies show a continuing awareness of tensions within the story, which are usually resolved in terms of 'oral variants' from a pre-literary stage. (Structuralist studies are noted, but given short shrift.) Wallace agrees with this trend, but suggests that biblical scholars need to move beyond Gunkel's conception of oral literature and look at more recent folklore studies by Parry, Lord and others.

It is easy to agree with Wallace's view that biblical scholars should take note of contemporary folklore studies, but the work of Parry and Lord is concerned with Yugoslavian epic poetry and its relevance to the Homeric epics. This is hardly the