Reviews


For reviews of this ambitious and well-intentioned but only partially successful book, the reader need look no further than the book itself. In a brief ‘preview’ to the volume (pp. xvii–xxii), the editor of JJS magisterially summarizes the contributions, not always without strong criticism, while a fine description of the project can be found on the back cover in the carefully phrased imprimatur of L. H. Schiffman: ‘There can be no question of the significance of the parallel study of the history of Judaism and Christianity in Late Antiquity. Some of the essays in this volume represent the most up-to-date research by leading authorities in their respective fields.’ But if only ‘some’, which? And is the study about whose significance there is no question the one presented here?

The prime aim of Hershel Shanks’s book is to confront readers with the fact that rabbinic Judaism and Christianity developed in parallel from identical origins over six centuries. The same aim lay behind Alan Segal’s much slimmer volume, Rebecca’s Children (1986). Hershel Shanks, by contrast, wanted detail. He has achieved it by asking eight scholars to contribute in their own special fields, four to write about different periods of Jewish history, four about Christianity from Jesus to the Arab Conquest. It does not seem to have been part of the brief of the main contributors to ponder the other side of the religious divide, and those who do offer comparisons essay only brief remarks. Instead, the parts of the book are subjected to the six-page preview by Geza Vermes to which I have already referred, and a final overview by James Charlesworth in which he seems remarkably unaware of the contents of the previous eight chapters. Hershel Shanks himself provides a brief preface (pp. xv–xvi), observing correctly that the histories of rabbinic Judaism and Christianity differ very considerably but offering no explanation of, or conclusion from, this fact. His touch as an editor is very light; it seems charmingly naive for the editor of Biblical Archaeology Review, which thrives on controversy, to express his surprise in the preface (p. xvi) at the extent of disagreement among scholars on how to approach his subject.

The main value of the book lies in the detailed histories, and fortunately some of these are very good. In general, the chapters are clearly written, sensibly and fully documented, and adorned with a commendable number of citations of primary evidence and some superb photographs.

Within the detailed narratives, little causes any surprise, since most of these authors have written extensively on the same topics in the past. That they vary greatly in their tone and approach even among those discussing the same religion reflects in part the different traditions of their academic disciplines: of the chapters on Christianity, the contribution by Howard Clark Kee, on ‘Christianity through Paul’, has the strongest undercurrent of theological debate as is customary in New Testament scholarship, while the chapters by Harold Attridge on Christianity from 70 to 312 (an excellent survey) and by Denis Groh on late-Roman and Byzantine Christianity are packed with allusions to obscure theological controversies which there is insufficient space to elucidate. (One wonders who many of the names of heresies will mean anything to the ordinary readers at whom the book is aimed.) The historians of Judaism have more of a shared approach, reflecting similar academic backgrounds. The freshest contribution seems to me the section of Isaiah Gafni’s chapter on ‘The World of the Talmud’ which deals with the history of rabbinic Judaism after 425 C.E. in Palestine and Babylonia.
The hand of the editor is rarely visible in any of this. Some obscure terms and references in the narrative are glossed, and occasional boxes inset into the text contain elucidation of particular problems, usually concerning the nature and use of the evidence, but, for the rest, each contribution stands on its own. That contradictions between different parts of the text are neither reconciled nor indicated is surely a drawback in a work apparently intended as a textbook (according to the citation of Jacob Milgrom on the back cover), since readers may simply be confused. It would also have been desirable to request those authors who put forward views with which other scholars strongly disagree to indicate such disagreement in the footnotes; of the contributors to *Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism*, some do, but others (e.g. Louis Feldman, p. 7, on the extent of Jewish proselytizing) sometimes do not.

But the fragmented character of the book was probably unavoidable once each author had been encouraged to write within his own tradition. Thus the history of rabbinic Judaism becomes too often a political and social history of the Jews with occasional references to curiously disembodied texts, while the story of Christianity is too often boiled down to disputes over organization and power and sectarian theology. The two histories seem to have almost no contact with each other, as if Jews and Christians lived in different worlds.

The question is whether this disparateness is necessary, since there are of course common themes which run through Jewish and Christian history in this period, not least attitudes to a shared sacred text. But perhaps the best way to view Jews and Christians together would be by a study of the world of late antiquity itself. There is nothing at all in this book about the theology, institutions and practices of late-antique paganism with which both Jews and Christians had to grapple. The political, social and economic histories of the Sassanian and Roman empires are tackled haphazardly by each author, with varying degrees of success; Dennis Groh's comment on the Roman *limes* that 'if there was anything a Roman hated, it was a sloppy border' (p. 234) could hardly be further from the mark. It can be argued that rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity are best understood not only on their own terms, as in this book, but also as part of the general religious change of late antiquity which accompanied the apogee and collapse of the Roman empire and the progress of Europe and the Middle East into the Middle Ages.

I am not as pessimistic as the editor of *Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism* (p. xv), who believes that it is simply impossible for any single scholar to write a book encompassing these different religious traditions and explaining their development in terms of each other. But even if I am wrong and he is right, it should surely be part of the task of modern students of late antiquity to attempt to achieve the breadth of vision which such a book would require. In the meantime, *Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism* performs a useful service first by providing readers with a large amount of valuable information and bibliography on a wide sweep of religious history, and second by reminding students of the desirability of studying the two traditions together.

Oriental Institute, Oxford


This book concerns itself with a complex of themes, reflected in the Hebrew Bible and in post-biblical traditions about harmony and disorder in the universe, in nature