# The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture II

Edited by
PETER SCHÄFER
and
CATHERINE HEZSER

*Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism*
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# Preface

The present volume is the second collection of essays originating from the Leibniz project on the Talmud Yerushalmi conducted at the Institut für Judaistik of the Freie Universität Berlin. The articles by Catherine Hezser, Martin Jacobs and Giuseppe Veltri are from the Leibniz team proper; the contributions by Martin Goodman and Aharon Oppenheimer were part of the conference on "Text and Context: The Talmud Yerushalmi in its Graeco-Roman Environment," which took place in Berlin in October 1996, and the article by Hayim Lapin was included because it excellently fits the framework of our project.

The broad thematic range and the multiplicity of approaches have already been described in the Introduction to Volume 1. The articles collected here deal specifically with the Talmud Yerushalmi's presentation of Christian and pagan religion, the Yerushalmi Rabbis' shift of focus away from Jerusalem and the Temple toward a form of Judaism which was mainly located in and increasingly interacting with the pluralistic intellectual milieu of the Graeco-Roman cities of Palestine, the relationship between Rabbinic and philosophical thought, and the significance of friendship in the respective cultures.

Martin Goodman asks how the Judaism of the Rabbis who produced the Yerushalmi was affected by the Christianization of the Roman Empire under Constantine. While Palestine itself was turned into a distinctly Christian country, the Talmud Yerushalmi does not reflect this change. Goodman suggests that the Yerushalmi's silence in this regard may be due to the Rabbis' disinterest in the religious life of non-Jews in general and Christians in particular.

Catherine Hezser reaches similar conclusions concerning the Yerushalmi's depiction of Jerusalem. After 70 C.E. Jerusalem was gradually turned into a pagan and later into a Christian city. Despite lavish building activities, Jerusalem without the Temple was for the Rabbis a "destroyed city," devoid of any holiness and therefore irrelevant for them. The Yerushalmi provides no evidence of Jews living in Jerusalem after 70 C.E., and the Rabbis even advise people not to visit Jerusalem, since they considered it full of violence and uncleanness. In contrast to the former focus on Jerusalem and the Temple, the Judaism of the Rabbis was decentralized. The major cities in which Rabbis resided never gained the significance which pre-70 Jerusalem had had.

The connection between the Rabbis and the cities of Palestine is examined in Hayim Lapin's article. Especially from the third century C.E. onwards the Rabbinic movement became more and more urbanized. The Rabbis' confrontation

with urban culture had a significant impact on the form of Judaism which they represented and the influence which they exerted.

Within the Graeco-Roman cities of Palestine Rabbis were likely to come in contact with various forms of pagan religion. In his contribution Giuseppe Veltri examines the Yerushalmi's treatment of pagan religious customs, whether they were politically motivated or an expression of popular religiosity, and Rabbinic discussions of pagan holidays. Veltri argues that the Yerushalmi can be considered an important source for the understanding of Roman religiosity at the periphery of the empire.

The discussion of pagan religiosity in the Yerushalmi is complemented by Martin Jacobs' article on pagan temples in Palestine. Jacobs examines Rabbinic texts which deal with pagan temples on the basis of new archaeological discoveries of such temples in Palestine. Like Goodman he reaches the conclusion that the Rabbis were not much interested in these temples: only the most famous ones are mentioned and details never discussed at all. The Rabbis do not even consider it necessary to warn their coreligionists against visiting temples. They are only interested in economic issues, i.e., in problems which could arise when Jews used the temples' building materials.

Besides pagan and Christian religion, Rabbis living in the cities of Palestine would encounter Graeco-Roman philosophy. In her article Catherine Hezser outlines the major areas of research into the interfaces between Rabbinic literature and Graeco-Roman philosophy. She argues that from Hellenistic times onwards philosophers were interested in ethical rather than in metaphysical issues and, like the Rabbis, provided instructions for the appropriate way of life. Accordingly, comparisons should shift away from focusing on metaphysical concepts and isolated motifs and examine the philosophers' and Rabbis' ethical teachings. In addition, the positivistic search for influences should give way to a description of the discursive spaces in which the texts participate.

One aspect of "practical philosophy" was friendship, which has been broadly discussed by philosophers from Plato and Aristotle onwards. Against the traditional scholarly assumption that the concept of friendship was entirely unknown to the Rabbis, Catherine Hezser argues that friendship did play a major role in Rabbinic society. Since the terms which the Rabbis used to describe friendship and the ways in which friendship manifested itself in Rabbinic society differed in some respects from their Graeco-Roman counterparts, the Rabbinic depiction of friendship relationships allows us to see friendship from a different perspective.

The last article by Aharon Oppenheimer addresses differences between the Talmud Yerushalmi and the Talmud Bavli with regard to the intercalation of the year. In the middle of the second century C.E. Hananiah seems to have questioned the hegemony of the land of Israel, thereby indicating the eagerness of the Babylonian sages to take away calendrical authority from the land of Israel.

Hence the story introduces a process which would eventually lead to the leadership role of Babylonian Jewry.

This second volume marks the termination of the Leibniz project in the sense that the financial support by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, which is limited to a period of five years, has come to its natural end. However, we will certainly continue our research on the Yerushalmi and hope to organize another conference with a still broader range of topics and contributors in the fall of 2000. The fruits of the research offered in these two volumes will be judged by our peers. One result, however – by no means the least important one of such a project – has been achieved to a quite unexpected degree: it is one of the goals of the Leibniz Prize to foster a new generation of scholars, and from this point of view the project was clearly a success. In addition to Hans-Jürgen Becker and Giuseppe Veltri who left the Berlin research team for chairs at the Universities of Göttingen and Halle, Martin Jacobs spent one year at the University of Amman/Jordan and will now finish his Habilitation with a grant from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, and Catherine Hezser will continue her research and teaching at the Institut für Judaistik with a Heisenberg fellowship.

My thanks go to the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft for the extraordinary opportunities and the unusual freedom granted with the Leibniz Prize and to the publisher for his unfailing support. Sabine Kößling has professionally prepared the Index, and Johanna Hoornweg was kind enough to correct the English of some articles.

Berlin, July 1999 Peter Schäfer

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# Palestinian Rabbis and the Conversion of Constantine to Christianity

by

Martin Goodman

How was the Judaism of the rabbis who produced the Palestinian Talmud affected by the conversion of Constantine to Christianity in 312 CE and the gradual Christianisation of the empire in the course of the fourth century? The question may be worth posing not just for its own sake but for its wider implications. If the Palestinian Talmud reflected specifically Palestinian concerns more than the Babylonian Talmud, the impact of Christianity on the empire might seem a prime case in which such differences should arise: although all the tannaitic material on which both Talmuds are based was produced within the pagan polytheist society of the Roman empire at its peak, the Babylonian Talmud was redacted within the distinctively Zoroastrian society championed in Mesopotamia from the mid third century, whereas the last generation of Palestinian *amoraim* were living under Christian rulers. If, on the other hand, such differences cannot be discerned, this will raise questions both about the relationship of the literary world described in the talmuds to the lives of the rabbis who produced them and about the relationship between the religious attitudes of the rabbis and events in surrounding society.

The subject of Jewish-Christian relations in the fourth century has been examined by a number of scholars over the past two decades, but they have tended to ask different questions of the material and in some areas they have come up with sharply different conclusions. Thus the surveys by Johann Maier and Günter Stemberger relate the histories of Judaism and Christianity in fourth-century Palestine but on the whole they deal with these histories separately, tackling only briefly the impact of Christianity on rabbinic Judaism.[1] Other studies, like the investigation by Oded Irshai of the career and ideas of Cyril of Jerusalem, have concentrated more on the influence of contemporary Jews on

[1] J. Maier, *Jüdische Auseinandersetzung mit dem Christentum in der Antike* (Darmstadt, 1982); G. Stemberger, *Juden und Christen im Heiligen Land: Palästina unter Konstantin und Theodosius* (Munich, 1987).

Christians than vice-versa.[2] Thus there is no doubt that, for instance, the process of inventing a Christian holy land was influenced by the traditions of indigenous Palestinian Jews, a fact which should not surprise, since Christians in Palestine like Origen and Jerome quite openly stated their recourse to Jewish informants in the interpretation of the Bible, but the willingness of one side to listen (at least occasionally) does not in itself imply a dialogue.[3]

Modern experience in a pluralist society shows all too clearly how easily groups can ignore each other's ideas and aspirations even when they are found in the closest geographical proximity. Hence the importance, if it was correct, of the assertion made by Jacob Neusner in what remains by far the fullest discussion of this issue:

> 'Specifically, in the fourth century, in response to the triumph of Christianity in the Roman Empire, Judaism as shaped by sages in the Land of Israel defined its doctrines of history, Messiah, and the identity of Israel ... It follows that Judaism as we have known it was born in the matrix of triumphant Christianity as the West would define that faith;' 'There was, in short, an argument, a dialogue, a true debate'.[4]

If it had been correct, this evaluation would have been extremely significant. Since, as this short study will suggest, it is in fact at best dubious, a brief critique of the weakness of Neusner's claim may be helpful in preventing historians of late antiquity from being led astray.

It is not in doubt that the impact of Constantine's conversion on Palestine as a whole was huge.[5] In the early years of the fourth century Caesarea was the site of a series of very public Christian martyrdoms during the persecution of Diocletian. The martyrdoms were recorded in some detail by Eusebius and it has been argued, with some plausibility, that the details incorporated by fourth-century rabbis into their stories about rabbinic martyrs derived from their witness to the sufferings of their Christian compatriots.[6] The conversion of Constantine in 312 CE itself took place across the Mediterranean in Italy, but the repercussions in Palestine were rapid. As in other parts of the empire, the withdrawal of funds from pagan temples both by the emperor and, in time, by civic aristocrats

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[2] O. Irshai, *Historical Aspects of the Christian-Jewish Polemic concerning the Church of Jerusalem in the Fourth Century*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Jerusalem, 1993 (Heb.).

[3] On Origen, see N. de Lange, *Origen and the Jews: Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations in Third Century Palestine* (Cambridge, 1976)

[4] J. Neusner, *Judaism and Christianity in the Age of Constantine: History, Messiah, Israel, and the Initial Confrontation* (Chicago, 1987), pp. ix–x. Neusner's book is often cited by him in his later writings, but I have come across only very few reviews; the brief reviews by G. Stemberger, *JSJ* 19 (1988), 252–3 and W. Adler, *JQR* 82 (1991), 185–7, do little more than describe Neusner's assertions, throw doubt on the validity of deriving so much from such a small selection of evidence, and reaffirm the importance of the subject.

[5] See especially the survey of the evidence in Stemberger, *Juden und Christen*.

[6] Eusebius, *Martyrs of Palestine*; cf. S. Lieberman, 'The Martyrs of Caesarea', *Annuaire de l'Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire Orientales et Slaves* 7 (1939–1944), 395–446.

keen for imperial favour led gradually to the decline of public pagan cults in the cities, although, here as elsewhere, direct attacks on pagan shrines by the state did not commence until after 388 CE under Theodosius the Great.

Palestine was more affected than other provinces by Constantine's conversion simply because it had been the site of Christ's ministry. The creation of a Christian holy land began almost immediately after 312.[7] Imperial funds were transferred for the erection of churches on sites of Christian significance, such as the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Jerusalem was now the site of a bishopric of increasing importance which showed signs of an ambition even to rival the see of Caesarea. In the following decades the population of Judaea was to increase markedly with more and larger settlements attested in the archaeological record; it is reasonable to assume that they were attracted in part by the economic benefits of state investment in Christian building projects and by the income to be gained by providing services for a growing stream of Christian pilgrims.[8] During the course of the fourth and fifth centuries the landscape of Palestine changed into the distinctively Christian country revealed in part on the Madaba map, a country of desert monasteries, urban bishoprics, holy sites and holy men. The change was not of course instantaneous under Constantine, but the basic elements were firmly in place during his time.

The religious change of the ruling elite of the Roman state also had a direct impact on the Jews of Palestine *qua* Jews. The theological reasoning that it was undesirable to convert Jews to Christianity because they served better the Church's purpose as *testes veritatis* by remaining a witness to the truth of Christian teaching both in their Jewish error and in a state of subjection was in contrast to the legislation of Christian emperors who sought to protect those Jews who converted to Christianity, threatening dire punishment on those Jews who, 'as we have learned is being done now', dared to attack such apostates from Judaism 'by stones or any other fury' (*CTh* 16.8.1, in 329 CE; the same threat was reiterated in 335 CE (*CTh* 16.8.5) ).[9] A long narrative preserved by the fourth-century heresiologist Epiphanius tells of the unsuccessful attempt by one such Christian convert from Judaism, an imperial official named Joseph with the rank of *comes*, to establish churches in the strongly Jewish region of Galilee.[10] Most dramatic of all was the action of the Christian apostate Julian

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[7] See E. D. Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage in the Later Roman Empire, AD. 312–460* (Oxford, 1982); P. W. L. Walker, *Holy City, Holy Places?: Christian attitudes to Jerusalem and the Holy Land in the Fourth Century* (Oxford, 1990).

[8] See in brief, M. Avi-Yonah, 'The Economics of Byzantine Palestine', *IEJ* 8 (1958) pp. 39–51.

[9] See A. Linder, *The Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation* (Detroit, Mi. and Jerusalem 1987), nos. 8 and 10.

[10] Epiphanius, *Panarion* 30. 4–12. On the *comes* Joseph s. T.C.G. Thornton, 'The Story of Joseph of Tiberias', *VC* 44 (1990), pp. 54–63 and M. Jacobs, *Die Institution des jüdischen*

who, on becoming emperor in 361 CE, attacked Christians by starting to rebuild the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem in order to demonstrate to Christians the falsity of Jesus' prophecy of its destruction.[11] The Jews of Palestine could hardly have failed to notice the revolution around them.

It is thus entirely reasonable to look in a corpus of writings such as the Palestinian Talmud, which was probably redacted in the fourth century and which certainly contains many teachings and sayings ascribed to Palestinian rabbis of the first half of that century, for evidence of a rabbinic reaction to these remarkable changes in the society within which they lived.[12] Entirely reasonable, but strikingly unproductive. A trawl through the huge talmudic text in all its variant forms reveals almost no sign that the rabbis were aware that the religion of Roman emperors had undergone any change, let alone that their new religion saw itself as akin to Judaism.

This fact is duly acknowledged by Neusner, but he is unwilling to leave the problem there.[13] If the explicit evidence for a rabbinic reaction to the conversion of Constantine is so meagre, Neusner asserts that one must hunt for implicit reactions. And this approach is not unreasonable, for even if the rabbis had no specific reaction to the events around them, those events were so extraordinary that a failure to react *might* itself be considered, as Neusner suggests, a response of sorts.[14] However, it might be thought that such arguments from silence should not be used unless other types of explanation have been tried and found wanting. In what follows I want to suggest a different way to understand the silence of the rabbinic sources about events of such magnitude.

The basis of my proposal is the hypothesis that the rabbis were not interested in the actual religious lives of gentiles. It is true that they apparently began from the third century CE to create theoretical rules (the Noachide laws) to stipulate how gentiles should behave,[15] but these had no connection at all with the behaviour of real gentiles. They were not totally ignorant of some of the elements of contemporary paganism (cf. *t.Sanh* 10:2), but they exhibit no evidence that they paid any attention to the evolution of different types of paganism in the Roman Near East during the first three centuries CE. Hence it is not surprising

*Patriarchen. Eine quellen- und traditionskritische Untersuchung zur Geschichte der Juden in der Spätantike* (Tübingen 1995 [TSAJ 52]), pp. 309ff.

[11] See the general discussion in M. Avi-Yonah, *The Jews of Palestine* (Oxford, 1976), pp. 185–207; P. Schäfer, *The History of the Jews from Alexander the Great to the Arab Conquest* (Luxembourg, 1995), pp. 182–185.

[12] This is not the place to discuss in detail the debate about the date of redaction of the Palestinian Talmud. See the careful comments in G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh, 1996), pp. 170–171.

[13] Neusner, *Judaism and Christianity*, p. 27.

[14] Ibid.

[15] M. Goodman, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 112–16. See also now R. Goldenberg, *The Nations that know Thee Not: Ancient Jewish Attitudes towards Other Religions* (Sheffield, 1997).

that they did not react when a Roman emperor adopted yet another cult. In the eyes of Christians, Christianity might be the heir and rival of Judaism, but in the eyes of the rabbis, the Christianity of the gentile state was simply another form of the 'alien worship' to which all gentiles were prone.[16] In numerous texts the redactors of the Palestinian Talmud referred to Rome, Edom and Esau as still pagan (e.g. *y. AZ* 1:2).

The best way to test this hypothesis is to examine the relationship between the picture of pagan polytheism found in rabbinic texts and the evidence for actual pagan practices in the region around Galilee.

The religious customs of the Roman Near East are known primarily from archaeological and epigraphic material, but sufficient survives to reveal an immensely complex picture.[17] In many places the ancient cults of local Baalim still continued, with the use of mountain top altars but with the name of the divinity sometimes preserved in a Greek form. In the cities there were also purely Greek cults, like the worship of Dionysus which was exceptionally popular at Beth Shean.[18] There were imported Egyptian gods, like Sarapis and Isis who had shrines at Gerasa.[19] Baalbek in southern Lebanon boasted a great temple dedicated to Iuppiter Optimus Maximus Heliopolitanus and inscriptions from there reveal that the main gods worshipped in the area around the Roman *colonia* of Beirut included divinities with Roman as well as local names.[20] It has even been argued by Fergus Millar that the distinctively Roman cult of Mercury was sometimes imported from the Roman *colonia* into remote villages like Nebi Ham, a small semitic settlement some 18 km south of Baalbek.[21]

Not much of this variety would be apparent to a reader of the Palestinian Talmud. The amoraic rabbis of Palestine made many references to the pagan practices of gentiles but their understanding of the nature of pagan polytheism was to a large extent bounded by the categories of paganism discussed in the Mishnaic text they laboriously clarified. When, for instance, the Mishnah referred to the *kratesis* festival as a day when Jews should avoid doing business with gentiles, it provided no statement of what festival this might be; hence the following speculation in *y. AZ* 1:2 based on the Greek derivation of the name (*kratein*, to acquire) and on a motley collection of biblical texts:

> Kratesis: It is the day on which the Romans seized power. Now has this opinion already been assigned [to Kalends, by Yohanan who said that the day on which Rome

[16] See also Neusner, *Judaism and Christianity*, p.102.

[17] See above all F. Millar, *The Roman Near East* (Harvard, Mass., 1993).

See also M. Goodman, *State and Society in Roman Galilee, A.D. 132–212* (Totowa, N.J., 1983), pp. 46–51.

[18] See A. Ovadiah, 'Greek cults in Beth-Shean/Scythopolis in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods', *Eretz Israel* 12 (1975), 116–24 (Heb).

[19] See C.H. Kraeling, ed., *Gerasa: City of the Decapolis* (New Haven, 1938).

[20] Millar, *Roman Near East*, pp. 280–5.

[21] Ibid., p. 283.

> seized power is Kalends, not Kratesis]? Said R. Yose b. R. Bun, 'It [celebrates] the second time [that Rome seized power].' Said R. Levi, 'It is the day on which Solomon intermarried with the family of Pharaoh Necho, king of Egypt. On that day Michael came down and thrust a reed into the sea, and pulled up muddy alluvium, and this was turned into a huge pot, and this was the great city of Rome. On the day on which Jeroboam set up the two golden calves, Remus and Romulus came and built two huts in the city of Rome. On the day on which Elijah disappeared, a king was appointed in Rome: 'There was no king in Edom, a deputy was king' (1 Kings 22:47). The emperor's anniversary: 'On the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, he made a feast for all his servants' (Gen. 40:20). His birthday and the day of his death. [transl. Neusner]

Similar is the discussion in *y. AZ* 3:1 of the Mishnaic prohibition of images that may be worshipped:

> Said R. Hiyya bar Ba, '[The reason why all images are prohibited] is that in the great city of Rome they are worshipped twice in a septennate.' If that is the operative reasoning, then in a locale in which they are worshipped they should be forbidden, while in a locale in which they are not worshipped they should be permitted [for Israelite commerce]. Said R. Yose, 'Once they are prohibited in a single locale, the prohibition applies in every locale.' How shall we explain [the dispute between Meir and the sages]? [Here is the problem:] If it is a matter of certainty that [statues are] of kings [and hence made for worship], then all will have to concur that they are forbidden. [transl. Neusner, adapted]

The reasons for the differing opinions given by these rabbis bear no relation to what actually went on in the world of Roman polytheism.[22] There were no images (so far as is known) worshipped in the city of Rome twice every seven years, and it was not the case that every statue of an emperor might be the object of cult.

At least two reasons can be suggested for this failure of the real world to impinge, at least in these matters, on the authors of the Palestinian Talmud. One is the literary phenomenon investigated by Christine Hayes, the extent to which the Palestinian Talmud simply exegetes the Mishnaic tractate rather than creating its own philosophical or theological discourse.[23] The other is more fundamental to all rabbinic discussion of idolatry. The whole tractate of *Abodah Zarah* was created not out of ethnographical interest in the behaviour of gentiles but purely to avoid Jews falling into pagan practices.[24] Hence the tannaitic definitions of what might constitute idolatrous behaviour – washing an object, sacrificing to it, offering incense or libations to it, or bowing down before it (*t. Sanh* 10:2), or in the case of Baal Peor excreting (*m. Sanh* 7:6) or for a

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[22] For a sympathetic picture of polytheism in the Roman empire, see now M. Beard, J. North and S. Price, *Religions of Rome*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1998).

[23] See the carefully nuanced discussion in C. E. Hayes, *Between the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds: Accounting for halakhic difference in selected sugyot from Tractate Avodah Zarah* (New York and Oxford, 1997).

[24] G. Porton, *Goyim: Gentiles and Israelites in Mishnah and Tosefta* (Atlanta 1988).

'Merkolis' (whatever that was thought to be) throwing a stone – needed no confirmation from surrounding pagan practice for the amoraim to take them as the categories that they too should take pains to avoid.

If it is correct that the rabbis were not interested in the religion of gentiles, it should not surprise that the adoption of Christ by Constantine as his patron deity made such little impact. It is notorious that Constantine's religious behaviour did not change entirely overnight: for some years his coins continued to celebrate the special relationship of his dynasty with the Sun god, and when in Rome in the 320s he continued to act as chief priest of the state cults in the city.[25] As far as the rabbis were concerned the Roman state was a gentile state and, as such, by definition pagan, hence the celebration in Rome of such pagan festivals as the Saturnalia (*y. AZ* 2:2). There is a consistent assumption throughout the Palestinian Talmud that all gentiles are idolaters: as R. Josiah claimed (*y. AZ* 4:8), even a gentile baby one day old can turn wine into forbidden libation wine because of the instinctive desire of all gentiles to pour libations to their idols.

How, then, did Neusner come up with his claim that in response to the triumph of Christianity in the Roman Empire the rabbis engaged in 'an argument, a dialogue, a true debate' with their Christian contemporaries (see above) when, on the face of it, the Palestinian Talmud shows no trace of a reaction of any kind? Neusner simply *asserts* that the redaction of the Palestinian Talmud marked an implicit attempt to create religious certainty when faced with the disaster of the Christianisation of the empire[26] specifically claiming that three of the issues addressed in the Palestinian Talmud were selected by the rabbis for such concentrated treatment precisely because of the need to counter Christian claims;[27] although he confesses that he is unable to say anything at all about the intentions of the rabbis in writing as they did,[28] he gives as his opinion that it was the Christian challenge in a Rome become Christian which stimulated the rabbinic sages to focus on these issues in a fashion similar to some contemporary Christians.[29]

These issues, Neusner states, are the history of Israel (which provides a theodicy for the present state of the Jews), speculation about the nature of the Messiah, and assertions about the nature of Israel in relation to other people. Neusner points out that such issues were also dealt with by some (arbitrarily selected) contemporary Christian authors, specifically Eusebius, Aphrahat, and John Chrysostom, and he claims that this fact is connected to the importance of these

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[25] On Constantine's complex relationship to Christianity, see, among others, T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981).

[26] Neusner, *Judaism and Christianity*, p. 27.

[27] Ibid., pp. 2, 96 and passim.

[28] Ibid., pp. 11, 29, 38.

[29] Ibid., p. 65.

themes in the Palestinian Talmud and the amoraic midrashim, in contrast to their virtual absence from the Mishnah and Tosefta.[30]

It is not my intention here to query the accuracy of Neusner's observations, but simply the logic of his argument.

The most crucial issue is the significance of silence. Of course silence *can* sometimes be significant: if the audience of the Jerusalem Talmud might reasonably have expected a description of the religious attitudes of the gentile state and their gentile neighbours, the failure of the amoraim to describe the Christianisation of Palestine in the fourth century would indeed have been extraordinary. But we have just seen that such description was not part of the rabbinic agenda. It is far more likely that the silence of the rabbis reflects not a reaction but a lack of interest.[31]

Conversely, the inclusion in the Jerusalem Talmud and other rabbinic literature from this period of passages of biblical interpretation dealing with the significance of Jewish history, the nature of the Messiah and the identity of Israel would only require explanation in terms of an external political impetus[32] if these themes were peculiar topics for the rabbis and for Christians to discuss. But, as Neusner himself notes, 'those three central questions had long presented points on which each party framed its own ideas'.[33] The mass of earlier Jewish literature on the lessons to be drawn from Jewish history is too extensive for there to be any need to describe it here, and for Jewish speculation on the nature of the Messiah it is enough to refer to the varied evidence collected by Neusner himself, with colleagues, in a volume published in the same year as *Judaism and Christianity*[34], although it is worth also noting that the fact that the Messiah is not a dominant theme in Mishnah or Tosefta is more likely to reflect the genre and purpose of those halakhic collections than a lack of interest in the topic among tannaitic rabbis; it is at the least misleading for Neusner to take these two texts as representive of all the topics which interested rabbinic Jews before the fourth century. Discussions of the election of Israel might seem almost inevitable for any interpreter of the biblical text simply because of the importance of the theme within that text[35]; thus it is certainly interesting that in fitting Rome into a scheme of biblical interpretation the rabbis saw the oppressive state as the fraternal rival Esau as well as the hereditary enemy Edom, but

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[30] Ibid., pp. 30, 60, 65, 82, 147–8.

[31] See the depiction of the 'solipsism' of the rabbis in S. Stern, *Jewish Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism* (Leiden, 1994), pp. 199–223.

[32] See Neusner, *Judaism and Christianity*, p. 2: 'These three issues proved paramount, I claim, specifically because the political revolution effected in the course of the fourth century by the Christianization of the Roman Empire made them urgent'.

[33] Ibid., p. ix.

[34] J. Neusner, W. S. Green and E. S. Frerichs, eds., *Judaisms and their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era* (Cambridge, 1987).

[35] For a tannaitic discussion of this sort, *see Sifre Deut.* 32:9, Pisqa 312.

it is simply unnecessary to link this identification to Christian claims to be the true Israel.[36]

In sum, the fact that some rabbis and some Christians had some (different) things to say on these topics in the fourth century is unsurprising in the light of this shared biblical heritage. In the case of neither of these religious traditions did these themes predominate; they were just some among many. There is no evidence at all for the 'true debate' and 'direct confrontation' which Neusner emphatically states that he has discovered, a claim which appears all the more bizarre in the light of his assertion that 'I work with what I know, not with what I do not know'.[37]

It seems to me that Neusner has been looking for the impact of Christianity in the wrong place. Rabbis in the fourth century only rarely referred directly to Christians and even less to the Christianisation of the empire, and, when they did so, it rarely affected directly their behaviour or ideas, but this does not mean that Palestinian Judaism would have developed in the same way if the conversion of Constantine to Christianity had not occurred. The influence of Christianity on rabbinic Judaism was indirect, mediated through the general change in religious assumptions in the Roman empire which were a natural corollary of the interests of Christian emperors. I have argued elsewhere that rabbinic Jews may have come to see proselytising mission as valuable because Christians took the notion for granted,[38] and there can be little doubt, for instance, about the impact of Christianity on the art and architecture of the late-Roman synagogue. Here there is clear evidence not of debate or confrontation but of the gradual permeation of Christian assumptions into the lives of Jews.

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[36] Neusner, *Judaism and Christianity*, pp. 106ff. After all, the identification of Esau with Edom goes back to Genesis.

[37] Ibid, p. 7; cf. p. 106 for his claim to have 'proof' of direct confrontation.

[38] M. Goodman, *Mission and Conversion*, p. 152.

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