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◆ note critique

THE SECOND CENTURY OF JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS

A BOOK DISCUSSION*

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Since the mid-forties of this century, research on Christian origins has undergone a tremendous evolution, mainly due to significant unearthings of new sources. The year 1945 marked the beginning of a new era, with the discovery, in December of that year, of a collection of Coptic papyri, near Nag Hammadi, in Upper Egypt. This event was followed, two years later, by the discovery of the first Dead Sea scrolls. Both discoveries have occupied more than two generations of scholars, journalists and publishers, and this scholarly and lucrative activity doesn't seem to be abating. But these findings, however extraordinary they were and still are, are not solely responsible for the renewal of our approach to Christian beginnings. Other factors have to be considered, which have led historians and biblical scholars to question the accepted views and redraw the map of the Late Antiquity Mediterranean world. Among these factors, one of the most important is our increased knowledge of the Second Temple Judaism, in terms not only of new sources but also of renewed perspectives.

The resulting shift in scholarly attitudes towards Judaism may be illustrated by the opening lines of James Dunn's *Partings of the Ways Between Christianity and Judaism* :

> Christianity is a movement which emerged from within first-century Judaism. That simple, uncontestable fact is crucial to our understanding of the beginnings of Christianity. But its significance has not been adequately appreciated. The same fact continues to be determinative of Christianity's character. But its implications have not been thought through with sufficient care. [...] Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity, two of the world's great religions emerged from the same matrix — second Temple Judaism. Why did they pull apart ?

* Stephen G. WILSON, *Related Strangers. Jews and Christians 70-170 C. E.*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1995. This book discussion was presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Society of Patristic Studies, Brock University, St. Catharines, May 26, 1996.

> Given the thoroughly Jewish character of Christianity's beginnings, why did it become a separate religion ? What were, and are, the distinctive emphases of Christianity which caused the parting of the ways ? How soon did it take place ? Can we indeed speak of a single parting ?[1]

To ask such questions presupposes a kind of Copernican revolution in the study of Christian origins. We have known for a long time that a standard Christianity has never existed, no more in Antiquity than today. And the same is true with Judaism, especially in the century before and after the beginning of the Common Era. But we still have the tendency to oppose, or compare, Christianity to Judaism, as if Judaism was no longer an evolving reality the moment Christianity was born. Jacob Neusner has engaged in an enduring scholarly polemic about the necessity of talking of Judaism in the plural.[2] In a more restrained way, James Dunn described Second Temple Judaism as consisting "of a range of different interest groups," and concludes that "the concept of an orthodox or normative Judaism for the period prior to 70 CE is, to say the least, very questionable."[3] On the other hand, as is the case with Christianity, to install diversity as the trademark of early Judaism posits the necessity of defining "a common and unifying core for Second Temple Judaism." Dunn does this with his "four pillars of Second Temple Judaism," while E.P. Sanders tries to single out "the theological ideas and religious practices that distinguished Jews from others,"[4] these ideas and practices which formed "the 'normal' or 'common' Judaism," which "the priest and the people agreed on."[5]

But whatever definition or description of first century Judaism is proposed, it has to make room for diversity and innovation. To put it in Richard Bauckham's words, it must "make it meaningful to ask what could exclude a Jew from this common Judaism, in the eyes of other Jews."[6] As for Bauckham, taking as paradigms the Pharisees, the Samaritans and the Qumran community, he suggests "the heuristic model that Christianity began as a party, like the Pharisees, within common Judaism, and became either a group marginal to common Judaism, like the Qumran community, or a community definitely separated from common Judaism, like the Samaritans."[7]

Useful as such models are, they remain largely theoretical, especially for the period prior to 70 CE, because of the paucity of Jewish and Christian documents ascribable to this period. But when we come to the following century, which Stephen Wil-

1. *The Partings of the Ways between Christianity and Judaism and their Significance for the Character of Christianity*, London, SCM Press/Philadelphia, Trinity Press International, 1991, p. 1.
2. Among his numerous publications, see *Judaic Law from Jesus to the Mishnah. A Systematic Reply to Professor E.P. Sanders*, Atlanta, Georgia, Scholars Press (coll. "South Florida studies in the history of Judaism," 84), 1993, and *Jews and Christians. The Myth of a Common Tradition*, London, SCM Press ; Philadelphia, Trinity Press International, 1991.
3. *Op. cit.*, p. 18.
4. *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, London, Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, 1993, p. 33.
5. *Judaism. Practice and Belief 63 BCE-66 CE*, London, SCM International Press/Philadelphia, Trinity International Press, 1992, p. 47.
6. "The Parting of the Ways : What Happened and Why," *Studia Theologica*, 47 (1993), p. 139.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

son calls "the overlapping century" (p. XIV), the situation changes radically, at least as to what pertains to the Christian side of the question. The period ranging from 70 CE to 170 CE sees the development of a Christian literature, of which one of the main tenets is the self-definition of the new religious movement as something different from and superior to Judaism. In that sense, Stephen Wilson is right in qualifying this period as "the crucial era for Jewish-Christian relations" (p. XIV). This period is indeed crucial, not only for the relations between Jews and Christians, but also for the very existence of Judaism and Christianity as two distinct religions. It is particularly clear in the case of Christianity, which, in the second century, encountered two major challenges to its identity, namely Gnosticism and Marcionism, which are both pretty well documented. In the case of Judaism, the situation isn't that clear, even if one cannot deny the impact of the Bar Kosiba/Kokhba revolt and its aftermath on the evolution of what was to become Rabbinic Judaism. But when we want to consider, from a Jewish viewpoint, the Jewish reaction to Christianity, we are confronted with two major "bones of contention," the evaluation of which has divided contemporary scholarship : the so-called Yavneh gathering and the *Birkat ha-minim*.[8] Furthermore, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to ascribe, with any confidence, Jewish written sources to the second century.

This situation makes the work of the scholar very hazardous from the onset, and obliges him or her to do a painstaking and careful analysis of all available sources, mainly Christian, in order to come to a balanced picture, a picture that doesn't underestimate "the extraordinary range of ideological and pragmatic reasons why Jews and Christians parted company" (p. XV). It is such a balanced picture we have in Prof. Wilson's book, which relates the complex and fascinating story of the progressive mutual estrangement of Jews and Christians. In his introduction (p. XV), Prof. Wilson pays homage to Marcel Simon's *Verus Israel*,[9] which has proved, over the years, to be one of the most influential studies of Jewish-Christian relations in this century. Since there is not much left in the present century, I would not venture to appraise Prof. Wilson's book by the same standard, but what I can say is that his *Related Strangers* is a major contribution to our knowledge of what is perhaps the most obscure period in Jewish and Christian history, the second century CE.

It's far beyond my competence to discuss here all the aspects of Prof. Wilson's book, but I would like to consider briefly a point of personal interest. I have read with particular attention the chapter on Gnostics and Marcionites. First of all, I fully agree with the clear distinction which Prof. Wilson makes (p. 207-208) between Gnosticism and Marcionism. Even if both movements show many similarities and were met with the same hostility, they are sufficiently different to be considered separately, and the ancient sources always discriminate between them. In the section of Chapter 7

8. On Yavneh, cf. J.P. LEWIS, "Jamnia (Jabneh), Council of," dans D.N. FREEDMAN, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, New York, Doubleday, 1992, vol. 3, p. 796-802 ; and on the *Birkat ha-Minim*, cf. S.J. JOUBERT, "A Bone of Contention in Recent Scholarship : The 'Birkath Ha-Minim' and the Separation of Church and Synagogue in the First Century AD," *Neotestamentica*, 27 (1993), p. 351-363.

9. English translation, Oxford University Press, 1986. First French edition, Paris, De Boccard, 1948, second edition, 1964.

devoted to Gnostics, Prof. Wilson conducts a fine analysis of anti-Jewish trends in some Nag Hammadi tractates. Here again, I agree with the conclusion he draws from this analysis, that "a form of metaphysical anti-Judaism, originating most probably within Judaism but perhaps within Christianity, came to full and varied expression in the second century" (p. 206), and, further, that "gnostic anti-Judaism was unique, radical, and deeply embedded in a significant portion of the early Christian movement" (p. 207). I am also of the opinion that, however vexing the question of the origins of Gnosticism may be, it is impossible to conceive of Gnosticism, as we know it from the available sources, without a close connexion with both Judaism *and* Christianity. That means, in my view, that Gnostic anti-Judaism is best explained as a radicalization, or expansion, of the Christian reinterpretation of Judaism. Such a radicalization is perfectly understandable if we keep in mind that the Jesus movement gave birth to expressions of itself as diverse as the Pauline, Johannine or James traditions, or even Marcionism. It is also my conviction that Gnosticism cannot be explained by any single specific event or situation, dramatic as they might have been. I refer here to Harry Green's or Robert Grant's theses (p. 205-206). Rather, Gnosticism appears to result from the junction of two factors : on the one hand, a philosophical criticism of the inconsistencies of a creationist theodicy, unable either to affirm the goodness of the creator and its creation or to explain the origin of evil, and, on the other hand, a cultural indebtedness to and familiarity with wisdom and apocalyptic literature, which were characteristic of both Judaism and Christianity in the first two centuries of the Common Era. Now, if I had to decide between Judaism and Christianity as the ultimate cradle of Gnosticism, I would definitely be inclined to favour a Christianity steeped in Jewish wisdom and apocalyptic traditions.

This viewpoint is amply sustained by the gnostic sources at our disposal, especially from the Nag Hammadi corpus. With the exception of the Hermetic writings and the Plato excerpt in Codex VI, and the *Sentences of Sextus* in Codex XII, almost all of the Nag Hammadi tractates exhibit a clear Christian character. This is true even of texts which have been made the paragon of a pre-Christian or non-Christian Gnosticism, I am referring to *Eugnostos* and the *Paraphrase of Shem*. On-going research on these texts by Anne Pasquier and Michel Roberge has shown that they are instead to be understood as the products of Christian redactors, despite the "received" interpretations provided by Douglas Parrott and Fred Wisse. This is also the case with what are often considered as "lightly Christianized works," such as the so-called *On the Origin of the World*, or the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*. The strong Christian flavour of these texts and others do not preclude, of course, that they may have evolved to their final form from Jewish traditional materials, as is the case with the *Hypostasis of the Archons*. Borrowings from Jewish tradition prove nothing concerning a Jewish origin for Gnosticism. But, even if Gnosticism comes to be seen as a Jewish offspring, one may wonder whether "anti-Judaism" is an appropriate qualification for the variety of "metaphysical" hostility to Judaism one finds in those texts. In other words, does our modern category "anti-Judaism" applies to the revisionist attitude towards the major tenets of the Jewish faith we encounter in most Gnostic (Jewish) texts ? In order to answer this question, we would have to know the degree of tolerance of mainstream

Judaism towards such attitudes. Perhaps we could find a historical precedent to Jewish Gnostics in Philo's allegorizers, whose stance towards their religious background was similar to that of the Stoics towards the Greco-Roman civic religion. Richard Goulet sees in both "une semblable volonté de dépassement ou de rejet intellectualiste d'une tradition à laquelle on reste attaché."[10] Nevertheless, I agree with Stephen Wilson that Philo's allegorizers have nothing to do with Jewish (proto-)Gnostics.

On the other hand, I would hesitate to grant a determining influence to "the trauma of the Bar Cochba rebellion" (p. 221) in the emergence of Gnosticism. I don't think that such a wide theological and intellectual venture as Gnosticism owes anything significant to "Jewish thinkers who began to despair of their traditional beliefs as their world collapsed around them" (p. 222). This doesn't mean that Gnosticism is not indebted, and heavily, to the "Jewish thinkers" who gave shape and content to the Judaism from which Christianity evolved.

Many other aspects of Prof. Wilson's book would deserve comment. Let's just mention the chapter on the "Patterns of Christian Worship," which is particularly rich and original, in that it makes use of a type of documentation seldom considered in relation with Antiquity's Jewish-Christian agenda.

As a researcher and teacher in the field of Christian origins, I am very grateful to Prof. Wilson for this important and useful book. Many articles and specialized monographs have been written on Jewish-Christian relations since Marcel Simon's 1948 dissertation, but not many scholars have ventured to consider the issue from such a wide perspective. For that reason and many others, Stephen Wilson's *Related Strangers* is a significant addition to the current bibliography.

10. *La Philosophie de Moïse. Essai de reconstitution d'un commentaire philosophique préhilonien du Pentateuque*, Paris, Vrin (coll. « Histoire des doctrines de l'Antiquité classique », 11), 1987, p. 521.