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From the Maccabees to the Mishnah

Shaye J. D. Cohen

Library of Early Christianity, edited by Wayne A. Meeks

Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987

251 pp. Cloth \$27.25; Paperback, \$14.25

From the Maccabees to the Mishnah is about 350 years. For Christians it is a crucial period: it is the Jewish "background" of the New Testament and the early Christian movement: it is the time when both came into being: it is a period of which present-day Christians should have some understanding. For Jews it is also a critical period, for it was then that what today is known as "Judaism" began to emerge from a diversity of Jewish groups. At the end of the period Christians have the New Testament and Jews have the Mishnah, foundational documents for both. It is a period to which many histories have been devoted, of which Cohen's is one of the best. Professor of Jewish history at Jewish Theological Seminary, New York City, he is able to pick his way through the thicket of sources in several languages, the tangle of issues, and the minefields of earlier interpretation (and misinterpretation) and polemic, and emerge with a highly compressed but extremely lucid account that is based on the latest scholarship in a number of fields, takes account of the diversity of the Judaism of the period, and yet—sometimes with the aid of insights from the social sciences—puts it into a larger, coherent whole, the Graeco-Roman world, which includes Judaism, which in turn includes early Christianity. At last we have a history that will be read by Christians that (in the words of Wayne Meeks, the General Editor of the series) "does not treat the history of Judaism as merely ancillary or preparatory to the history of Christianity" (9).

Although Cohen proceeds thematically, like the Mishnah, he also gives the historical and social contexts of the phenomena he examines. Chapter one, in fact, after offering "Definitions" ("the Persian Period", "Hellenistic Period", "B.C.E." and "C.E.", "Judaism", etc.), outlines the chronology of the period and briefly characterizes second-temple Judaism ("Unity and Diversity").

Chapter two looks at three factors in the relation of Jews and Gentiles. Politically, Jews were dominated by Gentiles and, except for three revolts against Antiochus Epiphanes and the Romans, accommodated themselves to such rule (cf. Matthew 22:15-22; Romans 13:1-7). Culturally, the kind and degree of accommodation to Hellenism was diverse; but Hellenization there was—Jews did not live on another planet. Socially, Jews generally kept to themselves but allowed Gentiles to convert to Judaism. Cohen's discussions of "anti-Judaism", "anti-Semitism", conversion, and "God-fearers" in this chapter are instructive.

Whereas Christians are inclined to view doctrine and faith as demarcating characteristics of religion in Mediterranean antiquity, it was practice

that really set a people apart. Jews of the period had beliefs, of course, but no one interpretation of them—"orthodoxy"—prevailed. In spelling out Jewish practices in chapter three, Cohen traces their democratization: alongside temple, sacrifice, and priesthood there emerge synagogue, individual prayer, Torah study, scribes. So, too, in beliefs: sin, retribution, and repentance are individualized. "The democratization of religion had as its goal the sanctification of daily life. Every act and every moment was to be in the service of God. The new regimen of study, prayer, ritual, and ethics was incumbent not upon some priestly or monastic elite but upon the entire community" (102).

In chapter four, "The Community and Its Institutions", Cohen demonstrates how Jewish society of the period was typical of the time. What made it " 'Jewish' was Judaism and its institutions" (123). These were public (temple, Sanhedrin, synagogue) as well as private (synagogue, sects, professional guilds, schools), though the line dividing the two spheres is not always sharply drawn.

"Sectarian and Normative" (ch. 5) is the longest chapter and for anyone who has ever puzzled over "Pharisee", "scribe", "Sadducee", etc., one of the most interesting and instructive. After Cohen helps himself (and readers) by careful definitions of "sect", "heresy", "orthodoxy", and "normative", he weighs to what degree and in what ways Pharisees, Samaritans, the Qumran community, and early Christians fit the category "sect". The focal points of estrangement from Jewish society were law, temple, and scripture. Most Jews were not sectarians; for those that were, however, sectarianism was

the culmination of the democratization of Judaism. Its essential goal was to bridge the gap between humanity and God through constant practice of the commandments of the Torah and total immersion in the contemplation of God and his works. Sectarian piety supplants or supplements the temple cult through prayer, scriptural study, and purifications, and rejects or dilutes the power of the priesthood (172).

Chapter six shows that the canonization of scripture was a process rather than a single event and that the various groupings within Judaism had differing canons and regarded them differently. Canonization meant that attention focused on study of scripture, but "in paradoxical fashion, even as the Jews declared their loyalty to scripture they liberated themselves from it" (193). They were free to interpret scripture, often in "remarkably fanciful and capricious" ways (193), and to write in imitation of canonical writings, but also "in styles and genres unknown to the Tanak" (194).

"The Emergence of Rabbinic Judaism" (ch. 7) explains how, in consequence of the three wars of 66 to 135, one group prevailed and became "Judaism". Sects died out, or in the case of one—Christianity—became another religion. Both Judaism and Christianity claimed, and claim, to be the Israel of tradition.

This summary cannot do justice to the rich content and methodological sophistication of this excellent book. It is a model of historical circumspection, resisting temptations to push conclusions beyond the evidence. Typical are Cohen's declarations that, rather than repeating the oft-repeated assertion that the

Pharisees consisted of two schools or wings, one progressive or liberal (the house of Hillel) and other conservative or strict (the house of Shammai), I prefer to admit ignorance. We know neither the social reality that the houses represent nor the relationship of the houses to the Pharisees (158).

Commentaries and textbooks, especially Christian treatments of early Judaism, often lag behind scholarship. To work one's way through this book is like having an expert sitting at one's elbow, pointing out stereotypes, correcting old mistakes, cautioning against easy generalizations, and, for Christians, putting early Christianity into its Jewish matrix. Cohen is quite at home in the New Testament and early Christian sources and uses them in delineating not only Christianity as a Jewish sect but in describing other Jewish groups as well.

Cohen is very careful about the use of inclusive language, but the role of women as leaders in Judaism does not get much play (as, e.g., in Bernadette Brooten, *Women Leaders in Ancient Synagogues* [Scholars Press, 1982]).

Disappointing and irritating is the lack of a complete index or full documentation. This is "In keeping with the design of the series," according to the General Editor (9-10). But it patronizes both students and general readers, who are deemed not interested in (or capable of?) verifying statements or pursuing interesting insights further. Done in small print at the back in the style of Roland Bainton's *Here I Stand* (Abingdon, 1950), such documentation would have added at most ten pages to the book but immeasurably to its usefulness.

Puzzling is the assertion that Philo's *Life of Moses* "omits the epiphany at Mount Sinai" (203). While it is true there is no epiphany narrative as such, Philo's statement that Moses "entered into the darkness where God was, that is, into the unformed, indivisible, incorporeal, and archetypal essence of the existents, perceiving those things invisible to mortal nature" (*Life of Moses* 1.158; cf. 2.69-71), is crucial to Philo's portrait of Moses.

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