

BOOK REVIEW

---

*Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages.* By Israel Jacob Yuval. University of California Press, 2006. 313 pages. \$49.95.

This book, which is the English translation of the Hebrew original published in 2000, reevaluates the relationship between Jews and Christians in late antiquity and the Middle Ages until the thirteenth century. While most previous scholars assumed that Judaism, the so-called “mother” religion, had a considerable impact on the development of Christianity, Israel Jacob Yuval reverses this argument and suggests that after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE and especially from Constantine’s emperorship in the fourth century C.E. onward, a complex relationship of mutual appropriation, refutation, and reinterpretation of religious symbols and ceremonies existed, in which Judaism “borrowed” from Christianity, if no earlier attestation in Judaism can be shown. The author thereby stands in line with other scholars who have recently emphasized the great impact of Christianity on late antique Judaism and the significance of the Jewish–Christian dispute, even if most of it was carried out indirectly and left few traces in our literary sources (cf. Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 BCE. to 640 CE*, Princeton 2001, and Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, Princeton 2007). As far as methodology is concerned, Yuval stresses that he is analyzing “the reciprocal attitudes of Jews and Christians toward one another” (1) rather than the history of Jewish–Christian relations itself.

The introduction and the first two chapters of the book discuss the foundation of the controversy in the Bible and ancient Judaism. The author asserts that the biblical Jacob–Esau typology (Gen. 24–32) has been of major importance for Jews’ and Christians’ perception of themselves and each “Other” from antiquity until today. Both Jews and Christians identified themselves with Jacob as the chosen one. For Jews, Esau was Edom, Rome, and eventually the Christian-Byzantine empire; for Christians, Esau was “the archetype of the Jew” (12) who had allegedly lost his birthright to his younger brother, the

*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, pp. 1–4

© The Author 2007. Published by Oxford University Press, on behalf of the American Academy of Religion. All rights reserved. For permissions, please e-mail: [journals.permissions@oxfordjournals.org](mailto:journals.permissions@oxfordjournals.org)

Church. Thus, in Judaism and Christianity, opposite interpretations of the same biblical story emerged. The identification with Jacob also involved the “claim to ownership of the Land of Israel on a divine promise” (9), which Christians tried to fulfill in the First Crusade, by freeing Jerusalem from Muslims. Yuval assumes that both interpretations emerged at the same time, after the destruction of the Second Temple, and that the Jewish exegesis exemplified in rabbinic Midrash was based on the Christian one: “the Jewish position is reactive and defensive” (18) and shows apologetic traits. At this stage, a principal assumption that guides his interpretation throughout the book is stated: unless the Jewish sources can be dated earlier, we have to reckon with Christian influence on Judaism, since “minority cultures tend to adopt the agenda of the majority culture” (22). The “one-way influence of Christianity on Judaism” is taken as the working hypothesis, albeit without distinguishing between different layers of tradition and redaction within the rabbinic source material. One may ask whether and to what extent this approach merely leads to a reversal of the former positivistic search for the Jewish impact on Christianity, in its desire to prove that “influence” existed in the opposite direction.

For example, Yuval maintains that the rabbinic notion of Oral Law was developed because rabbis feared that otherwise their teachings—like the Written Torah—could be appropriated by Christians and universalized (cf. *ibid.* 25). It is hard to believe that rabbinic halakhah could have been reinterpreted by Christians in this way and that Christians would actually have wanted to do so, given that Paul already rejected the significance of the “law.” In addition, no distinction is made between the Oral Torah principle and the rabbinic halakhic practice here. It is one thing to say that rabbis openly interacted with their environment, but another to claim categorically “that religious ceremonies and texts used by one side were known to the other” (30)—should we assume that rabbis were avid students of the Greek New Testament and the writings of the church fathers? The indirect allusions evident in rabbinic sources rarely support the claim of actual familiarity with Christian literary texts. For example, the rabbinic figure of the messiah son of Joseph/Ephraim, who suffers and precedes the Davidic messiah, must not necessarily be based on “an internalization of the figure of Jesus as messiah” (36). It may be based on the servant of God in Deutero-Isaiah instead. Similarly, the rabbinic foundation story about R. Yochanan b. Zakkai’s meeting with Vespasian in ARN and elsewhere can hardly be seen as “a Jewish counterpart to the fourth-century Christian legend of Sylvester,” securing the Jewish patriarch’s position by asserting his close relationship to the Roman emperor (“just like the pope received the Lateran Church in Rome, so did the Nasi obtain Yavneh,” 55). Scholars are almost unanimous nowadays in assuming that the patriarchate began much later with R. Yehudah ha-Nasi. The story about R. Yochanan b. Zakkai rather proposes that rabbis’ loyalty to Rome may be advantageous, in contrast to the rebels’ fight for a lost cause.

A lot of emphasis is given to the alleged similarities between Passover and Easter in Jewish and Christian tradition and practice. In particular, the theme

of redemption is linked to some of the symbolic foodstuffs of the seder table and reappears in the Christian Host—which is not limited to Easter, though. In his discussion of the Jewish-Christian controversy in the Middle Ages (chapters 3–6), the author develops the argument that Christian accusations against Jews were based on a misinterpretation and representation of actual Jewish practices and beliefs. Not only was the roasting of the Passover sacrifice associated with the annihilation of Esau/Christianity, but the burning of the leaven could be seen as a desecration of the Host. The theme of vengeful redemption, which was already part of the Passover rite, was seen by Christians as an expression of Jewish hatred of humankind in general and of Christianity and its messiah in particular. But again the reinterpretation and adaptation was mutual and two-sided. Yuval sees the *afikoman* matzah at the end of the Passover seder as a symbol of messianic redemption, as “a kind of Jewish Host” (240), the outcome of a “Jewish internalization of Christian ritual language” (242). A “covert dialogue” among symbols, gestures, and ceremonies existed, which always also involved polemics, hostility, and feelings of superiority over the respective “Other”: “the inner context of the ceremonies is completely different in each religion” (245).

Probably the most controversial proposition made in this book is that the Christian blood libel of the Middle Ages may be based on Jewish martyrs’ killing of their own children. The Jewish martyrdom chronicles of 1096 present self-sacrifice and the sacrifice of one’s loved ones to avoid apostasy as *Kiddush ha-Shem* (sanctification of God). Christians who heard of such acts were horrified by them and presented them as evidence that Jews were murderous people. Yuval sees this practice as the source of the blood libel and the accusation of ritual murder that was most widespread from the twelfth century onward. The blood libel represented the distorted Christian view of Jewish martyrdom: according to the Christian version, Jews would kill Christian children, when in reality they killed their own (*ibid.* 164). The dissemination of the blood libel in the time after the First Crusade may thus be based on Christian knowledge of the Jewish martyrdom acts—or rather rumors about Jews sacrificing their own children for the purposes of vengeful redemption.

In the final chapter, Yuval shows how Jewish messianic ideas associated with the “end of the millennium” (the year 1240 was the year 5000 in the Jewish calendar) had an impact on the Christian world. France and Germany were the centers of messianic ferment at that time, and calculations similar to the Jewish ones are found in Christian sources. The Jewish messianic idea was connected with the hope for Jewish resettlement of the land of Israel, whereas Christians wanted to appropriate the Holy Land for themselves and engaged in Crusades for that purpose. The different messianic expectations show a “tragic asymmetry” (289): Jews anticipated the destruction of Christianity and Christians, the conversion of Jews to their own religion: “the Jewish Messiah is the Christian Antichrist, and vice versa” (*ibid.*).

This bold reexamination of the mutual perceptions of Jews and Christians in antiquity and the Middle Ages and the construction of an image of the

respective “Other” should interest scholars of ancient and medieval Judaism and Christianity as well as general historians and theologians. It will certainly generate a new debate about Jewish–Christian relations and the impact of controversy on religious development.

doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfm106

Catherine Hezser  
University of London