

Variety in Judaism

By Martin Goodman

Members of any religious group are accustomed to the tendency of outsiders to ignore the differences between strands of the religion which, to insiders, have an obvious significance. It is thus unsurprising that pagan authors in Greek and Roman antiquity are not known to have been aware that Judaism in the Roman empire at the time of the birth of Christianity existed in more than one form. But quite how mistaken they were can be shown from the evidence from within Judaism, which was preserved quite separately from the works of classical writers in the religious traditions of Christians and rabbinic Jews, which emerged from the Judaism of this time and have thrived continuously to our days.

Judaism in the first century was already both, as today, the religious expression of an ethnic group and a potential world religion with a reach far beyond ethnic borders. Sacrificial worship in Jerusalem operated much like civic religion elsewhere in the early Roman empire, except for the size and magnificence of the Jerusalem Temple – a product not only of the architectural ambitions of Herod the Great in the late first century, but also of the insistence of the Jewish God, according to contemporary understanding of the biblical text, that He was to be worshipped with sacrifices only in the place He had chosen, so that the resources of His devotees were concentrated on the upkeep of just one building, rather than numerous local shrines.

At the same time, Jews admitted into their community outsiders who identified themselves as Jews by adoption of Jewish religious customs. Such openness to outsiders was unique in the ancient world. It was possible for a non-Roman to become Roman, but only by decision of a Roman magistrate; adoption of Roman customs or worship of the Roman gods might denote a non-Roman as a Romaniser, but not as a Roman. By contrast, although Jews in some periods and places in antiquity recognised and approved of adherence to Judaism by pagan god-fearers who remained non-Jews, the notion of a proselyte whose integration into the Jewish people resulted solely from his or her personal decision to devote himself or herself to obedience to the Jewish God is also widely attested by the first century. In the only conversion narrative from this period to

survive – the conversion in the 30s CE of the royal family of Adiabene, a region of northern Mesopotamia, as related by the Jewish historian Josephus towards the end of the first century – it seems clear that the decision of the king Izates and his mother Helena to become Jewish was achieved by self-definition, rather than a decree by a Jewish authority.

Conversion to a new way of life more often consisted in the ancient world in the adoption of a philosophical system for moral guidance than conversion to a religion. When ancient polytheists adopted worship of a new deity, as was not uncommon, they added the new god to their existing portfolio. Conversion to Judaism was different, because it involved rejecting the worship of all other gods. Ancient Jews believed as much as their pagan contemporaries in the existence of numerous supernatural forces which affected human life, speculating on the number and names of the angels and sometimes, as in Galilee, according to the Gospel accounts, explaining illness by demonic possession, but they believed their God to be a jealous God who would react angrily to worship of other deities. One metaphor for the relations between God and Israel to be found in biblical texts is that of marriage, with Israel cast in the role of the faithless wife. The metaphor differs from the polytheistic notion of the gods as friends with whom it was possible to commune as a group, as well as individually.

The terms of the relationship between God and the Jews was generally believed by Jews in the first century to have been laid out conveniently in a text transmitted through Moses many centuries earlier. The Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, seems to have been accepted as authoritative by all Jews by this date, despite continuing debate about the status of some of the rest of what was to become the biblical canon. The Pentateuch states rather precisely both a moral code and how God wishes to be worshipped, with prescriptions of lambs and other animals and birds for sacrifice, incense, libations and other rituals, so that there was no need for a Jewish priest to experiment, as in other cults, to see what would win divine favour, or to resort to consultation of an oracle. A moral code for relations between man and man was prescribed in the Pentateuch with the same divine authority.

Worship of one God, in one temple, with one set of agreed laws derived from a single set of authoritative scriptures might have been expected to produce a uniform

religious system and when, in the mid-90s CE, the Jewish historian Josephus, in the earliest known theology of Judaism written by a Jew for gentiles, contrasted Judaism to the multiplicity of gods, customs and myths to be found among the Greeks, this is precisely what he claimed:

Unity and identity of religious belief, perfect uniformity in habits and customs, produce a very beautiful concord in human character. Among us alone will be heard no contradictory statements about God, such as are common among other nations, not only on the lips of ordinary individuals under the impulse of some passing mood, but even boldly propounded by philosophers; some putting forward crushing arguments against the very existence of God, others depriving Him of His providential care for mankind. Among us alone will be seen no difference in the conduct of our lives. With us, all act alike, all profess the same doctrine about God, one which is in harmony with our Law and affirms that all things are under His eye. Even our women-folk and dependents would tell you that piety must be the motive of all our occupations in life.

But the appearance of uniformity was deceptive, since Jewish interpretations of the Pentateuchal laws they shared differed as widely in the first century CE as they do in the multiple denominations of Judaism which flourish today.

The extent of this variety can be gauged by contrasting the picture of first-century Judaism, which can be derived from evidence preserved by the later Jewish traditions to the evidence preserved within Christianity. Each of these later traditions naturally preserved texts which had religious value for them. The Jewish writings from the time of Jesus preserved by Christians (all either composed or translated into Greek, although many survive now in further translations into other Christian languages such as Ethiopic, Coptic and Slavonic) emphasised messianism, eschatology and the Greek philosophical traditions (particularly Platonism), which were to play an important role in the nascent Church. By contrast, the Jewish material in Hebrew and Aramaic, preserved by the rabbinic Jewish tradition through the first millennium CE and down to our own days, deals with the development of practical law through bible interpretation. Such texts are almost completely absent in the material found among Christians. The accidental discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls in 1947 revealed, unsurprisingly, that neither of these later traditions had preserved more than a very partial picture of first-century Judaism.

The writing of creeds to prescribe acceptable theological beliefs was a peculiarity

of early Christianity, brought about by the need to define a new religion whose adherents for many centuries could not even agree the nature of the God they worshipped. The lack of such creeds within Judaism until the Middle Ages has led some historians to claim that Jews were more interested in orthopraxy than orthodoxy, but in fact the practice of Judaism also varied hugely, as can be seen most clearly from a remarkable passage found in the writings of the Jewish philosopher Philo.

Philo, who lived in Alexandria in the Egyptian delta in the first half of the first century CE, devoted his religious writings to a search for deep symbolic meanings in the laws and narratives of the Pentateuch, which he knew primarily through the Septuagint, the Greek translation which had been one of the great cultural achievements of earlier generations of Alexandrian Jews. His allegorical methods were rigorous but unsubtle, as in his interpretation of Genesis 12.1-3:

And the Lord said unto Abraham, Depart out of thy land and out of thy kindred and out of thy father's house and into the land which I shall shew thee; and I will make thee a great nation and will bless thee and will make thy name great and thou shalt be blessed. And I will bless them that bless thee and them that curse thee I will curse and in thee shall all the tribes of the earth be blessed. God begins the carrying out of His will to cleanse man's soul by giving it a starting-point for full salvation in its removal out of three localities, namely, body, sense-perception and speech. "Land" or "country" is a symbol of body, "kindred" of sense-perception, "father's house" of speech. How so? Because the body took its substance out of earth (or land) and is again resolved into earth...

Philo's works were preserved in later centuries not by Jews but by Christians, who similarly sought allegorical meanings in a biblical text – defined by them as the Old Testament – which contained explicit instructions on such practices as circumcision and Sabbath observance which, under the new dispensation from Christ, they no longer wished to follow.

In one passage, from a treatise which discussed the allegorical meaning of the Genesis story of the travels of Abraham from Haran to Canaan, Philo attacked a group of Jews for doing precisely what later Christians were to do, in accepting the symbolic significance of these laws while ignoring the literal meaning:

There are some who, regarding laws in their literal sense in the light of symbols of matters belonging to the

intellect, are over-punctilious about the latter, while treating the former with easy-going neglect. Such men I, for my part, should blame for handling the matter in too easy and off-hand a manner: they ought to have given careful attention to both aims, to a more full and exact investigation of what is not seen and in what is seen to be stewards without reproach. As it is, as though they were living alone by themselves in a wilderness, or as though they had become disembodied souls, and knew neither city nor village nor household nor any company of human beings at all, overlooking all that the mass of men regarded, they explore reality in its naked absoluteness. These men are taught by the sacred word to have thought for good repute and to let go nothing that is part of the customs fixed by divinely empowered men greater than those of our time.

It is remarkable that such a passage survived in a manuscript copied by Christian scribes, whose own attitude to the laws was precisely that attacked by Philo. Perhaps the scribes failed sufficiently to understand what they were writing. But in any case, the survival of this passage shows that there must have been at least some such extreme Jewish allegorists known to Philo in order for such an attack to have been warranted.

Philo evidently disapproved of such Jews, but he did not describe them as no longer within Judaism and, in general, there is much evidence that practitioners of widely differing varieties of Judaism could accept the validity of alternative philosophies within the same religious system inherited from Moses. When the Jewish historian Josephus laid out for gentile readers, at the end of the first century CE, the different schools within Judaism, he emphasised quite specifically that the very different groups of Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes were all genuine forms of Judaism, in contrast to a novel anarchist philosophy (named by him, unimaginatively, as the “fourth philosophy”), which he claimed originated at the time of the imposition of direct Roman rule over Judaea in six CE and which he blamed for the Jewish uprising against Rome, which led to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE.

Josephus made no attempt to disguise that the Pharisees and Sadducees argued a great deal. A similar picture emerges from the early rabbinic texts and in the New Testament, most graphically in the description in the Acts of the Apostles of the trial of Paul by the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem:

Now Paul was well aware that one section of them were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, so he called out in the Council, “My brothers, I am a Pharisee, a Pharisee born and bred; and the true issue in this trial is our

hope of the resurrection of the dead". At these words, the Pharisees and Sadducees fell out among themselves and the assembly was divided. [The Sadducees deny that there is any resurrection, or angel, or spirit, but the Pharisees accept them.] So a great uproar broke out; and some of the doctors of the law belonging to the Pharisaic party openly took sides and declared, "We can find no fault with this man; perhaps an angel or spirit has spoken to him". The dissension was mounting and the commander was afraid that Paul would be torn in pieces, so he ordered the troops to go down, pull him out of the crowd and bring him into the barracks.

The possibility of life after death was only one of the areas of disagreement between the two groups. According to Josephus, Sadducees denied the belief of the Pharisees that God or fate intervenes in human affairs, a remarkable philosophical stance for Jews who claimed to base their doctrines exclusively on the biblical texts, in which divine intervention is frequently described and assumed. The notions of the Sadducees, who presented themselves as scriptural fundamentalists who rejected the traditional interpretations of the texts, were inevitably as incoherent as those of all such fundamentalists. They found themselves at odds not only with the Pharisees, who accepted ancestral practices, but with the ordinary Jews among whom those traditional practices were (by definition) long established.

Such differences of approach could have very practical consequences. One which was noted by later rabbis was a dispute over the date of the pilgrim festival of Pentecost. A literal meaning of the biblical text as favoured by the Sadducees ensured that they would almost never consider as correct the day chosen by other Jews for the celebration of the feast. Pentecost was the occasion of one of the three great national celebrations in Jerusalem, when the special sacrifices ordained by God for this festival, according to the specific injunctions in the Pentateuch, were carried out with due pomp in the Temple. There is no doubt that these sacrifices were indeed performed in the Temple, nor that they occurred only on one day each year. That day was probably the customary day, as approved by the Pharisees, and one can only imagine what a Sadducee high priest would have thought about making a public sacrifice on behalf of all Israel in a fashion that he believed contravened the explicit stipulations of God, as preserved in the written law. It is often imagined, incorrectly, that all the high priests were Sadducees in the first century CE, but it is certain that at least two High Priests were Sadducees, so the problem was

real.

There is no evidence that toleration of religious difference was ever seen as a virtue in itself by any Jew in this period. Pharisees and Sadducees cooperated grudgingly at best. But, as we have seen, cooperation was sufficient for Josephus, who could write in the late 80s or early 90s CE how Pharisees and Sadducees came to have “controversies and serious differences”, to be able to claim in the mid-90s CE that what was remarkable about Jews was their unanimity and uniformity in contrast to Greeks: one Temple, for one God, ruled over by one High Priest. Josephus was not the only Jew to insist, whatever the evidence to the contrary, that, despite their differences, all Jews are connected to each other in a web of mutual responsibility. The same notion is a commonplace in early rabbinic discourse. In a religious system which presupposed a covenant not just between God and the individual Jew, but between God and Israel as a nation, the sense of communal solidarity had an abiding impact, regardless of the differences with which Jews learned to live.

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