

The Setting and Story – Chapter 6

Introduction

[W]e cannot bypass the attempt to understand ancient Judaism as a whole if we are to make any sense of the new movement which was conceived, born and initially nurtured in its midst during the first century AD. To understand the origin of Christianity, and the terms in which the question of god was posed and addressed within it, and to do so in obedience to the demands of what constitutes a good hypothesis, we must gain as accurate an understanding as possible of the Judaism(s) in which Jesus and Paul grew up, and to which they related in various ways during their active ministries. We must understand the worldview(s) and self-understandings held by the Jews of the time, and, within that task, must attempt to grasp Judaism's sense of its own history, its belief in its covenant god, its aspirations, frustrations, hopes and fears. Looking wider, we must also understand something of the cultural milieu in which Israel, and Judaism at large, found itself, i.e. the Greco-Roman world of the first century of the common era (pg 147).

What emerges from this study may be outlined in advance as follows. The main feature of first-century Judaism, within Palestine at least, was neither a static sense of a religion to which one adhered, nor a private sphere of religion into which one escaped, but a total worldview, embracing all aspects of reality, and coming to sharp focus in a sense of longing and expectation, of recognition that the present state of affairs had not yet (to put it mildly) seen the full realization of the purposes of the covenant god for his people.

The Sources

Those most useful are those that reflect the situation in Palestine before the two great rebellions of AD 66-70 and 132-135.

- Josephus
 - The Jewish War
 - The Antiquities of the Jews
 - Life
 - Against Apion
- First two books of Macabees
- Rabbinic literature
 - Written later, but when read carefully, can reveal information about our time of study
- The Hebrew Scripture
 - They were read by Jews of our time of study, we must be aware that they were read from a specific perspective

The Greco-Roman World as the Context of Early Judaism

- Greek Rule (Hellenism)

- Palestine was conquered in 332 BC by Alexander the Great of the Greece and was added to the Greek empire
- Alexander’s expansive rule brought a single language and unprecedented cultural unity
- Palestine was saturated with Hellenistic culture
- “Any idea of a hidden curtain between Judaism and Hellenism, in the sense of a geographical line at which it might be said that one stopped and the other began, must be completely rejected.” (pg 153)
- Roman Rule – a “blessing and a bane” (pg 153)
 - Blessing – a world a peace
 - No wars levies, no traveling soldiers, thriving trade and commerce, unified system of justice
 - Bane – peace was brutally enforced
 - “[Crushed] dissent and resistance with ruthless efficiency” (pg 154)

The Story of Israel

- Babylon to Rome (587 – 63 BC)
 - Exile to Babylon
 - Babylon conquered by the Syrians, Jews allowed to return to Palestine
 - Alexander conquered, well, the world
 - The Maccabean revolt drove out the tyrants, setup the Hasmonean “regime” of Jewish priest-kings.
 - Out of exile? The Hasmonean rule was divisive and led to several sects (more on this later in the book)
- Roman Rule (63BC – AD 70)
 - The new Babylon, the Kittim, the new great enemy
 - No leader arose to fight Rome, and Israel’s leaders compromised with Rome
 - Procurators were installed in AD 6 (a la Pontius Pilate AD 26-32) and Judea became an official Roman province
 - “Isolated protests were put down with sporadic violence, and the embers of potential rebellion smoldered on, ready to be fanned into flames of expectation and aspiration. Sooner or later, the covenant god would act once more to vindicate his name, to resort the symbols (particularly the Temple) which express his covenant with Israel, and of course to liberate Israel herself.” (pg 161)
 - The great rebellion of AD 66. Jerusalem destroyed in AD 70.
- Judaism Reconstructed
 - “For Jews, the attempt to reconstruct and maintain an authentically Jewish way of life in the absence of the Temple produced, as we have seen, a variety of responses ranging from revolutionary determinism to the study and debating of Torah. For much of Christianity, which by 70 had spread far beyond the borders both of Palestine and of the Jewish communities of the Diaspora, there were pressing questions and issues quite other than that of relationships with the synagogue community. It

was a period of transition, when many ambiguities lived side by side; and many, on both sides of what was to become the great divide, seemed content to let it be so. We should not forget that early Christianity, claiming the high ground of Israel's heritage, was first and foremost a movement that defined itself in opposition to paganism, and only secondarily in opposition to mainline Judaism itself." (pg 165)

Questions

1. What information were you already familiar with?
2. What new information did you discover?
3. What did you find most fascinating?
4. Did you find anything troubling?