CHAPTER FOUR

THE WEIGHING OF THE PARTS: PIVOTS AND PITFALLS IN THE STUDY OF EARLY JUDAISMS AND THEIR EARLY CHRISTIAN OFFSPRING

In the study of early Christianity, we often hear references to the “Parting of the Ways” as the process or result of Christianity declaring itself independent of its Jewish origins, and of Judaism reciprocally rejecting Christianity. It is quite obvious that the “ways” that led to classical Christianity and rabbinic Judaism did indeed “part” by the fourth century CE. This becomes true simply by definition, since in those classical Christian and classical Jewish communities, each understood the other as “other.” To be a “Christian” involved in part not being a “Jew,” and vice versa. They came to understand themselves as exclusively different “religions,” and/or perhaps also, at times, exclusively different cultural options.

But the path to such a simple and clear answer is littered with the sorts of complexities that surround all historical and social developments, that is, all human developments; these complexities get masked by the urge to make and keep things clear and simple. It was doubtless with this in mind that the organizers of the Princeton colloquium selected the confrontational title, “The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages.” To issue such a challenge to “common knowledge” (or exclusive definition) may appear, on the surface of things, to be a bold step, but it constitutes an invitation to look more closely at the micro histories behind that “common knowledge” in order to determine what other trajectories may be ascertained. A challenge is offered to a unilateral development

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1 This essay appeared originally as pp. 87–94 in The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages (ed. Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed; Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 95; Tübingen: Mohr/ Siebeck, 2003).

model. Ockham’s razor is blunted if not shattered, and one of the major results is to explore quite closely the interrelationships of the various parts and participants and particularities that in various ways produced the familiar medieval/classical landscape. In an obvious attempt to be clever, I’ve christened this deconstructive exploratory process “The Weighing of the Parts.” Although there is a rash of modern literature that is relevant to this subject, I will make no attempt to survey it extensively or directly but will pay some attention, by way of footnotes, to aspects of two recent contributions, from Gabrielle Boccaccini and Seth Schwartz.3

Several points need to be made, some methodological and others evidentiary. Since effective methodology cannot take place in a vacuum (true by definition; otherwise it would not be considered “effective”), these aspects of method and data cannot always be separated. One of the first lines of attack on traditional assumptions and arguments is the recognition of how many “parts” there are to be “weighed”! It is fashionable in some scholarly circles today to speak of “Judaisms” (rather than simply “Judaism”) in the period prior to the ever increasing success of “rabbinic” authority;4 regarding Christianity, we hear fewer voices speaking of “Christianities” in the early period, but the same recognition is captured with the oft heard references to early Christian “varieties,” including discussions of whether such varieties as “gnosticism” can be considered legitimately “Christian.”5 The vocabulary used

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4 The use of “Judaisms” became popularized by the anthology entitled Judaisms and their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era (Cambridge: CUP, 1987), edited by Jacob Neusner, William Scott Green and Ernest S. Frerichs. Boccaccini is sympathetic: “Neusner’s approach has already left its clear imprint on Judaic studies (‘from Judaism to Judaisms’) and the indication of a much promising method of studying rabbinic origins and roots as a comparison of systems of thought that ‘took place in succession to one another’ ” (Roots of Rabbinic Judaism [2002] 14; citing Jacob Neusner, The Four Stages of Rabbinic Judaism [London: Routledge, 1998]). Schwartz emphasizes the variety without embracing the plural terminology: “It is difficult to imagine any serious scholar ever again describing the Judaism of the later Second Temple period as a rigorous, monolithic orthodoxy, as was still common only a generation ago” (Imperialism, 4–5); or again, “In this book I assume that ancient Judaism was complex, capacious, and rather frayed at the edges,” although not “multiple” (p. 9).