The use of rabbinic literature for the study of the gospels has been hugely influenced, for good and ill, by John Lightfoot’s *Horae Hebri- cae et Talmudicae*.¹ He used the model of a commentary to collate passages from rabbinic literature which contained parallels and background material. This was successful at adding colour and context to the gospels with regard to the Temple cult and, to some extent, the manner of Jewish teaching, but fell short on theological background. This deficiency was partly due to Lightfoot’s self-conscious rejection and reaction against Jewish theology, but it was also due to the nature of the available texts which were largely concerned with rules for life rather than the meaning of life.

New Testament scholars have largely inherited Lightfoot’s program, his attitude to rabbinic theology and the limitations of the literature which is available. A. Edersheim’s works² can be regarded as a useful popular reformulation of Lightfoot’s findings. During the last century the amount of available information has increased monumentally, with the massive projects by Emil Schurer revised by Vermes,³ Paul Billerbeck,⁴ George Foot Moore,⁵ and Safrai’s *CRINT*

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project. Schurer succeeded in putting rabbinic literature into an historical context, while Billerbeck pulled together the strands in a first attempt to show historical development within Jewish traditions and Moore highlighted the variety of Judaisms in the first century. The recent CRINT project attempts to use rabbinic materials in a more historico-critical way, though in practice it falls short of this aim. It does, nevertheless, represent a tremendous compendium of the information which has been amassed so far. Ongoing studies include revisions of Billerbeck (by the Orion centre and by Neusner, Chilton et al.) and the TRENT project. The revisions of Billerbeck aim to complete the task of Lightfoot and to address the problem of dating, as well as applying historico-critical criteria to the choice of texts and to the method of applying ‘parallels’ for illustrating the New Testament. The TRENT project does the reverse, by systematically dating the early rabbinic material and presenting it in its own context, whether or not a ‘parallel’ can be demonstrated with the New Testament.

The pursuit for a theology of Judaism has proved much more difficult than working out the laws and practices of Judaism, because classical rabbinic literature contains so little theology. This task was helped vastly by the rediscovery of apocalyptic Jewish texts, Qumran documents, Nag Hammadi texts and others which were much more concerned with theology than the classical rabbinic literature was. These discoveries have been somewhat distracting because they presented scholars with a bewildering variety of Judaisms, mostly from the fringes of mainstream society. It was tempting to extrapolate a theology of normative Judaism from the vast treasures preserved by the Qumran community, by apocalyptic sects or by second and third century Jewish Gnostic groups. The theologies of these fringe groups have therefore exerted an undue influence on New Testament scholarship simply because, by an accident of history, their documents were preserved. While these documents undoubtedly provide invaluable insights into the theology of the New Testament, it has been too easy to ignore the beliefs of those against whom these minority groups were campaigning so loudly.

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