CHAPTER 6

Antiquity’s Children: History and Theology in Three Surveys

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Through his publications on ancient Judaism and early Christianity Alan Segal has contributed immensely to clarifying ambiguities, unraveling complexities and recalling half-forgotten adversaries. His writing shows the way to cross many boundaries of thought and methodology. This characteristic of his research reflects the openness and ingenuousness of Alan himself, a direct and honest scholar and a treasured friend.

I here analyze a few aspects of one of Segal’s early books, *Rebecca’s Children: Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World*.¹ The book surveys how rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity took shape primarily during the formative age of late antiquity. Segal treats the Hellenistic roots of these religions, the social world of first century Israel, Jesus, who is called a Jewish revolutionary, and Paul, who is described as a convert and apostle. Segal moves on in the book to summarize the origins of rabbinic Judaism and discusses how the twin offspring of ancient Israel, the rabbinic and Christian communities, went separate ways, as the matriarch Rebecca’s twin children Jacob and Esau parted ways in the biblical account in Genesis. In comparing the theologies of these twins, Segal insists we “…must attend to the real social matrix in which the religious thought existed.”

I compare here Segal’s *Rebecca’s Children* with two comparable books and I ask a few perennial and fundamental questions about religious scholars who write about their own religions. The two other introductory surveys of the Second Temple and early rabbinic Judaism by Jewish scholars are Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*,² and Lawrence H. Schiffman, *From Text to Tradition: A History of Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism*.³

All three of these surveys of ancient Judaism make a contribution to research in the discipline, first of all, because they all are more than mere summaries and do show innovative conceptualizations. Secondly, these books have value for teachers because they serve as particularly complete, creative and accurate statements of the data and scholarship that they represent. Thirdly, these surveys of ancient evidence serve theological purposes because they provide some justification of a contemporary form of Judaism (or Christianity) in a prior formative age, and they support some implicit claim of greater authenticity for a current world view or way of life.

I ask if we see any signs that these books reflect the respective religious affiliations of the authors. I think they do and that they ought to. Works of scholarship in the humanities in general and religious studies in particular to some degree do not come out of the minds only, but also from the souls of their authors. There is then, as by now we all agree, no such creation as a ‘neutral academic account.’ A writer’s point of view permeates his or her book, sometimes more and sometimes less. Detachment inevitably gives way to some self-expression in any enterprise of creative expression. Given these assumptions, I prefer to bring the bias of the writer to the surface and confirm that it does not distort too greatly the evidence of the past. The ‘reader’ always wants to know if the personal background of the teacher or author deeply colors the scholarship, for in the end a heavily slanted account may be of less value to some readers.

Now, it would help if these three works were in any way self-conscious about the biases that they maintain. But they are not. It would make life easier if the authors told their readers where they ‘were coming from’ on page one of the books. They do not. Naturally, you may argue that a scholar does not need to reveal the location of his vantage points. The very license of academic scholarship allows a writer to keep mum about his or her personal beliefs or doubts. Most of the time, asking about that is the boundary that we do not cross.

I ask. And in these three cases I conclude that the religious and theological tendenz of each work is gentle rather than heavy-handed. The authors deftly clarify, unravel and recall the past without tilting it too greatly. Further, I argue that when the modern writer does bring his own reference points to bear on the data, it creates another value for the investigation. It is a positive act to read modern theological perspectives into a constructed historical survey. The projection in each case substantially contributes to the theological tasks of three varieties of modern Judaism. Each author either knowingly or subconsciously seeks the antecedents of his own system in the data of the past. Hence each book serves as a subtle means to highlight the authority of one or another form of Judaism.