
Since Nickelsburg’s and Stone’s compilation of Jewish texts of the latter part of the Second Temple period with commentary has attained the status of an almost classic in terms of authoritative and widely used sourcebook for the study of late Second Temple Judaism, it is reasonable to discuss the revised version of the book more thoroughly. Apart from a brief introduction, the book is comprised of six chapters, but is notably without a more general conclusion. Each chapter contains a bibliography consisting of two parts. The first part contains primary sources, whereas the second part includes a short bibliography of secondary sources that allows the reader to proceed to more detailed literature on the topics under scrutiny. The book has an index of passages quoted and cited, but no comprehensive and overall bibliography.

It is important to pay heed to the subtitle of the book, Texts and Documents on Faith and Piety, which indicates the overall nature of the discussion. It is neither a book on Jewish religion in the sense of including the artefactual aspect of religion, nor does it discuss Jewish inscriptions of the era. In this sense, it is an overstatement in the title to talk about documents. The book concentrates on Jewish theology of the epoch, since it does not attempt to reconstruct the general religion of Second Temple Judaism. In this manner, it resembles the tenor of Sanders’ Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion [1977] (cf. his Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 B.C.E.-66 C.E. [1992]) with his notion of a number of features held to comprise a common Judaism. In the same vein, Nickelsburg and Stone emphasize three aspects which they hold representative of the different faces of Jewish “religion” of the time. They are: (1) reverence for the temple and its service; (2) devotion to God leading some people to join a “monastic” community in the desert such as, for instance, the Essenes; (3) practical and sensible instructions pertaining to the wish to live one’s life in accordance with God’s will and pleasing to one’s fellow countrymen. The three aspects are further elaborated by taking six modalities into account. The modalities are simultaneously identical with the chapter structure of the book. They are: (1) Jewish sects, parties, and tendencies such as, for instance, apocalypticism; (2) different texts illustrating multifaceted sides of the temple-cult, including criticism for the temple and its cult; (3) ideals of piety; (4) different notions of deliverance, judgment, and vindication; (5) a concomitant chapter on agents of divine deliverance; (6) various sapiential ideas pertaining to the relationship between Israel and wisdom. The authors are keenly aware of the fact that more topics ought to have been included if the book were to provide a more comprehensive understanding of early Judaism. Among other central topics, they mention scriptural interpretation and exposition; views on the
world and humanity; personal religion; individual and communal devotion, including prayer; magic and astrology. However, given the scope and size of the book which may have been defined by the publishing house the number of subjects covered appear partly reasonable given the general nature of the book.

Personally, I would have favoured an approach less theological and idealistic in its way of framing early Judaism. Likewise, it would have been beneficial with a more general introduction discussing transitions from Israelite to Jewish religion or phrased in terms of a more comparative approach from primary to secondary types or from locative to utopian forms of religion. This issue is the more pertinent, since the question of the emergence of early Judaism is intrinsically related to the culturally evolutionary problem of a different form of religion. I would also have appreciated a more general discussion of the Hellenism-Judaism debate which looms large in the book but is never treated per se (see below). Although it is stated in the introduction that a number of parallels from Graeco-Roman religion are presented in the book, I have found it hard to substantiate this claim. In fact, I think it is one of the areas in which the book falls short by not contextualizing early Judaism in the wider Mediterranean religious world, although I simultaneously acknowledge that one cannot do everything within the constraints of a limited number of pages available. Finally, the book should be praised for its inclusion of well-chosen textual excerpts of nascent Christianity and early rabbincis as an addendum to the primary texts of early Judaism. It is meritorious to include texts from these two religious trajectories, since many people tend to think of them (especially formative Christianity) as representative of an entirely and categorically different world. However, at this point a more thorough discussion ought to have been provided in the introduction. The more so, since the texts selected form the early Christ-movement are contemporaneous with a great many of the texts chosen and held to embody early Judaism. Why not take the more radical consequence of making the early Christ-movement a similarly, historically legitimate form of late Second Temple Judaism as Philo, Josephus, Pharisees, Essenes, etc.?

In their discussion of Judaism the authors are careful to balance between the specific and the general throughout the book, but on one point I think they make a common mistake. Although in recent years it has in some academic circles for good reasons become fashionable to favour a plural version of Judaism in order to emphasize the diversity of the phenomenon under scrutiny, the use of Judaisms does not solve the problem. It only shows a failing philosophical ability to distinguish between a concept and a phenomenon. It would be beneficial if more scholars would acknowledge that concepts were never meant to reflect the world of phenomena in a one-to-one relationship. As a phenomenon Judaism is obviously a highly diversified entity, but that does not preclude us from speaking about it in singular, since there are also some common traits in terms of shared signs that unite the various species of Judaism with the genus.