REVIEW ESSAYS

ARKADY KOVELMAN, BETWEEN ALEXANDRIA AND JERUSALEM. THE DYNAMIC OF JEWISH AND HELLENISTIC CULTURE

Robert M. Berchman
Dowling College

To study the Jewish cultures of the Second Temple and Talmudic periods is to risk telling in one's own words a story that has been excellently told before. Victor Tcherikover brought Hellenistic civilization and the Jews to the attention of historians of ancient Mediterranean religion and culture. In vivid studies, Jacob Neusner, Martin Hengel, Louis Feldman, and David Winston increased and clarified what we know of the variety and interaction of Judaism and Hellenism in Greco-Roman Antiquity. What Neusner in particular makes plain is that what is needed is a new academic scale for the study of Judaism in Hellenistic, Roman, and Christian antiquity. Kovelman's Between Alexandria and Jerusalem meets just this required sense of scale.

Kovelman's thesis can be succinctly summarized: the writings of the Tannaim and Amoraim have been too easily misinterpreted by most modern and post-modern scholars. The reasons for this are complex but plain enough. They rest in misrepresentations of the dynamics of culture and in mistaken readings of both Hellenistic-Jewish and Rabbinic texts. Each offered neither grandiose metaphysical claims nor even merely legal compilations. Rather the Hellenistic-Jewish and Rabbinic writings were testimony to a variety of robust Jewish cultural systems, which were dynamically engaged, not only with

Central to Kovelman’s thesis is the claim that cultural and literary revolutions occurred in Hellenistic and Roman public consciousness in the second and fifth centuries C.E. These changes help explain the emergence of Hellenistic and Rabbinic Judaism. If the evidence of the Greek papyri from Roman and Byzantine Egypt and Alexandrian exegesis are trustworthy, then one can view the Mishnah not only as a codification of oral material. More important, it represents a philosophical transformation of mass mentality typical in the early Empire. Similarly, the transition from the Mishnah to Genesis Rabbah signals a general alteration of historical self-awareness in the wake of the collapse of the “Evil Kingdom” (pp. 1–38).

Kovelman is keen to explain how the birth of Aggadah mirrors a general literary revolution that takes place in the Roman Empire during the first and second centuries C.E., when seriocomic or secular literature replaces old classical genres. He is also careful to note how and why Jews, Hellenes, and Christians all share in this general tendency to replace old genres with new ones. Here he maps how Hellenistic-Jewish and Rabbinic literature takes on a “Greco-Roman face” by making the “Other” its own (pp. 39–66).

This genre “shift” can be explained through a study of the relationship between Alexandrian exegesis and Rabbinic midrash. Here Kovelman boldly goes where few have ventured before. He argues that Alexandrian exegesis played a crucial role in the emergence of early Rabbinic literature. Although the rabbis rejected the philosophical stance of the Alexandrians, they accepted their claim of the logos character of Scripture. When combined with their creation of a seriocomic aggadic tradition, the rabbis capitalized on the Platonic exegesis of Alexandrian Jewish philosophers to offer an Aggadic literature per se with its own generative logic and native category-formations. In nuce, Biblical culture is replaced by a Rabbinic culture in the first five centuries C.E. (pp. 67–100).

Standing Between Alexandria and Jerusalem, Kovelman, like few others, is keenly aware of the importance of Alexandrian Jewish culture for the emergence of Rabbinic culture. This emergence happened not through any slow entropy of either Biblical or Greco-Roman culture nor through any discrete and then dramatic rise in Christianity. Rather it was by developing new stylistic systems, as exemplified in the Letter of Aristeas, that we encounter the replacement of an old