WAS THERE A “MAINSTREAM JUDAISM” IN THE LATE SECOND TEMPLE PERIOD?

Günter Stemberger
University of Vienna

What comprises the unity of a religion despite its multiple outward phenomena? What is a religion’s true “essence”? Theologians have always been interested in these questions. There is also nothing new in establishing one’s own religious identity by differentiation from the other. Thus Adolf Harnack considered it essential to describe “The Essence of Christianity” (1900) by contrasting it with its mother-religion, Judaism. When Leo Baeck answered this challenge in his “The Essence of Judaism” (1905), he attempted thoroughly to correct Harnack’s representation of Judaism, a caricature by his very point of departure. But both authors and many other participants in this discussion so lively at the beginning of the twentieth century shared the conviction that on principle it was possible to depict such an “essence.”

1. The Search for the Essential Unity

Even more than for any other period of Jewish history, the question of unity has always been granted special importance in the context of the beginnings of Christianity and its separation from Judaism. How could the Judaism of that period tolerate its different currents—at least the three “religious sects” described by Josephus—, support the enormous cultural diversity that resulted from a widespread diaspora, and still preserve its unity even as it speedily separated itself from the Christian community?1 What was common to those cur-

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1 See P. Alexander, “The Parting of the Ways’ from the Perspective of Rabbinic Judaism,” in J.D.G. Dunn, ed., Jews and Christians. The Parting of the Ways A.D. 70 to 135 (Tübingen, 1992), pp. 1-25, especially pp. 2f. Alexander correctly emphasizes the problematic tendency based on this approach to date the separation as soon as possible.
rents that remained “within” and that Christianity did not have? Evidently, the general impression was that the differences within Judaism were relatively small and insignificant. Thus New Testament scholarship from the very beginning considered it possible to comprehend “Judaism” as a whole either in contrast with the message of the New Testament or as its “background” within the history of religion and culture. In this context, the Pharisees always played a central role; more and more they were considered the main representatives of Judaism, whose direct successors were the rabbis and whose heritage shaped Judaism until our own period.

This perspective was common to Christians and Jews although, of course, for very different reasons. It is fundamental for our understanding of the history of research on the Pharisees since the nineteenth century. Since the rabbis were considered to be the direct heirs of the Pharisees, everybody who could read the Rabbinic texts used them to reconstruct Pharisaic religion and spirituality; there was no need to justify this procedure. Other scholars were limited to Josephus and the data of the New Testament as their main sources. But increasing knowledge of apocalyptic and other nonbiblical literature of the Second Temple period posed some problems. Was it permissible to use these texts, too, for the reconstruction of Pharisaism, or should one regard them as representative of only marginal and obscure phenomena of first century Judaism? In scholarly publications of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we encounter two opposite tendencies: one group of scholars idealized apocalyptic thought as a world of creative freedom in contrast to the strait-jacket of a Pharisaic religion of the Law; another group either considered apocalypticism as marginal and unimportant or tried to regard it as one aspect of Pharisaic thought, which no longer could be accused of being a pure and exclusive “religion of the Law.” The more apocalypticism could be harmonized with Pharisaic thought, the more weight could it be granted in the reconstruction of the religious world of first century Judaism. In general the tendency prevailed more and more to include practically all literary remains from the latter half of the Second Temple period in the reconstruction of a largely uniform Judaism. The Pharisees, finally, were not just one of the three

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