

# Introduction

The five centuries that spawned the literature that is the subject of this book were times of crisis, transition, and creativity for the Judeo-Christian tradition. At the beginning of the third century (300 B.C.E.) most of the literature that would later become the Scriptures of the Jewish people had already been written. By the mid-second century C.E. both rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity had emerged. Both religions claimed to be the heirs of God's promises to Israel and embraced the earlier writings as Scripture. At this point, however, these religions had been shaped by the events and developments that had transpired during these five centuries. Thus the study of early rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity must reckon with this period and with the literature that grew out of it and that testifies to it.

Fundamental and far-reaching changes shook the Jewish people during these centuries. The Persian Empire fell. Alexander's victories brought Greek language and culture to the East. The persecution of the Jews by the Macedonian king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, tested the mettle of Jewish faith and threatened to exterminate the religion. After a brief period of independence Palestine bowed to the sovereignty of Rome. New turmoil brought revolt. Palestine was devastated, Jerusalem was sacked, and the temple was leveled.

These events and others like them made their inevitable impact on the shape of Jewish life, religion, and thought. Persecution, oppression, and political domination were met with capitulation in some cases, but they also spawned varieties of resistance and the theoretical undergirdings for it: militant zeal and passive resistance; apocalyptic revelations about help from the heavenly sphere and hopes for a human helper, a messiah; speculations about God's justice in an unjust world. The Jewish community divided into parties and groups and sects. In and through this process individuals and members of various religious communities wrestled with the events that touched and troubled their lives, and they sought to make sense of them by interpreting their religious heritage and by creating new traditions that spoke with relevance and force to their circumstances. The literature of this period provides us with the evidence and some of the actual substance of this religious, cultural, and intellectual process. Moreover, this literature reveals, in various stages of development, literary forms of biblical interpretation three to four centuries before they

emerge in the writings of the rabbis. Thus from almost any viewpoint the literature of this period is crucial to an understanding of the emergence of early rabbinic Judaism.

The situation is basically the same for the study of early Christianity. The seedbed of the church was first-century Judaism. As Jews, Jesus of Nazareth and his disciples breathed the air of this religious and cultural environment and spoke its idiom. They received their Bible from the Jewish community, as it was interpreted by that community. Indeed, the very early church was a messianic movement within the bosom of Judaism, and fundamental aspects of its early history are intelligible only when viewed against the rejection of its messianic views and expectations by the majority of contemporary Jews. Thus in a variety of ways the literature of this period provides an indispensable key for the understanding of the rise of Christianity.

Unfortunately, Christian study of Judaism has often been imperialistic. Its purpose has been to enhance the study of Christianity, and often to do so by contrast. Thus Judaism is mocked up as the dark “background” against which is played the glorious drama of Christian origins. A more appropriate model is that of “roots.” To the extent that I deal with the issue or imply it, I wish to show how both early rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity sprang from the same seedbed.

The problem of Christians coming to terms with their Jewish roots is particularly acute. Centuries of overt stereotype and polemic and the continued unconscious use of prejudicial concepts and terminology obscure the facts and issues. Consider the following configuration:

B(efore) C(hrist)		A(nno) D(omini)
Old Testament	Intertestamental	New Testament
Israelite	(Late) Jewish	Christian

The very chronological terminology that we regularly employ presupposes a Christian confession, dividing time “before Christ” and according to the “year of our Lord.” Similarly, the application of the term “intertestamental” to the Jewish literature of this period presumes the Christian belief that in Jesus there is a “new covenant” (i.e., testament), which has replaced the “old covenant.” Another distinction separates early Hebrew or Israelite religion and theology qualitatively from its Jewish development, and the latter from its Christian successor. On the one hand this distinction sees Judaism as a legalistic or wildly apocalyptic perversion of inspired Israelite religion. On the other hand it fails to admit the profound debt that early Christian faith and theology owed to Judaism. In its more arrogant and blind form it has defined the Judaism of this period as “Late Judaism,” as if this religion had come to an end with the emergence of Christianity.

In order to avoid these pitfalls and to sensitize the reader I shall employ more neutral terminology. My chronological determiner will be the common existence of Judaism and Christianity; hence the Common Era (C.E.) and Before the Common Era (B.C.E.). While in keeping with Christian self-understanding I shall speak of the “New Testament,” I shall also refer to the “(Hebrew) Bible” or “Scriptures,” imposing no category of oldness on the

covenant that Jews still consider viable. Similarly, recognizing the present existence of Judaism I shall speak of the period under consideration as “Early (postbiblical) Judaism.”

## APPROACH AND METHOD

As I have already suggested in the preface, I believe that literature is rooted in history and is affected by it. Theological conceptions arise not in a vacuum but in response to historical circumstances and events, and they reflect their social matrices and cultural contexts. While it is not always possible to determine these, particularly when we are dealing with ancient documents, our relative ability to understand milieu affects our understanding of literature. Thus I have arranged the book historically, I have provided most of the chapters with historical introductions, and I have raised historical considerations when and where they are relevant. At the same time, I have indicated where there are historical problems, uncertainties, and ambiguities.

Within this historical framework I treat the subject matter as literature. I am interested not simply or primarily in ideas or motifs or in contents in some amorphous sense, but in literature that has form and direction: in narrative that has plot with beginning, middle, and end (or situation, complication, and resolution); in other types of literature that use particular forms and rhetorical devices with consistency and purpose. The critic's task is to find these forms and directions and to interpret the text with reference to them. Not infrequently it is a difficult and ambiguous task. Nonetheless, I invite the reader to search with me for the logic that caused things to be written in the manner and the order in which they were written.

Above all I wish to emphasize that this volume is not a substitute for the ancient texts themselves. When I retell a story in brief form, my purpose is not to save the reader the trouble of interacting with the original. Here, as throughout, I offer a possible road map, a grid, an ordering of relationships and emphases as I see them. To some extent I intend this as a prolegomenon for a study of the exegetical *details*, and this is the way in which I have used the book in the classroom. At the same time, I hope that my interpretations will challenge the reader to find equally or more viable ways to read the texts. The history of interpretation and criticism is precisely such an ongoing process.

I have attempted to strike a balance between a study of the parts and a study of the whole. In general the overarching question is: wherein lies the integrity, the wholeness, the gist of a particular text? At the same time, some writings more than others are patently composites of earlier, shorter writings. Occasionally I discuss these parts separately. In some cases I have attempted to separate levels of tradition, but for the most part this has been a task secondary and consequent to an interpretation of the whole.

## PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVE

The study and interpretation of ancient literature is fraught with difficulties. We must deal first with the time gap. As people of the twenty-first century, we are reading the lit-

erary products of an age and culture separated from us by two millennia and thousands of miles. Even if we are able to read the texts in their original languages, we face the barrier of strange thought patterns and modes of expression. At times even persons who are familiar with the canonical biblical literature find themselves in a strange world.

The problems of interpretation are compounded by our individual prejudices and tastes. I have already mentioned false and derogatory Christian presuppositions, which must be neutralized if the literature is to be read fairly and in its own right. Taste presents another kind of problem. Distaste for mythic thought can erect a barrier to understanding it. A preference for clear, logical, conceptualized exposition may hinder the interpretation and appreciation of narrative. Empathy must precede criticism. The critic must first enter the artist's world and view it from within before criticizing the manner in which that world has been expounded or delineated.

Our experience and appreciation of modern forms of literature may also create difficulties for our study and evaluation of these ancient writings. As one adapts to more complicated and "sophisticated" art forms, older forms may seem not only simple but simplistic. The person who has experienced William Walton's boisterous oratorio interpretation of Belshazzar's feast may find it difficult to appreciate George Frederick Handel's exposition of the same story. But that is hardly fair to Handel, who wrote in his own time and place and wrote well. Similarly, we should judge the artistry of the narrative literature of early Judaism in terms of its own environment and not in the context of the modern short story or novel.

One important factor that holds together the largest part of this corpus of literature is its common setting in hard times: persecution, oppression, other kinds of disaster, the loneliness and pressures of a minority living out its convictions in an alien environment. Within this context we can read and appreciate these writings as a sometimes powerful expression of the depths and the heights of our humanity and of human religiousness and religious experience. In them we may see ourselves as we have been or are or might be: the desperate puzzlement of Enoch's decimated humanity; the anguish and then the ecstasy of a Tobit; the courage of a Susanna or a Judith; the defiant tenacity of the Macabean martyrs; the desolate abandonment of an Aseneth; and the persistent questioning of an Ezra.

Through it all is told the story of a people from whom sprang Jesus of Nazareth and Hillel, Akiba and Paul. Those who live in these two traditions, long ago tragically sprung apart, may find here some commonality. For others the story is recited as part of the human saga, as a source of interest, wonderment, and perhaps enlightenment.

## CORPUS

The noncanonical literature of early Judaism, which bulks considerably larger than the New Testament, and indeed larger than the Hebrew Bible, is traditionally divided into

five categories. The term “Apocrypha” (from the Greek for “hidden books”) was employed by Saint Jerome to refer to those books or parts of books not found in the Hebrew Bible but included in its Greek translation, the so-called Septuagint (see below, pp. 192–93). Jerome included these texts in the Vulgate, his Latin translation of the Bible, together with another popular work, the apocalypse 2 Esdras (4 Ezra). In 1546 the Council of Trent declared all these writings except 1 and 2 Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh to be part of the canonical Scriptures.

“Pseudepigrapha” (from the Greek for “pseudonymous writings”) is a term applied to other noncanonical Jewish literature, though not all of it is written under a false name.

The Dead Sea Scrolls, or Qumran Scrolls, were found in the 1940s in caves near the ruins of Khirbet Qumran, by the northwest shore of the Dead Sea. They include all the books of the Hebrew Bible except Esther and possibly Nehemiah, several of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, numerous sectarian writings composed by a group who lived at Qumran or by related groups, and a spate of other literature of unknown origin.

Two other categories of Jewish writings are tied to known authors. In the mid-first century C.E., Philo of Alexandria composed a large number of exegetical and philosophical writings and a few treatises in defense of Judaism. In the last part of the first century Flavius Josephus wrote *The History of the Jewish War* of 66–72 C.E. In the last decade of the century he composed his *Jewish Antiquities*, an extensive rewriting of the Bible and related traditions, tracing the history of the Jews from Adam to the Herods, as well as a treatise in defense of the Jews.

Although I occasionally use the terms “Apocrypha,” “Pseudepigrapha,” and “Qumran Scrolls,” the terms are problematic. If we treat these works in their own context, the canon-related term “Apocrypha” is after the fact and therefore irrelevant for historical study. “Pseudepigrapha” focuses on an aspect of a widely varied group of texts that is not their central defining characteristic. It also ignores the fact that some of the Apocrypha (e.g., Tobit and the Wisdom of Solomon) and some canonical writings are also pseudonymous. The Scrolls, as I have noted, are a mixed collection. A more proper literary categorization of these writings divides them into genres: apocalypses, narrative fiction, testaments, history, commentaries, philosophy, and the like, and it requires that we include the writings of Philo and Josephus.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bibliographies for the individual texts appear at the end of each chapter and divide into several sections. In the first of these sections I cite several readily available translations of the various works. The books of the Apocrypha are available in all editions of the Bible formally approved by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, in many other editions of the English Bible, and under separate cover. The Pseudepigrapha are cited according to the two volumes edited by James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament*

*Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983–85), and the handy but less encompassing volume edited by H. F. D. Sparks, *The Apocryphal Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984). The Qumran Scrolls are cited according to the translations by Florentino García Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (4th ed.; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995); idem, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (Allen Lane: Penguin, 1997); Michael Wise, Martin Abegg, and Edward Cook, eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (2d ed.; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005); the text and translation editions of Florentino García Martínez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Study Edition* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leiden: Brill, 1997–98); and Donald W. Parry and Emanuel Tov, eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Reader* (6 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2004–5). In the second section of each bibliography I list editions of the works in their original languages or ancient versions, and, in a few cases, in additional English translations. In the third section I list secondary literature, and, where relevant, I subdivide it into literature surveys, commentaries, and other literature, citing the authors in alphabetical order. In the notes of the respective chapters, literature listed in the bibliographies is cited by short title.

In my notes I have cited the secondary literature prolifically, but by no means exhaustively. For additional bibliography one should consult Lorenza DiTommaso, *A Bibliography of Pseudepigrapha Research 1850–1999* (JSPSup 39; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), an exhaustive resource, albeit somewhat difficult to use; and Andreas Lehnardt, *Bibliographie zu den jüdischen Schriften aus hellenistisch-römischer Zeit* (JSRHZ 6/2; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1999), which covers the Apocrypha as well as the Pseudepigrapha. Bibliographical resources for the Qumran Scrolls, Philo, and Josephus are cited at the end of the appropriate chapters. One can find bibliographical updates on the American Theological Library Association database, available in most research libraries, but one should note that it is by no means exhaustive in the entries it provides.

A few comprehensive works are worth noting. John J. Collins has written two useful introductory volumes, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) and *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1984). Broad coverage of the literary corpora treated here is provided in Michael E. Stone, ed., *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period* (CRINT 2/2; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), as well as in volume 3/1–2 of the revision of Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.–A.D. 135)*, edited by Geza Vermes, et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986–87). On the history of the period and its institutions, in addition to volumes 1–2 of the revised Schürer, one may consult Lester Grabbe, *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian* (2 vols.; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992); and Frederick J. Murphy, *The Religious World of Jesus: An Introduction to Second Temple Judaism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991). A detailed history of post-1945 research on early Judaism has been compiled in Robert A. Kraft and George W. E. Nickelsburg, eds., *Early Judaism and Its Modern Inter-*

*preters* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986). Finally, as a companion to this volume, I have written *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins: Diversity, Continuity, and Transformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), which treats the diversity of Jewish religious expression of the Second Temple period topically, comparing and contrasting it with the diversity of first-century Christianity.