WHY STUDY THE EXTRA-CANONICAL LITERATURE? A HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL ESSAY

GEORGE W E NICKELSBURG

ABSTRACT
The deuto-canonical status of the Apocrypha and the non-canonical status of the Pseudepigrapha and Qumran scrolls have hindered them from serving valuable functions for scholars of the Bible and communities of faith for which these texts are not (fully) canonical. In fact they reveal crucial developments in Israelite religion and culture during the Greco-Roman period. Understanding these developments helps to eliminate stereotypes about 'intertestamental' Judaism and to develop an honest and more accurate historiography which clarifies the continuities and discontinuities between first-century Judaism and Christianity and enhances the foundations of contemporary Christian theology.

1 INTRODUCTION
I recall at a meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature several years ago watching Willem Vorster's eyes light up and his enthusiasm increase as we looked at a passage in the Psalms of Solomon that bore on a New Testament text under discussion in our hotel room that evening. Willem knew a great deal about the extra-canonical literature, and he was always pleased when these texts provided new information for his quest to understand the New Testament and Christian origins. It is in tribute to his desire to open new paths of research over well-trodden ground that I offer the observations in this essay.1

The problem I wish to consider has both historical and theological dimensions, but its source is theological. The canonical status of the Tanakh in the Jewish community and of the Old and New Testaments in the Christian community has severely limited the study of contemporary or somewhat later Jewish and Christian material, and this canonicity has obscured the historical

1 Appropriately, the essay summarises and builds on a series of seminar papers developed for a 1993 visit to South Africa whose groundwork had been laid by Willem Vorster.

0254-8356/94 $4.00 © NTSSA
and theological implications that these texts have for our understanding of the canonical books and the early history of the religious communities that canonised these books. The issue is theological, first, because it is driven by theological concerns. For Christians and Jews these include the authoritative status of the texts that are studied and the lack of such status for the texts that are marginalised. In the case of Christians, a general lack of serious interest in non-canonical Jewish texts of the Greco-Roman period is also based on a theological stereotype of Judaism in this period. The lack of serious interest in these texts has theological implications also because viewpoints uniquely or clearly present in the non-canonical materials tend to be removed from consideration. However, as my initial statement of the problem indicates, a problem motivated by theological considerations has significant historical implications. Focusing on one set of texts, to the exclusion of others, skews one's historical perspective.

Because the historical and theological are so closely intertwined, I shall deal with them simultaneously. Basic to my approach is the fact that the extra-canonical Jewish literature of the Greco-Roman period is an integral part of the ongoing history of Israelite religious tradition and that it constitutes a major element in the context of emerging Christianity. In the first main part of my essay, I shall consider some of the implications that this literature has for the study of the history of Israel. In the second part, I shall focus on aspects of this literature and history that require us to rethink our reconstructions of Christian origins and our descriptions of the early interrelationships between Christianity and Judaism. I hope to demonstrate that Jewish and Christian biblical scholars need to study these texts even though the texts do not have canonical authority in their respective traditions.

2 ISRAELITE RELIGION IN THE GRECO-ROMAN PERIOD

2.1 The need for new approaches

2.1.1 The problem

Although the past forty-five years have seen a great deal published on the Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, and Qumran Scrolls (Kraft & Nickelsburg 1986), a broad and concerted effort to understand and interpret the history of Israelite religion in the Greco-Roman period has been hindered because most scholars with an interest in ancient Israel focus their attention on the literature that has been canonised by the Jewish and Christian communities. Students of the Tanakh/Old Testament view the Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, and Qumran Scrolls, and the writings of Philo and Josephus as post-biblical. Scholars of the New Testament study the Jewish texts for the light they may shed on the second half of the Christian canon, and many still tend to read the evidence within
the framework of long-established Christian presuppositions and to organise it according to Christian theological categories. Thus, the ongoing history of Israelite religion in the Greco-Roman period is given short shrift and is often studied in terms that are alien to it.

As a result, both Jewish and Christian scholars engage in a curious kind of historical leap-frogging. In the former instance, study of the Tanakh is supplemented by the reading of the Talmud and the midrashim. In the latter case, the New Testament is posited as the continuation of the Old and as its authoritative interpretation, rather than as the product of a first century Jewish community whose religion developed from the four to five centuries of history that are embodied and attested in the Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Qumran Scrolls, and other Hellenistic Jewish literature.

Concerning this period—bracketed out from the detailed study that has characterised much biblical scholarship since the Enlightenment—we hear such truisms as: prophecy ended during the Persian period (Jewish and Christian analysis); Jewish religion became increasingly legalistic (Christian and especially Protestant judgment); eschatology was governed by messianism, that is, the Jews were waiting for the Messiah (Christian oversimplification).

2.1.2 Reorganising the sources

I propose that we remove the brackets from this period of history and study it as an integral part of the continuum to which it belongs. The literature of what Christians have called the 'intertestamental' period cannot be responsibly separated from the late books of the Hebrew Bible. The earliest strata of 1 Enoch were composed only a century after the writing of Malachi, a century or less after the composition of Ezra-Nehemiah, and perhaps only a few decades after the writing of 1 and 2 Chronicles. Substantial parts of 1 Enoch, the book of Tobit, some of the sources of Jubilees, perhaps the Letter of Jeremiah, and an early form of the book of Judith variously antedate or are roughly contemporaneous with Qoheleth and the final forms of the Hebrew Esther and the book of Daniel. In view of this overlap of early 'intertestamental' writings and late texts in the Hebrew Bible, we stand to learn a great deal historically if scholars of the biblical books from the Persian period study them alongside the early non-canonical Jewish texts. Such comparative study will also enable us better to understand these works in their continuity with, and differences from one another.

2 For documentation of this and other aspects of Anti-Judaism in the writings of Christian exegetes and historians, see Klein 1975 and my review of her book (Nickelsburg 1978).

3 For the dates and settings of these texts, see Nickelsburg 1981a, ad loc.
The propensities of biblical scholars notwithstanding, the past generation has seen some genuine progress in the study of non-canonical texts and the Greco-Roman period that they attest. In this essay I shall summarise some of the results of this scholarship and tentatively sketch what I see as some significant aspects of the developments in Israelite religion and culture during this period. Historical clarification of these matters has, I shall argue, some significant theological implications.

2.2 Religious changes in new times

2.2.1 Times of tumult

For Israel, the major events in the sixth century BCE were the Exile to Babylon and the return to Judah and the restoration that took place toward the end of that century. The five centuries that followed were marked, first, by major political changes: the end of the Persian empire and a century and a half of domination by a succession of Hellenistic kings; a century of relative political autonomy under the Hasmonean dynasty; the Roman takeover and partial political control by the Herodian rulers; the decisive end of native rule after the Jewish War and the destruction of Jerusalem. These changes brought, in turn, major cultural and religious transformations, notably the Hellenisation of Judaism and the end of the Temple-oriented aspects of Jewish religion.

2.2.2 Corresponding changes in Jewish religion

The history of Jewish religion in the Greco-Roman period is the story of reaction and adaptation to these events, which both threatened and challenged the people and their culture and institutions. The literature and material remains of this period attest tenacity to tradition and reflection on it, entrenchment and transformation, diversity, social division, and sectarian separation. I shall trace aspects of these tendencies with reference to several institutions and areas in the intellectual life and social structure of Israel.

2.3 Religious institutions and religious thought

2.3.1 Temple and cult

It is widely recognised that the Jerusalem Temple and its cult and priesthood provided a major point of continuity between the pre-exilic and post-exilic periods of Israelite history. The Temple's destruction in 587 BCE had been deeply traumatic, and its rebuilding was an early order of business after the return, even if there were delays and debates (cf Third Isaiah, Zechariah, and Haggai). Once constructed, the Temple was revered as a special site of God's presence and was the goal of religious pilgrimages and the locus for the rituals, sacrifices, and offerings that maintained and renewed the relationship between
God and the chosen people. The annual half-shekel tax symbolised and helped to concretise the status of Zion and its Temple as a focal point for the loyalty and devotion of Jews in the Land of Israel and the Diaspora. Herod’s embellishment of the Temple and expansion of its facilities enhanced its significance and strengthened the impression it made on visitors to Jerusalem. The tremendous religious importance of the Temple and its centrality in Jewish life are presupposed, moreover, in the broad spectrum of texts in Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha that recount its pollution by Antiochus IV, its occupation by Pompey, and its destruction by Titus. This last event also made a deep impression on first century Christian texts.

All of this evidence notwithstanding, some of the Jewish literature of the Greco-Roman period gives voice to dissident views which have counterparts in the late books of the Hebrew Bible. Zechariah 3 suggests that Joshua’s fitness for the office of high priest was questioned, and a few decades later, Malachi strongly criticises the conduct of the cult. 1 Enoch 89:73 echoes Malachi’s words, and other strata in this apocalyptic collection appear to take a dim view of the temple and its priesthood. Additional critiques appear in the Psalms of Solomon (2:3-5; 8:12-13) and the Qumran Damascus Document (CD 5:6-11). Thus, the establishment view in the post-exilic biblical books did not represent the whole of Jewish opinion about the Temple, and anti-Temple statements in the New Testament were not unique Christian anti-cultic innovations.

2.3.2 Scribes, sages, and teachers: Interpreters of the Torah and the Prophets

As with the Temple it is widely recognised that the texts of the Tanakh were a major feature in post-exilic Israelite religion and that they provided significant continuity with exilic and pre-exilic Israelite religion. However, scholars of ancient Israel tend to take the existence of these texts for granted. With an eye toward the pre-exilic, exilic, and early post-exilic periods that generated most of these texts, and guided by the concerns of theology or the interests of the history of ideas, exegetes and historians tend to focus on the ‘theological’ contents of the texts and the events and the institutions that the texts describe or attest (e.g. prophecy and the monarchy). They rarely consider the post-exilic

---

4 These sources include: Daniel, 1 Enoch 85-90, the Testament of Moses, 1 and 2 Maccabees, and Judith (Antiochus); the Psalms of Solomon (Pompey); 2 Baruch and 4 Ezra (Titus).


6 Examples of this tendency can be found in the histories of Israel written by Bright (1981) and Noth (1960). Miller and Hayes (1986) end their history with the Persian period, though they indicate their intention to write a second volume (20).
WHY STUDY THE EXTRA-CANONICAL LITERATURE?

process by which these texts were gathered, interpreted, and given authority and the persons and institutions that effected the process. But this process and these persons were significant, creative components of Israelite religion and culture during the late Persian and the Greco-Roman periods.

Evidence for this aspect of post-exilic Israelite religion is both indirect and direct, and we can learn much about it if we put our minds to the task. The major piece of indirect evidence is the actual survival of the texts, which attests the existence of persons who compiled and edited the oracles of the pre-exilic and exilic prophets and the texts of the early writings. Doubtless there was a substantial relationship between these tradents and the authors of the post-exilic prophetic oracles and the early post-exilic ketubim. Our one piece of direct evidence in the Tanakh is in Ezra-Nehemiah, which depicts Ezra the scribe and priest reading the Torah before the people and uttering a prayer that describes Israel’s plight and pleads for its deliverance in the idiom of Deuteronomy and Jeremiah (Ezr 8-9; Neh 8-9). As time passed, other persons—scribes—continued to copy the texts of the Torah, the prophets, and the writings, as the survival of the texts attests.

Along with the material transmission of the texts there was a process of study and interpretation; scrolls were not copied simply to be catalogued and shelved in libraries. Of this process of study and interpretation we know relatively little, but we can learn more if we study the non-canonical texts of the Greco-Roman period with this purpose in mind. In doing so, we shall discover that there was considerable overlap and relationship between those who studied the older traditions and those who wrote new texts. The process of studying and interpreting Israel’s earlier sacred traditions produced new writings, for example, the texts that we call the Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, and Qumran Scrolls; that is, the authors of these new texts were students and interpreters of the earlier texts and traditions—the Torah and the prophetic books. Here I can only be suggestive, because much work remains to be done on the subject.

7 For a discussion of the rewriting of Israel’s traditions in the literature of this period, see Nickelsburg 1984a and 1984b.

8 One attempt to deal with the complexities of this period is a newly formed Society of Biblical Literature Consultation on Wisdom and Apocalyptic in Early Judaism and Early Christianity. Some of my suggestions in the present essay are worked out in a bit more detail in my paper for the first meeting of that consultation (Nickelsburg 1994).
Writing early in the second century BCE, Ben Sira describes the work of the professional scribe, who searches the Torah, the prophecies, and works with parables and riddles (Sir 38:24, 34b-39:11). Ben Sira’s own interpretation of the Torah is expressed in proverbial form and tends to be exhortatory in function, as his exposition of the fourth commandment indicates (3:1-16). Other of his exhortations deal with ethical obligations that may or may not be explicitly connected with the Torah, that is, almsgiving and other aspects of the use of one’s wealth. A substantial part of his book deals with common sense issues, the kind of everyday wisdom that characterises the Book of Proverbs. Nonetheless, Ben Sira explicitly identifies wisdom with the content of the Mosaic Torah (Sir 24:23). Whatever else he may do as a scribe, sage, and teacher, he describes himself as an expositor of the Torah whose words are a channel for the Torah’s life-giving wisdom (24:30-34). Less frequently noticed is Ben Sira’s interest in the prophets, attested in his hymn in praise of famous men (chps 44-50; esp 45:1-5; 47:1; 48:1-14, 22-25; 49:6-10) and in his prayer that God fulfil the prophecies and show the prophets to be trustworthy (36:1-17). Ben Sira mentions specifically the gathering of the dispersion and the glorification of Zion (36:12-14).

Two other wisdom texts evidence a similar interest in prophecy and also stress the importance of the Torah. Tobit recounts his fidelity to the Torah, expressed in pilgrimages to Jerusalem and in almsgiving and other deeds of kindness to his fellow-Israelites (1:3-2:7), and he instructs his son in the proverbial form typical of Ben Sira (4:2-19). Israel’s Exile is due to the nation’s disobedience to the Torah (3:1-4). Its future glory, which will follow the people’s repentance, has been predicted by the prophets and is described in a Zion hymn (13:1-14:7). The book of Baruch employs the idiom of Deuteronomy, identifies the Torah as the repository of heavenly wisdom to which Israel must turn, and paraphrases Second and Third Isaiah in his lengthy description of exile and return (Nickelsburg 1981a:109-113).

In short, these texts expound the Torah with reference to ‘wisdom’, and sometimes in proverbial form, and they interpret the prophets through direct reference and paraphrase. The authors of these texts were sages, scribes, or teachers who interpreted Israel’s sacred traditions for the purpose of moral exhortation and in order to encourage a people who were troubled because God’s ancient promises through the prophets had not been fulfilled.

The Book of Jubilees and the Qumran Damascus Document expound the Torah differently from the wisdom texts. Of central importance is halakah, the explication of the specific ways in which the Torah’s commandments are to be fulfilled in particular circumstances. This kind of interpretation seems to have had a double motivation. The first was a need to clarify law with respect to issues not mentioned in the law or with reference to circumstances not envi-
sioned in the original codes. The second motivation derived from the belief that Israel was suffering the curses of the covenant, which could be alleviated only when the Torah was rightly obeyed. Hence one ‘searched’ the Torah; one studied it to discover what its real requirements were and, thus, what constituted the true obedience that would lead to the covenantal blessings. This learned process of searching is explicitly referred to in the book of Jubilees 23:26-27 and the Damascus Document 6:2-11.

Following the paradigm in Sirach, Tobit, and Baruch the Qumranic halakic interpretation of the Torah was complemented by the study of the prophets. The *pesharim* are running commentaries on Isaiah, Hosea, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and the Psalms, which identify events in the community’s history as the fulfillment of prophecies, revealed to the Teacher of Righteousness, who recognised in his own time the events of the eschaton, toward which the prophets pointed (Horgan 1986). Other texts like the Damascus Document, the Florilegium, and the Testimonia contain conflated interpretations of the prophecies.

Israel’s sacred traditions were also interpreted by means of paraphrase. The earliest example of such rewriting of tradition is the work of the Chronicler, who retells Israelite history—mainly 1 Samuel through 2 Kings—with a new emphasis. More to our present interest are the recastings of the Pentateuchal narratives in the Book of Jubilees, which depict the patriarchs fulfilling the Torah according to the author’s halakah and acting as examples of moral virtues or vices (Nickelsburg 1981a:74-76). The latter interpretive tendency recurs in texts like the Testament of Job, which are increasingly influenced by the categories and idiom of Hellenistic moral exhortation.

Our brief sketch has revealed a widespread and varied process of interpreting the Torah and the Prophets in the Greco-Roman period. The notion that Judaism in this period was becoming increasingly ‘legalistic’ does not hold up to critical scrutiny. Of course, the Torah was expounded in halakic detail, but the dynamics of this halakic exposition do not justify the term legalism, as we have seen. Moreover, the majority of Torah-related texts in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha exhort their audiences to do God’s will without expounding halakic details as to how one fulfills that will. In this respect they are reminiscent of the prophets, and thus it is not surprising that they can allude to these texts and employ prophetic form and idiom, not least that Deuteronomic scheme that describes sin and punishment and posits repentance as the condition for the return of God’s blessing.9

---

9 I have summarised some of this usage of Deuteronomy in an article on ‘Deuteronomy’ in the forthcoming *Macmillan Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Age* (1995).
Since it is widely supposed that prophecy had disappeared by the end of the Persian period, we must ask what connections there might have been between the post-exilic prophets and the sages who were their interpreters. Is there a decisive break, or can we find a more nuanced set of relationships between these two groups of functionaries? Although I shall defer an answer to that question until I have briefly discussed aspects of Jewish eschatology and apocalypticism, it is possible to suggest what we might learn from the texts discussed up to this point.

Ben Sira the scribe and the Qumranic Teacher of Righteousness are our two known expositors of the Torah and the Prophets. While neither claims to be a prophet, both make claims to inspired interpretation. Ben Sira likens his teaching of the Torah to prophecy (24:32-33), employs genres that were at home among the prophets (Baumgartner 1914), and claims that the source of his wisdom is inspiration that comes in response to prayer (39:5-8). The Teacher’s understanding of Habakkuk’s prophecies is said to be the result of revelation (1QpHab 7:1-5), and the author of the Book of Hymns (whether or not it was the Teacher) claims prophetic-like revelation for his teaching (1QH 4:5-5:4). Thus, some of the texts of the Greco-Roman period indicate that sages, scribes, and teachers in this period saw less of a distinction between their activity and that of the prophets than conventional scholarly opinion has sometimes posited.

2.3.3 The rise and development of eschatology

Although ‘eschatology’ is a modern scholarly abstraction, the term correctly identifies a growing tendency in the exilic and post-exilic texts to focus on an end-time (Nickelsburg 1992a). This end can be construed in one of two ways. First, prophets like Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Second and Third Isaiah, Haggai, and Malachi increasingly described the future as a repetition of a past beginning, which implied the end of a present era. The return from exile and dispersion was described as a new Exodus or, more radically, a new creation. God would replace the old covenant with a new one to which Israel would adhere in a qualitatively better way. In a significant sense, the end was near and a new time was about to begin. For Second Isaiah the beginning of this new time was marked by the historical event of Cyrus's rise to power. The radical imagery of new creation, understood anthropologically by Ezekiel and cosmologically by Second and Third Isaiah and Haggai, laid the groundwork for the sharply dualistic eschatology that would permeate later apocalyptic literature.

Secondly, the notion of end can appropriately describe the increasing belief in the Greco-Roman period that the as-yet unfulfilled oracles of the prophets had a telos—that they pointed to a time when the events and conditions that they described would be come to pass. As we have seen above, as wide range
of literature as Sirach, Tobit, and the Qumran *pesharim* reflect a concern with this *telos*.

While much Jewish literature of the Greco-Roman period is unified around a common orientation toward a future that is 'the end', this eschatology varied in its content and expression. Two features should be noted. The first is a developing, diverse cluster of beliefs in resurrection, immortality, and eternal life, which are often exegetically derived from, or tied to prophetic oracles about the return from Exile (Nickelsburg 1972). The second feature is a wide diversity of opinion about the identity of a future agent of divine deliverance. The hope for a Davidic restoration runs like a thread through the oracles of Jeremiah and Ezekiel and resurfaces after the Exile in Haggai and Zechariah and, much later, in some Qumran texts and in the Psalms of Solomon 17 and 18. Nonetheless, the notion is notably absent elsewhere. Malachi expects the messenger of the Lord, whom a late addition identifies with Elijah. Second and Third Isaiah, for all of their focus on Zion, have no place for a Davidic king; in Second Isaiah the Servant of the Lord embodies traditional characteristics of the Davidic king. Texts like Tobit, Baruch, and the Wisdom of Solomon, which employ the idiom of Second and Third Isaiah, follow their example by omitting any reference to the Davidic king. For the author of the Parables of Enoch, the future transcendent deliverer embodies characteristics of the Davidic king, the Danielic son of man, and Second Isaiah’s Servant of the Lord. Some Qumranic texts give pride of place to a future Levitic high priest, and the tradition that was probably present in the prototype of the Testament of Levi. In short, evidence from the Greco-Roman period indicates no orthodoxy about a future eschatological deliverer. The Jews were not looking for *the* Messiah.

### 2.3.4 The rise of apocalypticism and the use of pseudepigraphy

The apocalypticism of works like 1 Enoch, especially, and the Book of Daniel reflects a dualistic world view that is mediated by revelation (Nickelsburg 1991a). At its heart is a spatial dualism that divides between the inhabited world on the one hand and the heavenly realm and outer reaches of the universe on the other. Complementing this is a doubly construed temporal dualism. On the one hand, the evils of the present time are understood as the functions of a demonic realm that came into being through a heavenly revolt in

---

10 In my volume I point particularly to Second and Third Isaiah and especially to Isaiah 52-53. See especially pages 62-111.

11 For texts and brief commentary, see Nickelsburg and Stone 1983:161-201. For more detail on the Elect One in 1 Enoch 37-71, see Nickelsburg 1987:56-64.
the primordial past. On the other hand, these present ills will be eradicated when God judges humanity in the imminent eschaton. The system's power to encourage the faithful lies in the apocalypticist's claim to have visited the hidden realms of the universe and to have seen the secrets of the hidden future.

The apocalypticists' view of reality is thoroughly syncretistic. Details of its world view are drawn from the kind of cosmological speculation attested in wisdom texts like Job and the Wisdom of Solomon (Stone 1978). In other respects the themes, vocabulary, and literary forms in 1 Enoch have counterparts in classic wisdom texts like Sirach (Argall 1992). Stories about a primordial rebellion draw some of their motifs from Hellenistic mythology (Nickelsburg 1977a:395-404), and Daniel 7 reproduces material from ancient near eastern mythology (Collins 1977:95-106). The apocalypticists' dualistic eschatology draws deeply on the viewpoint expressed in Third Isaiah, and 1 Enoch in particular expresses this by means of classical prophetic genres. 12

The clear connections between apocalyptic writings and biblically attested prophecy bear on the question: was prophecy dead in the Greco-Roman period? An answer to this should recognise the difference between texts that explicitly cite and interpret the prophetic texts and apocalyptic texts that make use of material from the Torah and Prophets, but attribute it to ancient seers, who allegedly received their revelation directly from God or God's holy ones. 1 Enoch and Daniel were composed by persons in wisdom circles who claimed to present divine revelation that was prior to (Enoch) or contemporary with the classical prophets (Daniel). Precisely who these persons were requires more study and clarification, but the texts provide some hints. The last chapters of 1 Enoch make reference to the 'wise', who expound the commandments of the Most High (Nickelsburg 1982) and employ the prophetic genres of woes and exhortations (Nickelsburg 1977b:310-18). Daniel 12:3 refers to the maskilim, teachers who 'cause many to be righteous', encouraging them to stand fast during the persecution by Antiochus IV. Like Daniel and his friends, they may also have interpreted revelation given through dreams and visions.

The two Pseudo-Mosaic texts known as the book of Jubilees and the Testament of Moses present a variation of this pseudepigraphic tradition. Jubilees rewrites Genesis 1-Exodus 12, interpolating it with halakic material that is said to have been dictated to Moses by angels who had gotten it from the heavenly tablets. The Testament of Moses rewrites Deuteronomy 31-34, explicating the Deuteronomic pattern of history with specific reference to events during the

12 I have discussed this and other issues concerning 1 Enoch's relationship to prophecy in an article entitled 'Scripture in 1 Enoch and 1 Enoch as Scripture', which will appear in another Festschrift in 1995.
time of Antiochus Epiphanes (and in a later update, the time of the Has­moneans and the Herodian family). These two pseudo-Mosaic texts are explicitly linked to the biblical texts of the Torah, but their anonymous authors claim to present genuine Mosaic revelation. They are noteworthy because they acknowledge the existence of authoritative religious tradition (the Pentateuch), but they view this tradition as deficient and claim to present the full, revealed version of the ancient tradition.

2.3.5 Revelation, inspiration, and prophecy in the Greco-Roman period

Our survey suggests that views about the presence or absence of claims to revelation and inspiration were diverse and complex in Judaism of the Greco-Roman period. The Torah and the Prophets were revered as authoritative and were interpreted for new times. Some of this interpretation was considered to be itself inspired and authoritative (ben Sira and the Teacher of Righteous­ness), and in some cases it was presented in the pseudonymous guise of the original author (Moses) or of an ancient or more recent sage (Enoch or Daniel). Not only Daniel, but also the Enochic corpus and the book of Jubilees were considered inspired and authoritative in some circles (e g, at Qumran). Thus, as historians we should not confuse what the subsequent Jewish and Christian communities judged to be inspired and authoritative with what the authors and some of their contemporaries considered to have this status. The question needs further study.

2.3.6 Sectarianism in post-exilic Judaism

The variety in post-exilic Judaism was sometimes expressed concretely in the creation and organisation of religious groups. Josephus identified four major groups—Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and a ‘Fourth Philosophy’. The Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, and Qumran Scrolls suggest a more complex social map. Here are a few of the issues that need to be considered.

1) There is no consensus that any of these texts was authored by members of any of the aforementioned groups. A majority of scholars do identify the Qumran community as Essene, but both Josephus and the Scrolls indicate that the ‘Essene’ movement was not monolithic in its structure, practice, or beliefs.

13 See Nickelsburg 1995 in ‘Scripture in 1 Enoch and 1 Enoch as Scripture’. (forthcoming).
14 For these and other texts, with brief commentary, see Nickelsburg and Stone 1983:19-44.
15 Murphy-O’Connor 1986:124-25. For an excellent, but unfootnoted update on opinions about the identity of the Qumranites, see VanderKam 1994:71-98.
2) The Damascus Document indicates that the Qumran group had a pre-history, and Jubilees 23 and the various strata of 1 Enoch point to a complex (set of) reform movement(s) that can be traced back to the third or fourth centuries BCE, or perhaps earlier (Nickelsburg 1986:342-345).

3) References to the 'congregations of the faithful' in the Psalms of Solomon and 11QPs\(\text{a}\) 19 and 22 reveal the existence of communities—however formally they may have been constituted—that considered themselves to be the truly righteous and faithful Israelites, implying that others were less faithful.\(^{16}\)

4) We should not posit the existence of formally organised communities when the evidence does not warrant this. In this respect, the Qumran Scrolls are helpful with respect to their own provenance and potentially deceptive if they are used as justification for concluding that other texts of the pious necessary derived from formally constituted communities.

5) The Qumran texts do attest the existence of a community, or set of communities, who understood themselves to be the true Israel, which alone possessed the revealed interpretation of the Torah that is necessary for salvation. A similar point of view is present in 1 Enoch 92-105 (Nickelsburg 1982). In both cases, social division is tied to the interpretation of the Torah; particular halakah is considered to be tantamount to the essence of the Torah and leads to sectarian division between the saved and the damned. This sharp division based on halakic practice needs to be distinguished from a posited differentiation between the righteous and sinners that was not thought to be conterminous with the division between the saved and the damned.

2.4 Historical conclusions about Israelite religion in the Greco-Roman period

The religious life of post-exilic Israel was governed by three institutions, which provided substantial continuity with the pre-exilic and exilic periods. The first was the Temple, its cult, and the priesthood that presided over it. The second was a body of written traditions that were assuming increasing authority as divine revelation that provided a guide for the righteous and pious life. The third consisted of teachers and preachers, who claimed direct revelation from God or expounded the tradition, claiming various degrees of inspiration and authority for the content of their teaching.

Variety rather than uniformity characterised the development of these three institutions and Israelite responses to them. There was no single, normative Judaism at any given time in this period, much less over the course of the six

\(^{16}\) For discussions of the knotty problem of the Hasidim, see Davies 1977 and Nickelsburg 1983:645-48.
WHY STUDY THE EXTRA-CANONICAL LITERATURE?

centuries from the return to the destruction of Jerusalem. As important as the Temple was, individuals and groups criticised the conduct of the cult and the credentials of the priesthood. The shape of the Hebrew canon emerged only over time, and in places such as Qumran, works later excluded by the rabbis were held in great regard. Early preachers like Zechariah, Malachi, and Third Isaiah, were cast in the image of the earlier prophets, but it is unclear at what point the teaching office of the sages took on a derivative character, and to what degree other preachers and teachers understood their claims to revelation to be substantially different from the prophets'. The notion that Torah was normative was widespread, if not universal in Judaism, but what exactly constituted such Torah and its correct interpretation and observance varied and even led to sectarian division.

The study, interpretation, and observance of the Torah in the Greco-Roman period is a topic worthy of several monographs, and there is much evidence that still needs to be sifted and evaluated, especially as new material from the Qumran Scrolls is published. Several facts are clear, however. Exposition of the Torah was not solely halakic, and the concern to observe it was not simply legalistic. While halakic study was clearly important for some persons and groups in the Greco-Roman period, it is absent in many Torah-related texts; thus the notion that Judaism in this period was legalistic is an unfounded generalisation.

2.5 Implications for theology and further historical study

Theological judgments about the canon have been responsible for the general lack of attention that scholars of ancient Israel have paid to the history of Jewish religion in the Greco-Roman period. This division between canonical and post- or non-canonical has often gone hand in hand with other theological judgments, both among Jewish and Christian scholars. Both tend to describe the period as post-prophetic. Ironically, another pair of contradictory judgments have contributed to the comparatively little interest that Jews and Christians have shown in this period. Jewish scholars do not find in the documents of this time the definitive halakic exposition that emerged with the rabbis. Christians, on the other hand, define post-biblical Judaism as legalistic.

Our sketch of Judaism in the Greco-Roman period suggests that the Jewish and Christian study of the late books of the Hebrew Bible can profit greatly from a comparative study of the texts of the Greco-Roman period. Inductive study will uncover important points of continuity with the biblical texts. Working from categories that are derived from these texts themselves, rather than from the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament, such study will offer the opportunity to understand and appreciate the religion of Judaism between 330 BCE and 100 CE in its own terms, as a dynamic and variegated set of
responses to the historical events and cultural currents that formed its context. Two important results will follow from this. First, Jews and Christians will better understand how rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity developed as alternative extensions of Israelite religion. Secondly, variety will be seen as the child of ambiguity. Alternative expositions of the Torah and the Prophets, sectarian divisions, the grey area between the authority of Scripture and the need to interpret it because it is no longer clear—all of these phenomena result from the contingencies of history to which theology speaks. The remarkable ferment in the Judaism of the Greco-Roman period offers an important paradigm for theological reflection and discussion at the end of the second millennium. To the extent that they can remove their canonical spectacles and immerse themselves in the historical circumstances of a people who were struggling with implications of a religious tradition whose authority was tenuous, Jews and Christians of today may find themselves looking in a mirror.

3 JUDAISM AND THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY

3.1 The myth that nascent Christianity was a foil to Judaism

In this section of my essay, I shall detail aspects of our emerging picture of Judaism in the Greco-Roman period that require us to revise the traditional description of nascent Christianity and its relationship to first century Judaism. To no small degree Christian descriptions of first century Judaism and the rise of Christianity have been developed in contrast to one another. The teaching of Jesus and the writings of the New Testament, on the one hand, and contemporary Judaism, on the other, are presented as foils to one another, as embodiments of right and wrong religion. Jesus and the apostles (especially Paul) reverted to the true prophetic religion, and Judaism of the ‘intertestamental period’ was an aberration, to be contrasted with both. Although the scheme is theological at its heart, it is presented as historical fact, documented in great detail in the major handbooks of nineteenth and twentieth century continental Protestant biblical scholarship.17 The paradigm can be traced back to Reformation exegesis and has roots in the New Testament writings themselves.

Recounting the history of this theological exegesis would be a long story. Here I critique it briefly by calling attention to some of the findings mentioned in the first part of this essay and by expanding on a few details that are relevant to the study of the New Testament and Christian origins. In so doing, I offer my brief for a careful Christian study of the non-canonical Jewish sources that will complement the interpretation of the New Testament and our accounts

17 The evidence is presented in considerable detail by Klein 1975. I have suggested that the categories derive from Protestant theology (Nickelsburg 1978).
WHY STUDY THE EXTRA-CANONICAL LITERATURE?

of Christian origins. I maintain that such responsible comparative exegesis of the Jewish and Christian sources will require us to revise long-standing theological judgments that have been based on defective historiography.

3.2 There was no single normative Judaism

The variety that we have repeatedly seen in Judaism of the Greco-Roman period reveals a fundamental flaw in the portrayal of early Christianity as a foil to monolithic, normative Judaism. Jewish attitudes toward the Temple, the Torah, and the shape of God's future, to name a few, diverged sufficiently in the first century that one must ask: to which Judaism were Jesus and early Christianity a foil? The study of early Christianity since Walter Bauer's landmark study on Heresy and Orthodoxy complicates the issue further.\(^\text{18}\) We may ask: which form of Christianity does one wish to contrast with which form of Judaism?

At this point the questions become more productive. As I have argued elsewhere (Nickelsburg 1993), aspects of early Christianity do pick up on important motifs that are documentable in certain forms of early Judaism, nuancing them in special ways, especially with reference to the person and roles of Jesus of Nazareth. In any case, we shall do well to let the variety in first century Judaism serve as a heuristic device for discovering the many facets and nuance of early Christian thought, institutions, social organisation, and activity.

3.3 Prophecy, revelation and inspiration

The notion that prophecy died in the late Persian period is, as we have seen, an oversimplification, driven by post-factum judgments about the unique character and status of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. From the perspective of New Testament studies, this means that we should not assume that the prophetic self-understanding of John the Baptist, Jesus of Nazareth, and the teachers and preachers of early Christianity represented something that had not been on the religious horizon since Malachi. (A Hellenistic date for the final form of Daniel creates an awkward exception even for those who limit their perspective to the canon.) Once we come better to understand the spectrum of belief about revelation and inspiration among Jewish sages, apocalyptists, and teachers, we shall be in a better position to perceive and interpret the variety in the New Testament. Rather than contrasting the prophetic oasis of first century

\(^{18}\) The work of Bauer (1971) was carried further with reference to the New Testament sources in Robinson and Koester 1971. Though individual judgments in both of these books have been questioned by subsequent scholarship, the notion of diversity in early Christianity is here to stay.
Christianity with the desert of Judaism in the Greco-Roman period, we can compare: the content and possible motivation of John's preaching with eschatology of the apocalypticists; the genre and world view of the Book of Revelation with that of 1 Enoch; Q's blend of sapiential and apocalyptic forms and motifs with similar blends in Jewish texts (Horsley 1994; Nickelsburg 1994); and varied New Testament attitudes about the authority and function of Jewish scriptures with complex and oscillating Jewish attitudes about these texts as a corpus of authoritative tradition. As we work through these issues, comparing, for example, Paul and Matthew with their Jewish counterparts, we may see new dimensions and points of continuity and discontinuity in the complexities of a learned exegesis that is combined with claims of revelation or inspiration. In any case, it should become apparent that early Christianity cannot be simply contrasted with contemporary Judaism with respect to this issue.

3.4 Faith versus works, law, and legalistic Judaism

Paul's antithetical formulation of justification by faith rather than the deeds of the law provided a major part of the theological foundation for Christian views of Jewish religion as a foil to Christianity (for the other part, see below §3.7). At the heart of these views is the belief that Jewish legalism and, to no small degree, the Torah itself need to be contrasted with a religion of faith based on the Gospel. As a result, much of Protestant Christianity has played down, at least in its theological formulations, the centrality of the imperative to live an upright life, which is at the heart of both the Old and New Testaments.

As we have seen above, the notion that Jewish concern for the Torah was based on, or could be reduced to halakic nitpicking is a Christian myth. Concern for halakah was rooted in the desire to live according to God's will in the concreteness of one's daily existence and in the belief that God rewarded such obedience and punished disobedience. This desire and this belief are rooted in the Hebrew Bible itself (on the latter, see §3.5). Of course a focus on halakic detail might become an obsessive point of focus, and the desire to live a right life could result in a sense of 'self-righteousness' or the pretense of hypocrisy. For each of these, however, there is a Christian counterpart that corresponds to the contrast between faith and the deeds of the law, as this was developed in Christian theology. Debates over halakah have a functional equivalent in Christian disputes over the details of doctrinal formulation. A sense of self-righteousness often pervades the rhetoric with which 'the orthodox' contrast themselves with the 'heretics.' Moreover, the anti-social and, indeed, violent actions that have often resulted from this Christian self-righteousness exceed much of what can be documented in the history of early Judaism.

The reductionism that portrays Jewish attitudes toward the Torah as halakic legalism also fails to take account of Jewish texts that emphasise internal
WHY STUDY THE EXTRA-CANONICAL LITERATURE?

qualities that lead to right action. An explicit concern for these appears in texts like the Psalms of Solomon (Nickelsburg 1981a:209-10), the Qumran Community Rule (1QS 4:2-6), and writings that have been influenced by Hellenistic moral exhortation. The Pauline catalog of vices and virtues in Galatians 5:16-26 and texts like Mark 7:20-22 should be studied in comparison with the aforementioned Jewish texts rather than in contrast with Jewish concern about the Torah.

Much New Testament scholarship has been governed by the notion that Jews suffered under the burden of their obligation to keep the many commandments of the Torah. Counter-indications of this caricature can be found in many Jewish texts; ben Sira’s admonition to take up Torah’s yoke and to find rest and joy in the Torah (Sir 51:26-29) offers a remarkable prototype rather than a foil for Jesus’ admonition in Matthew 11:28-30. Perhaps the best refutation for the traditional view of Torah’s burden is to be found, however, in the stories of the Maccabean martyrs (especially 2 Macc 6-7). Again, a comparison of Jewish and Christian concerns, respectively with Torah and faith, is instructive. If Christians died for their convictions about Jesus, Jews died rather than disobey the Torah that they believed to express God’s will for their lives.

This comparison brings us to one final Christian caricature: the alleged dichotomy between faith and deeds based on the Torah. In fact, Jewish texts are replete with stories and admonitions about human actions in obedience to the Torah which are construed not simply as adherence to commandments, but as expressions of trust in, and fidelity to the God of the covenant, who gave the Torah (e.g., 1-2 Maccabees, Judith, Tobit, Jubilees). In our penchant for doing word studies, we have often misunderstood Jewish texts that do not use words like ‘faith’ and ‘believe’, but exemplify the notion. The Jewish nexus between faith and obedience—that is, the understanding of obedience to the Torah as fidelity—has important parallels in New Testament texts like Hebrews 11 and the Epistle of James, and these, in turn, can sensitise us to Paul’s central concern with right and wrong human action and divine retribution.

3.5 Human deeds and divine retribution

---

19 Jewish texts that describe human behavior in terms of abstract moral virtues (and vices) include the Testament of Job, parts of Jubilees, 2 Maccabees, 4 Maccabees, and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, although scholars disagree as to the extent to which the latter is Jewish or Christian.

20 For an extensive discussion of Jewish texts that relates faith and obedience to one another and discusses this nexus in the thought of Paul, see Garlington 1991.
The Pauline formulation about justification by faith rather than the deeds of the Torah has often been seen as excluding the Jewish notion that God rewards one on the basis of one's deeds. Divine judgment on the basis of one's deeds (whether in this life or after it) is a motif that appears often in Jewish texts: in apocalyptic scenes of the final judgment; in texts that describe human deeds and their results in terms of the two ways of righteousness and wickedness; in proverbs that associate action and results; and in a wide variety of narratives and exhortations. These texts point in two directions. They express the repeated biblical emphasis on divine judgment for human deeds, explicit in the covenantal formulations of Deuteronomy 28-32, exemplified in the narratives of the Deuteronomic history, and repeatedly proclaimed by the prophets. Thus, divine retribution for human action is a central motif of the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Old Testament. Far from providing a contrast to New Testament notions of grace, the Jewish texts provide prototypes for New Testament formulations about the nexus between human actions and divine retribution. The accounts of Jesus' passion and resurrection stand in a continuum with stories about faithful actions and their rewards which runs from Genesis 39-50, through Daniel 1-6 and Susanna, to Wisdom of Solomon 2-5 (Nickelsburg 1980). The christological emphasis in the passion narratives should not obscure the human dimension of these stories, something that was recognised by the author to the Hebrews, who cites Jesus' obedience and its reward as the epitome of a pattern that began with Abel and that provides the impetus to present faithfulness under pressure (11:1-12:2). The two-ways section of the Qumran Community Rule, an expression of biblical covenantal theology (Baltzer 1972:99-109), helps us to understand Paul's catalogues of vices and virtues in Galatians 5:16-26 and to see that they are part of a larger pericope that is shaped by a pattern that includes reference to divine reward and punishment for those whose deeds involve sowing respectively to the flesh and the spirit (Nickelsburg 1991b:350-51). Paul's references to a judgment on the basis of actions (Rm 2:1-11; 1 Cor 3:10-15; 2 Cor 5:10) reflect knowledge of Jewish apocalyptic traditions (Fishburne 1970; Nickelsburg 1992b:147-148), but these Pauline texts are often overlooked by exegetes who focus on the language of justification by faith rather than the deeds of the law. Indeed, if one takes the whole Pauline corpus into consideration, Paul devotes much more space to right and wrong human actions than to admonitions to faith. Finally, the Matthewan description of the final judgment makes it clear that the Son of Man will judge human beings on the basis of their actions toward other human beings (Mt 25:31-46); this text is a Christianised version of a similar scene in the Parables of Enoch (Catchpole 1979:378-383).

In conclusion: Certainly many New Testament texts set aside large parts of the Mosaic Torah as the guide and criterion for an upright life—although the
process and debate by which the conclusion was reached is often oversimplified, and the pejorative and marginalising theological label 'Jewish-Christian' is attached to persons and groups who continued to adhere important aspects of the Torah. Nonetheless, a comparison of New Testament texts with parallel Jewish texts from the Greco-Roman period indicates that with reference to human actions and divine judgment, there is far more continuity from the Hebrew Bible through the Jewish literature to the New Testament than theologically driven Christian exegesis and historiography have allowed. By recovering a sense of this continuity, we can begin to see the extent to which such Christian exegesis has caricatured post-biblical Judaism as a legalistic religion, obsessed with halakic distinctions, focused on actions that are not anchored in right and sincere motivations, and anxious about the divine reward or punishment of one's deeds.

3.6 The Jewish community of the Greco-Roman period: the carrier of the Israelite tradition

Traditional Christian scholarship has described 'intertestamental' Judaism in terms of contrast. The description is negative in two respects. Judaism is portrayed for what it is not. Allegedly it is no longer the biblical religion of Israel, nor is it the mature expression of that religion in the teaching of Jesus and the proclamation of the church. Thus it is negative in a second sense; it is defective, bad, wrong-headed religion.

In the process of developing this description, Christian scholars have had to pay their tribute to Judaism in the Greco-Roman period, recognising in it the source of ideas and motives not clearly to be found in the Jewish scriptures. For the most part, they are eschatological. These observations and conclusions have much truth in them. Christianity budded from an eschatologically and, perhaps, apocalyptically oriented branch of Judaism.

Nonetheless, our abstractions and descriptive terminology often prevent us from perceiving the larger dimensions of the history we seek to reconstruct. Jewish with an apocalyptic or strong eschatological orientation also had great respect for the Torah and might have very complex attitudes about Temple, cult, and priesthood. We need to relate early Christianity to real people and communities whose concerns and practices related to the whole range of the aspects of Judaism that I have sketched above.

Christian scholarship on Judaism has often missed the obvious. Its focus on eschatology and its penchant for contrast have obscured the simple fact that it was the Jewish community of the 'intertestamental' period that preserved the Israelite religious tradition that Christians claim to epitomise. Scribes copied the books of the Hebrew Bible, and scholars translated them into Greek. Eschatology, apocalypticism, and moral exhortation arose from the Jewish
interpretation of its religious traditions. Jesus and first century Christian preachers and teachers read the Bible through the lens provided by the living interpretive tradition that has been preserved, in part, in the texts of the Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, and Qumran Scrolls. If one wishes to state that the Jews strayed from the way, one must note that ironically they brought 'the truth' with them. However one may wish to cast Jesus and the teachers of the early church in the role of the Protestant Reformers, the fact remains that their proclamation derived from the form of the tradition that they received from the community that was in need of reformation!

3.7 The early church as a Jewish sect

As was noted above, conflicting interpretations of the Torah sometimes led to sectarian division—the formation of groups that believed that they alone possessed the revealed interpretation of the Torah, the observance of which was necessary for salvation. This drive toward exclusivism is one of the genes that early Christianity inherited from its Jewish parentage. The issue was not Torah, however, but christology. Acceptance of Jesus as God's unique and final agent became the defining characteristic of a true child of the God of Israel, and those who did not subscribe to this belief were considered to be outside the realm of salvation. This tendency of Christians to define themselves over against the Jewish people, increased as the Church became increasingly gentile in its membership and is especially attested in the Gospels. In the second century, it would begin to govern the interpretation of Pauline texts and constitute the second major part of the theological foundation for Christian views of Judaism as a foil to Christianity (see above §3.4).

3.8 Careful and honest historiography: a solid basis for theology

I have argued that the prevailing Christian description of Judaism, which is based on theologically driven categories of contrast and discontinuity, is falsified by a study of the Jewish texts that reads them in terms of their own categories. Exegesis and the writing of history which are genuinely comparative, both with the texts of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, produce a very different view of Judaism in the centuries around the turn of the era.

My point is not that there are no differences between the Jewish texts of the Greco-Roman period and the earlier books of the Hebrew Bible. Obviously there are, just as there are differences among the biblical and post-biblical books themselves. I do not maintain that early Christianity was simply one variation of Judaism among many. The clearest distinction is obviously the area of Christology.

That christological orientation, however, bred apologetics and polemics with long-standing consequences. Christians responded to Jewish non-faith in
the uniqueness of Jesus as God's agent, by systematically describing Judaism as qualitatively different from Christianity, even in the many points where the two were similar.

My purpose in this essay is to propose that we turn to an honest comparative appraisal of the Jewish sources that seeks the continuities and recognises the differences, placing both within the framework of the historical contingencies to which they responded. This will have the salutary consequences that result from doing any history well. It will also have a number of theological consequences. It will open up dimensions in the New Testament texts that have been obscured by a defensive attempt to define Christianity over against Judaism. It will help overcome the moral problem of upholding one's rightness by through a dishonest deprecation of others. It will aid productive discourse between Christians and Jews, which (like all good dialogue): recognises commonality; acknowledges disagreements of differing significance; admits the inevitability that thinking, feeling human beings will disagree and respects their right to do so; and seeks contexts within which to broaden and enrich our cooperation in the common tasks of our humanity. This is not to reduce theology to humanism, but to recognise that theology is a human task whose goals include the enhancement of our humanity and a commitment to the quality of our interrelationships.21

WORKS CONSULTED


21 When I first conceived this article, I considered extending my discussion to include some remarks about the theological ramifications of the marginalising of the New Testament Apocrypha. Space has not allowed this. I note only the following. There is a noteworthy parallel between traditional Jewish interest in the (quasi-canonical) Rabbinic texts and lack of interest in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha and traditional Christian interest in the classic texts of the Fathers and lack of interest in the New Testament Apocrypha. It would be worth considering whether histories of Christian theology ought to pay more attention to the Apocrypha, both to understand better the catholic tradition that survived and to ascertain whether negative judgments about the Apocrypha excised material that might have enriched the philosophically- and doctrinally-oriented tradition that came to constitute the orthodox interpretation of the New Testament.


Nickelsburg, G W E 1992a. s v 'Eschatology (Early Jewish)'. *ABD*

Nickelsburg, G W E 1992b. s v 'Son of Man'. *ABD*


Prof Dr G W E Nickelsburg, School of Religion, University of Iowa, IOWA CITY, Iowa, United States of America.