

11-1-1989

The Other Judaisms of Late Antiquity

Harold Remus

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

Recommended Citation

Remus, Harold (1989) "The Other Judaisms of Late Antiquity," *Consensus*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 2 , Article 13.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol15/iss2/13>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

The Other Judaisms of Late Antiquity

Brown Judaic Studies, 127

Alan F. Segal

Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press

xvii + 213 pp.

Segal, professor at Barnard College and Columbia University in New York City, taught at the University of Toronto and has been a regular contributor to the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies' anti-Judaism and Torah-*nomos* seminars. The essays in this collection range widely but are held together by several common characteristics.

1. They make clear that early Judaism was a variegated phenomenon; this is a useful reminder since many handbooks and commentaries on the New Testament, especially the older ones, may leave one with the impression that there was only rabbinic Judaism and that this is the Jewish "background" (normative or otherwise) of the New Testament, even though the writings usually employed as sources for such Judaism are much later than the first century. Nonetheless, the title of the book is somewhat misleading: Segal does indeed treat "other Judaisms" but also rabbinic Judaism and its relation to the "others".

2. In studying early Judaism Segal draws on what may seem to be unexpected sources. Since the dating of traditions in rabbinic sources through form-critical and tradition-history methods is still relatively new, Segal, in examining covenant in rabbinic Judaism, turns to Jewish liturgy as a help in dating (154-165), concluding that

what is clear from the development of rabbinic liturgy is that daily prayers and observances of the Jews of the first century were a kind of dramatic enactment of covenantal swearing in the most obvious and literal way. It seems evident why we get only hints of the covenantal obligations of the Jews in the Mishnah: it was already present in the liturgy of the people (165).

Another source Segal draws on for studying first-century Judaism (he is not alone in doing so) is the New Testament,

one of the finest sources we have for the study of Judaism, in spite of its various biases. It needs to be read far more carefully and seriously by scholars equipped to read Jewish history and, of course, without falling victim to ancient polemics. The irony is that, although Judaism and Christianity have split to become two separate religions, the witness of each is necessary to understand the history of the other (xvi- xvii).

3. The essays consistently illuminate Jewish-Christian relations in the early period. Christian scholars have long studied early Judaism as a means to understanding the New Testament and early Christianity. Jewish study of the New Testament is also not new, but now some Jewish scholars are

New Testament professors and know their way around the history of Christianity. Segal is well versed in both areas. Each of his essays examines issues and texts that are important in early Christianity as well as in Judaism.

His study of Romans 7—a thorny chapter—goes against much received scholarly opinion. Paul returns to observance of some dietary laws (1 Corinthians 8:12–13; Romans 14:15) in order not to offend Jews he is seeking to win (1 Corinthians 9:20–22; 9:3, “This is my defence”). Such a compromise “is a normal Jewish way of handling differences in ritual practice,” and “Since Paul believes that the ritual is of no importance for salvation, whether Paul observes it or not is entirely irrelevant” (184). Segal’s argument, an attempt to read Romans 7 in light of contemporary Jewish practice and with reference to Paul’s personal experience, is interesting though not always easy to follow or convincing.

In looking at another thorny question—whether *nomos* (usually translated “law”) is a restrictive, legalistic translation of the Hebrew word *torah*—Segal again goes against much scholarly opinion, arguing that *nomos* has transcendent connotations (akin to “wisdom” in Jewish literature) and that Greek-speaking Jews understood it thus, using it to refer, e.g., not only to ordinances but also to the narratives of the Torah as well as the Platonic forms, in short as divine revelation in a broad sense. (See, further, other related essays also originating in the Torah-*nomos* seminar: Harold Remus, “Authority, Consent, Law: *Nomos*, *Physis*, and the Striving for a ‘Given’,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 13/1 [1984], 5–18; Jack H. Lightstone, “Torah is *Nomos*—Except When It Is Not: Prolegomena to the Study of Law in Late Antique Judaism,” *ibid.*, 29–37; S. Westerholm, “*Torah*, *Nomos*, and Law: A Question of ‘Meaning’,” *ibid.*, 15/3 [1986], 327–336; Adele Reinhartz, “The Meaning of *Nomos* in Philo’s *Exposition of the Law*,” *ibid.*, 337–345.)

Segal’s chapter on the sacrifice of Isaac (the *Akedah*)—provocative if not always convincing—suggests that it, rather than Isaiah 53, was a model for early Christian interpretation of Jesus’ crucifixion as atoning sacrifice and that such interpretation may have incited Jews to their own, counter-interpretation of the *Akedah*, in their case as a way to understand the destruction of the Second Temple.

Two long essays—“The Ruler of This World” and “Dualism in Judaism, Christianity, and Gnosticism”—deal with an issue at the heart of Jewish and Christian self-definition: the oneness of God and the question of mediators between God and humans. The “Ruler” essay compares Jewish evidence with Johannine and gnostic thought and, *inter alia*, argues that the Johannine claim that the mediator Jesus is unique results in ostracism of his followers by Jews, while gnostic interpretation of the Old Testament deity as the demiurge leads to persecution by mainstream Christians—even though Johannine dualism may have been a stop along the way to gnosticism.

“Dualism” looks at the problems raised by biblical passages where the plural form of the Hebrew word *Elohim* (“God”) as well as different names

for God or different descriptions of God's manifestations seem to cast doubt upon God's oneness, occasioning speculation and conflict among, and between, Jews, Samaritans, Christians, and gnostics.

The texts Segal examines did not come into being in a vacuum but represent the convictions, struggles, and conflicts of flesh- and-blood people; accordingly, Segal's application of social- scientific methodology to many of the texts shows how fruitful it can be in interpreting them. Especially revealing in this respect is the important essay "Hellenistic Magic: Some Questions of Definition". Segal's thesis (81):

no definition of magic can be universally applicable because "magic" can not and should not be construed as a properly scientific term. Its meaning changes as the context in which it is used changes. No single definition of magic can be absolute, since all definitions of magic are relative to the culture and sub-culture under discussion...we have been misled by our cultural assumptions into making too strict a distinction between magic and religion in the Hellenistic world...in some places the distinction between magic and religion will depend purely on the social context.

Segal therefore takes his cue to ancient definitions of "magic" from ancient documents that lay claim to "magic". This kind of approach, I have suggested elsewhere ("Does Terminology Distinguish Early Christian from Pagan Miracles?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 101 [1982], 531-551; " 'Magic or Miracle'? Some Second-Century Instances," *The Second Century: A Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2 [1982], 127- 156), yields a more adequate, less anachronistic, less prejudiced understanding of an important element in the religious spectrum of the Graeco-Roman world (see H.D. Betz's illuminating introduction to his *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation Including the Demonic Spells* [University of Chicago Press, 1986] vol. 1, xli-liii).

Except for "Dualism", which summarizes arguments in Segal's *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Brill, 1977), all of the essays in the book have been published elsewhere. Under one cover, they illuminate one another both in content and method. The detailed indexes are good. Unfortunately, the editing of the text and footnotes is not.

Harold Remus

Wilfrid Laurier University