AJS Review 37:2 (November 2013), 387–451

Book Reviews

Ancient Judaism and Rabbinics

Michael Stone. *Ancient Judaism: New Visions and Views*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011. 256 pp.
doi:10.1017/S0364009413000329

Professor Michael Stone is a world-renowned scholar in the fields of Jewish and Christian pseudepigrapha, apocalyptic literature, and Armenian studies. He has authored more than fifty books and several hundred articles. He is also the foremost living authority on the account of creation and the afterlife of the Ma'aseh Bereshit traditions in the Jewish and Christian milieux.

Ancient Judaism: New Visions and Views represents a set of stimulating methodological reflections directed to the very heart of the problems facing scholars of early Judaism and Christianity. The book contains seven chapters, which are supplemented with an extensive bibliography and comprehensive indexes. In chapter 1 ("Our Perception of Origins: New Perspectives on the Context of Christian Origins"), Stone reflects on the nature of surviving ancient textual data, arguing that the Jewish and Christian orthodoxies "filtered" the textual corpus in order to reinforce their claims and positions. In such "filtered" transmission the surviving texts are primarily those that were visible through the lens of orthodoxy, and these texts were often provided with the imprimatur of divine authority. Newly available sources, including the Qumran discoveries, which illuminated unexpected and exciting aspects of ancient Judaism, must be integrated into a balanced picture that resists the view of the past available through the prism of Jewish and Christian orthodoxies.

In chapter 2 ("Adam and Enoch and the State of the World") Stone explores two competing early Jewish etiologies of evil: the Adamic, which is traced to the mishap of the protological couple in the Garden of Eden, and the Enochic-Noachic, which is linked to the revolt of the Watchers in the antediluvian time. Stone explores the important role that the Enochic-Noachic etiology of evil played in the Qumran literature. Clarification of various aspects of this etiology helps to present a more textured and fuller picture of Second Temple Judaism and of the role of various etiologies of evil in the sacerdotal debates of that period.

In chapter 3 ("Apocalyptic Historiography") Stone revisits various approaches to construing the origins of apocalyptic eschatology, including the legacy of the *religionsgeschichtliche* school. He demonstrates that the Deuteronomic tradition exercised an important influence on the development of Jewish eschatology. Chapter 4 ("Visions and Pseudepigraphy") deals with the experiential dimension of apocalyptic literature. In my view this is the most fascinating and groundbreaking part of Stone's book. I shall discuss it more extensively below. In chapter 5 ("Bible and Apocrypha") Stone discusses the concept of authoritative

scriptures in the Second Temple period. He explores attitudes to such writings at Qumran, noting that the Qumranites, and perhaps other groups, regarded certain biblical and nonbiblical works as authoritative. Yet, Stone cautions against extrapolation of such attitudes to all Jewish groups, arguing that it is far from certain that the stance on authoritative writings prevalent at Qumran was held universally in Second Temple Judaism.

In chapter 6 ("Multiform Transmission and Authorship") Stone draws attention to three textual "clusters" dealing with biblical and apocryphal subjects: the books associated with Adam and Eve, the writings related to Ezra (Esdras, Sedrach), and some fragmentary compositions attributed to Elijah. These clusters, composed of multiple versions of the same textual material, raise a number of special methodological problems, including difficulties establishing any genetic relationship between different reworkings of common material. Stone masterfully demonstrates the limitations of the prevailing methodology and its inability to describe that relationship in the conventional literary-critical and text-critical terms of derivation, descent, and revision.

In chapter 7 ("The Transmission of Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha") Stone returns to some of the themes and concepts of the first chapter when he discusses the methodology of recovery of the pseudepigraphical texts and traditions from the remnants that were transmitted and "filtered" by Jewish and Christian orthodoxies. The chapter also offers an insightful historical sketch of the modern rediscovery of extracanonical Jewish scriptures in Western scholarship.

In a short review it is impossible to revisit all aspects of this extremely important and complex study of methodological issues. Yet, Stone's reflections in the central, fourth, chapter of his book—an essay situated at the very heart of his methodological discourse—illustrate the conceptual depth of his methodological enterprise. This chapter, on the experiential dimension of apocalyptic literature, raises a set of methodological questions that are not entirely novel to Stone's scholarship, but rather represent a recurrent theme of his studies from the very beginning of his remarkable career.

Stone's attention to the experiential dimension of apocalyptic literature stems from his seminal work on apocalyptic texts, and especially on one of the crucial specimens of this literature —a pseudepigraphon known to us as Fourth Ezra. Stone tells that during his work on the Hermeneia commentary on Fourth Ezra, he encountered grave difficulties in understanding the book's coherence and overall dynamic. Yet the recognition of the seer's religious experience, reflected in greater or lesser measure by that of the author of Fourth Ezra, provided a crucial key to understanding this apocalypse. In contrast to scholars who see apocalypses "as works of fiction from start to finish," Stone came to the realization "that a kernel of actual visionary activity or analogous religious experience lay behind the pseudepigraphic presentations of the religious experiences attributed to apocalyptic seers in the Jewish apocalypses of the Second Temple period" (90). Analyzing scholarly skepticism toward the religious experience, Stone rightly observes that the reluctance of scholars to grasp and recognize the experiential dimension of apocalyptic texts stems not only from their personal preferences, but also from the limitations of the prevailing methodologies of biblical

studies, which are often based "on the 'more objective' criteria of literary, form, and tradition criticism…." As Stone writes, "in these studies, the religious life and experience ascribed to the pseudepigraphic authors are rarely taken into account" (93).

Although there have always been attempts to interpret the visions in apocalyptic literature as a psychological reality, it has often been forgotten that they also represent a cultural reality. Even people who never experience a vision psychologically experience it culturally, understanding their reality through non-psychological means. Stone rightly observes that "religious visionary experiences, described in so many works of late antiquity, both Jewish and non-Jewish, were a part of the culture of the time. The absence of such elements, not their presence, would demand our attention. This observation is most significant for understanding the religious world of ancient Judaism, nascent Christianity, and contemporary Greco-Roman religion." (106) Since religious experience is a cultural experience, the seer's psychological experience must be conditioned by the prevailing religious culture and its symbols. In this respect Stone notes that "it is well known that, whatever the psychological characterization of a religious experience might be, the one who underwent it can only talk about it in the language of his/her culture…. It is equally true of the language used to describe all mystical and other sorts of religious experiences. The psychological experiences of Jews, Christians, Moslems, and others may be similar, yet when they come to describe those psychological experiences, each of them talks the symbolic and religious language of his/her culture and tradition." (106) In the conclusion of this section of his study Stone reminds us that "religious experience is not a panacea, a key to unlock all scholarly *aporiae*, but it becomes a factor actively to be taken into account…" (108).

Stone has written an extremely stimulating book that has an immense value for scholars of Judaism and Christianity. His study greatly enriches our understanding of the origins, nature, and transmission of early Jewish and Christian pseudepigraphical literature. This work will have lasting value for generations of scholars because it touches upon the whole range of methodological questions that are crucial for all who engage in the study of ancient Judaism and early Christianity.

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Ruth Langer. *Cursing the Christians? A History of the* Birkat HaMinim. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. 389 pp.
doi:10.1017/S0364009413000330

Birkat ha-minim (henceforth BH) is the name of one of the eighteen benedictions of the Jewish daily prayer, the Amidah. This benediction, which is in fact