

BOOK REVIEW

THE JEWISH FACTOR IN THE PAGAN-CHRISTIAN DEBATE

by RAY A. PRITZ

David Rokéah, *Jews, Pagans and Christians in Conflict*, Jerusalem, Magnes Press and Leiden, Brill, 1982 (Studia Post Biblica. 33.), 232 p.

At the time and in the geographical setting in which Christianity arose, only Judaism was *religio licita*, a monotheistic religion permitted alongside polytheistic paganism in the Roman Empire. As such, Jews were exempt from offering sacrifices to the pagan gods or even, usually, to the emperor. Inasmuch as certain political acts were bound up with the rites of paganism, for anyone other than Jews to refuse to sacrifice could be construed as a display of disloyalty to the emperor. Those Christians who were not Jews by birth found themselves in a dilemma when, as increasingly became the case, they were called upon to display their loyalty in an act of animal or incense sacrifice. There seem to have been four possible solutions to this dilemma: The Christian could simply refuse and face the consequences; he could go ahead and sacrifice while, as it were, crossing his fingers as if to say "This doesn't count. I hope God understands"; he could falsely claim to be Jewish, the one validly exempt group (This may be reflected in the persecution context of Revelation 2:9–10 and 3:9–10, which speak of "those who say they are Jews and are not but lie.") None of these was a very attractive solution, and certain thinkers in the Church seem to have hit upon a fourth option: They would prove to the authorities that the exemption granted to the Jews rightly belonged to the Christians. Since the ancient mind understood greater

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truth to be evidenced by greater antiquity, the newcomer Christians could have no hope of proving their case unless they could somehow show that they were the legitimate heirs of the promises of the Jewish Bible, that those manifestly ancient scriptures were their own. This is at least a partial explanation of the origins of the ever-widening literature of argumentation between Christian and pagan writers between the 2nd and 5th centuries of our era.

It is with this pagan-Christian conflict that Rokéah deals at length. Readers of *Immanuel* will already be somewhat familiar with his thesis. His doctoral dissertation, which treated the same subject in even greater depth (in Hebrew), was summarized in the second issue of the journal; one fine aspect of his argument (which now appears with minor changes in the book) was first presented here in English; and, most recently, he has presented here his thesis concerning early Christian anti-Judaism.¹ As Rokéah points out, scholars have long recognized the existence of such a polemic and have found numerous ways to explain it, usually saying that the Jews were themselves also somehow involved actively in the debate. Rokéah returns here to the sources, of which he demonstrates good command, and declares that “careful reading of the pagan, Christian, and Jewish sources relating to the polemic led me to the conclusion that the Jews were no party to it. However, without the Jews’ existence and independent attitude towards Christians and pagans alike, and without their holy scriptures and the writings of Hellenistic Jewry, the pagan-Christian polemic could not have taken the course and shape it did.” (pp. 96)

The book begins with a kind of *dramatis personae*, introducing the main participants in the polemic on both the pagan and the Christian side. The main personalities treated throughout the study are, for the pagans, Celsus, Propyry, and Julian the Apostate and, for the Christians, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Origen, Arnobius, and Eusebius Pamphylii, with occasional appearances of such as Aristides, Athenagoras, Minucius Felix, Clement of Alexandria, and Augustine. The informed and interested reader will find here a reassessment of the purpose of the *Adversus Ioudaeos* literature in the early Church, the background to some of that thought in pre-Christian anti-Jewish writers, and the Church’s use in the later polemic of the convenient material in the Jewish writers Philo and Josephus.

But perhaps the most valuable material here, for the Christian scholar certainly, is Rokéah’s insertion of examples and quotations from rabbinic sources on matters german to his thesis. In order to show the non-participation of Jews in the later polemic, he illustrates from the sources the Jewish attitude toward the

1. “The Jews in the Pagan-Christian Polemic from its Beginnings to the Emperor Julian,” *Immanuel* 2 (1973), pp. 61–67; “The Concept of the ‘Election of Israel’ in the Pagan-Christian Polemic of the Roman Empire,” *ibid.*, 11 (1980), pp. 56–63; “Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity,” *ibid.*, 16 (1983), pp. 50–64.

Roman government, particularly, after the Bar Kochba revolt. Similarly, he analyzes the tenor of the opposition of the Jewish sages to Christianity and concludes that before 135 there was a polemic, afterward only a debate or dispute. (The fineness of this distinction may be lost to English readers who, unlike Rokéah, are not thinking in Hebrew. However, the main drift of his argument will be clear enough in his contention that after 135 the Church no longer tried to make converts among Jews.)

While Jews no longer actively participated in polemic against either pagans or Christians, they did provide both of those with a convenient weapon in their battles against each other. Both sides alternately attacked or praised Judaism as a means of undermining the position of the opposition. If, for instance, Celsus belittled Jewish culture as described in the Old Testament, Origen was exercised to defend Judaism; if, on the other hand, Celsus berates Christians for having fallen away from Jewish tradition, Origen must justify Christianity by attacking that tradition. Rokéah has selected several dominant themes in the varicolored pagan-Christian debate to illustrate and prove his thesis. These include the place of divine providence in human affairs; the recognition of the nature of deity (one might say "God or gods?"), revelation and religious myth; the election of Israel; and the argument that cultural achievement or enslavement may be valid evidence of divine favor or displeasure.

While not light reading for the layman, Rokéah's book will be of special interest to the student of the turbulent years of religious development surrounding the rise of the Christian Church in the Roman Empire and the concomitant demise of paganism. It also ably demonstrates the inherent dangers of treating any people as an impersonal object: In the centuries with which this study deals were sown the seeds of Christian antisemitism, seeds which were to bear such bitter fruit in Europe a millenium later.

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