

The New Testament in Its World (N.T. Wright & Michael Bird, Zondervan, 2019)

JEWISH BELIEFS: ONE GOD AND ONE PEOPLE .

As we have seen, the Jewish world was anything but monolithic in its views, beliefs, and aspirations. If we were to collect together people like Ben-Sirach, Philo, the Teacher of Righteousness, Rabbi Gamaliel, and the apostle Paul and ask them, 'What makes a person a good Jew?', there would be a rather free and frank exchange of ideas. Added to that, we must remember that the Jewish way of life was just that, a way of life; people did not think of it as a 'religion' in the modern sense. It was a totality, comprising ethnic identity, geographical focus, shared history, customs, and traditions. (Indeed, people did not think of it as 'Judaism', which is a relatively modern term. The Greek word *Ioudaismos*, which looks as though it might mean 'Judaism' in our sense, was in fact an active noun, denoting the zealous propagation of the Jewish way of life.)⁹¹ Yet, despite all their diversity, the Jews who practised their ancestral customs would have had several things in common. They shared a commitment to Torah as both story and instruction, even though they disagreed fiercely with one another about what that involved in detail. They recognized the Temple as the intended place of the divine presence, even though nobody in the first century seems to have thought that the full, glorious 'Shekinah' had returned after the exile

⁹¹ See Paul's remarks in Gal. 1.13–14.

in the way Isaiah had promised.⁹² They recognized the importance of the traditional 'land of Israel' as the people's divinely given inheritance, even though it had been many centuries since the boundaries allotted in the book of Joshua had borne any resemblance to actual Jewish presence. They followed the annual calendar of festivals like Yom Kippur and Passover, even though there were disputes between different groups as to how the calendar should be organized.⁹³ All this is given. However, if we want to get down to the ultimate core of Jewish beliefs, and see what had been sustaining them over several centuries, despite domination by one pagan kingdom after another, it would be this: monotheism and election, or, one God and one people!

The Jews believed in a specific God, of whom there was only one, who had made the whole world and who was active within it even while remaining sovereign over it. They knew this God as YHWH, 'the One Who Is', the Sovereign One. He (they used masculine pronouns for YHWH, though they knew very well that he was beyond gender, and they could often use feminine imagery as well) was not remote or detached. Nor was he simply a generalized sense of a sacred dimension within the world, or for that matter the personification of spiritual forces. Rather, he was the *maker* of all that exists, and he remained powerful and involved within, though by no means reduced to terms of, the creation itself. Classic Jewish monotheism thus came to believe that (1) there was one God, who created heaven and earth, and who remained in close and dynamic relation with his creation; and that (2) this God had called Israel to be his special people. This latter vocation was sometimes explicitly linked with the former belief: YHWH had chosen Israel *for the sake of* the larger world. Election, the choice of Israel, was the focal point of the divine purpose to act within the world to rescue and heal the world, to bring about what some biblical writers speak of as a 'new creation'.

This twin belief in monotheism and election was never simply a pair of abstract propositions arrived at by philosophical enquiry or hypothetical speculation. It was discovered through a particular history, and characteristically expressed through telling and retelling that history in one shape or another. The history was that of Abraham's family going down into Egypt, becoming enslaved, and being dramatically rescued and given their own land. Those who lived through these events explained who they were, and gave shape to their continuing life, by telling the story and dramatically re-enacting it in various festivals. Whatever happened subsequently, whether oppression, suffering, exile, or seeming annihilation, those who belonged to the family of Abraham looked back to the story of the exodus to

⁹² Isa. 40.3–5; 52.7–10.

⁹³ According to James C. Vanderkam (2012, 91): 'The surviving evidence exhibits a richness and diversity in Judaism of the Second Temple era, a diversity so great that some have resorted to the neologism "Judaisms" to express it. Yet, despite the undoubted diversity present in the texts, there are fundamental beliefs and practices that would have been accepted by virtually all Jews during those centuries and that justify retaining the singular noun Judaism.'

rediscover who their God was and to pray that he would do for them once more those great saving acts that had constituted them as his people in the first place.

Part of the story was precisely the discovery of what God's faithfulness and rescuing power would look like in practice. This God would be known as the rescuer, the one who would then accompany his people through the wilderness, leading them in the pillar of cloud and fire, coming to dwell in their midst (or at least, after the 'golden calf' incident, in close proximity to the camp), and giving them his law, his own self-expression of the way of life for his people. The story of the exodus thus included within itself the story of two ways in which the one true God was present and active within the world and Israel: the Shekinah, the glory of God 'tabernacled' within the tent in the wilderness and later within the Temple in Jerusalem; and the Torah, the expressed will of God for Israel, the law of Moses. In addition, a strong strand in the story was the belief that God's own spirit had rested upon and indwelt Moses, enabling him to be the leader of God's people. Some later traditions referred to the strange pillar of cloud and fire in terms of the divine spirit.⁹⁴ Thus these three manifestations of YHWH's presence and rescuing love—God's presence, God's law, God's spirit, all seen to great advantage in the rescue-story, the freedom-story, that is, the exodus narrative—mark off the Jews' sense of who their God actually was from the theologies of the surrounding nations.

In many places in Israel's scriptures, and in subsequent post-biblical Jewish writings, these three ways of thinking about God's presence and saving activity, within the world and within Israel, were linked closely with two others: God's Word and God's Wisdom. Both are associated with creation; both are seen as other ways of saying what was said through Shekinah and Torah. Together these five ways form, not indeed a philosophical system, but a controlling narrative. Through retelling and reliving this story in liturgy and festival, in reading, singing, and prayer, Israel was able to rekindle the sense of God's presence. Its people were able to root themselves again in YHWH's rescuing actions in the past; to pray, often in extreme circumstances, for his rescuing help in the present; and, looking to the future, to hope for his final victory, and their own final liberation from all that enslaved them (see text grid: 'Ancient and modern Jewish scholars comment on Israel's plight in the first century').

Into this Jewish picture of the one true God we must now factor two other features characteristic of some Jewish writings in the second-Temple period. First, there was the expectation that YHWH would return to Zion, in power and visible glory, after his abandonment of Jerusalem at the time of the Babylonian exile. Second, there was the tradition of the enthronement of YHWH, and of one who somehow shared that throne. We will return to these themes when discussing Jesus' own self-understanding.

⁹⁴ Isa. 63.11; Hag. 2.5.

ANCIENT AND MODERN JEWISH SCHOLARS COMMENT ON ISRAEL'S PLIGHT IN THE FIRST CENTURY

Philo

Philo of Alexandria commented in his own day on how Israel was still suffering the effects of exile as the majority of Jews remained dispersed from the land and the nation persisted in a state of slavery, and he looked forward to a day when God would dramatically act to reverse this:

'For even though they dwell in the uttermost parts of the earth, in slavery to those who led them away captive, one signal, as it were, one day will bring liberty to all . . . When they have gained this unexpected liberty, those who but now were scattered in Greece and the outside world over islands and continents will arise and post from every side with one impulse to the one appointed place, guided in their pilgrimage by a vision and superhuman unseen by others but manifest to them as they come from exile to their home . . . Everything will suddenly be reversed, God will turn the curses against the enemies of these penitents, the enemies who rejoiced in the misfortunes of the nation and mocked and railed at them . . .' (Philo *Praem.* 164–9).

Klausner

Jewish scholar Joseph Klausner, writing in the 1920s, noted that the return of the Babylonian exiles to Judea was a bit of an anti-climax as it did not yield the realization of the prophetic hopes for the restoration of the nation; instead, things seemed to get worse:

'But what was the actual fact? Slavery to foreign governments, wars, tumults and torrents of blood. Instead of all nations being subject to Judah, Judah was subject to the nations. Instead of the "riches of the Gentiles," godless Rome exacted taxes and tribute . . . Instead of the Gentiles "bowing down with their faces to the ground" and "licking the dust of their feet," comes a petty Roman official with unlimited power over Judea. Instead of Messiah the son of David, comes Herod the Edomite.'

*Klausner 1929, 169–70.

If YHWH were to act afresh, decisively, in history, and if he were to do so through a chosen agent, how might that chosen agent be described? According to some texts from our period, the agent through whom Israel's God acted would be vindicated, exalted, and honoured in a quite unprecedented manner. This is a separate subject in itself, and I must be content with pointing in a general direction with some specific instances.

There is a complex range of Jewish texts from different periods that speculate about the exaltation and heavenly enthronement of a figure who may be either an angel or a human being. These speculations grow from meditation upon, and discussion of, certain key texts such as Ezekiel 1, in which the prophet receives a vision of YHWH's throne-chariot, and Daniel 7, where 'one like a son of man' is presented to 'the Ancient of Days' and shares his throne. Such speculations formed the staple diet of a whole tradition of Jewish mysticism, along with accompanying theological and cosmological enquiry.

How far these speculations were taken is a matter of continuing debate. But the point should be clear: things like this were thinkable; they were not obviously self-contradictory, nor were they necessarily seen as a threat to what second-Temple Jews meant by ‘monotheism’. They were attempts to find out what that monotheism would actually mean in practice: how was the one God going to fulfil his promises and purposes for Israel and the world? Thus, out of a much larger and highly complex set of speculations about the action of Israel’s God through various mediator-figures, one possible scenario that some second-Temple Jews regarded as at least thinkable was that the earthly and military victory of the coming Messiah over the pagans would be seen in terms of the enthronement-scene from Daniel 7, itself a development of the chariot-vision in Ezekiel 1.

One thing should be clear from this brief survey of first-century Jewish beliefs. At their core is the conviction of the Jewish people that their God was the creator God, not a tribal god or a local deity, but ‘God Almighty’, the ‘maker of heaven and earth’. He had called Israel to be his special possession, the people of his pasture, a kingdom of priests, and a light to the nations. Though the world was ravaged with evil and savaged by dark powers, it would not always remain so. Many Jews cherished, and brought to various expression, the hope that this one true God would deliver Israel through his agents—prophets, priests, and kings—to bring about a new exodus. This would utterly transform Israel’s fortunes and future; and, through this transformed Israel, God would one day transform the entire world.

Further reading

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