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Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins: Diversity,
Continuity, and Transformation (review)

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Journal of the American Academy of Religion, Volume 74, Number 1,
March 2006 , pp. 212-215 (Review)

Published by Oxford University Press



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BOOK REVIEWS

Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins: Diversity, Continuity, and Transformation. By George W. E. Nickelsburg. Fortress Press, 2003. 264 pages. \$23.00.

In *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins* Nickelsburg proposes “a broad and synthetic picture of some of the results of modern scholarship on early Judaism,” and a discussion of Christian origins in light of that research (6). He summarizes for a nonspecialist audience some of the findings of the past fifty years, developments in which his own work has been so important.

The introduction presents the author’s intent and methodology, as well as the context in which he is working. Developments in the study of Judaism indicate its complexity and diversity and call for a reexamination of previously held notions about the origins of Christianity. Nickelsburg believes that new perspectives require acknowledgment of the limitations of our knowledge and corresponding tentativeness in relation to conclusions we might draw.

Nickelsburg has organized his material according to traditional topics. Chapter 1, “Scripture and Tradition,” describes the development of the canon and its ongoing interpretation. Nickelsburg complicates our understanding of that process in several ways. For example, he observes that Jesus ben Sira knew something of the tripartite division of *torah*, *nebi’im*, and *ketubim* (instruction, prophets, and writings)—*before* the writing of the canonical book of Daniel.

Nickelsburg’s attention to the importance of the hermeneutical enterprise illustrated in the Qumran manuscripts and other early Jewish sources reminds readers that canon exists in the context of varied, sometimes disparate interpretations of authoritative texts. Early Christians read their scriptures in the framework of such interpretive traditions, already centuries old.

Chapter 2, “Torah and the Righteous Life,” discusses matters that have long been sources of misunderstanding. Nickelsburg locates problems not only in (mis)readings of New Testament texts but also in disputes of the patristic and Reformation periods. Responding to Christian presuppositions about Jewish “legalism,” he places Torah and related notions of justice, reward, and punishment in the broader context of covenant. Nickelsburg’s examination of New

Journal of the American Academy of Religion March 2006, Vol. 74, No. 1, pp. 212–271

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Testament materials displays varied approaches to Torah and the righteous life in those texts. His analysis suggests that one can uphold a caricature of Judaism as “law” over and against the “gospel” of Christianity only by restricting oneself to a reading of certain of Paul’s letters.

Chapter 3, “God’s Activity in Behalf of Humanity,” presents matters such as deliverance, salvation, revelation, sacrifice, and expiation in ways that demonstrate interconnections between these motifs. Nickelsburg’s treatment of the “cosmic character of evil” and various traditions regarding expiatory suffering and the place of the “nations” shows readers how New Testament reflections on the suffering and death of Jesus are contextualized in much older traditions about the suffering of the righteous.

Nickelsburg continues with “Agents of God’s Activity” in chapter 4. He describes biblical and early Jewish traditions concerning human agents as well as transcendent figures and demonstrates early Christians’ appropriation of traditional categories to interpret the story of Jesus. Thus, in some traditions, Jesus as Son of Man represents the convergence of anointed one, judge and servant present in earlier sources. In other traditions Jesus is the embodiment of the pre-existent Logos and/or Wisdom.

Nickelsburg discusses the variety of Jewish messianic notions. For some Jews the Messiah would be an exalted heavenly figure. For others he would be an earthly ruler. In still other sources there is no reference to a Messiah. Such a complicated picture of messianic notions calls into question earlier Christian presuppositions about Jewish “unbelief.” Claims made about a Messiah, and about Jesus as Messiah, “would not have been universally taken for granted even among pious, eschatologically oriented Jews” (116).

Nickelsburg turns to “Eschatology” in chapter 5. The discussion of eternal life, resurrection, and immortality indicates ways in which Jews of the Greco-Roman period considered the transcendence of death. New life or the new age could thus be identified with entry into the community (Qumran), a renewed “new earth” (*1 Enoch*), heaven (*Jubilees*), or immortality of the soul (Wis. Sol., 4 Maccabees). Nickelsburg discusses the “eschatological orientation of early Christianity” (135) against this polymorphous backdrop. He delineates tensions between present and future in Jesus’ teaching and various early Christian traditions, and discusses New Testament resurrection narratives in the context of Jewish eschatology. In relation to eschatology, as in other matters, Nickelsburg asserts that the “uniqueness” of early Christianity is not in its religious and intellectual framework but in connections drawn between traditional categories and the figure of Jesus.

Nickelsburg describes the historical settings of his material in chapter 6, “Contexts and Settings.” He states the importance of studying texts in relation to time, place, social location, and function (148). The discussion of “Judaism and Hellenism” is a clear statement for nonspecialists of a complex issue fundamental to study of the period. Nickelsburg describes institutions as well as religious groups, concluding that “nascent Christianity was conceived in the matrix of first-century apocalyptic Judaism” (183–184).

In the final chapter, “Conclusions and Implications,” Nickelsburg summarizes his findings. He pursues questions about the gradual divergence of Judaism

and Christianity, each “drawing on a different element in its Jewish heritage” (194), and reiterates principles for careful historical study and consequences for theological work and interreligious dialogue.

Nickelsburg intends *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins* for a broad audience, including biblical scholars who do not specialize in the study of Judaism, university and seminary students, and people involved in Christian–Jewish dialogue. He has succeeded admirably, making complex material accessible to non-specialist readers. The notes include general dictionary references as well as more technical entries.

Throughout the volume Nickelsburg challenges readers to be aware of the complexity of the material and the limitations of scholarly knowledge. Nickelsburg himself models this awareness. In doing so he displays for his reader something of the exquisitely textured multivalence of the texts, allowing the sources themselves to complicate hitherto overly simple notions of such matters as “Messiah,” canon, and law. Nickelsburg presents the material with clarity, but he also continues to raise new questions, leaving them unanswered, and thereby engaging his readers.

There are some difficulties, of course. While Nickelsburg clearly respects Judaism on its own terms, the organization of the chapters, with an examination of Jewish sources, followed by a section on the implications for study of Christian origins, could reinscribe mistaken notions of Judaism as prolegomenon to Christianity so prevalent in earlier Christian scholarship. Furthermore, expressions such as “law and gospel,” the discussion of law and grace, and references to debates of the patristic and Reformation eras need explanation for readers unfamiliar with the history of Christianity.

The reasons for Nickelsburg’s choices of topics are not always clear. For example, in chapter 4 (“Agents of God’s Activity”), he has a section on God’s Wisdom. He refers briefly to ways Logos traditions are used in New Testament texts. However, there is no section on the Logos, although this concept is as important as Wisdom in the sources Nickelsburg discusses. Furthermore, no attention is given to such noncanonical texts as the *Didache* and *Epistle of Barnabas*, even though they may be contemporaneous with later New Testament books and contain material bearing on the issues he is treating.

Nickelsburg is sensitive to historical and social contexts and the ways in which they shape text and tradition. However, in this volume he does not bring together sufficiently a sense of historical context and social location in relation to specific matters, other than general references, such as describing apocalypticism as a response to difficulty. What would have been, for instance, the relation of the figure of the Son of Man to Jewish experience specifically during the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes? And what would it have meant for early Christians in Matthean or Johannine communities to think of Jesus as the embodiment of Wisdom or Logos?

In relation to social location Nickelsburg speaks of a variety of religious groups in early Judaism, all of which are learned elites. It seems to me that one must at least raise the issue of how little or how much we can know about the religious life of the vast majority who were not learned.

There is also a terminological difficulty. For the sake of convenience, in this review, I have followed Nickelsburg's usage of the expressions "early Christians" and "early Christianity." But study of the sources problematizes such usage, suggesting that boundaries remained porous in some places for much longer than previously supposed. Nickelsburg's arrangement of the material as well as his unqualified use of the designation "early Christianity" suggests clearly separate groups as early as Paul, even while the author speaks of the new movement as emerging from the matrix of apocalyptic Judaism.

Finally a remark for the editors. This very helpful volume would have been made even more useful by including a bibliography and subject index.

For all of my questions I believe Nickelsburg has given us a book that will extend conversation about Jewish and Christian origins in nonspecialist circles by demonstrating ways in which followers of Jesus and subsequent generations used traditional sources to interpret their understanding of Jesus and their own sociohistorical realities. I certainly intend to use this book with my students and recommend it to others.

doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfj032

Advance Access publication January 19, 2006

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Approaching the Land of Bliss: Religious Praxis in the Cult of Amitābha. Edited by Richard K. Payne and Kenneth K. Tanaka. University of Hawai'i Press, 2004. 304 pages. \$32.00.

This aptly titled volume takes "approaching the Land of Bliss" as its subject in two distinct senses. On the one hand each of the studies included here investigates some of the myriad means by which Buddhist practitioners have approached the goal of birth in Sukhāvatī, the "Pure Land of Utmost Bliss" presided over by the Buddha Amitābha. On the other the collection as a whole is the product of skepticism about what has been the dominant scholarly approach to the study of Pure Land Buddhism and indeed of Buddhism in general. As Richard K. Payne points out in a lucid introduction, that approach has tended to treat texts and nations as basic analytical categories, defining groups of Buddhists primarily in terms of the doctrinal writings they embrace or the nation-states in which they reside. Payne takes issue with this way of conceptualizing Buddhist history for a number of reasons: it does not correspond to the ways in which most Buddhists have situated themselves within the Buddhist tradition; it distorts our perception of that tradition by privileging doctrine at the expense of practice; and it encourages us to view "the history of Buddhism as a movement from India to China to Japan" and thus "implicitly makes the Japanese forms of the various lineages and traditions into the culmination of Buddhist history" (2). This, in turn, causes us to exaggerate the importance of sectarian Buddhism (and of certain Japanese sects in particular) and to ignore, downplay, or misinterpret phenomena that cannot be slotted neatly into one