

Mark Adam Elliot, *The Survivors of Israel: A Reconsideration of the Theology of Pre-Christian Judaism*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000.

Recent days have seen the appearance of a significant new volume on the theology of Second temple Judaism. This book of very impressive proportions is intended to establish a “systematic theology” of Judaism as represented by the apocalyptic portions of the Pseudepigrapha and the Dead Sea Scrolls (p. 4). Its author is aware of the pitfalls of such a systematizing approach; and his sensitivity is all the more appreciated, I might add, in the face of the heavy criticisms of E. P. Sanders’ *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, viz., that Sanders tried to impose a uniformity on the texts of Second Temple Judaism which, by the very nature of the case, defies such classification.¹ Nevertheless, Elliot, in my view, is justified in redressing the balance back from a more fragmentary approach to a methodology that is aware of the “community of nature” (my phrase) that exists among the variegated documents of pre-destruction Judaism. Elliot’s selection of texts, as he admits, is limited, as is inevitably the case, given the sheer mass of literature available. In his words, his preference is to canvass “*a single chronologically and ideologically circumscribed movement in Judaism*” rather than “*the entire Jewish world over lengthy periods of time*” (p. 11). “The point to be made here is that it is only by grouping writings of a similar social milieu that one can adequately determine the social context and solve the various questions of literary function—and thus arrive at the all-important levels of meaning intended by the author” (p. 11).

The purpose of the book is stated clearly: “to offer a vital *prolegomena* to the study of New Testament origins” (p. 12). Integral to this purpose is that the New Testament itself belongs centrally, not peripherally, to the literary world of Second Temple Judaism, a point often overlooked, if not rejected, by a traditional dogmatic/confessional reading of the New Testament. Even so, Elliot maintains that his study also functions as study of Judaism in its own right.

Elliot characterizes the literature under consideration as “sectarian.” He does not entirely discount the theory, propounded chiefly by Norman Golb, that at least some of the scrolls found at Qumran may have been the product of other groups than the Dead Sea community itself. Nevertheless, they do represent a certain mindset, preserve a more or less common point of view and stem from the same general movement (p. 21). Incidentally, the preservation of notable amounts of apocalyptic material at Qumran argues that the community, and, by extrapolation, other Jewish sects sensed no tension between very stringent law-observance, on the one hand, and apocalyptic/cosmic expectation, on the other. Perhaps one of the clearest examples of the intersection of the two is the importance of the calendar as it is joined with astrological speculation.

The main target in Elliot’s crosshairs is the notion of a “normative Judaism,” a phrase stemming from George Foote Moore.² More recently, Sanders has proposed that there is an “essence” to be discerned in the various strands of Second Temple Judaism.³ Elliot provides a quote from Joseph Bonsirven, whose comments, he says, on the unity of Judaism are quite representative of scholars past and present and illustrate the tremendous momentum of this conventional view even before Moore’s time:

The Jews of Palestine were divided into various sects: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, popular and apocalyptic groups. But in spite of differences, some superficial and others profound and essential, these sects were united by a common fund of beliefs and practices derived directly from the Bible and from revered and universally accepted traditions.⁴

Scholars such as Bonsirven, Sanders, Solomon Schechter, Kaufmann Köhler and J. D. G. Dunn,⁵ who believe that there is an “essence” of Judaism, identify this essence in terms of

several “pillars:” the doctrine of God, the place of the law and Israel’s national election. It is the concern of Elliot’s book to call the third “pillar” in particular to the bench, i.e., the notion of *the irrevocable national election of Israel* (p. 28). Elliot acknowledges that while it may seem bold or even stupid to question any of these beliefs, at least an examination of the context out of which the “pillar” approach to the sources arises will facilitate an objective critique of it. This view, Elliot maintains, is the outgrowth of two flaws: (1) basing conclusions on rabbinic literature rather than on the earlier, Second Temple, sources; (2) the methodological misstep of using modern Jewish belief for the purpose of systematizing ancient doctrine (p. 29). With regard to the latter, Elliot rightly maintains that “there has been a prevailing tendency *throughout* the history of scholarship to treat Judaism as timeless and, therefore, as largely *unconditioned by development*” (p. 29). The obvious fallacy here is the assumption that earlier thought can be determined by later preferences (p. 33).

The nub of Elliot’s work pertains to “nationalism,” a word which conjures up “a vast range of associations from political ideology to military zealotism” (p. 33). But as he notes, nationalism is not only a political concept but a theological concept as well, especially as it embraces God’s relations and intentions with respect to the nation Israel, and more especially as it is reflected in the *election* of Israel. Elliot acknowledges that a nationalistic theology could and apparently did consist of the hope that God would save Israel. Nevertheless, the nationalistic approach to Judaism has had as its chief focus the life and ideals of the nation rather than of individuals or groups. Elliot thus seeks to redress the balance by arguing that each of the Jewish sects in existence at the time of Jesus and Paul conceived of itself as the remnant of Israel, the true people of God. Therefore, to put it in my own words, “nationalism” must give way to “sectarianism.” “Sect,” however, is not taken in the sense that scholars have traditionally assigned to the term, i.e., any group which deviates from the “main stream” of Judaism. Rather, each “sect” of Second Temple Judaism, as just stated, represents itself as the only true remnant (the elect) of the nation Israel. Elliot traces the tendencies toward fragmentation back to the captivity, when Israel was divided into at least three groups, all of which made claims to being the continuation of the pre-exilic people: (1) the “dwellers,” those allowed to remain in Judea; (2) the “returnees,” who returned from Babylon to resettle the land; (3) the “settlers,” who remained on in Babylon. The situation was exacerbated by developments in the Maccabean period, when various pietistic groups took exception to what was considered to be the illegitimate usurpation of the priesthood by the Hasmoneans. Later, as a result of the Roman invasion of Palestine (63 BC), the battle lines were drawn even further between loyalists groups and those perceived to be less than loyal to the traditions. Elliot summarizes:

Our survey of the period between the first and the second destructions of the Temple has witnessed an almost endless variety of religious, social, and political influences and experiences acting on the Jewish world. While no two stages of this lengthy duration were identical by any means, a limited number of outstanding influences or factors have nevertheless been seen to have been repeatedly and consistently at work throughout the period. While these factors probably had their origins in the exile, they became especially noticeable during the late Second Temple period (200 B.C. to A.D. 100)—noticeable, that is, partly due to the relatively detailed nature of the sources for that period and partly to the infelicitous rule of the Seleucids, which so forcefully brought these factors to the fore. These influences, or factors, can be summarized as follows: (1) influences tending to move the Jewish people away from traditional understandings and practices, in particular the influx of Gentile thought and ways resulting from dominance of foreign powers—namely, Greeks and Romans; (2) the gradual acceptance of the new ideology by the priests and other Jewish leaders and a corresponding

liberalization of the nobility; (3) the involvement by growing numbers of the population in the liberalizing tendencies and a corresponding downgrading of traditional ideas among the masses; and (4) the existence of relatively small groups of dissidents to the religious reform who saw in both active and passive involvement in the reform and in the liberalization of the people as a whole signs of a general failure to remain faithful to the religion of Israel—that is, a mass apostasy. Occasionally the protest of such groups resulted in active and more or less well organized reform parties being formed, but more frequently it resulted in division and factionalism of a less-organized kind (p. 235).

Accordingly, documents such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Enoch collection, Jubilees, Psalms of Solomon, 4 Ezra, and 2 Baruch roundly condemn other Israelites as being apostates from the covenant, who consequently must bear the curses of the covenant. Given the chronological gaps in this literature (from the time of the Maccabees until after the destruction of Jerusalem) the same identical people, of course, cannot be in view. However, in principle they are all the same, namely, Israelites who have capitulated to pagan influence and have forsaken the most basic beliefs and institutions of the Jewish way of life. In brief, “When it comes to the traditional conservatives of the late Second Temple period, to be specific, one is dealing with *the reaction of pietists to perceived apostasy in Israel*.... They directed their message of dissent to the apostasy that they perceived *within Israel*” (pp. 236, 237). The mentality underlying these documents, says Elliot, is that of a *protest movement* that expressed itself in *nonnationalistic* terms (p. 241). He proposes that *displacement* is a helpful way to understand this movement, but with two qualifications: (1) the displacement is more religious than political or economic; (2) the alienation is directed against the masses as much as against the establishment. These groups can be described as *nonconformists* or even *anticonformists* since such designations properly convey a distinction between their behavior and beliefs from popular or official norms. But although the various sects form a “*Movement of Dissent*,” they are *purists*, *traditionalists* or *conservatives* in that they claim to be the continuance of time-honored traditions. Integral to this movement is the self-perception of the various groups as the remnant of Israel. Therefore, Elliot uses the phrase “*Remnant Groups*” as a synonym of “*Movement of Dissent*” (pp. 241-43).

Elliot adds the caution, however, that:

one cannot claim that the dissident attitudes mentioned above were necessarily shared by a wide circle of Judaism, or that the writings resulting from it were in any way more representative, or more “standard,” than other views of Judaism. In fact, although the movement may well have enjoyed more or less “popular” approval at different times, it is precisely this minority aspect of their view that was distinctive and was no doubt partly determinative for their self-identity (p. 243).

To the body of the book consists of ten chapters: The Judgment-of-Israel Theme; Limits on the Community of Salvation; Reform and Dissent—the Sociohistorical Context; Dualistic Covenant Theology; Soteriological Dualism; A New Approach to Apocalyptic Forms; The Dualistic Trajectory of Pneumatology; The Messiah-for-the-Elect; Eschatology in the Dualistic Context; “Destruction-Preservation” Soteriology. His survey is rich in historical and theological detail, demonstrating, for example, the role of the calendar (including polemics against astrological speculation) in defining and delimiting the community of God, the importance of purification/atonement at Qumran and the necessity for adhering to what was considered by the Dead Sea sect to be divine revelation, the “second law,” which in some cases merely clarified and applied the Torah, but in others constituted a supplement to the law. Knowledge is also very important, since knowledge

serves polemical ends. The social function of knowledge is especially revealing when it comes to the “defining laws” of the community, associated with the calendar, intermarriage, blood laws, etc. These defining laws serve effectively to identify or point out the elect. The question of who is saved, then, comes down to membership in the right group.

Along these lines, the doctrine of the covenants in these writings is concerned to define the participants in the community. This frequently required a new definition of the covenant, a new proof of entrance into the covenant, or even an entirely new covenant. There is evidence that the groups represented by *Jubilees* and the Dead Sea Scrolls believed that they possessed a more complete and perfect covenant than their various rivals. This even involved adding to the Torah, a practice presumably justified because the sects in question thought that they had been made privy to a superior revelation (in the case of *Jubilees*, the law of the heavenly tablets). Such data lead Elliot to observe:

That even conservative Jewish people could be open to this kind of *relativization* of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants alerts us to the essentially dynamic view of covenant held in these circles. This relativization also suggests the potential seriousness of the rift between these and other Jews who may have centered their understanding on the *inalterability* of a single and irrevocable covenant—notably that of Abraham or Moses (p. 258).

But not only is the covenant dynamic, it is conditional and individual as well. This means that individuals must persevere in the covenant or otherwise suffer eternally the judgment meted out to apostates. The practical upshot of this conclusion is that Jews are not safe (saved) simply because they are Jews: they must belong to the right group and must comply with the terms of law(s) of the community. Consequently, the covenant theology of groups like the Qumran covenanters exhibits a “soteriological dualism,” i.e., a distinction between the good and the evil “seed,” “the sons of light” and “the sons of darkness.” This distinction pertains not only to Israelite as distinguished from Gentile, but as well Israelite distinguished from Israelite. Accordingly, one is not surprised that the concept of the Messiah among such enclaves turns out to be a “messiah for the elect,” i.e., for the sect in question (“That the messiah was *not* coming for the nation so much as for the ‘elect,’ therefore, is a central tenet that must be acknowledged whenever one consults these writings as a foundation for studies of messianology or Christology” [p. 514]).

Such soteriological (and eschatological) dualism represents the end of a process. This is a process that began with a protest against perceived apostasy and moved away from one of corporate identity (ethnic or national Israel) and ended with the establishment of another entirely new corporate identity (the group of the righteous).

On the soteriological level one...witnesses a move away from a national “soteriology” (better: covenantal nationalism), an increased attention to individual categories, and, finally, the emergence of a soteriology based on a renewed (but entirely redirected) experience of corporate consciousness. This last stage of the development is the important one, inasmuch as soteriology is no longer centered on the nation, nor has it become entirely individual, but through an emerging “corporate identity” stimulated by shared experiences of crisis has become *ipso facto* a corporate soteriology focused on a remnant of Israelites (p. 354).

Elliot concludes his study with a brief chapter on the implications of the theology of the movements of dissent for New Testament study, in which he suggests new directions in comparative research. His findings are related to the following: the *ekklesia* in the ministry of Jesus; the Fourth Gospel; Paul; and the book of Revelation. His final word is:

Our startling conclusion is that conventional views of Judaism pose insurmountable difficulties for the comparative study of Judaism and the New Testament. In order to reduce these difficulties somewhat, comparative studies in the past have required that *the period between Jesus and the New Testament was a time of significant “dejudaizing” or “Christianization” of doctrines previously held in a much different form in Judaism.* But if the New Testament faith is so radically different from this nationalistic Judaism (a fact we do not contest), this could imply, not that the early church (or in part Jesus himself) in important points reformulated Judaism, but *alternatively*, that conventional nationalistic understandings of Judaism do not after all provide an adequate or complete basis for comparison. It may be, in that case, that *another kind of Judaism altogether* must be called upon if fruitful comparative analysis is to proceed into the future (p. 663).

In evaluating Elliot’s book, it is to be acknowledged that he has made a very plausible case for the documents under consideration. Based on the sources in question, it would indeed appear that the literature of the various groups under investigation gives evidence of “sectarian” as opposed to an all-inclusive soteriology respecting the whole of Israel. This general conclusion does not, however, preclude various methodological questions that might be put to the author. Do the various groups condemn all Israelites or just those who in their eyes are apostates? Did the various groups produce all the documents in question or only some? How wide-ranging were the groups represented by the various documents? Is it a case that each document represents a different community and that each group was opposing all other groups? Are the groups represented by the documents in question on the fringe or “main stream?” Would “main stream Judaism” be offended by the notion of an elect within Israel? Answers to these questions do not of necessity call into question Elliot’s overall thesis, but they would be useful for refining and honing the issues as precisely as possible.

Having said this, however, I believe qualifications are necessary in two basic areas. The one is that “nationalism” is not a bad way to describe the Judaism of this period after all. Granted that each of the sects conceived of itself as the true elect, it is nonetheless true that they were the self-perceived *Israel of God* and, therefore, the objects of God’s favor as over against Gentiles. The notion of a people dwelling alone and not mingling with the nations (Num 23:9) remains intact. Each segment of this Judaism was zealous to maintain what Paul calls the “dividing wall of hostility” between itself and pagan humanity.

The second is that I cannot agree with I. H. Marshall (on the back cover of the book) that Elliot has refuted that Second Temple Judaism is to be understood, in terms of E. P. Sander’s now famous phrase, as a “covenantal nomism.” For the sake of clarity, it should be explained this “covenantal nomism” is characterized by the following factors. (1) Israel became the people of God by his electing grace as manifested in the Exodus. (2) The covenant forms the context of law-keeping. In other words, Israel is bound to keep the law not in order to earn salvation, but in order to maintain her side of the covenant bond. Thus, the stress falls not on legalism but on fidelity to the covenant (a point made earlier by Moore and others) and preservation of the community.⁶ (3) Sanders, therefore, epitomizes his understanding of Jewish religion with the phrases “getting in” and “staying in.” One “gets in” the covenant by being born into the Jewish community, which was formed in the first place by the electing grace of God. One “stays in” the covenant by keeping the law, not perfectly and certainly not for the purpose of establishing a claim on God, but out of a sincere intention to remain loyal to the God of grace. And if one sinned, God has provided the sacrifices to atone for sin and restore one to his standing within the community. I must say that I have found nothing in this work that places this covenantal nomistic understanding of Judaism in jeopardy. In one place, Elliot maintains that the *Psalms of*

Solomon are “fundamentally legalistic” (p. 184). However, he simply asserts this with no documentation.

This is a book decidedly for the specialist. Massive in proportions, it argues its thesis technically and in great detail. However, a study of this volume will give one a greater appreciation of the New Testament in its historical context and bring one up to speed on the debates that still rage concerning the character of Second Temple Judaism.

If I may venture one application of Elliot’s work, apparently overlooked by him, Romans 9-11 takes up the very issue of the remnant of Israel. If Elliot is correct, then Paul is seen arguing against all the sects of the Judaism of this period. In other words, whereas each sect maintained that it constituted the “Survivors of Israel,” Paul asserts that the church of Christ and it alone comprises the true remnant. In Paul’s day, this would have been a radical thesis indeed!

¹E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977). For examples, see my ‘*The Obedience of Faith*’: *A Pauline Phrase in Historical Context* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/38; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1991), 263-64. I would call attention in particular to J. H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha and the New Testament. Prolegomena for the Study of Christian Origins* (Society of New Testament Studies Monograph Series 54; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 50-55.

²G. F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim* (3 vols.; Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 1927), 1.125-32.

³*Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 9-10; “Patterns of Religion in Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: A Holistic Method of Comparison,” *Harvard Theological Review* 66 (1973), 455-78.

⁴J. Bonsirven, *Palestinian Judaism in the Time of Jesus Christ* (New York: Rinehart and Winston, 1964), vi.

⁵S. Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Judaism* (New York: MacMillan, 1909), xvii-xviii; K. Köhler, *Jewish Theology* (London: Lutterworth, 1928), 15; J. D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (London/Philadelphia: SCM/Trinity Press International, 1991), 18-35. Dunn identifies four “Pillars” of the Judaism of this period: Monotheism: God is one; Election: a covenant people and a promised land; Covenant focused in the Torah; Land Focused in Temple. Elliot unfairly characterizes Dunn as a New Testament scholar who merely consults experts in the Jewish sources. In point of fact, Dunn is equally qualified as a specialist in pre-destruction Judaism as in New Testament.

⁶Developed in the “pre-Sanders” era by Meinrad Limbeck, *Die Ordnung des Heils. Untersuchungen zum Gesetzesverständnis des Frühjudentums* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1971).