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JEWS IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

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The use made of Old Testament imagery in the Book of Revelation has received much attention, but little study has been devoted to the direct reference to Jews in 2.9 and 3.9. This article finds clues to John's invective in literary sources and archaeological inscriptions. We see Judaism not as monolithic but as heterogeneous and influenced by extraneous cultural influences. John believed the Jews with whom he had contact to be in danger of losing their distinctive character. This accords with the widely-held view that John's message to the churches arises from his fear of their accommodation to the prevailing culture.

Introduction

The influence of Judaism on the Book of Revelation has long been recognised and work done on the images and symbols drawn from Judaism has done much to open up the meaning of the book. However, the direct reference to Jews in 2.9 and 3.9 has received rather less attention.

To the church at Smyrna, I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan (2.9).

To the church at Philadelphia, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but are lying - I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you (3.9).

These twin texts have been taken as evidence of an implacable conflict between Christians and Jews. It is linked with the view of

Jews in the fourth gospel and in the case of Revelation is widely believed to have been exacerbated by Jews informing on Christians to the Roman authorities. This article will attempt to show that the attack on the Jews in Rev.2.9 and 3.9 reflects a danger faced by both Judaism and Christianity in Asia Minor at the time of writing.

The Literary Context

The genre of the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3 is composite, but its prophetic character predominates. This is clear from the use of the formula “thus says” (*tade legei*) (2.1, 8, etc), which is equivalent to the Old Testament formula used for prophetic proclamations. But this formula has been shown by Aune to have also been used in royal and imperial edicts issued by Persian kings and Roman magistrates and emperors.¹

The first part of the edict is the *praescriptio* or introduction, which states the authority behind the edict. The *narratio* of the edict contains information. Next is the *dispositio* or exhortation/ threat. Finally, we have the *sanctio*, the conditional promise of victory. This structure can be seen in each of the seven letters (cf., e.g. 2.18, 19-21, 22-25, 26-28). Such an interpretation of the letters resonates with the message of Revelation as a whole: John’s aim is to assert the sovereignty of God and polarise God and the emperor. Thus the letters introduce Jesus as the all-powerful Lord “from whose mouth comes a sharp, two-edged sword” (1.16). He is presented as the one who solemnly and authoritatively issues edicts.²

A further interesting observation is made by Friedrich. He says that John in casting his message in the form of an edict was in fact employing a custom used in contemporary literature by persons who did not execute power but were making a bid to do so.³ Friedrich

¹ D. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, Dallas: Word Books, 1997, 124-9.

² Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 129.

³ N.P.Friedrich, *Adapt or Resist? A Socio-Political Reading of Revelation 2.18-29*, JSNT 25 (2002), 187-8.

draws on Margareta Benner who shows that in the years between the fall of Nero and the rise of Vespasian these promulgations were an important means of contestation.⁴ She says:

They (the edicts) were issued by persons of important political standing: emperors, governors, etc., and were sent and posted up all over the empire, declaring the political standpoint of the personage who issued them, informing the inhabitants, influencing public opinion, and recruiting followers.⁵

Hence John in declaring that it is “the Son of God” who addresses the church at Thyatira (2.18) may well be attacking the claims made by the emperor. Roman emperors characteristically claimed that they were “sons of god.”⁶ Right at the outset of his work John engages in polemic against the fraudulent claims being made by Caesar, asserting that the one who speaks and exercises power is not the emperor but the one who rules the kings of the earth.

The Imperial Rule Challenged

The attack on the imperial ruler launched by John in the letters introduces us immediately to the main part of the book (4-22). The opening vision of God enthroned in glory and worshipped by all is a subtle condemnation of the rule of the emperor (4.1-11). The idolatry and oppression that was part and parcel of Roman rule is exposed and condemned in the succeeding visions. Those in authority are deceived by the peace and prosperity they enjoy (12.9; 13.14; 19.20; 20.3). Intertwined with John’s criticism of Rome’s idolatry and oppression is his exposé of the economic order. All

⁴ M. Benner, *The Emperor Says: Studies in Rhetorical Style in Edicts of the Early Empire*, Gothenburg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1975.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 141, quoted by Friedrich, 188.

⁶ C.J.Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in their Local Setting*, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986, 116; Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 201-2; Friedrich, 187-8.

who buy and sell bear the stamp of the Beast (13.16-17). As Knight writes,

This explains the extended description of the goods that can no longer be sold when Babylon falls (18.11-13). This catastrophe causes the merchants (18.15) and the shipmasters and seafarers (18.17) to regret the city's demise. The description of the fall of Babylon is a symbolic rejection of Rome's attraction for those who benefited from supplying her with goods. That probably included some of John's Asian readers, so that the criticism has a cutting edge for those who perceive its meaning.⁷

The letters to the seven churches show John attacking idolatry not only in the state but also in the church. A church leader whom he denigrates as Jezebel is severely criticized. Jezebel is guilty of "teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols" (2.20). This charge is virtually identical to the false teaching of the Balaam party and the Nicolaitans in Pergamum (2.14-15), which means that all three very likely were harming the churches with the same teaching. The substance of their teaching can be inferred from the use of the term Jezebel since Jezebel in 1 Kings incited king Ahab and Israel to compromise and "fornicate" by worshipping Baal (16.31; 21.25; LXX 4 Kgdms 8.18; 9.22). Jezebel apparently led a group which defended participation in idolatrous aspects of the local culture, i.e. it advocated a more accommodating attitude toward mainstream culture. Moreover, since Thyatira was the centre of numerous prosperous trade guilds we can safely infer that Christian guild members would be expected to honour the emperor.⁸ This also explains John's reference to the eating of food offered to idols. What John faced was the distressing fact that idolatry pervaded not only the political and economic life of the empire but the church itself.

⁷ J.Knight, *Revelation*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999, 26.

⁸ Cf. e.g. Beale, 261; J.N.Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John's Apocalypse*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996, 110-13, 117.

For John compromise between God and Caesar and church and world was right out of question. It is in this context, I suggest, we should understand John's attack on the Jews in 2.9 and 3.9.

In responding to the theological challenge confronting him John set out to make clear the true nature of Christian faith and discipleship and to reinforce the boundaries which marked the church off from the world.

Those Who Say They Are Jews And Are Not

Support for the view that those whom John regarded as false Jews were Jews who informed on Christians to the Roman magistrate has been found by commentators in the part played by Jews in the death of Polycarp as reported in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. In this document Jews denounce Polycarp publicly (12.2-3), demand his execution (13.1) and attempt to prevent his friends from retrieving his body (17.2; 18.1). But this writing is regarded as an historically tendentious attempt to copy the gospel story of the death of Jesus. Much the same is said about the strong anti-Jewish sentiment in Justin Martyr, Eusebius and other early Christian writers, if not the New Testament gospels themselves. The emphasis on Jewish opposition to Christians in literature of the period is believed to be in part a theological convention in Christian apologetics that required little if any hard evidence.⁹

A related view takes John's words as his reaction to Christians being excluded from the synagogue. This is connected with the *birkath ha' minim*, the so-called Test Benediction which was added to the *Prayer of XVIII Benedictions*, recited daily in the synagogue. It ran, "Let Christians and *minim* (heretics) perish in a moment. Let them be blotted out of the book of the living and let them not be written with the righteous". This cannot be regarded as a

⁹ D.R.A. Hare, *The Theme of Jewish Persecution of Christians in the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, SNTSMS 6 CUP, 1967; Auwe, *Revelation 1-5*, 162-3.

satisfactory view because conflict with Judaism is not present in Revelation generally.

An alternative interpretation is offered by Kraft. He believes that those whom John had in mind were Christians who deserted the churches and sought refuge in the synagogue in order to avoid persecution.¹⁰ This is possible, but there is no evidence in Revelation to support it.

A variant of this is the suggestion of Knight that the “false Jews” are Christians who engage in practices such as social relations with the outside community which John condemns.¹¹ In this case, those in mind are similar to Jezebel and the others attacked. John does speak of “false apostles” (2.2), but to describe Christians as those who claim to be Jews seems very unlikely.

A not dissimilar interpretation is that which sees “those who say they are Jews and are not” as Judaizing Christians. Support for this is found in the letters of Ignatius, which indicate that Judaizers were a still a problem after John wrote (*Mag.8.10; Phil.6.1; 8.2*). However, there is no indication that this kind of opposition was experienced by John’s churches (2.10,13; 3.10).

A quite different view is taken by Marshall.¹² He maintains that Revelation is a Jewish work, “a parable on the historical situation of Asian Jews during the Judean war.”¹³ Marshall argues that John’s aim was to support the hard-pressed Jews of Palestine by drumming up support among the Jews of Asia Minor. In some ways, Marshall’s arguments resemble Christian interpretations of the

¹⁰ H. Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, HNT 16a, Tübingen: J.C.B.Mohr, 1974, 61.

¹¹ Knight, *op.cit.*, 45,54.

¹² J.W.Marshall, *Parables of War: Reading John's Jewish Apocalypse*, Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2001.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 141.

book. Rome is the enemy. The Lamb is the messianic leader of the faithful. The faithful are charged to keep the “commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus” (12.17). The problem, according to Marshall, is a fifth column within the synagogue - those Jews who are guilty of accommodation with Rome and indulge in syncretistic practices. John writes “to move them to resist the temptations of the Greco-Roman complex” and to “trust God through his lamb.”¹⁴ Although Marshall’s thesis is a *tour de force*, his view that “those who say they are Jews and are not” are Jews who have made accommodations with pagan society suggests an interesting line of enquiry.

A similar view was suggested by Tarn as early as 1927. He opined that the offence which those whom John refers to as Jews was their syncretistic tendencies.¹⁵ This view is tentatively entertained by Ford.¹⁶ Commenting on the “synagogue of Satan”, Ford says, “this is especially possible as the altar of Zeus at Pergamum is referred to... as “Satan’s seat.”¹⁷ Since syncretistic practices are widely believed by scholars to be the basic problem represented by the Nicolaitans and the others condemned in Revelation 2 this interpretation deserves attention.

It is time to look at what we may learn from the sources about the Jews of Asia Minor at the beginning of the Christian era.

Jews And Asia Minor Culture

The evidence from literary sources and from archaeological inscriptions provides valuable information on Jewish communities

¹⁴ Marshall, *op.cit.*, 182.

¹⁵ W.W.Tarn and G.T. Griffith, *Hellenistic Civilization*, 3rd Edition, London: Edward Arnold, 1927, 225. See also W.O. E. Oesterley, *A History of Israel*, Vol. 2, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932, 424).

¹⁶ J.M. Ford, *Revelation*, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1975, 393.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 393.

at the beginning of the period in question. Josephus has preserved a letter from Antiochus III to his viceroy Zeuxis, governor of Lydia, giving instructions concerning two thousand Jewish families who had been moved from Mesopotamia to Phrygia (*Ant.* 12.148-53). He speaks of large and influential Jewish communities (14.259-61; 16.171,235). From Philo we learn that "the Jews were numerous in every city of Asia" (*Leg.*245). Inscriptions also testify to active Jewish communities in many places.¹⁸ This is borne out by the Book of Acts (13.14; 14.1; 16.13; 18.19,26; 19.8).

The synagogue at Sardis is a good illustration of the size, wealth and influence of some Asia Minor communities.¹⁹ Other Jewish communities were obviously prosperous. The Jews of Pergamum had twenty pounds of gold for Jerusalem taken from them by the predatory Roman governor (Cicero, *Pro Flacco* 28.66-69). Similarly, the Jews of Cos had a large sum of money confiscated by Mithridates of Pontus (*Ant.* 14.111-13).²⁰

Recent studies of Asia Minor Judaism by Trebilco and Barclay have emphasized the extent to which Jews were integrated into the life of their cities. They served in commercial, social, municipal and imperial offices and would have been familiar with the all-

¹⁸ *Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum*, vol 1, 1936, ed. J.B.Frey, 738, 741,748, 756, 766, 774.

¹⁹ A.T.Kraabel, "The Impact of the Discovery of the Sardis Synagogue," *Sardis from Prehistoric to Roman Times*, ed. G.M.A. Hanfmann, Cambridge: Harvard, 1983; P.R.Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor*, Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1991, 37-54.

²⁰ On Jews generally in Asia Minor see Cicero, *pro Flacco* 28.66-69; Rev.3.15-22; D. Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor to the End of the Third Century After Christ*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950, 469 - 74; S. Applebaum, "The Social and Economic Status of the Jews in the Diaspora," *The Jewish People in the First Century* *Compendia Rerum Judaicarum ad Novum Testamentum* I, ed. S.Safrai and M.Stern, Assen/Amsterdam: van Gorcum, 1976, 701-27; Hemer, *Op.cit.*,182-3; G.K.Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, Grand Rapids and Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans and Paternoster Press, 1999, 287.

pervasiveness of pagan cults.²¹ The cults undoubtedly affected Jews who found themselves increasingly integrated into social and political life.²² In his study of the different levels or degrees of the assimilation of Jews into pagan society Barclay lists participation in non-Jewish cults as the chief influence.²³ Trebilco believes that while some communities were discerning and careful in regard to pagan society and its institutions others were not and adopted a relaxed attitude. The Mishnah tractate *Abodah Zarah* forbade Jews from doing business with Gentiles for three days before a pagan festival (1.1), but, as Trebilco points out, it is clear that this ruling was not known or not observed in Jewish communities of Asia Minor²⁴

Just how relaxed some Jews were in regard to non-Jewish culture is clear from the important synagogue in Acmonia. An inscription refers to a woman, Julia Severa, who built the synagogue during the reign of Nero.²⁵ Although Ramsay believed the lady in question was a Jewess²⁶ and Barclay has reopened the question of her identity,²⁷ it seems clear that she was a priestess of the imperial cult. Her first husband, Servenius Capito, belonged to a Roman family of much distinction. It is remarkable that the fact that she

²¹ P.R.Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 173-85; J.M.G.Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1996, 259-81.

²² See e.g. A.T. Kraabel, "Paganism and Judiasm - the Sardis Evidence", *Paganisme, Judaïsme, Christianisme*, A.Benoit, M.Philonenko, C. Vogel, ed., Paris: Boccard, 1978, 13-33.

²³ Ibid. 320-26.

²⁴ Ibid. 31, 180-1.

²⁵ Trebilco, 58-84.

²⁶ A.M.Ramsay, *Cities and Bishoprics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897, 639, 650-1,673.

²⁷ Barclay, 280 n 5.

functioned as high priestess (ἀρχιέρα) of the imperial cult at Acmonia and was president of the athletic games²⁸ did not stop the Jews of Acmonia from accepting her gift or recording it for posterity.²⁹ It is evidence that diaspora Judaism was much more diverse than was generally recognised.

It is germane to this stage of our enquiry to note that syncretism was a feature of worship generally in Asia Minor. The imperial cult was often influenced by local cults. Price and Friesen give numerous examples of sacrifices that were offered to both the emperor and the Greek deity.³⁰ In some instances the imperial cult activities were simply incorporated into an existing temple. Thus at Pergamum worship was offered both to Julia (Livilla) sister of emperor Claudius and to Athena. In another inscription from Pergamum we find the *sebatoi* (probably Augustus and Livia) are assimilated into the worship of the local deity Asklepios. At Ephesus the imperial cult was conjoined to the worship of Demeter.³¹ In the friezes of the temple complex of Aphrodisias victorious Roman emperors are portrayed as Olympian gods and Aphrodite and Asklepios fit into the imperial cult with no sense of incongruity. It is Friesen's opinion that "the practice of joint worship - incorporating imperial worship and the cult of another deity - was widespread".³² He believes that municipal cults tended to focus on local deities more than upon the emperor.³³

²⁸ Trebilco, 58-60.

²⁹ Trebilco, 60.

³⁰ S.R.F. Price, *Rituals and Power. The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor*, Cambridge University Press, 1984; S.J.Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John*, Oxford University Press, 2001, 77-95.

³¹ Friesen, 62-63.

³² *Op.cit.*, 75.

³³ *Op.cit.*, 77-103.

Thus the Beast of the earth of Rev. 13. 11 -12, which is widely regarded by commentators as referring to the local magistrate or some other representative of the emperor, may very well have been the local priest of a Greek shrine. "For the most part, the emperor in the imperial cult was subordinated to the gods, so that the imperial cult could be assimilated to the cult of the gods".³⁴ Price has shown that the difficulties experienced by early Christians "lay firstly with their threat to traditional cults in general and only secondarily with an allegedly subversive attitude to the emperor."³⁵ Price cites only four instances where Christians were asked to sacrifice to the emperor. The challenge they faced came firstly from traditional cults.³⁶

Evidence From Magical Texts

That non-rabbinic Judaism was not monochrome in character but often multifarious is still clearer when we consider the evidence of the so-called magical texts. As these texts become more familiar they are casting useful light on Judaism and Christianity.³⁷

Trebilco describes the inscriptions from Acmonia which record curses used to protect tombs against violation. These cite for their authority the curses in the book of Deuteronomy (27.15-28.68). They are evidence of the widespread violation of tombs in Phrygia and elsewhere in Asia Minor. Kraabel believed that in some of the

³⁴ L.L.Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, 164.

³⁵ *Op. cit.*, 125.

³⁶ *Op. cit.*, 125; Thompson, 164.

³⁷ On the significance of the Greek magical papyri see H.D.Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986. On the Jewish magical texts see below.

inscriptions the Old Testament is used as a magic book,³⁸ but Trebilco rejects this possibility, while acknowledging that “there was considerable Jewish involvement in magic in this period.”³⁹

The book of Tobit has a remarkably detailed story of Jewish magic. It tells how Tobit on the advice of the angel Raphael expelled the demon that spoiled his wedding night. It is a story that, in the opinion of Alexander, “must surely reflect actually, contemporary, magical practice”.⁴⁰

In the New Testament the Book of Acts has several references to Jewish magicians (8.9-24; 13.6-11) and what it says about magical practices at Ephesus (19.19) indicates the city’s renown as a centre of magic arts. This is reflected in the use of the term “Ephesian writings” (ἑφεσίων γράμματα) for such magical scrolls (Anaxilas, quoted by Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* xii, 548c; Plutarch, *Convivial Questions*, 706e; Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* v. 8.45.2) and in the magical apparatus discovered at Ephesus.⁴¹ The Book of Revelation is believed to make use of magical motifs.⁴² In particular, the woman clothed with the sun and who wears a crown of twelve stars (12.1) has been taken by a number of scholars to be a

³⁸ A.T. Kraabel, *Judaism in Western Asia Minor under the Roman Empire with a Preliminary Study of the Jewish Community at Sardis*, D.Th. Thesis, Harvard University, Mass., 1968, 82.

³⁹ *Op. Cit.*, 66-9 and n 32.

⁴⁰ P. Alexander, “Incantations and Books of Magic, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, E Schürer, revised and edited by G.Vermes, F.Miller and M.Goodman, Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, III.1, 1986, 342.

⁴¹ A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1927, 263-4; R. Wünsch, ed., *Antikes Zaubergefäß aus Pergamon*, *Jahrbuch des Kaiserlich Deutschen Archäologischen Institutes*, 6th Ergänzungsheft, Berlin, 1905, 35-36.

⁴² D.E.Aune, “The Apocalypse of John and Graeco-Roman Revelatory Magic,” *NTS*, 33 (1987), 481-501; Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 57.

reference to the zodiac.⁴³ Similarly, the twelve-fold heavenly city has been seen to allude to the zodiac.⁴⁴ But the strongly Jewish character of the context and John's frequent use of the number twelve for the people of God makes this somewhat uncertain.⁴⁵

Best known of the magical texts is the *Testament of Solomon*. This writing describes how Solomon, using a magic ring given to him by the archangel Michael, summoned various demons and compelled them to help him in the building of the temple. The tract is strongly astrological in structure and content. Both men and demons "reside" in a star (a sign of the zodiac) and, as McCown says, "mortals seem to be particularly liable to injury from demons who are associated with them, that is, belong to the same star."⁴⁶

What is considered the most important early Jewish work of astrology is the treatise known as *Sefer ha-Razim* or "The Book of Secrets." Of particular interest is the prayer to Helios. This remarkable part of the text has surprised and fascinated scholars. It is a Greek prayer, translated into Hebrew. It reads:

Holy Helios who rises in the east, good mariner,

⁴³ R.H.Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, I, Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1920, 316; G.B.Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, London: A&C Black, 1966, 149; D. Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 681.

⁴⁴ A.M.Farrer, *A Rebirth of Images*, London: Dacre Press, 1949, 216-44; cf. *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964, 68; Beale, *op. cit.*, 626-7.

⁴⁵ Knight, *op cit.*, 91.

⁴⁶ C. C. McCown, *The Testament of Solomon*, Leipzig: J.C. Hinrich, 1922, 46. Cf. Alexander, "Incantations and Books of Magic," 37. On the astrological and magical traditions that grew around the figure of Solomon see P.A. Torijano, *Solomon the Esoteric King: From King to Magus, the Development of a Tradition*, Leiden, etc.: Brill, 2002. This book is a good illustration of the highly syncretistic character of magical material. Jewish, Hellenistic and Egyptian traditions are all interwoven.

trustworthy leader of the sun's rays, reliable (witness),
who of old didst establish the mighty wheel (of the
heavens),
holy orderer, ruler of the axis (of the heaven), Lord,
Brilliant Leader,
King, Soldier. I, N son of N, present my supplication
before you,
that you will appear to me without (causing me) fear,
and you will be revealed to me without causing me terror,
and you will conceal nothing from me
and will tell me truthfully all that I desire (4.61-63).⁴⁷

Morgan writes "we can sense the tensions between a developing orthodoxy and the popular religion here. *Sefer ha-Razim* is a fine example of the syncretistic nature of the Hellenistic world."⁴⁸ In similar vein, Alexander says that this text "contains many surprises which raise acutely the question of its orthodoxy...Doubtless, some early rabbinic authorities would have condemned the subject-matter of ShR as *minut*, that there is good evidence to suggest that such material circulated at the very heart of rabbinic society."⁴⁹

Further evidence of the syncretistic tendencies within Judaism is its interest in astrology. The Sibylline Oracles denounce astrology (3.18-36), but I Enoch, while referring to astrology as godlessness (8.3), uses zodiacal ideas. It calls the twelve signs of the zodiac "portals" in which the sun and moon rise and set (72.1-27) and says that the sun in his chariot is driven by the wind (72.4-5), an obvious reference to Helios. II Enoch has the sun moving according to each of the twelve animals of the zodiac (30.3). The *Treatise of Shem* in fact encourages astrology. Charlesworth believes that this largely unknown text was composed in Aramaic in Alexandria towards the

⁴⁷ Michael A. Morgan, *Sepher Ha-Razim: The Book of Mysteries*, Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1983, 71.

⁴⁸ *Op cit.*, 11.

⁴⁹ Alexander, "Incantations and Books of Magic", 349.

end of the first century BC. It has twelve chapters, one for each of the signs of the zodiac. It gives predictions regarding crops, political events, personal health and the climate based on the particular sign of the zodiac in question. The text exhibits a strong astrological fatalism.⁵⁰

In Palestinian Judaism the presence of astrology and magical practices in the Qumran texts is a particularly good illustration in the way in which Judaism was penetrated by outside influences.⁵¹ The zodiac was used in their calendars and priestly rosters (4Q Astronomical Enoch (4Q 209) Frag.23; 4Q 210, frag 1). The Essenes, Josephus tells us, “undertake to foretell things to come by reading holy books ... and it is seldom that they miss in their predictions” (*Wars* 2.159). Although the Jews of Qumran were familiar with the Biblical prohibitions against magic (11 Q 419; lx. 16-21; cf. Deut. 18.9-14) their writings prove that, in Alexander’s words, “they believed in and practised certain types of magic.”⁵² Josephus again bears witness to the use of magic by the Essenes (*Wars* 2.136).⁵³

The texts that mention the horoscope have created particular interest. They are small fragments and their full significance is still debated. These texts use astrology to determine the character of a person from the colour of his eyes, the shape of his body and so forth. This text is written in code from left to right and uses

⁵⁰ J.H.Charlesworth, “Jewish Astrology in the Talmud, Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls and Early Palestinian Synagogues,” *HTR* 70 (1977), 190-1.

⁵¹ F.G.Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated*, Brill: Leiden, 1994, 441.

⁵² P. Alexander, “Magic and Magical Texts”, *Encyclopaedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. L.H. Schiffman & J.C. van der Kan, vol. 1, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 502.

⁵³ On the Essenes and magical practices see M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, London: SCM, 1974, 240-44.

irregularly letters of the archaic alphabet mixed with Greek characters. The use of code puzzles scholars. Some think the esoteric form of writing emphasises the importance of astrology at Qumran,⁵⁴ but others think it has to do with secrecy and means that the contents of the text were contrary to accepted belief.⁵⁵

Still within Palestinian Judaism, but possibly of particular relevance to the subject under consideration is the zodiac on the floor of synagogues.⁵⁶ What this undoubted symbol of paganism was doing in synagogues has sparked a lively debate. Some scholars think it was a harmless piece of art work. Others think it was intended to signify the universe under God. Still others believe it served as a calendar.⁵⁷ However others see evidence of syncretistic tendencies. Urman and Flesher state that “the discovery of magic texts indicates that the border between orthodox Judaism and magical and astrological practices was somewhat blurred.”⁵⁸ We have to reckon with the fact that Jewish attitudes to the use of pagan symbols changed over time,⁵⁹ but although pressure from Hellenisation eased with the decline of paganism ambivalence over external influences continued. Thus in the Dura synagogue the central image of Helios in the mosaic of the zodiac was replaced by Moses and in the synagogue at Sephoris Helios is

⁵⁴ M. Albani, “Horoscopes,” *Encyclopaedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 371-2,

⁵⁵ Alexander, “Incantations and Book of Magic”, 365.

⁵⁶ Cf.,e.g. D.Urman and P.V.N.Flesher, *Ancient Synagogues: Historical Analysis and Archaeological Discovery*, Leiden: E.J.Brill,1995.

⁵⁷ R . Hachlili, “The Zodiac in Ancient Jewish Art: Representation and Significance,” *BASOR* 228 (1977) 61-77; see the discussion in,e.g, H.Shanks, *Judaism in Stone: The Archeology of Ancient Synagogues*, New York,etc., Harper & Row, 1979, 150-84.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 311.

⁵⁹ L.I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2000, 599 - 600.

substituted by an image of the sun, while in another synagogue the zodiac was covered over by a new flooring.⁶⁰ The same conclusion must be drawn from the Targum of Pseudo-Jonathan to Leviticus 26.1. It reads, "You may set mosaics with pictures and figures into the floor of your synagogues but you may not worship them, for I am the Lord your God".

In the rabbinic writings we find astrological beliefs frequently condemned and rejected, but as Charlesworth says, there are notable exceptions, especially *b. Shabbat* 156.⁶¹ On astrology in rabbinic writings Urbach goes so far as to say that "the actual value of astrology and its reality were beliefs shared by Tannain and Amoraim."⁶²

It is interesting, as Urman and Flesher note, that the zodiac has not been found in churches in Palestine in the early Byzantine period.⁶³ Mosaics abounded in early churches of Palestine. They included representations of birds, animals, plants and of human figures usually depicting saints or benefactors of the church in question. Some of the mosaic designs resemble the zodiac circle with the sun and the moon at the centre and the twelve months of the year depicted by various figures. But the zodiac itself has not been

⁶⁰ E. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1952-68, 12,45,71; L.I. Levine and Z. Weiss, *From Durer to Sephoris: Jewish Art and Society in Late Antiquity* = *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, Supp. Series 40, Portsmouth, R.I., Thomson-Shore, 2000.

⁶¹ Charlesworth, *Op. cit.*, 189-99.

⁶² E.E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, Jerusalem: Magnus, 1975, I, 277.

⁶³ *Op. cit.*, 311; B. Kühnel, "The Synagogue Floor Mosaic in Sepphoris: Between Paganism and Christianity", Levine & Weiss, ed., *op. cit.*, 43.

found.⁶⁴ Hippolytus of Rome says that the apostles took the place of the twelve signs of the zodiac.⁶⁵

Finally, there is the evidence of the little known *Fragments of Artapanus*, preserved by Eusebius (*Praeparatio Evangelica*.18) and believed to come from the second century B.C. We are informed that Abraham taught astrology to Pharaoh (frag.1).⁶⁶ This is developed in *Pseudo-Eupolomus* from the period 100-150BC. It claims that Abraham taught astrology to the Egyptians (Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 9.17.8).⁶⁷

Conclusion

What I have offered is only a glimpse of the fascinating area now opening to us as a result of the work being done by scholars in Judaism researching in the interface between historic belief and paganism of the Greco-Roman period. It demonstrates the heterogeneous character of Judaism of the period and the way in which Jews were influenced by pagan beliefs. Jews like Josephus and Philo apparently had no difficulty in subordinating astrological ideas to their belief in the cosmocrator, but those represented by the *Treatise of Shem* and *Sepher ha-Razim* reveal a world from which God is effectively banished and is in the control of astrological powers and demons.

I want to suggest that it was such syncretism that John was inveighing against in Rev. 2.9 and 3.9. Those whom John criticised

⁶⁴ J.W.Crowfoot, *Early Churches in Palestine*, London: OUP, 1941, 119,127-8, 135-7 and Plate XIX.

⁶⁵ J. Danielou, *Primitive Christian Symbols*, London: Burns and Oates, 1961, 124-35.

⁶⁶ J.H.Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 2,1985, 897.

⁶⁷ Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 880 - 1.

no doubt believed that a more accommodating attitude towards things like sacrificial meat allowed greater freedom in socialising and greater access to employment and public office. But however reasonable the point of view that placed fewer restrictions upon people may have appeared to those John had in mind it was for him a blurring of the difference between faith and paganism that could only invite danger. For him all dalliance with the prevailing culture was quite out of the question. Those who called themselves Jews had forfeited the right to make such a claim. They had become the synagogue of Satan. This is the blasphemy of which John accuses them (3.9), the ultimate sin that puts them in league with the Beast (13.5-6). However harmless magic may have appeared to be in the eyes of some of his Jewish contemporaries it was anathema to John. He did not hesitate to consign those who practised it to the lake of fire (21.8) or to shut them out of the heavenly city (22.15). To quote Aune, "These explicit references...only partially reveal the depth of the struggle which John waged against the widespread beliefs and assumptions of Graeco-Roman magical revelation"⁶⁸

John was not alone in his concern. The author of Colossians was troubled by syncretism. Ignatius urged the Philadelphians to flee from magical arts (vi. 2) and he told the Ephesians that the incarnation of Jesus Christ meant the end of magic (xix.2). How John views the Jews he has in mind is similar to how he views the Balaamites, the Nicolaitans and the followers of Jezebel. In both cases they failed to make the boundaries clear. What John is saying about the Jews in 2.9 and 3.9 is all of a piece with his call to the churches in the main body of his work, "come out of her, my people, so that you take no part in her sins and do not share in her plagues" (18.4). John deals in black and white. There is no in-between. But if John appears to modern readers to be forcing people into a ghetto we have to point out that time and again it was

⁶⁸ D.Aune, "The Apocalypse of John and Graeco-Roman Revelatory Magic," *op.cit.*,494.

by entering the ghetto that Jews and Christians survived. As far as the church is concerned, John's writing marks the beginning of the long battle it was to wage with the prevailing culture. We have to thank him for sharpening the issues so that they are unmistakably clear even if they seem impossibly radical to us today.

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