Shaye J. D. Cohen

From the Maccabees to the Mishnah

3rd edition


John J. Collins

Yale Divinity School

New Haven, Connecticut

Shaye Cohen’s popular introduction to Judaism around the turn of the era first appeared in 1987, the second edition less than a decade ago (2006). The main innovation in the third edition is the addition of a chapter on “the parting of the ways,” which is a revised and shortened form of a 2013 article, “In-Between: Jewish-Christians and the Curse of the Heretics,” which appeared in Partings: How Judaism and Christianity Became Two, edited by Herschel Shanks. Otherwise, Cohen has made only minor changes. He admits in the preface that if he were to write the book anew he would be more careful in his use of the terms “Judaism” and “Christianity” and would speak of “Judeans” rather than “Jews,” especially in the historical survey in chapter 1. In short, this is not a new book but a reissued classic with very modest updating.

The book has eight chapters. The first provides a chronological overview and comments on the issue of unity and diversity. The second, “Jews and Gentiles,” discusses the various Jewish revolts, the impact of Hellenistic culture, hostility and attraction between Jews and gentiles, and the phenomenon of conversion. The third chapter is devoted to the Jewish “Religion,” described primarily in terms of its practices but including a twenty-page discussion of beliefs. The fourth chapter discusses the community and its institutions. The fifth is a substantial discussion of the various sects. Chapter 6 is devoted to the
canonization of scripture. Chapter 7, on the emergence of rabbinic Judaism, was the original conclusion of the book. That place is now taken by the new chapter on "Ways That Parted."

Cohen writes lucidly and resists theological and ideological prejudices. But any book that covers this much material in three hundred pages is, of necessity, terse and selective. Its strength lies in the overview it provides, not in in-depth discussion of particular problems (although the discussion of some issues is quite substantial).

That overview is generally satisfying. One exception is the categorization of the actions of Antiochus Epiphanes as "religious persecution," which seems dated, although in fairness to Cohen the decisive action that sparked the revolt was the suppression of the traditional cult. Cohen notes that Hellenistic Judaism denotes a period rather than a region, since all Judaism was Hellenized to some degree. He firmly rejects any notion of "anti-Semitism" in antiquity but recognizes that there was plenty of "anti-Judaism," as indeed there was plenty of ethnic prejudice against various people. The phenomenon of God-fearers shows that Judaism was visible and open to outsiders and that Judaism and Hellenism were not mutually exclusive categories. Canonization was a process, not an event. Different communities had different canons and viewed their canons differently. Cohen reiterates his well-known thesis on the disappearance of sectarianism after the destruction of the temple. The rabbis were prepared to absorb even the elements that originally opposed them. The benediction against the heretics was directed against "all those who persisted in maintaining a separatist identity in a world without a temple and in a society that was prepared to tolerate disputes" (226). The tolerance of the rabbis evidently had its limits, and it is difficult to shake the suspicion that it is somewhat overrated. The last chapter mounts a vigorous defense of the view "now unaccountably out of fashion, that by the early second century CE Jews (that is, ethnic Jews who do not believe in Christ) and Christians (that is, ethnic gentiles who do believe in Christ) constituted separate communities, each with its own identity, rituals institutions, authority figures, and literature" (254). Granted that there was variety among both Jews and Christians, "there were no mixed communities of Jews and Christians." In light of recent claims about "the ways that never parted," his argument here is both convincing and refreshing.

Fundamental to Cohen’s account of Judaism is his firm view that "the boundary line between Judaism and Polytheism was determined more by Jewish observances than by Jewish theology" (54), in contrast to the typical Christian view that tends to equate religion with faith. Practices, not theology, also determined the boundary lines between the sects. For this reason, the question whether there was a parting of the ways between Jews and Christians is whether they constituted separate communities, with their separate practices. Cohen gives some space to matters of belief and to literature, but the balance of
his book tilts towards the institutions and practices. This is in accordance with his view that Judaism is “what Jews do.”

Cohen’s book remains an ideal textbook for introductory courses on ancient Judaism. It should be supplemented with books on the literature of the period, but it provides the framework within which that literature should be understood.