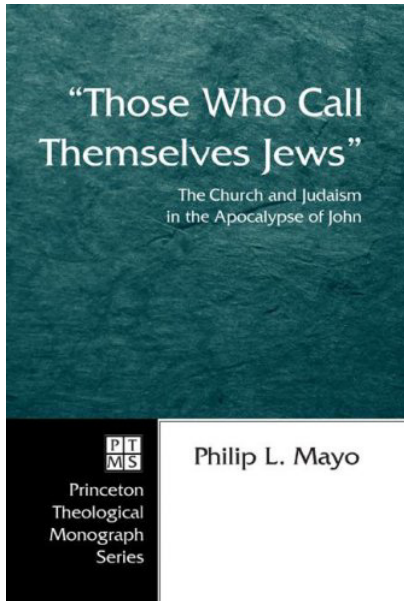


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Mayo, Philip L.

“Those Who Call Themselves Jews”: The Church and Judaism in the Apocalypse of John

Princeton Theological Monograph Series 60

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This work is a (presumably revised) Ph.D. dissertation written for Fuller Theological Seminary under the direction of David M. Scholer. It is thus surprising to see that the endorsing quotation on the back cover of the book comes from the same David Scholer. The author explains (ix) that the dissertation project lasted seven years and that it began “as a vision and a call from God.” He does not make clear, however, whether the vision included the contents of his investigation and his conclusions.

In the introduction (1–26) the author discusses matters of an introductory nature, especially the date of Revelation, and gives an overview of recent scholarly studies of the book. His conclusions about such things as Irenaeus’s witness, the question of a persecution during Domitian’s reign, and reliance on Ezek 40–48 in Rev 11 are entirely reasonable and well within the mainstream of scholarship, and his review of current scholarship, while brief, shows good understanding.

Chapter 1 (27–50) provides “An Overview of Jewish-Christian Relations (70–150).” Here Mayo discusses conflict between early Jewish Christians (whom he calls the Palestinian church [28]) and mainstream Judaism (which he calls “the Jews”); how Christianity developed a self-definition that made it distinct from Judaism; the “persecution” (or, one

might say, punishment) of Christians by Jews; the two Jewish wars against Rome; the question of Judaizing within Christianity and just what that meant; and the development and role of the Birkat Haminim. His language here reveals a perceptual flaw that he fails to overcome, since his thesis, repeated many times throughout the work, is that John (the author of Revelation) thinks of the church as the “new spiritual Israel.” John cannot be anti-Semitic, for he is himself Jewish (*passim*, e.g., 50). That understanding, however, fails to correct Mayo’s language of difference and opposition (e.g., the just-cited Palestinian church versus the Jews). Thus it is not surprising that he rejects all suggestion of anti-Semitism in Acts and accepts Acts as accurate history (34), thus gaining a fairly distorted view of the first Christian generation. Naturally, further, he also takes Paul’s statement in 2 Cor 11:25 that he had once been stoned as evidence for (persistent?) Jewish persecution of the early church, refusing to realize that Paul did not say who stoned him and that, had Paul been on the receiving end of a proper Jewish stoning, he would not have been alive to write about it later. Otherwise, Mayo’s summary of the other topics in this chapter is adequate and reasonable.

Chapter 2 (51–76) takes up John’s charge in Rev 2:9 and 3:9 that there exist in Smyrna and Philadelphia, respectively, synagogues that call themselves Jews but are not. After a review of the alternatives for understanding this strange accusation, Mayo reasonably endorses the majority opinion that the two synagogues in question are Jewish but not Christian. For the latter reason, therefore, they are not true Jews, in John’s opinion. “The ‘true Jews’ for John,” he writes, “are the believers who are suffering on behalf of God and the Lamb” (61). When he then concludes, however (74–75), that “John usurps for the church the Jewish right to be called the people of God and designates the church as the heir of Jewish covenant promise,” he has nuanced the issue in a way that may seem correct to many modern Christians but fails to be true to John’s intent, for John is not, in his own thinking, transferring Jewish heritage onto a new group. That would be what we are wont to call supersessionism, of which Mayo claims John is not guilty (50). Rather, John’s position is that his group is the one in true continuity with Jewish tradition while non-Christian Jews are apostates.

Chapter 3 (77–106) is titled “The 144,000: Israel or Spiritual Israel?” The discussion here, crucial for Mayo’s case, deals entirely with the 12,000 from each of the twelve Israelite tribes who are “sealed” (7:4) or “bought” (i.e., redeemed; 14:3). He discusses the origin of the tribal list in 7:5–8 at considerable length, only to conclude that “the order of John’s tribal list is unlike any other extant list, which implies that the list is probably a result of his own design” (85); then he turns (89–102) to the issue of who the 144,000 are. Ruling out “ethnic Israel” (89–92) and “Christian martyrs” (92–94), he opts for “the church universal” (94–102), that is, “the faithful elect of the church, both Jews and Gentiles” (94). He emphasizes that the 144,000 are redeemed ἀπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων (14:4) and explains

that this “phrase precludes any notion that these are a remnant of Jews or Jewish Christians. They are the eschatological people of God” (96). They are therefore not to be distinguished from the “innumerable multitude before the throne of God” in 7:9–17 (98). Unfortunately, this point, to which Mayo returns again and again, rests on a basic misunderstanding of the Greek text, for ἀπό does not mean “from among” or “from within,” as he understands it. It means “away from.” The parallel phrase at the end of verse 3, redeemed ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς, should have provided a clue to the meaning of the phrase in verse 4, since the redeemed were not component parts of the earth but are rather redeemed away from it: they have not “been polluted with women” (v. 4) and such things. The preposition that would express the idea that Mayo wants would mostly be ἐκ. (John uses the standard Greek παρά + genitive only twice, in 2:27 and 3:18.) The difference can readily be seen in the frequently occurring phrase in Revelation, ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ, “from heaven away from God” or, in other words, “out of heaven sent by God” (e.g., 21:10). This use of ἀπό is originative or generative, but the root meaning of “away from” is maintained. The 144,000 in Revelation are therefore eschatological *Jews*, and they have a special place, if not priority, in the scheme of salvation that John presents.

The next chapter (107–63) presents analyses of later sections of Revelation that support the conclusions that Mayo has reached to this point. These sections are 10:1–11:14 (the narrative of eating the scroll, of measuring the temple, and of the two witnesses and their martyrdom in the city called Sodom and Egypt [11:8]) and 12:1–17 (the vision of the woman clothed in the sun). Much of the discussion here has to do with the sources of the symbolism and with the structure of Revelation, which will be informative to the reader not familiar with the discussion. Mayo’s conclusions, except for his continuing to call the church the “new spiritual Israel,” are reasonable. Thus he explains that the two witnesses are not to be identified with any historical persons but are “a corporate symbol representing the entire community of God” (133) and that the city is Jerusalem. This view of Jerusalem as a locus of hostility to Christianity does not, however, show that Revelation is anti-Semitic, for John is not “rejecting outright all Jews or even Judaism as a religion. He is redrawing the parameters that designate the people of God” (141). Here, incidentally, Mayo gets his language nuanced correctly when he writes that these people of God “are the ‘true Jews’ who are the heirs of God’s covenant promises.” As long as one remembers that those people are both Jews and Gentiles, the statement is correct.

He also finds the woman to be “at once Israel and church” (158), a view in keeping with the fact that “John consistently blurs the line of distinction between Israel and the church” (157). There will probably never be a consensus about what the woman symbolizes, as is the case with much of the symbolism in Revelation, but there is no reason to quarrel at this point with his conclusion. It is consistent with the rest of the monograph.

A final chapter (164–98) argues that the new Jerusalem of 21:1–22:5 is a figure for the eschatological people of God. I remain unconvinced on the basic point here, that “the best interpretation of the vision of the [New Jerusalem] ... is to understand it symbolically as the people of God and not as a place” (176). It seems rather to represent a Jewish hope—Christian-Jewish, to be sure, but Jewish. Mayo has just not let his basic insight of continuity between Judaism and Christianity, in John’s thinking, push out his perspective that Christianity is new and better. For John, Christianity *is* Judaism—the right Judaism.

A conclusion (199–204) summarizing the findings of the monograph ends the work. There is a bibliography but no indexes. In general the work is well written (although there seems to be no rule for where commas go), and it should serve as a good introduction for students to the study of Christianity in tension with Mother Judaism in the first Christian century.