

Reseñas



Del Río Sánchez, Francisco, *Living on Blurred Frontiers: Jewish Devotees of Jesus and Christian Observers of the Law in Palestine, Syria and Mesopotamia (5th-10th Centuries)*. Series Semitica Antiqua, 5. Córdoba: Universidad de Córdoba Press, 2021.

At the end of *Living on Blurred Frontiers*, author Francisco del Río Sánchez quotes the famous psychologist C.G. Jung: “When facts are few, speculations are most likely to represent individual psychology” (147). This challenge of adding concrete data applies to our knowledge of religious people who lived between the boundaries of orthodox Judaism and Christianity. Were these individuals perhaps a type of Jewish Christians? Does that mean Jewish devotees of Jesus or Christian observers of the law? Or were these mainstream Syriac Christians who were simple believers, and who preferred to integrate concepts and rituals from their local (and diverse) religious contexts? Del Río Sánchez seeks to deepen his readers’ understandings of the problem by analyzing seven case studies from the fifth to tenth centuries, where we find mention of individuals and/or groups who do not conform nicely to classical religious boundaries. These texts are extremely varied and have a wide range of origins, dates, languages, genres, and purposes. While this diversity reveals hidden spaces for religious beliefs and practices, it also limits the author’s ability to draw firm conclusions one way or another. But it does demonstrate that a problem exists with fitting groups neatly into religious categories like a heresiography. He acknowledges that the primary sources don’t provide certain factual data but rather “elusive and controversial evidence” (147) that is circumstantial concerning the relations between Jews, Christians, and other possible syncretistic hybrids that existed around the fuzzy margins of orthodoxy.

Del Río Sánchez is well equipped to consider the status of possible Jewish Christian groups, having published two articles related to this book (chapters 1 and 4) and edited the recent fascinating volume *Jewish Christianity and the Origins of Islam* in 2018. In his introduction, he argues that the term “Jewish Christianity” continues “to be useful to refer to the common denominators of an extremely complex religious phenomenon in which we should include the multiple ‘Jewish’ ways of belief and worship that continued to persist thanks to almost two

different circumstances, that is, the evolution of the original Christianity of Jewish origin or the continuous mutual contact between Christians and Jews” (19). The seven case studies examine this persistence via development and engagement between religious individuals during Late Antiquity. Del Río Sánchez outlines two scholarly models for this relationship. While the inheritance model sees Jewish concepts and practices in Eastern Christianity largely as vestiges of the past, he eschews this narrative for “the ways that never parted” popularized by Annette Yoshiko Reed and Adam Becker, in which Jews and Christians continued to mutually interact and develop in conversations that blurred the rhetoric of official imperial theology. Del Río Sánchez rejects the inheritance model and its language of boundaries which he finds mostly textual and rhetorical, improperly applied to realistic approximations of the period. This process of developing orthodoxy resulted in a separatist model that was affixed retrospectively on the past by Jewish and Christian hierarchies. In contrast, we should imagine the Late Antique Middle East as a continuum of religious fuzziness or blurring that existed in the lived experiences of individuals on the ground. These religious encounters described in the miscellaneous texts should make readers more ambivalent about the portrait of a uniform doctrine and practice among all Jews and Christians set up in binary opposition to one another. Here we find instead the “Middle Ground” where there are spaces between Jewish and Christian peoples for encounter. Del Río Sánchez finds mutual contact a fruitful area for analyzing the spaces in between orthodoxies.

Some caveats apply to this approach. First, we do not find an abundance of texts, figures, and groups as to assume that there was something we might associate with a continuous community that might be called Jewish Christianity. Second, these sources are not neutral reports but a subjective selection by del Río Sánchez meant to interrogate his historical question and elicit a particular interpretation. Indeed, the sources themselves cannot tell us for certain whether these were descriptions of actual communities in a middle ground or rather a recollection of the practices of “simple believers” among Jewish and Christian communities (see Jack Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East*, 2018).

The book is structured around seven chapters, each devoted to a primary source from the fifth to tenth century that is presented in the original language along with an English translation. Each subject refers to persons or groups who are described as somewhere on the continuum between Judaism and Christianity. He argues that while we do not know much about these individuals, “their different behaviors occasionally attracted attention and caused surprise or disquiet in their more ‘orthodox’ co-religionists” (25). Before presenting each source, del Río Sánchez analyzes the historiography of the text, the debates over its interpretation and meaning, and sometimes (though not always) offers his own conclusions. The book is a true miscellanea – sources in the book include Greek, Aramaic, Syriac, Latin,

and Arabic. The book does not intend to provide a wholistic analysis of all of the materials together, but rather attempts to link them thematically as instances of religious blurring.

The first chapter examines the *šabtāyē* (*sambatiyānē*, or sabbath keepers), who practiced circumcision, celebrated liturgy on Saturdays, and maintained Jewish practices, such as Passover, according to their critics. Del Río Sánchez argues this group was mistakenly conflated with the Greek Sabbatianoï in sixth-century memory but were a distinct group in the Syriac milieu. The bishop Mārūṭa, who helped the Syriac Church of the East accept the Council of Nicaea at the Synod of Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 410, did not consider them Christians. This fits with del Río Sánchez's thesis nicely, although it would be helpful to include some more historical context alongside the historiographical survey and document under discussion, in order to follow his complex line of argumentation.

The second chapter examines a magic bowl in Jewish Aramaic script that closes with an invocation of Jesus and the Trinity. While other scholars such as Shaul Shaked believe it simply was a case that the scribe, patron, and person upon which the spell was to be cast were different religions, del Río Sánchez argues the magic bowl reveals a space in between conventional religious doctrine, where the spell suggests a confession of faith in Jesus by a Jew who was comfortable with syncretistic formulas that could invoke multiple powers: "By the name of I-am-that-I-am, Yahweh of the armies, and by the name of Išō, who subjugated the height and depth by his cross, and by the name of is exalted Father, and by the name of the Holy Spirit(s) forever and ever. Amen, Amen" (63).

The third chapter recounts the Latin *Itinerarium* (essentially a travelogue) of the Piacenza Pilgrim, which records his visit to the Holy Land in the sixth century. This text provides an in-between space for Hebrews sympathetic to Christianity as described during the pilgrim's visit to Nazareth. There he observes the reputed synagogue where Jesus studied as a child, the basilica built on the Virgin Mary's home, and most importantly, the alleged female descendants of Mary, who are declared to be beautiful Hebrew women. The identity of this group (Jews sympathetic to Christian tourists? Or Jewish Christians?) is not conclusively determined but demonstrates a blurred moment of religious encounter.

The fourth chapter is a piece of question-and-answer material belonging to Jacob of Edessa, who wrote a seventh-century response in Syriac about the legend of Qamšū, a female who disguised herself as a man and became a bishop among the *šabtāyē* during the fourth century. The account reinforces the first chapter's arguments for the continued knowledge of such a group since the late third century. These practitioners in the middle ground between Jews and Christians are ridiculed for letting a woman (posing as a male eunuch) become a teacher in their church. While the first chapter and this one present compelling evidence, readers may wonder if there are more sources to demonstrate greater certainty about these peoples from their own view (and not that of hostile critics like Jacob).

The fifth chapter surveys an eighth-century dispute between Sergius the Stylite and a Jew regarding the status of Jesus as the Son of God. In one argument, the Jewish disputant notes that many Christians in the region of Antioch appear to be linked with local synagogue rituals – attending Jewish services and festivals, offering charitable donations and goods, and other activities. The debate among scholars here as elsewhere, is whether these are middle ground movements (per del Río Sánchez) or simple believers among orthodox Syriac Christian churches who sought out symbolic rituals to which they had local access. For Sergius, these were “weak Christians” and also “children of the Hebrews” (97). But the question remains what exactly the latter reference means and whether these practitioners constituted a distinct Jewish Christian identity.

The sixth chapter reviews *De Locis Sanctis (On the Holy Places)* attributed to Arculf of Gaul and recorded by Adomnán of Iona (d. 704). Del Río Sánchez convincingly demonstrates that the work can reliably reflect the account of Arculf who visited the region and reported this material to Adomnán. It is especially relevant for mentioning a group of “believing Jews,” who may be Christians of Jewish background. It should be noted that this is a western Christian account, and the text is a retelling a story about a certain group in possession of Jesus’ shroud (*sudarium*) and the controversies over who had legitimate rights to it. However, it seems more likely to reflect a Catholic outsider’s attempt to explain intra-Syriac polemics and controversies over the shroud, rather than an in-between group of literal believing Jews.

The seventh chapter examines the catalogue of the Islamic bookseller of Baghdad, Ibn al-Nadīm (compiled 987–988). In his catalogue, he mentions several interesting groups, including the Babylonian baptist movement known as *al-muġtasilah*, who kept purity laws similar to Jews (and of course the Mandaeans). He also mentions an apparently Christian community with Jewish affinities known as the *Asūriyīn*. These are not Assyrians, del Río Sánchez convincingly argues, but the manuscript tradition is marred by variants that make conclusive association of this group and others in the chapter difficult to disentangle. Del Río Sánchez surmises that the name should be linked to the name of one of its leaders, tracing it to the islands of Socotra, which was within the jurisdiction of the Church of the East. He presents later European reports as evidence of encounters with these Christians in Latin, Portuguese, and Italian (unfortunately not translated, 133–134). They indicate these peoples amalgamated Jewish practices into their way of life. Given that Ibn al-Nadīm is writing about ancient groups back to Mani and the attempt to reconstruct these practitioners is supported by medieval Catholic sources, it is difficult to assign much historical certainty to the references. There are problems of textual transmission, authorial knowledge and confusion regarding sources (e.g., the Sabians are misidentified by Ibn al-Nadīm). Nevertheless, the case demonstrates that outsiders observed many practices by other Christian groups and considered those rituals and beliefs to be shaped by the Jewish people around them (and vice versa).

Francisco del Río Sánchez utilizes evidence effectively to show that scholars must now look more closely at the middle ground in between “official” Judaism and Christianity as presented by its leaders in Late Antiquity. These sources demonstrate that religious belief and practice in daily life was far more diverse and fluid than is commonly assumed. In this regard, del Río Sánchez is successful due to his facility in handling a vast corpus of texts, languages, and religious commentaries in order to help point readers to new assessments of belief and practice in the time period. There are a number of minor typographical errors that can be distracting (also read “Gabriel” Said Reynolds for “Edouard” pp. 105, 184). But the book guides the reader through a challenging collection of texts that complicates our understanding of the blurred frontiers between Late Antique Jews and Christians in the Middle East.

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