

FRENCH PERSPECTIVES ON ANCIENT JUDAISM AND
CHRISTIANITY

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It must be stated from the outset that the present issue of Henoch is not thematic in the usual sense of the term. Its topic, "Ancient Judaism and Christianity in their Graeco-Roman Context," is much too broad to be considered a specific theme. It is clear that Ancient Judaism and Christianity, at least from the Hellenistic period onwards, cannot be apprehended apart from their Graeco-Roman environment, be it from a political, economic, cultural or religious point of view. But the implications of this statement are not necessarily perceived in all their nuances. This brings us to a few considerations concerning the history of scholarship, and about the cultural and institutional contexts in which research on ancient Judaism and Christianity is undertaken.

The fact that the editors of Henoch have opted to set up national editorial boards implies an awareness of the existence of different national intellectual or scholarly traditions. As representatives of the French editorial board of Henoch, we would like to say a few words about the peculiarities of French scholarship, which have deep historical roots going back to the time of the French Revolution. Without going into too many historical details, it must be recalled that theology was progressively banished from French public (State) universities, even before the law on the separation between Church and State was passed in 1905. Thus, in 1886 the faculty of Theology at the Sorbonne was replaced by a Department of "religious sciences" ("sciences des religions") within the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (EPHE), which itself had been created in 1868.¹ This Department was inspired by the Dutch and German models (Leiden University, Religionswissenschaft) and had for its main purpose the philological and historical study of ancient texts.

The Catholic Church chose to establish its own universities rather than to maintain Departments of Theology within public ones. As a result, nowadays, there are in France five private Catholic Universities, each including a Faculty of Theology. To these one must add the particular case

¹ On this topic see E. and O. Poulat, "Le développement des sciences religieuses en France," *Archives de sociologie des religions* 21 (1966), pp. 28-36; E. Poulat, "L'institution des 'sciences religieuses'," in *Cent ans de sciences religieuses en France*, ed. J. Baubérot et al. (Paris: Cerf, 1987), pp. 49-78.

of the public Catholic and Protestant faculties of Theology at the University of Strasbourg,² the Reformed-Lutheran Institute of Theology in Paris and Montpellier, two Evangelical Faculties in Vaux-sur-Seine and Aix-en-Provence, and an Orthodox one, the Saint Serge Institute, in Paris. In most of these places, the philological and historical study of biblical and ancient Jewish and Christian texts is now accepted and practiced, even if confessional readings may be considered legitimate. The original division and opposition between theology on the one hand, and religious sciences on the other have grown weaker, so that the line is now partly blurred, although it certainly cannot be said to have completely disappeared.

As far as State academic institutions are concerned, the creation of the Department of Religious Sciences at the EPHE remained a rather isolated phenomenon. Nowadays, research on languages and texts from the ancient Near-East, Judaism, and Christianity is conducted in the framework of the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique), whereas research and teaching in these fields takes place at the EPHE, in a more limited way (as far as Antiquity is concerned) at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, and at the Collège de France. There are still no Departments of Religious Studies in public universities. Departments of History, Classics, and Semitic Languages do sometimes offer courses on cultural and religious issues, depending on the areas of expertise of their teaching faculty. Moreover, religion, especially everything pertaining to the Bible and to Christian theology, has for a long time been considered somewhat of a taboo in the French academic system, a topic that was better left outside of the curriculum.

Until now, it has been common to have courses on Homer in public universities, but not on the Bible.³ The setting up of the Chair of Septuagint and Greek Patristic Literature at the Sorbonne in 1958 (first held by Marguerite Harl) was a significant turning point in this respect: before

² Because of the particular history of Alsace, which was under German sovereignty and jurisdiction from 1871 until 1919, faculties of theology as well as religious ministries (priests, pastors, rabbis, etc.) are still funded by the State until this very day. On this exceptional situation within the French context, see for instance F.X. Cuche, "Quelle place pour une faculté de théologie dans une université de service public française ?," *Revue des sciences religieuses* 78/1 (2004), pp. 67-79. The public University Paul Verlaine in Metz (Lorraine) also has a small Catholic faculty of theology that is part of the Humanities.

³ On this issue see for instance M. Bressolette, "La lecture de la Bible à l'Université: Enjeux et défis," in *Les nouvelles voies de l'exégèse. En lisant le Cantique des Cantiques*, ed. J. Nieuwvarts – P. Debergé (Lectio divina 190; Paris: Cerf, 2002), pp. 57-71; P. Lassave, "La Bible, l'Eglise et l'Université. Une transmission incertaine," in *Catholicisme et modernité* (Paris: EHESS Editions, 2010), forthcoming. I thank Pierre Lassave for sending me a copy of his article before publication.

that, no religious texts were taught in the Department of Classics.⁴ Nowadays the tendency is clearly to develop programs in religious studies in public universities, but so far they consist either of introductory courses or of research seminars for students who have not had the opportunity to follow a systematic training in the relevant fields. Thus, a great deal remains to be done.

Whereas this situation has obvious disadvantages, there is nevertheless at least one positive aspect to it. Since there is no systematic training in religious sciences, except in faculties of Theology, scholars dealing with Ancient Judaism or Christianity who are not theologians have necessarily been thoroughly trained either in History or in Classics, and sometimes in both. Thus, for instance, French Septuagint scholars are generally Classicists, not theologians. Similarly, Philo of Alexandria's work may only be studied in Departments of Classics. This obviously implies that students may lack elements to appreciate Philo's Jewish culture and identity. But it seems to us that French Classicists have contributed in a very special way to Philonic studies. To take another example, the French school of anthropological history (Jean-Pierre Vernant, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, Marcel Detienne, etc.) contributed a lot to the study of religions in Antiquity in general, especially that of Greek and Roman cults.

Beyond their particular topics, the four articles gathered in this issue of *Henoch* all illustrate the importance of putting Judaism and Christianity into their Greco-Roman context. They also illustrate the fact that referring to the Greco-Roman context goes far beyond looking for cultural influences. As a matter of fact, comparisons can be drawn that shed light on phenomena without presupposing influences of any kind.

First, Gilles Dorival proposes a synthetical view of the origins of the Septuagint, underlining its importance for the history of Judaism as well as Christianity. He shows that several aspects of Hellenistic civilization must be taken into consideration when dealing with the motives behind the translation: the cultural policy of the Lagids, their judicial system, the particular status of Alexandrian Jews, the issue of citizenship within this city, the historical reality of the *politeumata*, and the status of translations in Antiquity. After having reviewed the different theories on the origins of the Septuagint since the beginning of the 20th century, and having underlined the importance of the papyri of Herakleopolis, published in 2001 by J.M.S. Cowey and K. Maresch, he concludes that the best explanation is that of Joseph Mélèze-Modrezejewski, who argues that the translation of the Torah into Greek originated in the context of the

⁴ See M. Harl, *La Bible en Sorbonne ou la revanche d'Erasmus* (Paris: Cerf, 2004). However, in 1945 H.-I. Marrou had been appointed to the chair in history of religions at the Sorbonne, and he taught history of Ancient Christianity.

judiciary reform of 275 BCE, and was meant to integrate the Mosaic laws among the *nomoi politikoi* of Ptolemaic Egypt.⁵

Marie-Françoise Baslez, who recently published a whole book on persecutions in Antiquity and the correlated notions of victims, heroes and martyrs,⁶ addresses the issue of Jewish martyrdom in the Hellenistic context. She builds upon pioneering works like that of Jean-Pierre Vernant, who showed in an article entitled “*La belle mort et le cadavre outragé*”⁷ (“Noble Death and Injured Bodies”) that in Homeric epic, noble death is the death of the young warrior whose physical beauty is preserved even after he has succumbed, and reveals his glorious fate, his immortality through glory. Conversely, when the body of the enemy is mutilated and disfigured, it is in order to deprive the enemy of his glory, of his noble death, condemning him to be forgotten by human beings. Marie-Françoise Baslez argues that in 2 and 4 Maccabees, the awful death of the Jewish martyrs, described in gruesome details in both works, is nevertheless presented as a noble death, according to a reverse anthropological model. The very fact that Eleazar and the seven brothers endure the tortures and mutilations inflicted upon their bodies without renouncing their faith qualifies them as heroes, renders their names worthy of eternal memory, and grants them eternal life in a resurrected, glorious body (especially in 2 Maccabees). Thus, a new anthropology of the human body developed in Judaism in response to the Hellenistic environment.

In a completely different field, that of ancient philosophy, Carlos Lévy’s article deals with two fundamental Stoic notions pertaining to the theory of knowledge, *sunkatathesis* (assent) and *katalêpsis* (comprehension), and the way these were understood by Cicero and Philo. There are many reasons to study Cicero and Philo jointly.⁸ First, they are both important sources for the history of Hellenistic philosophy up to the beginning of the Roman

⁵ In this context, one must stress the importance of papyrology for the study of the Septuagint, and refer to the new annotated translation of 3 *Maccabees* by Joseph Mëlèze-Modrzejewski in the collection *La Bible d’Alexandrie. 15/3. Troisième Livre des Maccabées* (Paris, Cerf, 2008), which contains a detailed introduction illustrating how papyri contribute to our understanding of the apparently fanciful story told in 3 *Maccabees*, and also help in translating certain technical terms.

⁶ *Les persécutions dans l’Antiquité. Victimes, héros, martyrs* (Paris: Fayard, 2007).

⁷ Published in G. Gnoli – J.-P. Vernant (ed.), *Le Mort, les morts dans les sociétés anciennes*, (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 45-76. See also J.-P. Vernant, *La mort héroïque chez les Grecs* (Nantes: Editions Pleins Feux, 2001).

⁸ For previous studies on both Cicero and Philo, see R.A. Horsley, “The Law of Nature in Philo and Cicero,” *HTR* 71/1-2 (1978), pp. 35-59; A. Michel, “A propos du bonheur: pensée latine et tradition philosophique,” *REL* 56 (1978), pp. 349-368; C. Lévy, *Cicero Academicus: recherches sur les Académiques et sur la philosophie cicéronienne* (Collection de l’Ecole Française de Rome 162; Rome: Ecole Française de Rome, 1992); C. Termini, “Taxonomy of Biblical Laws and ‘Philotechnia’ in Philo of Alexandria: A Comparison with Josephus and Cicero,” *SPA* 16 (2004), pp. 1-29; O. Kaiser, *Des Menschen Glück und Gottes Gerechtigkeit: Studien zur biblischen Überlieferung im Kontext hellenistischer Philosophie* (Tria Corda 1; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), pp. 169-230.

period. Second, both Cicero and Philo were non-Greeks, who learned Greek philosophy and responded to it or continued its tradition in a critical way. Third, they can both be considered to have adopted to a great extent the philosophical ideas of the Academy.

Carlos Lévy shows that Philo rejected the Stoic theory of knowledge partly for the same reasons as Cicero, both disagreed with the Stoic idea that there is a harmonious relationship between representations and assent, but each also for reasons of his own. For instance, the Stoic theory was too deterministic in Philo's eyes, and contradicted his conception of God as the ultimate ruler, able to change even the laws of nature in order to do miracles. Moreover, for Philo God could not be an object of *katalêpsis*. Beyond Carlos Lévy's sharp analysis of the Philonic theory of knowledge, this article emphasizes the relevance of the study of the Roman context of Philo – again, not necessarily in terms of influence –, and the necessity to resort to a comparative approach.

Finally, Nicole Belayche's article on "Angeloi in Religious Practices of the Imperial Roman East" reminds us of the methodological danger of looking at pagan cults and pagan religious experience through the lens of Jewish and Christian texts or notions. Angeloi have been wrongly perceived as a case of Oriental influence upon the Greek and Roman world, in particular when the word is translated as "angel." For F. Cumont it all went back to a Zoroastrian influence on Semitic paganism and monotheism (Judaism). Nicole Belayche studies the occurrences of *angeloi* and *theion* in inscriptions from Carian Stratonicea, carefully avoiding analyzing things in terms of influences, and rather trying to look at the whole system of relationships between divine beings in a local polytheistic context.

Belayche focuses on the concrete devotional practices, and questions the idea that *angeloi* are intermediaries between humans and superior beings, who would dwell in a remote sojourn. It seems that in most cases, *angelos* may be the personalization of the manifestation of the god himself, rather than an autonomous deity conveying the message of another deity, as in the case of *Hermes*. It is true that the inscriptions contain a great deal of diversity; but since they reflect the perception of the pious devotees, no systematized or theorized use of the term should be expected. Nicole Belayche's study of the uses of *angeloi* helps to understand how polytheists constructed their representation of the divine realm and understood the actions of the gods.

Through the publication of these contributions, the French Editorial Board intends and hopes to promote a more extensive conversation between the international scholarly community and French scholarship on the Graeco-Roman world.