

Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations

Volume 3, Issue 1

2008

Article 9

FEATURE TOPICS:
THE LAND AND STATE OF ISRAEL
PAUL AND CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS

Jewish and Christian Liturgy and Worship: New Insights into its History and Interaction

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REVIEW

Albert Gerhards and Clemens Leonhard, eds.

***Jewish and Christian Liturgy and Worship:
New Insights into its History and Interaction***

(Jewish and Christian Perspectives, vol. 15; Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), hc, 334 pp.

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Collections of articles by different authors are always qualitatively risky business, doubly so when the articles are the reworked versions of papers delivered at a conference: conferences are by nature hit-or-miss propositions, even when organized around a defined topic. Nonetheless, collections offer the possibility of serendipitously discovering an unfamiliar writer or topic.

The present volume comprises papers delivered at a 2003 symposium in Germany, organized in memory of Jakob Petuchowski, who was of the generation that produced elegant, erudite European Jewish polymaths, who were religiously and secularly highly educated; who were entranced with religious texts and traditions yet open to the world and its intellectual fruits. To study with “The Pet” was to sit at the feet of a master, to be filled with both the desire to emulate and the despair of ever knowing so many languages and so much text. (The brief biography of Pet by Hans Hermann Henrix alone makes this volume worth reading.)

A number of such individuals focused on Jewish liturgy, and it is upon their shoulders that the study of Jewish liturgy has progressed in the immediate generation. As such, this volume represents a second generation of Jewish liturgical studies, dependent upon that fundamental work, but just as often modifying or overturning that earlier work’s conclusions. Likewise, most of the Christian research herein moves beyond foundational work (e.g., of Talley and Taft), representing a second generation in that field, as well.

Pet’s work in liturgy went hand-in-hand with his advocacy of Christian-Jewish dialogue. His commitment to the latter and interest in the former was the organizing principle of the Aachen symposium.

The symposium’s participants were instructed to choose topics of cross-liturgical interest, but not to simplify their presentations. This second specific has a cost: a couple articles are so technical and arcane that one wonders how they were received in the original venue. Similarly this reader speculates just how much one who is not well acquainted with terminology like *k’rovah* and *kinah* would glean from Michael Rand’s otherwise fine article, even with its remarkably clear and concise English introduction to the genre.

Some papers are groundbreaking; one hopes that their appearance here won’t result in the ideas being buried, but instead represents a trial run of a larger project soon-to-appear. Not coincidentally, these overlap with those that demonstrate what the symposium was intended to be – liturgiologists of one tradition daring to step into another, setting the stage for genuine conversation and scholarly fermentation: a fitting tribute to the scholar who served as the impetus for the conference. Outstanding examples are the revisionist articles of Daniel Stokl-Ben Ezra (on Pentecost and Shavu’ot) and Marcel Poorthuis (on the interaction of Psalm exegesis), both of which illustrate how medieval Christianity influenced Judaism (a radical idea

in the world of Jewish scholarship), not only vice versa. Ruth Langer, writing on Jewish liturgical use of biblical text, explicitly invites Christian scholars to respond to her observations regarding that tradition. Wolfram Kinzig explores the function of Christian creed in a fashion that is readily graspable and enlightening to a reader from another tradition. These pieces alone justify the entire volume.

Other pieces lamentably miss the opportunity to make cross-tradition observations. Uri Ehrlich offers amazing evidence for the theological notion that the Jewish forefathers actively entreat God on Israel's behalf and even have a responsibility to do so. This excellent, albeit brief, article overlooks the potential comparison with Orthodoxy's use of icons.

A couple writers rehash already-known material, but this does not necessarily translate into weakness: Stefan Reif provides a good summary of the Genizah's contributions to the study of Jewish liturgy, and while there is no new information, Reif sets the stage for several others who illustrate this importance. For example, Elisabeth Hollander (on piyyut commentary) and Avi Shmidman (comparing prose and poetic versions of Birkat ha-Mazon) would not have been able to make their significant contributions without this treasure trove (not to mention the foundational work of the earlier generation of scholars that Pet represented). However, other articles are merely reiterative, and that fact, along with a sense that this collection serves to illustrate that Jewish and Christian liturgiologists labor as much in isolation from each other as in dialogue, tempers one's enthusiasm for an otherwise excellent volume.

A parting thought: While reading these articles, all originally delivered in 21st-century Germany, in a volume devoted to cross-religious dialogue, one is deafened by the silence of Muslims. Occasional glancing references to Islamic liturgy at best draw attention to this absence and at worst sound like tokenism. Pet died before the bold presence of Islam in Europe and North America was keenly felt, but this reader feels confident in asserting that had he been part of the symposium's planning, the Muslim tradition would have been represented on its own terms, not left to well-meaning Jews and Christians.

On the other hand, Pet would have likely argued that exclusively Jewish-Christian dialogue remains imperative, demonstrated by the recent hubbub over traditional Catholic liturgy; here again lacunae in this collection reveal themselves. Any address of controversial topics is absent, and the Orthodox Christian tradition goes largely unrepresented.

The solution to any mild reservations expressed here about an otherwise important volume is to convene another symposium, equally as exciting as the original must have been, so that the conversation can continue, both in speech and print.