Grabbe, Lester L.

Judaic Religion in the Second Temple Period: Belief and Practice from the Exile to Yavneh


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Grabbe intends Judaic Religion in the Second Temple Period as a companion to his much-appreciated and widely used two-volume work Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian, which appeared in 1992. “The purpose of the present volume is to focus purely on the religious side of Judaism and leave the details of political, social, and economic history to the larger work. This will allow a greater concentration on original sources, a more detailed look at the religious belief and practice, and a chance to update in areas where the earlier work is already becoming dated” (1). With the book he aims “to contribute to the field by presenting an overall synthesis and interpretation, though I hope also to make original contributions in some individual areas as well” (2). He does not explain exactly how he sees Judaic Religion in the Second Temple Period in relation to his 1996 book entitled An Introduction to First Century Judaism: Jewish Religion and History in the Second Temple Period.

In an introductory section he defines the terms in the book title, explains his approach to writing history, and clarifies a few features of the book. The body of the book falls into two large parts, with a short conclusion termed part 3, “Judaism in the Second Temple Period: A Holistic Perspective.” Part 1 is a chronological overview of the texts that supply the pertinent information. In it Grabbe surveys the sources in historical order,
moving from the Persian, through the Greek and early Roman periods, and ending with the “Transition to Rabbinic Judaism: Yavneh.” In each of the six parts into which he divides this section he first describes the major sources and indicates the important religious points expressed in each one. As in Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian, he supplies very helpful bibliographies for each subdivision; much of the bibliography is recent, while he often refers the reader to the earlier work for further references. At the end of each of the six divisions he places a short “synthesis.”

Part 2, “Special Topics,” he arranges in eight sections, with each further subdivided and almost all of the smallest divisions fortified with its own bibliography. The eight sections are: “Temple and Priesthood”; “Scripture, Prayer, and Synagogue”; “Sects and Movements”; “Concepts of the Deity and Spirit World”; “Prophecy, Apocalypticism, the Esoteric Arts, and Predicting the Future”; “Eschatologies and Ideas of Salvation”; “Messiahs”; and “Jews and Judaism in the Hellenistic World.” Each of the eight sections concludes with a synthesis. At the end of the book are a lengthy bibliography (with more complete citation of publication data than in the bibliographies in the body of the text) and three indexes (modern authors, names and subjects, and citations).

The first and most important reaction to the book is one of gratitude to Grabbe for writing another highly useful, learned, and detailed overview of Second Temple phenomena. As in his earlier efforts, he here demonstrates a strong engagement with the primary sources and a remarkable control of secondary literature. He is indeed an impressive guide through a wide range of topics. Judaic Religion in the Second Temple Period should prove to be a rich source of information for readers with a serious interest in the subjects treated; alas, individual scholars who want to purchase a copy will also have to be fairly rich to afford the hefty selling price (US$100!).

It will be noted that Grabbe defines the period he covers in this book slightly differently than he did in Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian, where he included the Bar Kokhba period (something he does to a lesser extent here). Yavneh may be the great dividing point, but the second revolt, if the casualties were as high as the sources say, would have had a larger practical impact than the discussions at Yavneh, whether in the short or long run. But one has to end somewhere, and Yavneh is a defensible point.

Because the book covers so much, it is difficult to know which parts to discuss in a review. The hesitations that I had about it usually involved minor points rather than larger issues of approach and interpretation. On a general level, there could be some quibbling about which articles and books were included in some of the section bibliographies and which were omitted. Grabbe does come close to apologizing for how often he includes his own writings (especially Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian and Priests, Prophets,
Diviners, Sages [1995]), but as he rightly points out he has written on a large number of the subjects treated, and it is convenient to refer to those studies, often for more detail and earlier bibliography. The reader may at times grow weary with being reminded repeatedly about how we do not really know this or that, how complicated the problems are, or how much received wisdom has been disputed by one scholar or another. Perhaps Grabbe could have saved space by stating more generally in the introduction that our sources are quite inadequate for most parts of the Second Temple period, with all the consequences that fact has, and that what is offered here is the reading of one very well informed researcher who is grappling with those inadequate sources.

Grabbe in more than one context raises questions about how much interpretation of authoritative literature there was before and shortly after the exile and about the modern scholarly search in the Second Temple literature for rules of interpretation (see, for example, 166–70). He makes the solid point that such interpretation had to await the rise of authoritative texts and that we rarely know when texts achieved such a status. But our ignorance on that point also makes it unlikely that we can date the rise of interpretation or declare that it did not exist at a certain time. For all we know, it may have begun with some texts as soon as they were written down. Also, the search for rules of interpretation does not appear to be vain, even if one suspects that writers often had first embraced views and then “discovered” them in authoritative texts rather than deriving them from them. Rules could govern such a procedure, just as they are supposed to regulate historical-critical interpretation. Grabbe advances the interesting thesis that Judaism first became a religion of the book in the Diaspora and among the groups that separated themselves from the temple establishment (e.g., 329), but it may be asked whether our meager evidence allows us to say this much.

He devotes a helpful section to various kinds of literature in which writers offer predictions. On his view, apocalyptic (the word he uses) is a subgenre of prophecy, not a separate phenomenon. They do have much in common, but a better way to express their relation might be to say that both are subcategories of a larger entity: communication with and about the beyond. Also, he quotes the shorter form of J. Collins’s definition of apocalypse rather than the later expanded form, which includes a statement of purpose.

While I very much admire what Grabbe has accomplished in the book, I was surprised to read a number of statements in it. These statements are not ones produced by simple misprints (such as Zechariah as governor with Joshua rather than Zerubbabel [16], the mistaken chapter numbers for parts of 1 Enoch [62], or listing just 1QS as the manuscript evidence for the Community Rule [202]) but express his views that are at times repeated in several places. Often they go well beyond our evidence, something he has pledged to avoid. So, for example, it seems inaccurate to speak of three competing foundation
legends in Ezra-Nehemiah, with Sheshbazzar minimized or “cut out” of the story. It is not obvious that they are competing stories, and it is even less clear that Sheshbazzar was treated as charged (the writers may have had no more information about him). Also, Grabbe claims that “the temple personnel were the ones who had the education and leisure for intellectual pursuits and thus constituted the bulk of the educated and those who read, wrote, and commented on religious literature” (136). That may be true, but what do we know about “the bulk of the educated”? Indeed, a comment on page 322 makes it sound as if Grabbe thinks a majority of Jews in the Mediterranean world read Greek by 70 C.E.

There are a few other dubious claims. So, for instance, he thinks that if one accepts the statement about Nehemiah in 2 Macc 2:13–15 a problem arises because “this is clearly a tradition which omits the work of Ezra and thus differs from the present Hebrew canon” (154). He does not point out that the phase “letters of kings about votive offerings” is often understood to include the missive of Ezra 7:12–26. His treatment of textual and “canonical” issues is well informed and balanced, but it is surprising to read that 11QPs⁴ “by and large agrees with the present canonical Hebrew book of Psalms but has an additional five psalms” (154). It has eight additional units and disagrees in numerous other ways (order, division of psalms, wording) from the Masoretic psalter. And students of the great Isaiah scroll may have difficulty with the assertion that it “is basically a MT text-type, despite the impression sometimes given in early studies” (160). It was also jarring to read that the notion that the Sadducees accepted only the Pentateuch as authoritative “is only a deduction from their supposed rejection of beliefs in angels and spirits” (197–98). If they accepted the Pentateuch, they certainly would not have denied the existence of angels. The mistaken view about the Sadducees actually arises from a misreading of Josephus’s statement about the sources they regarded as binding for legal purposes (Ant. 13.297). When Grabbe says of Josephus that “there is no evidence that he was himself ever a member of either movement [Pharisees or Sadducees]” (191), it is difficult to imagine what he has in mind, after he has just adduced Josephus’s own testimony that he followed Pharisaic rules—a statement often understood to mean he considered himself a Pharisee. One may wish to reject Josephus’s autobiographical claim, but it is still evidence. And does Pliny really say there was only one Essene settlement? He describes one but does not touch on whether there were others (see 202). To mention just one more example, it is not correct to say there is no messianic character in the War Scroll, when the Prince of the Congregation seems to be one.

It may be that some of the above examples were cases of careless phrasing. However they are to be explained, they are few, and the book is an excellent one deserving of high commendation.