



Guy G. Stroumsa

The Making of the Abrahamic Religions in Late Antiquity

Oxford Studies in the Abrahamic Religions

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This is a book on the formation of Abrahamic religions, in a series named Studies in the Abrahamic Religions, written by the former Professor of the Study of Abrahamic Religions at Oxford. I detect a theme.

The speed with which the notion of “Abrahamic religions” has permeated scholarly and popular discourse in the last two decades is remarkable. Although the terminology has existed for centuries, the years since the World Trade Center attacks have seen a considerable growth of interest in the concept of Abrahamic religions, in the form of book titles, conferences, professorships, university course catalogs, and, of course, media outlets.¹ The usefulness of the concept for historical study, however, remains an open question. In a recent book entitled *Abrahamic Religions: On the Uses and Abuses of History* (Oxford University Press, 2012), Aaron W. Hughes subjected the concept to a stringent examination. Hughes argued at length that *Abrahamic religions* is a vacuous term more at home in interfaith dialogue than academic inquiry. The critique leveled by

1. See Mark Silk, “The Abrahamic Religions as a Modern Concept,” published in a volume that itself shows the newly achieved normative status of the discourse in the current academic climate: Adam Silverstein and Guy G. Stroumsa, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Abrahamic Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 71–87.

Hughes claims that Abrahamic religions are “a modern projection that we then transcribe onto the historical record” (3). For Hughes, if we wish to study the lives of Christians, Jews, and Muslims in an academically responsible way, a great deal of rethinking must occur:

Our employment of “Abrahamic religions” is not simply a terminological mistake, but primarily a categorical one. Rethinking both the term and category must take the form of developing a new conceptual language that avoids positing discrete religious traditions interacting with and borrowing from one another, and that instead envisages complexity and porosity between manifold and overlapping subgroups within and among “religions.” (3)

This is a demanding agenda indeed. But, in fact, it would be a fitting description of Stroumsa’s new volume. *The Making of the Abrahamic Religions in Late Antiquity* collects and revises material from eleven essays, most of which were published between 2007 and 2015. The resulting book has less in common with the growing literature on Abrahamic religions and seems more a part of a different, though related, scholarly growth industry, namely, the push to view early Islam as a part of the late antique world.² The introduction, aptly titled “From Qumran to Qur’an,” captures the temporal and conceptual spread of the essays gathered here. Stroumsa begins by challenging the traditional view that, over this time period, there was a neat division between monotheism and polytheism. He both surveys recent work on “pagan monotheism” and questions the supposed monotheism of Christians, quoting Origen’s *Dialogue with Heraclides* as “the best proof text in all of Patristic literature showing that the doctrine of the Trinity is inescapably polytheistic” (14). Against this backdrop, Stroumsa suggests (following several scholars of Islam) that the Qur’an’s *mushrikūn*, generally thought to be polytheists, may well have included what we would call monotheists as well.

The body of the book is divided into four parts. Part 1, “Transformations of Religion in Late Antiquity,” consists of two chapters. The first, “The End of Sacrifice,” borrows its title from Stroumsa’s important 2005 book, but the contents of the chapter constitute a focused critique of Karl Jaspers’s notion of the Axial Age as it is employed in Robert Bellah’s monumental *Religion in Human Evolution* (Belknap, 2011). Stroumsa notes that periods aside from the middle of the first millennium BCE also witnessed widespread transformations in human life. He points to the cessation of animal sacrifice and the rise in importance of codified “scriptures” across cultures in the late antique Mediterranean as

2. See, for example, the recent book by Garth Fowden (who, it should probably be pointed out in this context, is the Sultan Qaboos Professor of Abrahamic Faiths at Cambridge), *Before and after Muhammad: The First Millennium Refocused* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

one such period of profound change. From here, Stroumsa moves on to explore “Patterns of Rationalization,” by which he means a broad set of innovations and transformations, ranging from the dualism embraced by gnostic and Manichaean groups as a response to the philosophical problem of evil presented by monotheism, to the establishment of rules of biblical interpretation in the talmudic tractates, and the intellectual efforts of patristic authors to hold together elements of their tradition that appear contradictory.

Part 2, “The True Prophet,” includes three chapters. The first, “False Prophets of Early Christianity,” frames the early Christian reception of Muhammad as a heretic and false prophet in terms of the history of polemic against false prophets, beginning with Deuteronomy and ranging through early Christian literature, but focusing on the Ebionites and Elchasaites, especially that renegade Elchasite, Mani. The next chapter, “False Prophet and False Messiah,” draws out this story further, first by arguing for the continued existence and importance of communities of “Jewish Christians” into the seventh century, then by investigating how the rise of Muhammad fit into various strains of Jewish and Christian eschatological thought. The final chapter in this section, a chronological outlier first published in 1986, is a valuable exploration of the prehistory of the “Seal of the Prophets.” While the designation is most generally associated with its occurrence in the Qur’an and interpreted as meaning that Muhammad was the last in the line of prophets sent by Allah, Arabic sources also describe Mani as the “Seal of the Prophets.” Stroumsa traces changing uses of the term *seal* in the Hebrew Bible, early Christian literature, Mandaean sources, and Manichaean texts.

Two chapters make up part 3, “Religious Communities and God’s Law.” In “Religious Dynamics between Jews and Christians,” Stroumsa begins with the observation that “it was sometimes difficult to distinguish a Christian from a Jew in the late ancient Near East” (103). With that caveat in mind, he goes on to narrate the changing fortunes of Jewish and Christian communities under the shifting imperial structures of the Roman (and later Christian) Empire in the West and the Sassanian (and later Muslim) Empire in the East. The next essay, “God’s Rule in Late Antiquity,” continues this train of thought by problematizing the idea of “theocracy” in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim sources.

Part 4, “The Way to Mecca,” consists of three chapters. In “Jewish-Christians and Islamic Origins,” Stroumsa provides a history of scholarship on the notion of Jewish-Christians and a *status quaestionis* on the question of Jewish and/or Christian influences in the emergence of Islam. The next chapter, “Christian Memories and Dreams of Jerusalem,” focuses on the Temple Mount as a locus for the eschatological hopes of different groups of Christians and Jews. Amidst these competing visions, the Temple Mount becomes, in Stroumsa’s words, “a *Rashomon* of sorts: to each community, it tells its own story” (173). The final chapter in this section, “Barbarians or Heretics?” investigates perceptions of

Jews and Arabs through the complicated lenses of Byzantine identity. The Byzantines were not only both the true Christians and the true Romans; they were also the true Hebrews (*verus Israel*) as well as being linguistically Greek. They thus inherited a variety of “toolkits” for understanding those perceived as “others.” It should not be surprising, then, that in Byzantine eyes “Jews and Arabs retained an unstable status, at once barbarians and heretics, ever on the lines” (188).

The book concludes with a short coda “Envoi: Athens, Jerusalem, Mecca: *Praeparatio coranica*,” in which Stroumsa explicitly deals with late antique debates over who were the true heirs of Abraham. This “Abrahamic moment” was contentious, though less a clash of civilizations than a conflict of interpretations, to use a phrase Stroumsa deploys elsewhere in the work. In addition, the contentiousness of the Abrahamic moment provided its generative power as *praeparatio coranica*: “The Abrahamic moment did less to promote ecumenism than to enhance the rise of heretical movements, each claiming that its own vision was the only correct one” (198).

The book is a pleasure to read. We are able to witness an excellent historian overturn a number of truisms by means of careful examination of a wide array of ancient evidence. Yet, even more old notions could be overturned. For instance, Stroumsa sets the stage for his discussion by offering the apostle Paul as a foil to followers of Jesus who maintained Jewish practices: Paul “gave up ... on the traditional Jewish patterns of behavior” (5). A growing body of scholarship has greatly complicated, if not completely upended, such a view of the apostle.³ Similarly, the discussion of conversion (109) that makes a singular reference to Arthur Darby Nock’s classic 1933 book could be enriched by more recent studies that have challenged Nock’s premises.⁴ But these are rather small matters; what of the larger concerns expressed by Hughes? Does the study of this material under the overarching rubric of Abrahamic religions tend to reduce Islam, Judaism, and Christianity to monolithic wholes? There are some passages in the book that appear liable to that criticism (e.g., 123–24), but such a reading of Stroumsa’s work would be uncharitable. Time and again the book undercuts and complicates those sorts of broad comparisons, and the points where Stroumsa explicitly articulates his theoretical orientation are worth noting. In the course of challenging some of Daniel Boyarin’s claims about Jewish-Christians, Stroumsa offers a statement on methodology:

3. See, for example, Paula Fredriksen, “Judaizing the Nations: The Ritual Demands of Paul’s Gospel,” *NTS* 56 (2010): 232–52; and Stanley K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

4. See Zeba A. Crook, *Reconceptualising Conversion: Patronage, Loyalty, and Conversion in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004).

Suffice it here to say that, in any domain, research demands an intellectual effort to identify common denominators of various phenomena (for instance, multiple religious sects and groups). Such common denominators allow us to retrace central trends underlying the complexity of observable reality. One cannot fulfill this task without creating categories, the primary justification of which is their heuristic usefulness. Gnosticism and Jewish-Christianity are examples of such categories, which cannot be abandoned, although they must be used with care, without forgetting what they are not: a truthful representation of historical reality. (141)

This approach to history seems to me to be the sort of study that Hughes envisions (though I suspect it is also a statement with which Boyarin would agree). The key point is that self-consciousness represented by the words *without forgetting*. It is a reflexivity toward which to strive, even if we all (both as authors and readers) will inevitably fall short.