

**Eric C. Smith**  
***Jewish Glass and Christian Stone:  
A Materialist Mapping of the  
“Parting of the Ways”***

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“Stuff matters,” and when it comes to religion, this “stuff” can often tell us just as much, if not more, than texts, creeds, beliefs, and arguments (p. 1). Eric C. Smith demonstrates this in his study of the emergence of Judaism and Christianity as separate but related (and intertwined) religions. He does this from a materialist perspective, examining some of the material and objects left behind from the formative years in which their religious social systems and identities developed.

The book is comprised of two parts. The first part contains a methodological preface and three chapters that provide an overview of how Jewish and Christian identity has been understood in the past. He also offers a proposal for how to study the “parting of the ways” in materialist terms. The remaining seven chapters present case studies of particular objects (e.g., glass, clay, marble, and papyrus) using different theoretical frameworks, as Smith wrestles with questions raised by a materialist approach to religious identity in this period.

Normally I would not comment on a preface (“Introduction: the Geographies of Identity”). However, Smith, after encouraging scholars to “be honest about who we are” (p. 2), offers a detailed discussion of his Appalachian background and his personal spiritual journey. I found this to be overdone and mostly irrelevant to the academic discussions of the matter at hand. None of his discussion of “objectivity” and “bias” is necessary for a materialist account of formative Judaism and Christianity.

Chapter 1 (“Mountains, Valleys, and Stones”), the first chapter of the overview, builds upon the epitaph of Germanos, a young man who died in 550 CE in Avdat, a town in the Negev, and whose grave inscription had crosses and (possibly) a menorah. These two symbols, together with a seemingly unrelated text from a third-century CE anonymous Christian author who understands Judaism

and Christianity as two mountains separated by a valley, serve as the models for Smith's book. It is the valley, though, as a space where identity is "contested, intersectional and complicated" that is of most interest to the author (p. 7). Chapter 2 ("Mountains: the Construction of World Religions") is about how "world religions" have been formed as scholarly categories, and the role of colonialism and imperialism in their construction. These categories are then used to study ancient Jewish and Christian religious identity. Chapter 3 ("Valleys: Intersectional, Material Antiquity") introduces the author's ingredients of materialism: feminism, critical race theory, intersectionality, and hybridity, as resources for understanding the ways that identity might have been produced. While these, especially hybridity, might be important for a materialist understanding of early Judaism and Christianity, this reviewer was somewhat surprised at what was missing in his study of material culture: social archaeology and anthropology, and even the technology of ancient realia. "Stuff" converses in these languages as well.

Chapter 4 ("Glass: the Identities of Things") begins the case studies. The author considers a gold glass from a Roman catacomb and asks what it means to state that an object or a place is Jewish or Christian. He argues very persuasively against applying the category of syncretism and in favor of hybridity as a better way of understanding identities expressed by things. Chapter 5 ("Clay: The Economics of Belonging") considers two oil lamps and a clay stamp seal, all of which display a juxtaposition of attributes of Judaism and Christianity. The author uses consumer theory to explain the connection of the consumers to the hybrid nature of the objects that they bought, which were likely produced by workers "agnostic about the symbolism" of the objects (p. 83). The hybrid, intersectional nature of the purchased objects represents the hybrid, intersectional religious nature of the purchaser. This seems to make much sense. The author, though, might have been aided by additional evidence available for the study of material culture. For example, we know of manufacturing centers in the Galilee, and the quality and provenance of the products they produced, though this omission does not detract from his basic claim regarding the nature of the objects purchased and their meaning. Chapter 6 ("Marble: Stories in Stone") discusses the famous marble statues of Jonah depicting him in various poses, some with Christian overtones. These are not the types of postures we would expect in light of the themes in the biblical book. The author uses these figures to examine how narrative texts find expression in material forms. Smith sees these figures as reflecting hybridity, but in an extremely expansive form embodying haptic functions of touch realized when these figurines perhaps were carried and touched in funeral processions. Touch is fairly common in Christian ritual; haptic elements are less common in Judaism, even in its proposed hybrid form. This interesting point warrants further examination.

Chapter 7 ("Paint: the Hollowness of Symbols") considers common symbols associated with Judaism and Christianity and especially the menorah and the cross. Both symbols function religiously and nationalistically and are always inflected with politics, violence, and memory. They are "hollow," meaning they cannot stand for any pure, uncomplicated identity (p. 111). For some reason

Smith stresses the menorah in Jewish funerary art with hardly any discussion of the symbol when it appears in synagogues. Moreover, by restricting the discussion of the menorah in this chapter to “paint,” he neglects important evidence, such as the monumental menorah, pieces of which were found in the ancient synagogue in Maon, in the southern Mt. Hebron region. An analysis of meaning and role of this free-standing menorah, with lions at its base and placed next to the ark, might have impacted upon his understanding of both menorah, cross, and other religious symbols of the time.

Chapter 8 (“Vellum: Relations in Miniature”) considers the question of manuscript illustration as a case study for the ways Judaism and Christianity exhibited “relations” with one another (p. 127). Chapter 9 (“Papyrus: The Practice of Text”) considers supposed markers of Christian and Jewish scribal practice. Chapter 10 (“The Mountains from the Valley”) returns to the metaphor of two mountains and a valley between them, discussed in chapter 1. The mountains, supposedly Judaism and Christianity, may not even exist and may be no more than constructed ideals. Materialism points us to the valley and it is there that the complex, transecting, over-lapping, and crossflowing wash of identities play out. Reality is the valley and not the mountains. When it comes to ancient Judaism and Christianity, there is much that commends this view of the author.

This is a fairly slender volume chock full of fascinating insights. However, it is far from inclusive. The author picks and chooses the objects of study somewhat too narrowly. What would he do with phylacteries, for instance, or fringes? Is there hybridity here? And what about objects of everyday life that may also have functioned within the realms of Jewish and / or household religion? Finally, as pointed out above, his framework of methodologies of materialism should also be expanded. Thus, Smith has provided us with prolegomena, an important stepping stone to a materialist mapping of the “parting of the ways,” and as such this book should be required reading for all who study ancient Judaism and Christianity. Scholars should look forward to his future work on materialism and ancient religion.