

REVIEW

C. T. R. Hayward

*Interpretations of the Name Israel in Ancient Judaism and
Some Early Christian Writings:
From Victorious Athlete to Heavenly Champion*

(Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), xiii + 397 pp.

Reviewed by Joseph B. Tyson, Southern Methodist University

C. T. R. Hayward, Professor of Hebrew at the University of Durham (England), has produced a book that calls attention to the richly varied interpretations of the stories of Jacob in Genesis. The author stresses the contrasts between ancient and modern biblical interpretations by noting that, while exponents of historical-critical methods usually try to find a single meaning in a text and attempt to distinguish between an "original folk-tale" that may lie behind the text and the secondary additions to it, ancient interpreters revel "in endeavors to derive as many meanings as possible from a text." (p. 28) The chapters that follow illustrate this point in respect to the ancients by exploring interpretations by early Jews and early Christians of the Jacob texts in Genesis.

The major issues faced by the various interpreters include, among others, the meaning of the change of Jacob's name to Israel, the meaning of the term Israel, the significance of Jacob's wrestling, the identity of his opponent, and the meaning of the commandment to refrain from eating the sinew of an animal's thigh.

After a discussion of the relevant material in Gn 32:23-33; 35:9-15, the author explores variations of the stories in Hos 12:3-6 and the Dead Sea Scroll text known as 4Q158. Hayward then turns to the Septuagint (LXX) translation, which he regards as the earliest interpretation of the Hebrew texts, and here he deftly compares the LXX with the Masoretic text of Genesis. These Greek translators understood Jacob's wrestling with the angel as pre-figuring Moses' experience at the burning bush. The author writes, "Indeed, the translators seem to go out of their way to show how the future covenant at Sinai is, in some mysterious manner, in part prefigured in the agreement between Jacob and Laban on a mountain with no one else present, but where God is experienced in vision and in His seeing what shall take place." (p. 49)

In the following chapters the author deals with Jesus ben Sira, the *Book of Jubilees*, Philo, the *Prayer of Joseph*, Josephus, and selected rabbinic texts. In the final chapters he turns to the New Testament and some texts from Christian writers up to the fifth century.

This reviewer was most impressed with the rich diversity to be found among these writings. The *Book of Jubilees*, for example, is a re-writing of the biblical story, which reduces the two Genesis accounts to one, omits the wrestling match, and constructs a non-biblical setting for the change of Jacob's name. Philo understands the term "Israel" to mean "the one who sees God," and he claims that the one who wrestled with Jacob was the divine Logos. In Mishnah and Tosefta, there is concern with the matter of Jacob's injured thigh and the observance of the ensuing prohibition noted in Gn 32:32. The Gospel of John, Hayward claims, presents Jesus as a Jacob-figure, and Clement of Alexandria draws on Philo to show that the wrestler with Jacob was the Logos, not at that time given a name but later known as Jesus.

Hayward has clearly succeeded in showing how a relatively brief biblical text may be exploited in multifarious ways. One might, however, like to see a bit more exploration of the historical and social context of the selected texts. In his concluding chapter, the author suggests the importance of context: "The Bible insists that none may remotely be compared to the Holy One (Is 40:18, 25; 46:5); yet this Holy One is the Holy One of Israel (Is10:20), the people who are near to Him. The exegetes set themselves the task of further explicating this, each in ways *appropriate to contemporary needs and concerns*." (p. 352, italics mine) From time to time Hayward offers some aspect of an author's context as a partial explanation of a particular interpretation. He claims, for example, that a section of *Genesis Rabbah* may be dated to the time of the Hadrianic persecution, although the text as a whole was not finally redacted until the fifth or sixth century C.E. Thus he suggests that the text presents "Jacob's struggle with the angel as a violent physical contest in which Jacob, although sustaining an injury, was ultimately victorious over the heavenly representative of Esau, who stands for the power of the Roman Empire" (p. 259). This comment is helpful, but it would have been good to see more attention paid to the contemporary needs and concerns that affected the writing of various texts.

The author includes no explicit suggestions that might make the material he surveys useful in Christian-Jewish relations. Indeed, his main concern is with Jewish interpretations, although the chapters on early Christian texts might have led him to raise some comparative questions. A discussion of the Christian belief in Jesus as "Son of God" in the light of the fact that Jacob/Israel is given this title in a number of Jewish texts would have been helpful.

Readers without knowledge of Hebrew and, to a lesser extent, Greek will find the book very difficult. The author's discussions frequently center on the meaning of important Hebrew words and phrases, and he includes English translations of only some of them. At crucial points he thus leaves behind those readers who are not proficient in the ancient languages.

Persons who are interested in early Jewish history will find this book very helpful; those interested in Christian-Jewish relations may find it merely suggestive. Its major benefits will be appreciated by scholars who are acquainted with the cited texts and proficient in the appropriate languages.