

REVIEW

Leo Duprée Sandgren

Vines Intertwined: A History of Jews and Christians from the Babylonian Exile to the Advent of Islam(Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), paperback,
xxvi + 838 pp. with CD-ROM

Reviewed by Joshua Ezra Burns, Marquette University

Though there have been numerous scholarly studies on the common origins of Judaism and Christianity, there has yet to be a definitive historical treatment of the subject. In his textbook *Vines Intertwined: A History of Jews and Christians from the Babylonian Exile to the Advent of Islam*, Leo Sandgren undertakes the ambitious task of narrating a coherent history of the two religious traditions on the basis of their theoretical conceptions and implementations over the roughly 1,300-year span between the fall of the kingdom of Judah and the rise of Islam. As stated in his introduction, the author's aim is to present something more than a pair of parallel histories of the two sibling religions during their early centuries of coexistence. By emphasizing, rather, the inherent interconnectedness of the early Jewish and Christian religious communities throughout this period, Sandgren seeks to demonstrate how each helped define the other during the early centuries of the Common Era, and how each informed the other's unique theological and social views. He pursues this argument through a series of topical discussions tracing the respective evolutionary trajectories of the Jewish and Christian communities with particular attention to their points of intersection. He thereby argues that what emerged from antiquity were not two distinct religious communities but two culturally proximate communities who "shared common interests and the mutual needs for survival" by virtue of their common cultural heritage (p. 7).

The success of Sandgren's project is subject to debate both in respect to its premises and its results. Continuing critical efforts to demonstrate the commonalities between early Judaism and early Christianity have yielded results too numerous and too diverse to be reconciled with a single, monolithic analytical principle. Sandgren's attempt, therefore, to conform these results to his particular historical narrative is bound to privilege certain critical assumptions over others. In general, Sandgren seems to locate himself squarely in the camp of the sort of conciliatory (and often apologetic) discourse on the Jewish context of the apostolic church that has dominated New Testament scholarship since the Holocaust. This is not, of course, a bad thing. But focusing on efforts to demonstrate the common ground shared by Jews and Christians in antiquity entails the marginalization or exclusion of scholarship predicated on other equally valid analytical grounds. For example, his effort to avoid labeling the early Jewish followers of Jesus as Christians or even as Jewish Christians ignores the issue of whether the individuals in question regarded themselves as Jews, and, if so, in what sense. In fact, one is left to wonder what sorts of beliefs these so-called "Jewish believers" actually professed aside from their likewise ill-defined devotion to Jesus. These questions, of course, engage issues of historical interpretation far more complex than Sandgren chooses to acknowledge. Needless to say, ambiguities of this nature sometimes undermine the general integrity of his historiographical method.

Sandgren's attempt at comprehensiveness exhibits its greatest weakness in respect to the literature and culture of the early rabbinic sages. Here, the author relies primarily on the methodologically questionable and, frankly speaking, outdated work of Jacob Neusner, whose much-criticized efforts to remove ancient Judaism from historical discussion have been the source of significant misunderstanding among scholars of early Christianity. In his efforts, therefore, to relate the practice of the Jewish religion in antiquity to the contemporaneous practice of Christianity he tends to analyze the former on the basis of the latter, adopting a paradigm of comparative religious phenomenology largely removed from the context of history. When he does try to situate persons or developments within the early rabbinic movement in specific historical contexts, it is almost exclusively in reference to parallel developments in the Christian tradition. In fact, his most elaborate and arguably most incisive discussions of Judaism during the flourishing of the rabbinic movement are based not on the copious rabbinic documentation but on the relatively scarce Christian and Roman imperial documents on the Jews. As a result, the net effect of Sandgren's portrait of early rabbinic Judaism is skewed heavily toward those of its facets mirrored in contemporaneous Christian practice and thought.

In fairness, Sandgren's general inattention to emerging scholarship on the history and culture of the early rabbinic movement is not unpardonable. Indeed, it is difficult to fault a textbook author for failing to account for every current scholarly debate on the many and diverse topics covered in a work, let alone one of such impressive scope. One could single out similar deficiencies in virtually any area of discussion to which the author applies his heuristic lens. Controversial issues such as the causes of the Maccabean revolt, the attitudes of Jesus and Paul toward the Jewish religion, and the nature of Constantine's conversion are treated with the economy of space appropriate to Sandgren's broad-based treatment, yet without attention to the diverse critical opinions expressed in the more nuanced treatments of these subjects that appear to inform a great deal of his narrative. His attempt to be comprehensive in a project of this scope makes what is already a massive tome positively cumbersome to navigate. One is left to wonder, therefore, whether Sandgren's project is too much for one historian to manage, at least between the covers of a single book.

To be clear, I neither mean to suggest that Sandgren's project is fundamentally flawed, nor his synthesis inaccurate or misleading. Often, his points of critical reference represent the very best of scholarship in the fields through which he pursues his narrative. His presentation is erudite, his writing style fluid, and, above all, his unique expertise thoroughly and judiciously applied. I would not hesitate, therefore, to recommend his work to the reader seeking an informed and accessible overview of the topics he discusses. It seems to me, however, that Sandgren's book will find its greatest utility in precisely those situations where one must acquire a great deal of general knowledge yet with minimal attention to its sources. I might recommend *Vines Intertwined* as a textbook for an undergraduate course, although I hesitate to advise anyone to condense over a thousand years of Jewish and Christian history into a single academic term. Perhaps, then, it would work better as a companion to a sequence of courses on early Christianity predicated on the laudable principles of contemporary interreligious understanding espoused by the author in his introduction. From a critical standpoint, however, the manifold subjects and often complex interpretations sampled by Sandgren would be better approached through a range of historiographical objectives more diverse than those utilized here.