
Isaac Sassoon’s study of attitudes to conversion in Judaism is at once a work of historical scholarship and of theological advocacy. In keeping with his first task, Sassoon traces the development of the institution of conversion from the Biblical period to the 20th century, subjecting a wide range of Biblical, rabbinic, and philosophical texts which touch on the topic and on related topics such as the nature of priesthood, to exhaustive scrutiny. At the same time, Sassoon makes a forceful and sustained argument throughout the text for a non-essentialist Judaism, which does not ontologize Jewish-Gentile difference or fetishize physical descent, and which should thus be open and welcoming towards, and perhaps even should valorize, converts.

Although much of this work is spent discussing post-Biblical texts, the book is animated by its Biblical scholarship. Sassoon’s basic methodology is documentarian; he works from the assumption that “the Pentateuch comprises no fewer than three very distinct strands,” which are “distinct inasmuch as each conveys a variant message delivered in a style all its own” [7]. The distinctions which most interest him are those between the Priestly Source (which Sassoon assumes is a post-Exilic document) and the rest of the Pentateuch. Indeed, the story that Sassoon tells about the history of Jewish conversion is one which can be read as a series of recapitulations of what begins as an internal tension in the Priestly documents. In pre-Exilic scriptures, Sassoon argues, the term ger “signifies exclusively a transplanted, or non-indigenous individual” [21], a vulnerable refugee for whom the Israelite is responsible. The Priestly sources which postdate the Exile, however, are innovative in that they “urge…the ger’s participation in Israel’s cultic life,” a move which Sassoon sees as confirming the Rabbinic opinion that “conversion to Judaism” is “firmly anchored in the Torah” [23]. Yet Priestly sources also show the beginnings of a preoccupation with genealogy (perhaps a result of Zoroastrian influence) which would grow more and more pronounced throughout the Second Temple period, as evidenced in both canonical texts like the Books of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah and apocryphal ones like Jubilees. Sassoon sees these texts as the origin of a “carnally skewed anthropology” [3] can be at best grudgingly accepting of converts and at worst openly hostile to them. Having identified the basic battle-lines in the Exilic and Second Temple periods, Sassoon then shows how texts of Jewish law and philosophy from the classical Rabbinic period to the modern era, by treating a host of issues such as how perspective converts are to be received, their eligibility to marry into the priesthood, and the degree to which they can be instructed in Torah prior to their conversion, vacillate between a conception of the covenant that “rests upon will and commitment” and one focused on “non-volitional, deterministic ‘holy seed’” [48].

Sassoon’s readings are mostly careful and illuminating. The problems which do exist are mostly ones of methodology — Sassoon is not always successful in his attempt to carry out a historical and theological task simultaneously. His tendency to think of Biblical criticism as the framework through which to read all texts on the subject of conversion leads to some rather baffling statements. For example, he attempts to “lay claim to Ibn Ezra; the Ibn Ezra who believes that P affords outsiders the option to join Israel once their menfolk undergo circumcision, a procedure adumbrating rabbinic conversion” [40] — it should go
without saying that, as the Documentary Hypothesis is a product of the 19th century, the 12th-century Ibn Ezra had no views about “P” whatsoever. Or again, when he criticizes Michael Wyschogrod for his statement that “Israel’s symbol of the covenant is circumcision” [37] on the grounds that Wyschogrod fails to note the D source’s lack of interest in physical circumcision. Wyschogrod, of course, was not making a claim about concepts of covenant in ancient Israel, but one about contemporary Rabbinic Judaism, in which circumcision is referred to metonymically as a brit (covenant).

These moments are indications of a more fundamental issue: the study’s lack of a consistent theological methodology. Sassoon faces the daunting challenge of doing constructive Jewish theology which takes into account not just a diversity of authorship in the Pentateuch, but which assumes that that the Bible is animated by fundamentally diverging points of view. Although writing from within the tradition of normative rabbinic Judaism (he is Senior Lecturer Emeritus at in Bible and Talmud at the Institute for Traditional Judaism) Sassoon works in both a historical-critical mode and a theological mode without giving any explicit indication of how the former can make sense of the latter. For example, Sassoon goes to great lengths to show, as part of his case for a non-genealogical Judaism, how Israelite priesthood was not always so rigidly genealogical as rabbinic tradition understands it. He also shows that Israelite theology seems to have undergone an evolution from henotheism (at which he shudders) to monotheism (of which he approves). Why is the fact that (ancient Israelite) priesthood was once a calling or vocation any more relevant for (rabbinic) Jewish theology today than the fact that YHWH was once understood to be only one of the gods?

David Weiss Halivni, the founder of the Institute with which Sassoon is associated, also faced this challenge of integrating Biblical criticism into Jewish theology. His own theory is that while the Bible we have today is indeed ‘maculate,’ composed of mutually incompatible traditions, this fact is overcome by the normative tradition of Biblical interpretation which begins with Ezra and continues through the Rabbis. Although this is not the only avenue available to a Jewish theologian who is convinced by the arguments of Biblical criticism, it at least provides a way to answer the question. Without it, the reader is left with the impression that one may simply sift through the Biblical material, pick out what one likes best, and denigrate the remainder (indeed, Sassoon describes various Biblical texts such as Ezra and Chronicles using terms like “fanatical” [31], “racist” [86], and “neurotic” [74]). In the absence of some controlling methodology which explains how to avoid the situation of ‘historicize and choose,’ is the partisan of Jewish essentialism not equally justified by the project Sassoon has undertaken?

Sassoon’s study, which considers a large number of texts which do not usually find their ways into debates on Jewish conversion, constitutes a noteworthy contribution to contemporary Jewish thought. Its passionate advocacy for a non-chauvinistic Judaism is a welcome intervention in an era when ontological conceptions of Jewish difference still find a ready hearing in many quarters, with deleterious consequences for individual converts and for non-Jews in the State of Israel. While it leaves some crucial questions about the way in which Jewish theology should appropriate historical scholarship of the Bible unsolved, it retains considerable value for students of the Bible, Rabbinic literature, and contemporary Jewish philosophy.

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