

Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries edited by Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2007. Pp. xxx + 930. Price \$49.95 hardcover.

A topic as complex as that addressed by these writers deserves a tome as massive as this book. *Jewish Believers in Jesus* is a formidable collection of articles examining the original ethnic-cultural-religious community that surrounded Jesus and formed the earliest Christian church, along with nuanced investigations about those who most closely adhered to this heritage when Christianity began its multicultural expansion throughout the Mediterranean world. As Skarsaune notes, the task posed by this investigation is itself staggering, let alone the organizational structures necessary to define its progress (ix).

The method of pursuit ultimately was reduced to six moves. Part 1 serves as the apology for definitions adopted, sources explored, choices made, and interaction given to theological methods outlined by others. Part 2 surveys New Testament materials, part 3 looks into the literary heritage of Jewish believers, part 4 delves into the Greek and Latin Fathers to find next stages of this identity's expressions, and part 5 searches out other literary and archaeological evidence for Jewish believers. Skarsaune returns with a concluding chapter (his seventh in the work, out of its total of twenty-three; co-editor Hvalvik wrote three), the entire substance of part 6, which seeks to summarize outcomes and hint at conclusions.

The overall goal for this collection of individual studies, according to Skarsaune in his opening article, was a doublet. First, there was an attempt to pay close attention to all the names of individual Jewish people who were written about in the New Testament and in other early Christian sources and provide as much historical and cultural data about them as possible. In this regard, Richard Bauckham's inquiry into the membership rolls of the first Jerusalem congregation (chapter 3), Hvalvik's articles on Paul's missionary companions (chapter 6), and the makeup of the congregation in Rome (chapter 7) are fascinating. Second, Skarsaune and Hvalvik wished to "identify some sources, fragments of sources, pieces of exegetical expositions, and the like that *came from* Jewish believers, [and] were *authored* by them" (17). This, of course, is the much harder part and leads toward greater speculation, as the articles in parts 3–5 show.

In general, the authors of the various articles express a fairly orthodox and traditional view of the development of early Christianity. In his search for the right terms of identity, for instance, Skarsaune opts for "Jewish believers in Jesus" rather than "Jewish Christians," because the former appellation preserves the ongoing Jewish religious or cultural community allegiance of the target group (even after the new factor of Jesus messianism is introduced) in a manner that the latter does not. There were Jews throughout the Greco-Roman world who were Hellenized in one way or another and did not retain the religious distinctives of their Palestinian kin.

This study is designed to inquire about those Jewish folk who fully identified themselves with at least one of the dominant strands of strongly religious and ethnic Judaism evident in the first century. Thus, their Jewishness, both before and after connecting with nascent Christianity, is as important as their belief in Jesus.

Again, when Donald Hagner writes about Paul as a Jewish believer according to his letters (chapter 4), he is careful to highlight both the continuities and discontinuities in Paul's thought, as his Jewish understanding of the world is not displaced but expanded when encountering the risen Christ. Indeed, according to Hagner, in the new reality of Jesus' coming, Paul "found the meaning and culmination of his Jewish identity" (120).

Furthermore, when mining the data of the book of Acts, both Bauckham (chapter 3) and Hvalvik (chapter 5) respect the literature as providing faithful expressions of events that actually happened and refer to people who clearly existed. In fact, it is through their eyes that early Christian congregations begin to take on fresh relational depth as the snippets of individual biographical references are brought together in prosopographic summation (the Jerusalem church in 81–92, and the network of Paul's associates in 155–70).

Part 4, Jewish Christian Groups according to the Greek and Latin Fathers, is particularly helpful for broadening the mosaic of multicultural early Christianity. Communities of Jewish believers who were known by the church's earliest historians are investigated. The Ebionites come under Skarsaune's scrutiny in chapter 14, with the result that the multiplicity of references to this group are found to emerge from essentially two sources—Irenaeus and Hippolytus. The portrait of Ebionite congregations that results displays two dominant characteristics: (1) confidence in the Davidic ancestry of Jesus along with his perceived flawless observance of the Law, caused these people to identify Jesus as the true fulfillment of messianic prophecy and thus the object of their worship; and (2) the goal of discipleship is to imitate Jesus in complete obedience to the Law, a requirement forcing Gentile adherents to become fully ritualized Jews in order to participate in Christian belief. This mandate obviously drove a wedge between the Ebionites and Paul, likely resulting in their demise by the third century, because Christianity had by that time become a religion of predominantly Gentile members.

Clarity about the "Nazoraeans" of northern Syria is less defined, according to Wolfram Kinzig in chapter 15. "With the Pharisees they shared the belief in the resurrection. With the Sadducees they were critical of the oral interpretation of the Law. And with the Christians they shared the belief in Christ, a belief that, while it did not render the observance of the Law unnecessary, relativized it considerably" (478). Their perspective on Jesus was very similar to that portrayed in the gospel of Matthew, with liturgical and ritual practices similar to those spoken of in Acts and Galatians

as expressed among early Jewish believers who identified with James, the brother of Jesus, an acknowledged leader of the Jerusalem council in Acts 15. It is likely that their more relaxed attitude toward the Law heightened tensions with the Pharisaic rabbinic tradition that dominated Judaism after the destruction of Jerusalem, but there is no certainty as to why their views were soon seen to be heretical by the Gentile majority in the church.

The analyses of part 5 show that the distinctives of Jewish believers in Jesus were significantly blurred in the second to fifth centuries. Literary sources evince a rapidly growing polarization between normative Christianity and Judaism as it was understood in the common mind. This, in turn, made Christianity appear to be a Gentile religion, which was only open to Jewish converts if they gave up their historic religious and cultural identity. A final chapter, “Archaeological Evidence of Jewish Believers?” by James Strange (chapter 22) shows that we can know more than we thought about the practices of early Jewish believers in Jesus (especially through burial practices and the accompanying descriptions and markings) but tantalizingly less than we would wish.

Skarsaune’s culminating reflection in chapter 23 is truly engaging. Rather than simply summarizing the findings of the preceding chapters, he distills the essential questions out of the whole investigation and explains the relative confidence that he believes is possible when answering a number of significant questions. Is the category “Jewish believers in Jesus?” an artificial construct? No, because Jew was understood both by its claimants and by the larger Roman world as an ethnic designation, and Christianity forced its members to ponder whether it was also an appropriate religious description. How close were Jews and Christians in antiquity? Social interaction was rarely limited, according to Skarsaune, but once evangelistic preaching about Jesus became widespread, it began to challenge categories and definitions by which leaders of communities organized their understandings of membership. Were Jewish believers predominantly found in clearly defined sects? Although Epiphanius made it seem so in his *Panarion*, the evidence is to the contrary; apart from a few Ebionite congregations and possibly some Nazoraeans who were marginalized by their former social groups, there is little indication that Jewish believers isolated themselves into communities. Where, then, should we find Jewish believers in Jesus in the first centuries of the Christian era? Virtually everywhere, but especially in Palestine and in the larger urban areas where Jewish communities had prominently established themselves. How many Jewish believers in Jesus were there? Using several statistical analyses, a reasonable estimate would be about one-quarter to one-half of the Jews in Rome by the middle of the first century and probably around 100,000 in the Roman Empire in 250 C.E.

Skarsaune and Hvalvik have bequeathed Christian theology with a unique gift through this collaborative survey. In spite of the sheer size of the field of investigation, there is remarkable unity and coherence among

the many articles without any significant overlap. While the chapters themselves provide excellent sources of competent scholarly conclusions, the notes and references link users to the huge corpus of materials that is distilled into manageable shape by this collection. This is definitely a resource tool that will prove to be of continuing value.

—Wayne Brouwer

1–3 John by Robert W. Yarbrough. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008. Pp. 464. \$39.99 paper

This commentary is a bit of an enigma. It is nearly as long as Koestenberger's volume on the gospel of John earlier in the series (even though the documents each considers are widely diverse in length), yet it offers less directly usable interpretive material (now and again a moment of applicatory connection sneaks in, as on 129). It declares that historical, geographical, and cultural contexts for these letters can be deduced with reasonable confidence (21), while it consistently avoids identifying any specific false teaching or location or time frame behind the strongly apologetic text. It strenuously objects to any Gnostic influence in John's theology (8, 48, and 72) but never wrestles with hints of proto-gnosticism among John's opponents, even though a number of issues have consistently been viewed by others as closely linked to that tradition. The result is a book that promises more than it delivers.

Yarbrough understands well the intended dynamics of this commentary series because he is one of its editors. He acknowledges that at least a hundred commentaries have been written on 1–3 John (ix), including a dozen significant studies in the last decade or so. His justifications for adding this volume to the mix include his desire to augment the growing literature on a "Johannine theology" that takes into account the gospel and Revelation along with these letters (x), use of computer technology to provide clearer comparisons with Septuagint literature (x), exhaustive exploration of textual variants to affirm the integrity and usefulness of the received text over against detractors such as Ehrman (x), synthesis and distillation of the burgeoning recent scholarship on these letters (xi), and the use of a broadly diverse interpretive social and cultural milieu to enhance applications (xi–xii). He accomplishes each of these to some degree, although the comprehensive effort does not make the text significantly more transparent, nor does it provide a new or brilliant understanding of the theology as a whole.

Almost half of Yarbrough's introduction (3–28) is focused on the question of authorship. His survey of the positions on the matter is very helpful. Yarbrough outlines the early church reception of the fourth gospel and these letters as written by Jesus' disciple, John, the son of Zebedee; the Enlightenment and modern banishment of this John from any connection with New Testament writings; and the recent renewal of interest in Johan-