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Biblical Narrative and the Formation of Rabbinic Law. By Jane L. Kanarek. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. 212. $90.00 (cloth). ISBN: 9781107047815.

The Law and Literature movement of the last few decades has largely sought to reveal the discursive links between legal and narrative language and to characterize law not as a specialized science but as a rhetorical, cultural practice, like art. Jane Kanarek, in *Biblical Narrative and the Formation of Rabbinic Law*, contributes to this project by examining talmudic legal interpretation and showing that the narrative portions of the Hebrew Bible, and not just the legal texts, stand as a source of sacred authority behind Jewish law. This insight has two primary implications for the way law and narrative interact in early rabbinic literature, both of which Kanarek fleshes out. The first is that rabbinic legal exegesis of biblical narrative essentially "converts" story into law, transforming the indicative into the imperative and the particular into the universal. The second is that this "conversion" is not unidirectional: on the contrary, the rabbis elaborated, recontextualized, and revised biblical narratives as they drew out their legal undertones, creating complex webs of story-laws that were thoroughly interdependent and mutually reinforcing. It is in the tracing of the latter phenomenon—both as it is successfully executed and as it fails to take hold—that Kanarek masterfully demonstrates the complex interaction of law and narrative within this religious, normative universe. Although Kanarek is quite detailed and technical in her parsing of traditional rabbinic texts (as it must be for truly rigorous analysis), *Biblical Narrative and the Formation of Rabbinic Law* should be of interest to any student or scholar of law and literature in religious traditions.

In each of the book's four substantive chapters Kanarek explores a specific subset of narrative scriptural verses and the network of rabbinic laws and stories that emerge from it. The case studies in the chapters become progressively messier and more complex, yet Kanarek expertly explicates them, revealing a variety of types and effects of the legal-narrative networks that the rabbis produce. If there is one fault in this analysis, it is perhaps that Kanarek remains relentlessly optimistic about the potential for "meaning-making" through the interlinking of laws and narratives and often neglects what is lost. As Kanarek writes in the conclusion, "To participate in the past's stories is to act legally. In turn, to act legally is to reenact the past. ... Through this mixture of law and story, these texts simultaneously prescribe norms as they give them meaning" (174–75). She goes on to assert that "[t]he goal of reading explicit law back into narrative scripture is not only to rabbinize these tales, but also to build a picture of *law which is richer than rules*" (175, emphasis added). But while these laws, grounded in rabbinically revised versions of biblical tales, may indeed be richer than a dry list of regulations, the sacred narrative in all of its unfinalizable particularity (and infinite potential for meaning) is diminished. While Kanarek notes this—"these legal readings serve to domesticate these stories, to stabilize what might otherwise be unstable elements" (181), she does not worry about the implications of it for the religious imagination. What happens to the power of a sacred story when it is yoked by authoritative commentators to "master narratives" and treated as "conveyors of correct behavior" (181)? Does the rabbinic linkage between these narratives and laws permeate into a larger religious world view, or is it only activated in the moment of exegesis? What happens when a direct encounter with the original biblical text (let alone the polyphony of rabbinic commentaries) may reanimate other, more dangerous meanings of the sacred story? These are questions that remain to be addressed, as the analysis tends to be, as is often the case in law and literature studies, more concerned with what narrative can do for law than with what integration into a legal praxis does to narrative.

After a substantial introduction, chapter 2 tackles one of the most famous, and powerful, stories in Genesis: the binding of Isaac, or the Akedah. In this chapter, Kanarek demonstrates that the binding of Isaac, through multiple rabbinic commentaries, is "domesticated" as it is woven into a tapestry of rules for routine ritual performances: ritual slaughter, ritual sacrifice, and zealotry in hastening to perform the commandments. The unique and startling narrative of God commanding Abraham to sacrifice his own beloved child, only to be saved from the knife at the last instant, is tamed: Isaac, the victim, becomes an exemplar of atoning self-sacrifice, the chilling act of binding a child for slaughter becomes a prototype for the routine practice of animal sacrifice, and Abraham's apparent urgency in fulfilling this dreadful command becomes a model for the religious practitioner's fulfillment of *all* commandments. As Kanarek comments, the rabbis "shift the deeply troubling and out-of-the-ordinary Akedah to a text about normative law" (65). How exactly does this occur? The process in which Isaac is taken to the altar for sacrifice is seen as "set[ting] precedent for the future" (65)—the future in which animal sacrifice is performed during the time of the Jerusalem temple, and the future of the post-destruction, rabbinic era in which ritual slaughter of animals for food outside the temple supersedes animal sacrifice at or inside the temple (60). "Following the laws concerning the knife used for everyday ritual slaughter and acting zealously becomes a way of reenacting ancient narrative—the binding of Isaac, Abraham's zealousness, and Temple sacrifice" (66). This powerful statement invites us to imagine that every act of animal slaughter today, following the logic of rabbinic legal exegesis, is in some way analogous to child sacrifice: the killing of an innocent with God's blessing. And, according to Kanarek, this is precisely the analogy the rabbis intend as they create a web of meaning wherein routine slaughter, ritual sacrifice, and self-sacrifice were bound inextricably together. As the binding of Isaac becomes precedent-setting, it ceases to be a unique, mysterious, inexplicable event—it is reimagined as normative and encoded in ritual practice.

In the third chapter Kanarek examines Rebecca's betrothal to Isaac and the method by which this story is turned into a template for marriage law. Rebecca herself is seen as a test case for woman's consent to marriage, the betrothal of an orphan, underage betrothal, and questions of a bride's virginity. Nevertheless, Kanarek shows that there is no simple or necessary route toward embedding this story in a normative universe; she demonstrates instead that Palestinian and Babylonian rabbinic texts differ in how the text is "made [legally] operative" (104, citing Peter Brooks). For the Palestinian sages, Rebecca is a moral and spiritual paragon, and thus her guarding of her own sexual purity and virginity is emphasized. The Babylonian sages were less interested in Rebecca's character, and so they use her story to derive rules about the age at which a woman might be married. These are two different conceptions of the underlying story, and two different ways for rabbinic law to perceive (objectify?) a potential bride. At the same time, what these commentaries share is the idealization of this particular biblical narrative and its universalization. The narrative ceases to be about one girl and her family and is instead read as a universal story of archetypes: "Rebekah, the paradigmatic virgin, marries Isaac, the paradigmatic circumcised male" (101). Rebecca and Isaac's marriage is also exemplary for the rabbinic understanding of ideal marriage because "Rebekah and Isaac's marriage is the first explicitly endogamous marriage [as Abraham's servant is explicitly tasked with finding Isaac a wife from his own people], and it is the only ancestral marriage without concubines" (101). Just as with the Akedah, Kanarek also points out how this biblical narrative comes to undergird normative practice: "When rabbinic Jews prepare for marriage or decide the worth of a *ketubah*, they also live out the biblical tale of Rebekah and Isaac's betrothal and marriage" (102). Perhaps they do. But it is worthwhile (as well as timely) to note that the rabbinic framing of Rebecca and Isaac's marriage as "ideal" because of issues of virginity, virtue, endogamy, and monogamy—and their turning of this ideal into a universal norm—severs it from any sense of narratival

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contingency. In the Hebrew Bible, endogamous monogamy is by no means presented as a dominant paradigm. It may have been helpful had Kanarek noted that this story's meaning for those who are able to compare themselves to Rebecca and Isaac is made possible by marginalizing the stories of others.

Chapter 4 quite possibly makes the strongest case for Kanarek's contention that the early rabbis constructed extensive, interlocking networks of biblical citations and rabbinic commentaries within which to ground religious, normative practice. She does this by reading a particularly counterintuitive example of rabbinic legal exegesis. Rather than relying on a clear and straightforward scriptural verse to legislate the length of the requisite mourning period ("[Joseph] performed mourning for his father for seven days," [Genesis 50:10]), the rabbis instead explicate oblique verses to arrive at the same conclusion: mourning must be performed for seven days. As Kanarek puts it, "Through examining the non-citation as well as the citation of a particular verse in legal readings of biblical narrative, I argue that a more complex exegetical route leads to richer law and creates more legal meaning. Indeed, much as we learn about an exegetical culture through what it chooses to read, we also learn about that culture through what it chooses *not* to read" (107). She contends that for the rabbis to base the laws of mourning on such an explicit verse is essentially to concede that it is not a rule derived exegetically—through rabbinic hermeneutical methods—from scripture, but rather one that is continuous with the ancient practice of Joseph, Job, and Jewish communities of the Second Temple period. Rabbinic legal authority would thus be abrogated in this sphere, which would continue to be dictated by ancestral practice (custom) rather than codified law. In rejecting the mourning practices of Joseph as a basis for rabbinic practice, the rabbis are free to ground the rules of mourning in any analogous legal practice: the rules of purity and impurity, festivals, the nazarite oath, or even the theological idea that God himself mourned his creation when he sent the flood to destroy the earth. In fact, rabbinic texts use all of these motifs and more to situate the seven days of mourning among them. Mourning thus becomes not simply a customary practice imitative of previous generations, but a legal practice "imbue[d] ... with meaning" (138): the sorrowful inverse of festival rejoicing, an isolation from society like those ritually impure, a reflection of divine grief itself.

The fifth and final chapter presents a case of legal-narrative failure in rabbinic biblical interpretation. Kanarek calls it a case of "textual messiness" which occurs "when no larger rabbinic exegetical web can be discerned and when a multiplicity of legal categories all require the same legal delineation" (140). The issue at hand is setting a minimum number of people required for the fulfillment of particular ritual obligations, or to define the "public sphere." Kanarek shows that the rabbis actually inherited a strong tradition suggesting that this number is ten, but much as in the previous chapter, the rabbis attempt to subvert the authority of ancestral tradition and replace it with the authority of direct biblical exegesis. The problem, however, is that in this case, there is a variety of laws that require or rely on the "quorum of ten" ranging from prayer recitations to the obligation to sacrifice one's life as a martyr; there are also a variety of biblical verses that suggest the number ten, but none of them is persuasively woven into the fabric of the legal requirements derived from it. Therefore, rabbinic literature evidences various "fragmentary" exegeses that tie the number ten to biblical verses that allegedly define a public gathering; these texts appear to be incomplete or unconvincing, so much so that they continued to be amended in the manuscript tradition centuries after they are authored. What is fascinating about this chapter is that Kanarek does not argue that it would have been impossible to create a powerful legal-narrative network out of these sources—in fact, she points to a late text that does just that, creating "one coherent text out of what were once separate exegetical traditions" (172); however, for whatever reason, it simply did not happen at an earlier stage. The chapter serves as a significant counterpoint to the other

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chapters, highlighting the kind of work that law and narrative need to do to successfully reinforce each other. But the conclusion of the chapter is somewhat thin. It would have been helpful to hear whether there are any consequences of this legal-narrative failure: is the requirement of ten seen as more or less arbitrary? Is it treated as less authoritative? Is the difference between legal-narrative success and failure merely one of aesthetics, or is there a pragmatic fallout?

Biblical Narrative and the Formation of Rabbinic Law is a significant addition to a subset of work in the field of rabbinic literature engaged in the project of dismantling the artificial wall of separation between law and narrative while still engaging with them as separate but inextricably interrelated categories. It also reveals how rabbis or other religious leaders may shape a community's practice not only by acting as legal decisors, but also through adept and attentive reading of sacred stories.

Chaya Halberstam
Associate Professor of Religious Studies, King's University College at Western University

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