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BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTES

Jewish-Christian Dialogues on Scripture in Late Antiquity: Heretic Narratives of the Babylonian Talmud. By **Michal Bar-Asher Siegal**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. ix + 228 pp. $99.99 cloth.

Michal Bar-Asher Siegal's new monograph investigates the world of late antique Jewish and Christian polemics through a particular set of *minim* ("heretics," singular: *min*) stories that appear in the Babylonian Talmud. Her central claim is that the Babylonian rabbis knew a remarkable amount about Christian theological conversations, felt threatened (to some degree) by Christian exegetical claims, and responded to some of these Christian arguments through the literary trope of a min story. Understanding the precise polemical nature of this subset of min stories, she contends, allows for fresh insight into Jewish-Christian interactions and polemics in late antiquity.

In her introductory chapter, Bar-Asher Siegal lucidly outlines the contours of her argument. After reviewing the history of scholarship on the term minim, she argues that "heretic" is an appropriate interpretation for the Talmudic min stories on which she is focused, for in each case the min presents a theological claim or scriptural reading that the rabbis viewed as erroneous. On the issue of contact between Jews and Christians, Bar-Asher Siegal is careful not to claim too much, stating that the min stories at the heart of this book should not be understood as retellings of actual encounters between Jews and Christians but rather as rabbinic literary responses to real Christian claims circulating in the time period. Bar-Asher Siegal also stresses the importance that these heretic stories played for the Babylonian rabbis in the process of social boundary-marking, as each respective story conveys the "right" way to read or understand the Torah.

In chapter 2, Bar-Asher Siegal discusses a primary reason why she chose the particular min stories included in her book: in each story, a min's question or claim regarding a particular biblical verse is met with (1) rabbinic ridicule (the min is called a "fool") and (2) a demonstration of the min's misunderstanding of the biblical verse in question. Bar-Asher Siegal's intriguing claim in this chapter is that the term "fool" functions as a very particular type of accusation. After tracing uses of the term "fool" in the New Testament, Dead Sea Scrolls, patristic texts, and Talmudic sources, she argues that a "fool" is one who fundamentally misunderstands scripture. Thus, the application of the term "fool" to the min in each story should alert the reader that the Rabbinic-min encounter is a specific one focused on the correct interpretation of scripture.

Chapters 3–6 provide four test cases for Bar-Asher Siegal's proposal. Each chapter follows a (roughly) similar pattern: a rabbinic encounter with a min is recounted, the scriptural issue being contested is explained, evidence of Christian interpretation in the min story is teased out through appeal to specific Christian theological tenets or figures, and the rabbinic response is then placed into this context of a struggle with Christian interpretation in order to show how the rabbis

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were able to combat these Christian interpretations. The point: the Babylonian rabbis had a fairly extensive knowledge of Christian theological arguments and scriptural interpretations, and they were actively engaged in boundary-marking exercises in order to explain to their audience the faulty nature of the Christian interpretation.

The tight argument in each chapter would be too difficult to describe in a few short sentences. In lieu of this, I will highlight particular issues that arise in these chapters. In each story (found in b. Hullin 87a, b. Berakhot 10a, b. Eruvin 101a, and b. Yevamot 102b), the interpretation of a particular scriptural verse is being contested (Amos 4:13, Isaiah 54:1, Micah 7:4, and Hosea 5:6, respectively). The issues are major ones in Christian circles: messianic implications of specific verses, discussions of the creation of the wind/Holy Spirit, Jesus's resurrection after three days, the term *euangelion* and Jesus's return, the Christian concept of heavenly treasures, ideas of the virgin birth, anti-Jewish polemics relating to whether God had separated from the Jewish people, and the like. In many of the rabbinic-min dialogues, the min's argument initially seems silly, but once Bar-Asher Siegal provides background to the heretic's question, the polemics of the specific scriptural interpretative issue come to light.

Rabbinic literature is full of insider language, and its shorthand style often makes it difficult to comprehend. Bar-Asher Siegal elegantly walks readers through each min story. She deftly moves between Jewish and Christian texts, highlighting the particular linguistic and theological nuances of the issues at play in each given minim story. She is careful in her judgments and offers a sophisticated argument. She also assumes a fairly high level of competence with late antique rabbinic argumentation and Christian theological discussions. While not needing to be an expert in either field, the novice would likely find it slow going.

For those who want airtight arguments with direct evidence for every statement, this book may feel a bit too speculative. But to those comfortable with scholarship that establishes a firm baseline and then suggests intriguing possibilities—which to my mind is good scholarship—this book is a fascinating and important read. Bar-Asher Siegal's monograph reveals the extent to which Babylonian Talmudic rabbis were knowledgeable of Christian exegetical and theological arguments, that they cared enough to respond to these ideas in polemical fashions, and that they did so in order to delineate boundaries between their views and Christian ones. Bar-Asher Siegal's voice is an important one in a growing scholarly corpus arguing for a sophisticated exegetical and theological back-and-forth between late antique Jews and Christians.

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