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Book Reviews

Adiel Schremer, *Brothers Estranged: Heresy, Christianity, and Jewish Identity in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 272 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-538377-5 (hbk.), \$74.00.

Adiel Schremer is an associate professor of Jewish history and chair of the Halpern center for the study of Jewish self-perception at Bar-Ilan University in Israel. Though he says his book is about “the role that Christianity occupied in the formation of early rabbinic Judaism” (11), it is more about the role that Christianity did *not* play in the formation of rabbinic Judaism. He suggests that there has been a “Christianizing” of the discourse about the relation between rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity such that we commonly understand these early movements through Christian colored glasses that privilege “religion”—by which he means theology and belief—above communal solidarity and practice. This false view also finds that Judaism and Christianity emerged at roughly the same time, out of the same basic tradition, and that rabbinic polemics against various Others were code for their anti-Christian rivalry. Overall his book is an extremely important contribution to scholarship on ancient Judaism and the formation of Christianity. It should compel us to be more skeptical about the traditional reading of rabbinic texts that supposedly refer to Christianity.

In particular, traditional scholarship has tended to point to early rabbinic use of the term *minim* as evidence of an ancient Jewish-Christian rivalry. Schremer argues against this recent trend in scholarship; through a detailed, well articulated, and thorough examination of the texts that refer to *minim*, Schremer casts doubt on the idea that the term *minim* refers to Christians. Instead, he shows that the term refers to all sorts of borderline sectarians (from the perspective of the central rabbis), whether they were gnostic Jews, Samaritans, Sadducees, Baethesians, or Roman sympathizers. When rabbinic polemics and perceptions of otherness were not directed towards these groups, they were most often projected upon the Roman occupiers of Palestine, not Christians, who were relatively off the rabbinic radar until much later. It was not until long after the conversion of the empire to Christianity, with Constantine in 324 CE, that the rabbis truly start mentioning Christians in polemical ways. As such, the earliest forms of Christianity did not emerge *with* rabbinic Judaism but rather emerged *out of* an already existent form of Judaism in Palestinian rabbinic society.

Schremer's basic methodological position is quite prudent: we should not read Christianity into ancient rabbinic texts without good warrant. He does not present his argument as a definitive fact but rather as a more probable line of reasoning considering a detailed examination of all the relevant texts.

As for the question of why at that particular time we see a rabbinic discourse about otherness and heresy, wrong belief and wrong practice, emerging, Schremer argues that this discourse was not reacting to Christianity but was caused by an "identity crisis" that resulted from the destruction of the temple in 70 CE and the failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt in 135 CE. The concept of "identity crisis" he relies on is derived primarily from Kai Erikson's (1966) study of "sociology of deviance" among New England puritans.

The philological, hermeneutical, and analytic aspects of Schremer's argument are enlightening and a pleasure to read. However, the theoretical conjectures of his argument, at least from the perspective of the history of religions, I found to be the weak point of the book. References to the idea about an "identity crisis" are scattered throughout the text, and do not provide much help to the reader in trying to isolate an explanation for the events Schremer describes.

There are some further problems as I see it to Schremer's approach. The first is that reading normative definitions into religious history often has the effect of recreating religious polemics on which those definitions are based. Thus Schremer's book is a modern incarnation of the argument between Jews and Christians about who came first and who is more legitimate.

The second problem is the dubiousness of speculating about a social and historical reality behind rabbinic texts. Of course early rabbinic texts were an "existential" response to life in the second and third century in Palestine, but it is a much bigger leap to draw specific conclusions from the quotations attributed to various rabbis about what the non-rabbinic population of Palestine thought, even if they were "Jews" or Judeans. In spite of Schremer's broad argument to the contrary, we are not presented with any reliable sociological data about what he calls "the social community" from which these text emerged (34). However, despite these hazards I fully accept the point that hermeneutical and philological choices are implicit in all historical arguments and Schremer's book is quite helpful in picking out the good choices from the bad ones.

The first chapter explores in what manner early rabbis were so testy about the various alternative groups such as *minim* and pagans in Palestine. Schremer thinks that this was the case because rabbinic society was going through an identity crisis after the destruction of the temple. The rabbis in this period were faced with God's apparent impotence, bending over backwards trying to rationalize the destruction of the temple and failed revolts.

The rabbinic religious and existential crisis is encapsulated in a tradition found in various forms (the oldest from the *Sifra*, a Tannaitic midrash on Deuteronomy)

about the Roman general Titus Vespasian coming into the temple when he sacked Jerusalem and, in effect, challenging the Judean god to a fight. Schremer thinks the instability during this period of crisis provoked the in-group/out-group polemics about outsiders and separatists (*minim*) that later scholars would read as reference to Christians. Schremer sees these polemics not as a reaction to Christian sects but rather as their generating factor.

Schremer grounds his definition of *minut* in the early rabbinic sources and tries to define exactly what it was the rabbis did not like about *minim*. In the early texts *minut* means denying God. This denial could take a number of forms: either denying God outright in some form of atheism, or postulating (two or more) competing or equal powers with God. Schremer is convinced that this discourse is not just a theological one, but rather a debate about social practice. The term *minut* in these early texts most likely applies to Romans and their sympathizers, who were the primary challenge to God's sovereignty in this period.

When the term *minim* does not refer to Romans, it refers to "separatists." Thus the earliest use of the term in the *Tosefta*, the ancient supplement to the *Mishnah*, states that the prayer concerning the *minim* should be joined with the daily prayers concerning the *paroshin* in the Amidah (the Eighteen Benedictions). The rabbis usually coupled prayers thematically, and the *paroshin* were those who "separated themselves" from the community. So, in the early sources the *minim* are generally associated with various Jewish sectarian groups (i.e., non-rabbinic Jews), such as perhaps those at Qumran, apostates, traitors, Sadducees, and Jewish gnostics. From the rabbinic perspective these were people who were disloyal to God and "the Jewish people" (62); their denial of God was, in effect, a form of siding with the Romans.

Schremer claims that the discourse about *minut* was as much a "political" and "social" matter as a "religious" matter, though he never attempts to offer even working definitions of these normative terms. He seems to be making the point that *minut* was not simply about doctrine but also "social-national loyalty." He is clearly reacting to a highly theologized scholarly discourse on the subject in which arguments often fall back to abstract points about theological innovation in early Christianity.

Schremer rereads the core texts that use the term *minim*, and that scholars have understood as referring to early Christians. The most important source text in this regard is the second chapter of the tractate *Hullin* in the *Tosefta*, which describes a number of rulings meant to limit social interaction with *minim*. Slaughter done by a *min* is considered idolatry, along with their bread, which is "like the bread of a Samaritan," and their wine. Their scrolls of Torah are considered "magical," and thus idolatrous. One should not sell anything to them, buy from them, marry them, have children with them, teach their sons crafts, nor seek any form of healing from them.

Schremer finds that these rules represent an earlier source that was added to a section in *Hullin* about “legal rulings relating to the slaughtering of an animal.” He dates the rules to the early second century CE. The confusion about the reference of *minim* is due to the editor of the *Tosefta* who attached to these rules two stories about followers of Jesus. This has led to “the widespread scholarly view” that assumes “*minim*, in general, are Christian,” and that then goes on to read this view into other sources where the term *minim* appears (78).

Schremer’s basic purpose in the book is to reverse engineer this error and propose a more likely theory. He wants scholars to drop the automatic association between *minim* and Christianity. Late rabbinic texts do refer to Christians as *minim*, but Schremer maintains this was not the case in early texts. The fallout of this exercise is extremely important for our understanding of early Judaism because it means that early rabbis did not have Christianity in mind for most of their polemics until relatively late.

In the Tannaic literature (2nd–3rd centuries) there are twenty-two traditions that use the term *minim*. Through detailed readings of the relevant texts, Schremer shows that except for the single passage noted above as amended to *Hullin* 2, in “none of its occurrences throughout Tannaic literature does the term *minim* need to be understood denoting Christians” (79). In all the other cases, the term should be read as referring to “Jewish sectarians and deviants of various types.” Nothing, it turns out, links the references to early Christians. Most often it appears to refer to Jewish gnostics of various stripes whom the rabbis understood as worshipping multiple gods.

After examining many of the other cases, Schremer returns to the tradition from *Hullin* 2, which is the only sure reference to Jesus (“son of Pantera/Pantiri”) in Tannaic literature. If we do not assume that the other uses of the term *minim* refer to Christians, he thinks this will have significant ramifications for our reading of the tradition in *Hullin*. He argues that the text does not take for granted that *minim* are Christians but rather “addresses the question of whether the followers of Jesus should be considered, too, as *minim*” (88). In other words it is just at this period in the third century when the *Tosefta* was being edited and these stories added, that the question began to surface about how to classify the followers of Jesus. In these pages, Schremer shows his virtuosity as a teacher of rabbinic text in the way he unwinds the various layers of rabbinic intertextuality.

The first story concerns a healer named Jacob who is about to heal a rabbi, who was bitten by a snake, “in the name of Jesus.” Rabbi Ishmael does not allow the procedure to proceed because it is better to die than to be healed in such a way. The second story is about Rabbi Eliezer, who was charged, apparently by a Roman authority, with *minut*. The charge was dismissed, but upon speculating about why he was charged, Eliezer suggests it was because he heard “a teaching of *minut* in the name of Jesus” and was pleased by it.

Schremer argues that these stories were appended to the rules about *minim* to make the point that the followers of Jesus were *minim*, but this was definitely not an assured fact at the time. The ambiguities in these stories suggest to Schremer that the separation within rabbinic society was just taking place in the second and third centuries; this was the “moment [...] in which a historical change *begins* to take place, here the boundary *begins* to be constructed” (94). Schremer wants us to be sure that this was not a process of two religious traditions parting ways, but rather of a centralized and established religious system, rabbinic Judaism, excluding and in turn being segregated from a splinter sect, that eventually became Christianity.

Overall I highly recommend this book for general scholars of religion interested in learning something new about the early history of Judaism, along with scholars who specialize in Judaism and Christianity in late antiquity. I am convinced by Schremer’s general skepticism about the traditional reading of the sources and their Christian bias. He lays to rest the idea that early rabbinic texts had “Christians” specifically in mind in their polemics. While I am convinced that early rabbinic texts do not necessarily refer to Christianity, I am far less sure that Schremer presents a coherent alternative, which is based on a rather poorly articulated and defended theory about identity in crisis.

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