CHAPTER ONE

ABULAFIA AND ALTERITY: THE OTHER IN THE SELF

Once I [R. Eliezer] was walking in the marketplace of Tsippori, and I found there Yaakov, the man of Kefar Sikhnin, and he recounted a saying of sectarianism in the name of Yeshu the son of Pantiri, and it caused me pleasure, and I was arrested by/for the words of sectarianism...

So reads Tosefta Hullin 2:24, composed roughly a millennium before Abulafia’s day. As the story continues, R. Eliezer ultimately appears before the Jewish authorities and is acquitted. But what is of immediate interest is the notion that R. Eliezer committed an offense simply in his having been pleased by a Christian pronouncement. The actual nature of the sectarian utterance is not divulged, and so it is never made clear whether its actual content was or was not heretical by Jewish standards. We may infer that R. Eliezer’s crime is in his having been swayed by a Christian on any point whatsoever. As Lawrence Schiffman puts it, the story reflects the rabbinic perspective that “even the most minimal contact” with the heretics posed a grave danger.1 The story, then, reflects two elements, the first being the perceived threat to notions of normative Judaism constituted by the heretical Christian sect,2 the second being the uncomfortable truth that aspects of Christianity may have held a certain appeal even to renowned rabbis. Boyarin, as he renders the story above, writes that it “…illustrates beautifully the hypothesis of simultaneous rabbinic attraction to and repulsion from Christianity.”3

Boyarin observes a relationship between this story of R. Eliezer’s encounter with the sectarian and the story of his excommunication in Baba Mezia 59a. There, his recourse to magico-mystical means to argue a halakhic (legalist) point appears to have been his principle offence. In particular, R. Eliezer is guilty of enlisting of a bat qol, or divine voice. In

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1 Schiffman discusses the historicity of the story in Who Was a Jew? pp. 71–73.
2 Schiffman suggests that it was not until the Bar Kokhba war that Christians were no longer viewed by the rabbis as misguided Jews “…whose identity as Jews was [nonetheless] unquestionable.” Ibid., pp. 73, 76.
Boyarin’s estimation, rabbinic mistrust of such means was intertwined with the censure of Christianity, which, the rabbis maintained, was sorcerous at its root. In two ways, then, R. Eliezer was seen to bear a sectarian stigma in the two stories. Further, Baba Mezia relates that R. Eliezer wore tefillin on Sabbath, violating rabbinic law and marking him as deviant. This again appears to have contributed to the rabbinic suspicions of his seemingly sectarian tendencies. Ultimately, nevertheless, R. Eliezer answers with a well-framed response to the challenge posed to his orthodoxy, and he is vindicated. Boyarin relates that R. Eliezer’s reply, “. . . because it is a rational answer based on a good halakhic principle,” marks him as “within,” that is, in the in-group of purportedly normative Jews, and not as “. . . ‘out of his mind,’ that is, suspect, in a mystical and perhaps sectarian state.”

The story of R. Eliezer’s attraction to a Christian principle, Boyarin suggests, reveals that the rabbinic authorship was aware of the sometimes uncomfortable closeness of Christian to Jewish belief and practice. For this reason, distancing the self from the other, and cementing one’s own identity in the process, became a necessary, difficult and sometimes anxiety-producing undertaking for the rabbis. Through the story of R. Eliezer’s attraction to a Christian utterance, the authors were, as Boyarin puts it, “. . . marking out the virtual identity between themselves and the Christians in their world at the same time they are very actively seeking to establish difference.” The possibility of a Jew’s being attracted to elements of Christianity was not unexpected, due to the two groups’ intimate relationship, but the Tosefta authorship insists that an irrevocable difference exists nonetheless between the groups, one which calls for R. Eliezer’s censure. The marking out of this difference from Christianity by the authors of these stories from the life of R. Eliezer comes in the form of his condemnation, while the fact that the charges levied against him never seem to stick, and that he is ultimately not merely exonerated but honored as a great sage, illustrates the awkward ambiguity in determining the real difference between heresy and piety, in-group and out-group. R. Eliezer, as he is characterized in these tales, threatens to destroy the illusion of clarity that underlies the self/other dichotomy. Chimerical as this oppositional framework may be, as suggested by the figure of R. Eliezer, Jewish normativity is its champion. One may sense from these stories

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4 Ibid., p. 288.