Susanna Drake


Susanna Drake’s brief book traces various portrayals of Jews by Christian authors from the first through the fifth centuries, illustrating the increasingly condemnatory rhetoric these authors employed. As the title indicates, Drake frames her study around the “sexual slander” which Christian authors levied against Jews and Judaizers, but it would have been helpful for her to define “difference” more clearly. In the introduction, Drake helpfully raises some intriguing categorical observations from Foucault and Judith Butler regarding subjection and subjugation as well as postcolonial theory. However, Drake never fully develops these categories in the remainder of her work. She posits that “as the interests of Christian leaders began to dovetail with the interests of the empire, the figure of the carnal Jew served to dehumanize Jews and justify violent acts against them” (p. 2). Drake traces this thesis throughout the work in order to demonstrate the increasing denunciation used by Christian writers, beginning with the accusation of *porneia* in Paul’s letters and culminating in Chrysostom’s sermons *Adversus Iudaeos*.

Drake’s first chapter locates the origin of an anti-Jewish rhetoric in Paul’s description of gentiles and their tendency towards *porneia* as an ethno-religious “other” (pp. 23–24). Drake notes that while Paul did not intend to characterize all Jews as “according to the flesh” (1 Cor. 10,18) and all Christians as according to the spirit, that is precisely what later Christian authors interpreted the passage to mean (p. 27). She then notes that the *Epistle of Barnabas* taught that Jews interpreted the Bible literally (as opposed to Christians’ spiritual interpretation), which led to the numerous sacrificial and dietary laws. For *Barnabas*, passages restricting diet were actually about curtailing sexual desires. In their literalism, Jews missed the point of these passages and found themselves “vulnerable to the snare of illicit sex, since they do not properly understand the divine commandments regarding sex (and take them to be about food instead)” (p. 31). Finally, Drake employs Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho* in order to depict Christians as “morally superior to” Jews (p. 33). Justin’s strategy was to show through biblical examples that Jewish men were particularly susceptible to sexual sin. Although her analysis of these texts is brief, Drake illustrates how early Christian authors began to frame Jews as prone to engage their base desires.

Chapter two of Drake’s work observes a dramatic shift in the Christian portrayal of Jews through the example of Origen, who taught that Jews too often focused on the literal interpretation of Scripture. Origen goes further in
his application as he was the first Christian author to employ Paul’s language of spirit and flesh to “produce Jewish-Christian difference and to subordinate Jewish identity and interpretation” (p. 44). Origen focuses on circumcision as the instance par excellence of Jewish misinterpretation. According to Drake, “Origen contends that circumcision as observed by the Jews constitutes an obscene gesture and exposes their debased sexuality” (p. 48). Origen takes his message of otherness further as he classified Jews as feminine and sexually deviant as opposed to Christians who were masculine and spiritual (p. 54). While the discussion of gender in Origen is helpful, Drake does not sufficiently develop this aspect of his rhetoric.

Chapter three focuses on the apocryphal story of Susanna and the elders, as Drake analyzes the interpretations of Susanna by Origen and Hippolytus. However, in this chapter, Drake lumps Hippolytus in with Origen in a discussion of anti-Jewish interpretation. A careful reading of Drake’s chapter will reveal that Hippolytus focuses his invective against Jewish and gentile opponents of the church (pp. 63–65). A more overt distinction should be made throughout the chapter between Hippolytus's and Origen's interpretation of Susanna, especially in the concluding parts of the chapter. There is one small distinction made by Drake between the two (p. 66), but afterward she tends to group them together as anti-Jewish. Hippolytus employed Susanna in order to differentiate between the pure, “feminine vulnerability” of Christians and the sexually predatory actions of the wider Roman world. Origen, by contrast, likened Susanna’s plight with that of Christian interpreters of Scripture: either interpret incorrectly and literally (the Jewish way) or interpret it correctly and spiritually (the Christian way) and be persecuted by the Jews because of it (p. 72).

The final chapter of the work focuses on Chrysostom’s Sermons against the Jews as indicative of a new era of anti-Jewish teaching within the Christian church. He frames Judaism as a demonic illness that is corrupting the healthy church body (p. 81). Chrysostom, like other Roman moralists of the time, accused Jews of “drunkenness, gluttony, and porneia” (p. 82). Drake notes that the close proximity between Jews and Christians in the city of Antioch led Chrysostom to use sexual slander against Jews in his sermons, describing Jews as prone to promiscuity and animalistic urges. He also condemned the Jewish men as feminine, interpolating gender stereotypes into his rhetoric (p. 85). Drake also demonstrates how Chrysostom used passages from the prophets which condemned Israel to condemn Jews in Chrysostom’s time, creating a biblical precedent for his anti-Jewish rhetoric (p. 92). Finally, Drake employs Homi Bhabha’s work on border-crossing to understand Chrysostom’s motivation for harshly delineating between Jews and Christians, since they lived and operated in many of the “same sacred spaces” (p. 97). Bhabha’s work illuminates some of