
Emmanuel Friedheim, Assistant Professor in the Jewish History Department at Bar Ilan University, argues that the Rabbis of the second to fourth centuries C.E. had detailed knowledge of pagan cults in Roman Palestine. He criticizes the conclusions of Ephraim Urbach (1959) and Adolf Büchler (1968), who posited that the Talmud reflects minimal knowledge of Hellenistic and Syrio-Phoenician religious worship. While Urbach argued that pagan cults were on the decline from 200-400 C.E., Büchler maintained they ceased to exist altogether. F. is aware such views are no longer widely held: pagan temples, statues, tablets and altars did not lose spiritual potency. Consequently, he sets out to re-examine the pertinent evidence—including archaeological and epigraphical material not available to Urbach or Büchler—in order to determine what the Rabbis knew about “les cultes gréco-romains, les religions orientales, le culte impérial, les noms de divinités, les lieux de cultes, les coutumes cultuelles, les cultes à mystères, les festes et les différents rites, notamment ceux ayant trait aux sacrifices” (3).

The monograph is divided into seven chapters, each subdivided into smaller sections. Included at the end of the monograph are an epilogue, a bibliography, an index locorum, and an index nominum.

Chapter 1 includes a discussion of methodology vis-à-vis the interpretation of rabbinic texts. The author concedes the a-historical nature of the Mishnah, Tosefta, the Talmuds and the midrashic literature (5). In spite of the conclusions of Jacob Neusner (1999) that see rabbinic documents as reflections of contemporary ideology, F. believes in the possibility of extracting historical data from the Talmud “en comparant les traditions parallèles, en se méfiant des traditions talmudiques babyloniennes pour reconstituer la réalité palestinienne, et en utilisant toutes les méthodes de la critique talmudique…” (7). He criticizes Nicole Belayche (2001) for her inability to discern “literary” talmudic passages from those that could yield real historical information, attributing this error to an unfamiliarity with Aramaic (17). F. then argues that pace Peter Schäfer (2002), m. 'Abo-dah Zarah (et par.) does not deal with idolatry purely through a biblical prism (e.g. Leviticus and Deuteronomy), but evinces a 2nd-4th C.E. critique of Pagan cult (20). However, this chapter lacks a similar discussion about interpreting coins and inscriptions, evidence upon which the central thesis relies.

Chapter 2 is where F.’s interests closely intersect with those of Seth Schwartz (2001); it investigates the presence of “Judaeo-Pagans” in late Roman Palestine. The key is said to lie in Palestinian texts like t. Baba Qamma 8:31 and Mekilta de Bahodesh 6 that discuss yetsara davodah zarah: the inclination to worship idols (37). Looking at the Babylonian Talmud (b. Yoma 69b and b. Sanhedrin 64a), he
concludes that its stories of the "imprisonment" of the *yetsara* after the Second Temple's destruction are historical unreliable.

F. affirms that such evidence, combined with passages like *t. Shabbat* 15:17 and *Leviticus Rabbah* 17:3, belies the vitality of pagan culture in Roman Palestine. He holds that such passages can't be attributed to an elaboration of biblical attitudes towards idolatry, pointing to evidence provided by a dedicatory inscription to Tyche from Gerash, an altar from Khirbet Metzer, and an altar to Jupiter-Heliopolis from Akko (29-31).

Chapter 3 begins with a discussion of R. Gamliel's encounter with Proclus (*m. 'Abodah Zarah* 3:4ff). F. contends that such a passage needn't be interpreted as evidence that pagan statuary had lost its religious value, an argument dubbed by Seth Schwartz (1998) as the "doctrine of mere decoration" (70). F. provides a brief survey of Greek and Roman *cultes des sources*, including those that contained purificatory and healing functions (75-87). The rest of the chapter demonstrates the presence of healing and mystery cults in Roman Palestine (*Ein-Tzour, Hamat Gader*) pertaining to Aphrodite, often identified with the Syrian goddess Atargatis and the Canaanite Derketo.

In his analysis of numismatic evidence from Gadara, F. argues for the possibility that a cult to Aphrodite existed *ad locum* (92). Nicole Belayche (2001) demonstrated that representation on coins doesn't prove the existence of a temple, let alone a cult. While F. does well to see a disconnect between Gamliel's response and amoraic reactions to it (e.g., *y. 'Abodah Zarah* 3:4, 42; *b. 'Abodah Zarah* 44b), he doesn't explain it. Given the fact that fourth century rabbis insisted on the cultic power of bath-house statuary, what was behind Gamliel's acceptance of it? Azzan Yadin (2006), for example, has shown that Gamliel wasn't stating rabbinic policy towards idolatrous statuary, but offering a philosophical retort to a Greek who challenged a sage's behavior on the basis of Jewish *halakah*. Later sages, less familiar with neo-platonist critique, were ignorant of Gamliel's reply.

Chapter 4 starts with the solar imagery on synagogue mosaics in Palestine dating from the 3rd-6th c. C.E., especially depictions of Sol Invictus/Helios. Before discussing the relevant rabbinic evidence, F. surveys inscriptions from Aelia Capitolina, Phoenicia, and Upper Galilee pertaining to solar cults (e.g. Jupiter Heliopolites and Eshmun). From the mid 2nd century, Syrian solar cults became more enmeshed in the Roman Imperial Cult until they were combined in 3rd century under Aurelian and Diocletian (126).

F. points to *t. 'Abodah Zarah* 5:1 and *Genesis Rabbah* 6:1 to show that many sages saw the sun as an idol *par excellence* (i.e. on coins, gems, etc.), its worship meriting God's wrath. This represents "un culte parallèle voire concurrent du judaïsme" (127). According to F., some Jews participated in this cult, and the depiction of Sol Invictus on the Hamat Tiberias floor wasn't purely aesthetic (159). F. doesn't deal *in extenso* with issues like the extent of rabbinic guild influence from the 2nd-4th C.E. or the role of the patriarchate. Considering recent